

# INCITE 2020



INCITE 2020

11<sup>TH</sup> EDITION





Shannon Bramer is the author of four collections of poetry and three plays. Recently she published *Climbing Shadows*, her first book of poems for children, illustrated by Cindy Derby.

## JUDGE'S PREFACE

I want to thank the students for writing the beautiful, candid and often heartbreaking work collected here in this anthology. Each piece of writing, in its own way, reflects the diversity of vision and experience, knowledge and confusion that exists in the complicated world we all share. I read poetry that dazzled me with its vividness and urgency. I read prose that made me see paintings come alive in my mind. I read audacious, brave creative non-fiction pieces that flooded me with empathy, worry and ultimately, understanding. I read stories that were careful and austere, alongside the densest, forest-like pieces of labyrinthine fan fiction. Please know that it was extremely difficult for me to choose and rank winners because I saw something radiant and special in every single piece of writing I spent time with. Reading your work gave me the gift of insight. It called to mind one of my favourite quotations, by the incomparable novelist and essayist Zadie Smith, who once wrote: “And so it happened again, the daily miracle whereby interiority opens out and brings to bloom the million-petalled flower of being here, in the world, with other people.” To shine a light on what is not in plain sight requires us to shine that light on ourselves—to spend time with difficult questions, ideas, memories, history. Language reflects the landscape of our hearts: where the light and shadows fall. Reading is a form of listening and writing is an act of faith and generosity. Words, artfully considered – or sung, or shouted, or cried, or abandoned to silence — have the power to simultaneously hold and reveal the human soul, to elevate us all.

Shannon Bramer

# *Message from the Conference Host: The Bishop Strachan School*

Message from *The Bishop Strachan School*, CITE 2020 host school

Welcome to INCITE 2020! Normally, the anthology of student writing and visual art is the jewel of each year's conference. This volume has the unique distinction of being the first one to be published independent of the teachers' conference, since the revival of CITE in 2010. The events of the year thus far following the emergence of the coronavirus has sent Toronto into quarantine, and as of this writing, school has moved into the virtual world, where students and teachers only see each other on screens. This tight window limiting what we see of each other juxtaposes the essence of the writing prompt presented to students earlier this year. The conference theme of 20/20 Vision plays on the relationship between clear eyesight and enlightened insight. To have 20/20 vision, we need to see clearly not only what is in front of us but also what is all around us. To have true insight, we need to shine a light on what is not in plain sight. Students were invited to write a story that is not often told to help us see what is not often seen and thus help contribute to a richer vision of our world in the 21st century.

Even when you have 20/20 vision, you can't see some things coming and we were disappointed to forego our annual opportunity to come together for a day of professional learning. But we wanted to celebrate the creativity and vision of our students by showcasing their writing and visual art. In a world where the concept of a global village is starkly evident with how quickly the COVID-19 virus spread, it's all the more important that we see and pay attention to the stories around us. It is through story that humans can best learn to understand and empathize with one another.

Thank you to all the teachers for encouraging their students to tell their stories and thank you to all the students who answered the call. Thank you to judge Shannon Bramer, a poet and playwright who has been involved in our community for years, conducting workshops for both students and faculty. She is the author of several books of poetry and a collection of her plays

(TRAPSONGS) is forthcoming from Bookhug Press in September 2020. She is also the editor of THINK CITY: The Poems of Gracefield Public School. Her most recent work is an illustrated collection of poetry for children entitled Climbing Shadows (Groundwood Books) which she wrote while working as lunchroom supervisor in a kindergarten classroom in Toronto. Climbing Shadows was recently named a 2020 Notable Poetry Book by the National Council of Teachers of English. As a writer of poetry for both children and adults, and a writer of plays for all ages, Shannon provided her expertise in seeing from many angles. Thanks to Adrian Hoad-Reddick for his shepherding of this magazine through the long process to publication. Much effort went into the planning and organization of the conference, vitally supported by the CITE executive as well as CIS Ontario, and we look forward to a long future of collaboration.



# THE BISHOP STRACHAN SCHOOL

Annette Chiu | CITE 2020 Organizer  
CITE Conference 2020, The Bishop Strachan School



# INCITE [2020]

ISSN 1923-158X Incite (Print)

ISSN 1923-1598 Incite (Online)

## CITE EXECUTIVE

### **Co-Chairs:**

Ellen Palmer, Appleby College & Claire Pacaud, St. Clement's School

**Communications:** Claire Pacaud, St. Clement's School

**Treasurer:** Chris Jull, Crestwood Preparatory

**Professional Development:** Danielle Ganley, Holy Trinity School

**INCITE Coordinator:** Adrian Hoad-Reddick, Hillfield Strathallan College

## THIS YEAR'S COVER

This year's cover art is by Grade 12 BSS student Maggie Qian.

**Look, Commenters (2019)**

**Medium:** Acrylic on Plywood **Size:** Variable Dimensions

*Who are you? How many identities do you have? Packaging and identifying yourself based on how society labels you has become what we are trained to do; yet, we must learn to block out those whispers and judgments from others and find who we truly are. These eyes and mouths are from a diverse range of people to represent each individual's uniqueness. No matter gender, race, or age, we are all distinctively different, and we should be proud of that.*

*Grades 7 & 8*

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 6  | <i>A Dream</i>   Graham Tomori                        |
| 11 | <i>Dear Quinten, Love Evelyn</i>   Kumkum Anugopal    |
| 16 | <i>Through The Eyes of Mother Earth</i>   Bryony Chan |
| 19 | <i>Leader</i>   Sophie Cheng                          |
| 24 | <i>The Will</i>   Yoyo Dou                            |
| 27 | <i>Ripples</i>   Tiffany Tse                          |
| 28 | <i>Destiny</i>   Ethelyn Fu                           |
| 38 | <i>Tell Me What You Know</i>   Audrey Rajapakshage    |
| 43 | <i>To The Man Who Let Me Go</i>   Faye Alqadhi        |



*Grades 9 & 10*

- 48     *Gone With the Stars* | Olivia Choi
- 54     *Grief* | Chloe Comeau
- 58     *I of the 176* | Kian Torabi Ardakami
- 66     *I Spy* | Hiba Khan
- 70     *The Masked Girl* | Mia Kohn
- 74     *Our Bodies* | Maryn Rice
- 77     *Newspaper Clippings* | Victoria Zalewski
- 82     *A Journey* | Charlie Coke
- 87     *Surreal* | Alex Wang
- 91     *Parasite* | Bella Melardi

96-117 *A Gallery of visual art and photography*

- 118    *The Tale of Two Horses* | Kate Chandler
- 123    *And She Was* | Amy Nam

*Grades 11 & 12*

- 127    *Beauty of Physics* | Kate Reed
- 129    *Silence Me* | Anjali Juneja
- 130    *And so we return...* | Anjali Juneja
- 133    *A Conversation with My Optometrist* | Em Merchant
- 137    *Negative Space* | Kaitlyn Maddox
- 141    *soft violence* | Norah Peebles
- 144    *We, Us, Them* | Tofunmi Oluwajuyigbe
- 145    *Zombotron* | Siddique Shabbir
- 159    *Self-Discovery: A Film Manifesto* | Parsa Eftekhari
- 162    *Only a Redbone* | Zoé Jammes
- 166    *instead,* | Alexis Patrascu
- 169    *Passcode* | Ariana Akbarieh
- 174    *Belonging* | Kaidi Xie
- 177    *The Family Next Door* | Caden Reid Shapiro
- 180    This year's winners and honourable mentions!



## *A Dream*

Bang! Went the starting gun and Bam! I was off - Breathe, I thought, breathe. I was so close to the finish line. I could feel the applause in my chest, the college scouts couldn't pull their eyes off me - then, beep, beep, beep!

I groaned and hit my alarm clock, wishing my dream was real. I still had a race to run. Only a few hours then I would know. Would I win, impress the scouts, get a college scholarship, or would my dream stay a dream? I pulled myself out of bed and went to the kitchen.

Dad hadn't gotten back from his night shift yet. We usually ate breakfast together when he came home. Sometimes it was the only time we saw each other in a day. I opened the fridge and saw a granola bar and some peanut butter. I took a few spoonfuls of peanut butter and saved the granola bar for Dad; payday wouldn't come until tomorrow.

I heard the rattle of Dad's key in our apartment door. "Hey, Dad," I said, helping him with his backpack. "How was work?"

"Work was horrible," he groaned. "I need some sleep, but first, food!"

I slid the granola bar across the table.

"Thanks, son," he said, hugging me.

I sat down beside him so we could catch up.

"Good luck on your race today. Do you feel ready for the scouts?"

I was too nervous to answer. Dad saw my face and promised, "I'll be there as soon as I can. I need a nap but I'll set the alarm so I won't miss anything."

My fingers started drumming on the counter. Whenever something bothers me I twitch and I feel like I need to run. Dad looked at me worriedly and set his hand on top of mine. "Son, doctors, have tests for hyperactive



disorders and they could help you.”

I didn’t want to worry him so I said “That’s not it, I’m tired.” I could tell he didn’t believe me and I hate lying to him, so when he looked at me again I blurted the truth.

“Zach’s going to be there, I can’t beat him!” I started ranting, “Why does he have to run this race, he doesn’t even need a scholarship! His parents can afford to send him anywhere!”

“Don’t worry ” Dad said “It’s gonna be okay. All you can do is your best. Just breathe.” He patted my shoulder.

I left to get dressed, grabbing my lucky Reebok shirt. It was the only item I owned that wasn’t secondhand. When I pulled my track shoes out of the closet and laced them up my toe popped through the top. I groaned and reached for duct tape. It was the best I could do until payday. Dad is always telling me to stay in school and get good grades so I don’t end up like him. The problem is I have a hard time concentrating in class, so my grades aren’t so great. I needed to win a scholarship today so I could go to university.

I stuck my head into Dad’s room to say goodbye. When he saw me he looked straight at my taped shoes.

“Bud, what happened?”

“Well,” I said shyly “It’s my fault they fell apart and I should’ve told you sooner.”

“You can’t be wearing those! The scouts will think you don’t care about running! Here, take my shoes. I know they’re a bit big but -”

“No, Dad it’s okay, I can’t take your shoes. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

“No, it’s not fine. Take these,” he said, removing his shoes from his feet. “Please son. Take them.” I didn’t want to argue anymore, so I put them on and gave him a hug.

I shut the apartment door behind me and made my way to the bus. By the time I finally arrived at the track, the other kids were already there stretching. I looked around for Zach, but he wasn’t there. My relief didn’t last, because a shiny Porsche came speeding into the lot. It was Zach. I glared



over at the car trying to send bad vibes but stopped. His Dad's face was angry and he was yelling.

Good, I thought. Knock him off his game. I felt remorse for the tiniest of seconds after thinking that, but flipped back over to anger. My phone rang, interrupting my thoughts. It was my boss.

"Hello Adam speaking," I said politely.

"Ya! I know it's Adam speaking, you feeble-minded boy, your shift is now! Get in here or you're fired!" he screamed.

"Wait - I have my big race today, I told you last week! Please, sir!" I begged. What am I gonna do? We need my job to help pay bills. Without it, we could get kicked out of our apartment. But if I won today I could get a scholarship. My head was buzzing and everything started to get twitchy again. I tried to think but my boss wouldn't stop yelling at me. I looked over at Zach. It felt ironic we were both being yelled at, I almost felt bad for him.

I looked down at my dad's shoes. My job as a waiter paid well, or at least the tips were great. I'd only need a few shifts and I could replace them. I opened my mouth to say I'd be right over when I heard Zach's car door slam behind me and then the announcement rang over the park: "U16, U16 please come to the front lineup." Adrenaline rushed through me. I knew what I had to do.

I apologized to my boss, hung up and started walking over to the starting line, sizing up my competition. There was Zach. His eyes looked slightly red from crying. I couldn't let that bother me. He had been my competition for years, also I needed this race and he could do without it. I lifted my head up. Everything was shaking again. I got into position and tried to quiet my body. Breathe, I thought.

Bang! went the starting gun - we were off! I quickly got in front of the pack, everything felt focused when I ran. No more noise. I was breathing hard and the sound of the competition behind me pushed me harder. I needed that scholarship. I ran like it was in front of me and I was getting closer. Then I heard a thump from behind and someone cried out.

I turned my head back. Zach had crumpled to the ground and was groaning and grabbing his leg. I looked in front of me. My scholarship. I looked behind me. He had started to cry. I stopped. I couldn't keep going if someone was injured, even if it was Zach. I jogged back toward him. "Hey, are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah I'm okay," he said, but as he tried to stand he crumpled back down in pain. I grabbed his arm to help him up and we could hear the crowd cheer from all around us. The race had ended. The boy from second place had won and he was smirking and taking all the attention, waving at the crowd.

I shook my head and helped Zach to the hospital tent, where the nurses quickly took over. I looked around expecting to see Zach's dad racing towards him, but I couldn't see him anywhere. I jogged out to the parking lot and there he was, sitting in his car on his phone. I tried waving at him, but he ignored me. After the nurse iced and taped him up, I offered to help Zach back to his car.

"Thanks, Adam sorry I made you lose," he said which meant a lot to me because he was usually "too cool" to talk to me.

When we got to the car I knocked on the window. His dad took one look, then started yelling, "Zach! What's your problem! We said you would win!"

"I'm sorry Dad, I fell." Zach whispered.

"You've got to get your act together! Get in the car!" his dad yelled, and turned to me, "What are you looking at kid?"

"I'm sorry," I said solid voiced, trying not to show the fear inside me and backed away. I was never so relieved to see Dad waving at me from the bleachers. On my way to him, a short man with glasses and a tie came up to me.

"Hello," he said, "Are you Adam?"

"Yes," I said, confused.

He held out his hand. "My name is Troy McGregor and I'm a scout



with Gonzaga University. I've watched almost all of your races. You're a good runner. But today, you really impressed me. We could use more athletes like you, And your sportsmanship would be great at our school"

I couldn't believe it. I ran to grab Dad and introduce him to Troy. After the summer I had a college to go to. I finally had my dream.

## *Dear Quinten, Love Evelyn*

June 4th, 2019

Dear Quinten,

Who knew that after all these years I'd be writing to you days before my high school graduation, when our lives turned upside down days before yours. You're gone but I can still hear your voice, sounding just like it did. I can still feel your hand, as if it's touches my skin. It's like you never left. But I know you did.

June 5th, 2019

My whole life, I had been in the spotlight. I was the ballet queen, the social kid, the track and field star and to be honest, I loved it. But it all changed the moment you started to cough. A cough that became a cold. A cold that sent you to the hospital. A cold that shattered my life.

Why did you get sick? Why did you have Cystic Fibrosis? It wasn't fair to you, but it wasn't fair to me either. I was always the favorite child. When they began to focus on you, I became jealous. You were the best brother ever and you didn't deserve the fate you were given. But what did I do? Absolutely nothing. Instead I was a 7-year-old brat.

June 6th, 2019

I remember that day so well. You woke up with a cold that lasted a few days, which turned into a week, and eventually a month. We were getting worried, so Mom decided to go see a doctor. They sent you home saying it



was just a cold. But Mom and Dad weren't convinced. You went back a week later, this time worse. They said that your "cold" had gotten worse, except this time they didn't send you back home. I remember asking everyone around me what was happening. But all they told me was, "Quinten's not feeling well honey. Don't bother him."

I remember feeling left out. Lonely. Confused. But most importantly, worried. Worried that you were going to die because that was the first thing that came to my mind. You always had my back. You protected me, you believed in me and showed me that I was never alone. With you in the hospital, I started to develop anxiety. I needed someone to tell me that everything was alright, but Mom was by your side 24/7 and Dad always seemed to disappear. Some nights after everyone was asleep, I could hear them argue. Most of the time Mom would be crying and shouting at Dad to "man up" and be there for his son. Not for their daughter, their son. That was the beginning of their divorce, and my depression.

June 7th, 2019

Even though it's been years, it feels like days since the doctors told us you had Cystic Fibrosis, or CF for short. Mom cried when they told us. I know that you wanted to cry but all you did was hold my hand tight and smile as a single tear fell from your eye. You never cried. You would always put on a brave face for me. That's when I knew this was no joke.

By the time I finally learned what CF was, you were pretty sick. You had weird tubes put inside of you that helped you breathe. All I wanted was to sit next to you, hold your hand and tell you that everything was alright. But Mom and Dad made me go to school. They thought that it would make things more "normal" for me. I hated them for it.

During classes, I stared at the clock, counting down the time until the

bell. At recess, I'd sit in the corner and eat my lunch all by myself. Slowly, I became lonely and depressed. As soon as the bell rang, I biked as fast as I could to the hospital. That became my routine. My A's dropped to D's and mom didn't care. Our, "You've got to do well in school," mother didn't care. That's when it finally struck me. I wasn't important anymore.

June 8th, 2019

Years passed by, but every day was the same. You were 17, I was 12. Like any other day, I biked as fast as I could to the hospital from school. But instead of holding your hand and telling you about my day, I ran away. I was told there had been an accident, and you'd died. My heart stopped. I looked around, my head was spinning, and all I saw was Mom crying, Dad with his head in his hands and the doctor coming out of the emergency room and shaking his head. I couldn't process it. I couldn't face the fact that you would never wake up. I couldn't face the fact that you were gone.

I didn't know what to do, so I ran. I ran out of the hospital. I could hear people calling after me, but I ignored them and kept running. I ran until I reached school. I sat in the corner of the courtyard and cried. I cried until all the water in my body was gone. I didn't know why or how you died. I still don't. Every now and then I try to ask Mom but she always says that she'll tell me when the time is right. Back then, all I wanted to do was curl up in a ball, sleep and never wake up, hoping that it would somehow make us closer.

June 9th, 2019

Mom and Dad made me speak at your funeral. I had prepared a speech where I talked about how you cared about me more than yourself. When I stepped up on the stage and held the mic, the memories of our time together rushed through my head. Instead of going through with my speech, I started crying, dropped the mic and ran. No one came after me. They just let me run.



I went home later that afternoon. That's when Mom and Dad finalised their divorce and told me that Mom and I were going to move to the other end of the country. Mom thought it would help my depression and help her get some closure after separating from Dad. So we moved in with Nana. Away from Dad, my friends, and you.

June 10th, 2019

Every now and then I imagine what you'd be doing right now. I promised myself that I would visit your grave every day, but that was hard to do at the other end of the country, so I started writing letters. Moving away was probably the worst mistake of my life. I started to become even more closed off and introverted after your death. I isolated myself. Being at a new school where no one knows about you made things easier. My anxiety grew and my depression as well. But now I can say that I am better. I am better because Mom, along with Nana, helped me. They helped me remember that you're in my heart, that you'll forever be with me.

Four years in high school went by fast. Faster than I would have liked. I made new friends after a year at my new school. It took me sometime to realise that I needed to open up if I wanted to heal. They helped me find peace within, especially my bestie Ally. She lost her sister to cancer a couple of years ago, so she understood what I was going through. She told me that she makes videos for her sister and that those videos helped her heal. She found closure, and she told me that I needed to as well, otherwise I would be torturing myself. She was right.

I have to go now. Tomorrow's my graduation and we are having a party to honour you, Ally's sister, and everyone else.

June 11th, 2019

I have never been ambivalent in my life. I'm finished with high school.

I am finally done. It feels so weird. I was valedictorian at the graduation ceremony. Mom was crying and taking photos and I was crying and letting her take them. We both needed a victory after everything we had been through. I hope that I have made you proud because I am so proud to be your sister.

My anxiety grew due to the lack of attention I was given. We all wanted to be with you, some of us more than others. But that resulted in my loneliness, and everyone else together. If only we had stayed together as a family, I would have healed. If only I was given attention, but I didn't matter to anyone. Anyone except you.

I'll never forget what you told me the last time I saw you, "Heaven isn't too far away. I know someday you'll come and visit." I told you to be quiet because I hoped you wouldn't leave so soon. I know that you didn't want to leave me, but little did I know you would. I love you forever and ever.

*Love, Evelyn*

## *Through The Eyes of Mother Earth*

My eyes scream for help,  
My breath seizes  
My lungs are slowly rotting.  
I try to break free while smog coats my skin.  
Blazes of red  
Orange,  
Yellow,  
Blow past my eyes.  
12 million acres of land vanish in a heartbeat,  
My dear beloved Australia,  
I have hope is all I can say.

Beady black eyes turn glossy and tears shed  
Dribbling their frosty white fur.  
A polar bear's hoarse roar shudders me awake for nights.

The smoke and gas from building and cars,  
Suffocate my lungs,  
Plug my lungs  
I can't breathe.  
I'm crying,  
I'm mourning,  
My tears are falling.  
I glance down while horror paints my face.  
Each tear sizzles as it touches my skin,  
Burns.



They are turning brown,  
Acidic even.  
I can't control the tears anymore,  
They overcome me.

I was once young,  
Flourishing,  
Lively.  
I would weave flowers and grass together to make crowns.  
I played with my friends Mars and Venus  
As laughter filled the air  
But years passed,  
Dark bags cast under my eyes.  
I can't fulfill who I once was.  
My friends barely recognize me,  
Neither can I.

I can't piggy back you forever,  
I can't give you the money people hunt for,  
But I can give you unconditional love and hope.  
My health will be hard to restore but it's not impossible.  
People care about me out there and I'm not giving up.  
People hope,  
I hope,  
People want,  
I want,  
People know,  
I know,  
We all will get better,  
Not perfect, but way better.  
I am doing all I can to make myself better

but you can be my doctor.  
I am calling for help,  
I am begging to see light once again,  
I am praying for someone to reach down and hoist me back up.  
I am yearning for soft eyes to smile back at me and restore mine.

Dear 2020,  
I have ambition that gives off that northern light spark  
I have the anger to create earthquakes  
I have the hope to sprout flowers and life  
I just need you to give me life.  
Give my breath back,  
Give my rhythmic heartbeat back,  
Give my spark back.  
Before my life comes down to a single line running on forever  
Burying deep into our hearts.

## *Untitled*

Leader clicked his pen and looked down at his long, long list.

“Who next?” he wondered, scanning the thousands of names on his long to-end list.

“Oh, it’s only a matter of life and death, Leader,” his secretary said. “I would advise you to do ‘eenie, meenie, miny, mo’.”

“You’re right, Caroline. It’s only killing someone.” Deep in his heart, Leader knew that one day, when Caroline had enough power, her name would end up on the to-end list. And he would end her.

“Okay then. Eenie, meenie, miny, mo...” and Leader recited the nonsensical rhyme. What would the nation’s people say, if they found out that their beloved Leader used foolish rhymes to pick who to end? And it was Caroline’s suggestion. Maybe he would underline Caroline’s name in red one day just because she had once suggested “eenie, meenie, miny mo” to him. Who cares anyway? He could always get a new secretary, a more intelligent secretary.

His finger landed on a name. Martha Forbes.

All right, he said to himself. Goodbye, Martha. And without any idea of what Martha Forbes had done against him, he crossed out the name in red pen.

“Caroline, call the police station of Leaderville. Martha Forbes once committed a crime against me, and she will pay.”

\*\*\*

Martha had almost forgotten the crime she committed four years ago.

Her father had been arrested by the police for spreading anti-gov-



ernment sentiments, and she had never seen him again. She was infuriated at Leader--she wasn't stupid and ignorant like the other inhabitants of Leaderville. She knew just how prejudiced and manipulative the government was. And it was all Leader's fault.

She remembered comparing Leader to George Orwell's Big Brother at the time. Nineteen Eighty-Four had been banned years ago, but Martha's father had an old copy. Ignorance really was strength. Ignorance could save one's life. Too bad her father was the opposite of ignorant.

So after they dragged her father away, she committed a "crime". She marched to the city square and there, in front of masses of people and surveillance cameras, she triumphantly hurled a bottle of ink at the mural of Leader.

She was not arrested immediately, and went home glowing in complacency.

"Mother, guess what I did!"

"What, Martha?"

"I poured ink all over Leader's face in the town square. Serves that swine right."

Martha's mother dropped her knitting and stood up with a hand over her heart, her breaths coming in trembles.

"You did what?"

"You heard right. I poured ink over Leader's face."

"You nasty child!" her mother cried, bursting into tears. "Do you know that will get you killed? Do you know? They'll take you away just like they took your father and label you as a murderer or arsonist. The newspapers called your father a terrorist! And it's not true at all! You'll be taken away and--and--maybe killed--and who will I have in the world then? You selfish child!"

"I'm not afraid," Martha said brazenly. "If I die, then I've died for a good cause. I've helped millions of ignorant people in this country take a step towards freedom. One day, when democracy is the new breath of the nation, everyone will remember me--Martha Forbes, the one who started the revolu-

tion by pouring ink on Leader's mural."

"Hmph! Maybe you're too romantic to think death a bad thing, but they won't just shoot you, you know. They'll torture you! And I'll be living alone, and they might come for me too...might as well finish off the last of the family...that'll kill the possibility of me becoming a rebel..."

Martha's mother shuddered.

"Let's hide you somewhere. They'll probably come looking for you soon. You run and hide in the cornfield, you hear me? When they come searching I'll tell them you never came home."

"Mother, there's dozens of cameras on every corner. They'll know."

"Yes, maybe, but there aren't any cameras in this neighbourhood. It's too rural to bother spending the money on cameras. Run to the cornfield now! I'll cover for you!"

Martha ran to the cornfield. Her mother watched anxiously.

A moment later, three masked officers came. They didn't even bother coming to the door to search the house. One of them had a torch in his hand. He lit it and tossed it into the fields.

Immediately the whole horizon lit up with hellfire. Would Martha die? How her mother regretted sending her to the cornfield! She would surely burn to her death!

Yet she didn't die. After the men left, Martha crept back.

"Where were you?"

"I ran to the creek."

That had been fourteen years ago. Now Martha had her own kids who were just toddlers. She lived in the countryside with no neighbours for miles around. No danger of cameras watching her every move then.

She was putting a loaf of bread into the oven and set it for twenty-five minutes. Then she dried her hands and sat by the window, watching her toddlers play in the fields.

Just as she sat down, a loud banging began at the front door. Martha's heart leaped and quirked with fear. Was this her nightmare come true?

She opened the window and yelled to her kids. They came over.

“Um...listen. We’re playing hide-and-seek, okay? And there’s someone at the door, and they’re going to come find you. So make sure you hide really well, okay? Don’t come out of your spots until...until the house lights on fire and burns down. Do you hear me? Go! You have ten seconds...”

Her little boy and girl turned to go.

“Wait, wait, wait!”

They turned around.

“You might not see me for a long time, okay? I’ll be gone off to another place, but don’t miss me. I’ll miss you though. And always, always remember that one day, democracy must be the new breath of the nation.”

Her children had just disappeared from sight when the front door was kicked down brutally. Three masked officers came into the room then.

“Good evening,” Martha said, her breaths coming in quick gasps. “How can I help--”

She never got to finish her sentence. One of them clamped a hand over her mouth and the other two dragged her by the arms. Together, all four went out the door. The last the house saw of Martha was her being pushed into a black van with Leader’s face on it. The van zoomed off.

Shortly after, another van came, a firetruck in the most literal sense. Firers got out of the van with their firehoses.

“Three, two, one!”

Three firers stationed themselves in front of the house, and when the countdown ended, all three sprayed snaking, roaring dragons of fire at the tumbledown farmhouse.

The kids, one girl and one boy, were hiding away happily among the boughs and foliage of the big quaking aspen. They saw their mother’s words become reality.

“Wow, look! The house is on fire like Mom said!” the girl exclaimed, pointing through a small crack between leaves to the house as it became the snack of a hungry fire demon.



"I want to be a firer one day. Don't you think that'd be cool?" the boy said to his sister.

"Yeah. And I want to be Leader's secretary."

"But Mom told us Leader isn't a very good person..."

"So what? Mom also said that Leader's secretaries are really rich because Leader pays them a lot to stay loyal to him."

As they spoke, the black van with Martha in it sped farther and farther away, even deeper into the impenetrable hinterland. No one knows what happened to Martha Forbes--she disappeared quietly, invisibly, as shadows fade with the increasing light of dawn. She was not the only one who cast a mere shadow upon the earth--there were hundreds of thousands more like her whose stories of injustice never made the headlines--because the people who wrote the headlines obeyed Leader, and were obligated to twist any headline tarnishing Leader's name into a blasphemy, into anything really, as long as it diverted blame from Leader. And the people lived under the media, influenced by every article praising Leader and every other article condemning Leader's critics.

And these revolutionists, they were thrown into prison without a fair trial, without the power of defending themselves. They were tortured--their bodies were confined in tiny cells, but despite this, their souls still rose in unison, singing a long-lost song of something their ancestors knew, and something they hoped their descendants would come to know.

But all this torture and confinement and injustice, of course, happened because they were despicable, and anyone who dared touch a hair on Leader deserved to suffer and die. Yet more and more revolutionists are born every second, for no matter how strong the seawall is, the waves will break it, if they come constantly with strength and the spirit of liberty which has no death, only birth and rebirth.

## *The Will*

“I believe that my late husband, who suddenly died two months ago, would at least leave some money for Lilly and me, but unfortunately, he didn’t,” Mrs. Hayes said to Rose Carter.

Rose met Mrs. Hayes and her five-year-old granddaughter, Lilly, a week ago when Lilly chased after her ball onto the road. Rose pulled Lilly away just before the car zoomed by. Mrs. Hayes, after thanking Rose for saving Lilly, invited Rose to dinner as a token of her gratitude.

Now, sitting in Mrs. Hayes’s living room, Rose attentively listened to Mrs. Hayes’s story.

“Mr. Hayes, Lilly, and I had always lived comfortably. Lilly’s parents died when she was a baby, leaving Lilly in our hands. Although most of our properties were under Mr. Hayes’s name, he always talked about how Lilly and I would be able to get on well with the money the will would leave us. Now, with all that money going towards his nephew, Douglas Hayes, I’m afraid that Lilly and I will run out of funds very soon,” Mrs. Hayes explained.

Rose immediately became suspicious of the situation. Growing up with detective parents, Rose had learnt to think beyond what was given. She was persistent to learn more about the case.

“Have you ever questioned the legitimacy of the will?” Rose asked.

“I have, but the writing on the will was definitely Mr. Hayes,” Mrs. Hayes answered.

Just as Rose was about to reply, Lilly came running over with a bundle of cream-coloured papers.

“Granny, I found some of Grandpa’s old papers in the garage! Can I please draw on them?” Lilly requested, as she dropped some papers in excitement.

“Of course,” said Mrs. Hayes.

Lost in thought, Mrs. Hayes murmured, “You know, Mr. Hayes used to only use these cream-coloured papers. These papers offer great memories of him.”

Meanwhile, Rose was picking up the papers. As she inspected them, she suddenly found what seemed like Mr. Hayes’s will.

“Mrs. Hayes, come here and read these papers!” Rose exclaimed.

Mrs. Hayes started reading the papers. Her eyes glistened with tears as she confirmed Rose’s observations.

“This is Mr. Hayes’s will! He left all the money to us!” Mrs. Hayes gushed.

Rose, seeing her chance to solve a mystery, told Mrs. Hayes about her background as the daughter of two detectives and convinced Mrs. Hayes to let her investigate.

The next day, Rose drove to Douglas Hayes’s bungalow. Just as Rose arrived, she spotted a tall man stepping into the bungalow. Deftly, Rose ducked behind a bush near the open window of the bungalow.

“Buzz, would you please be more discreet about coming to my house next time? I don’t want anyone suspecting us!” Douglas exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, Doug. I’ve done plenty of forgery before. Plus, we’re leaving for Brazil tomorrow,” Buzz replied.

“I know, but we still don’t know if there is a real will. Now, help me pack up for our flight tomorrow,” Douglas replied grumpily.

Rose excitedly ran towards her car. Her suspicions were finally proven! Rose knew she had to move fast if she wanted to catch the criminals before they escaped tomorrow. She picked up her phone and dialed 9-1-1.

She hastily explained the situation and requested Mr. Hayes’s lawyer to bring a copy of the will. Within five minutes, police surrounded Douglas Hayes’s house. Rose called Mrs. Hayes to bring the real will over. Mrs. Hayes arrived with Lilly soon after with a bag full of papers. When the criminals refused to acknowledge their forged document, Rose quickly took out the real

will.

“Officer, I have a way to prove that the will giving all the money to Douglas Hayes is forged,” Rose said, “Mrs. Hayes once mentioned that Mr. Hayes only used a particular kind of cream-coloured paper. The will Mrs. Hayes brought is written on that kind of paper. However, the other will uses regular white paper instead. Douglas and Buzz must have forgotten this detail when forging the will.”

After some interrogation and several searches of Mrs. Hayes’s house for evidence of the fact that Mr. Hayes only used the cream-coloured papers, the police agreed with Rose and Mrs. Hayes’s statements.

Douglas and his friend Buzz were both arrested and charged with forgery. Mrs. Hayes and Lilly were extremely thankful for Rose and were very happy to finally claim what was rightfully theirs. As for Rose, she was soon driving around town looking for another new mystery.



## *Ripples*

One bead of water  
Shimmering like a gossamer tear,  
Ripples cast against the crystal  
mirror.  
Beneath the roiling clouds  
Through one drop of water  
Emerges waves.  
Deep velvety darkness  
A glistening veil of silk  
Swallowing all light.  
Not a breath,  
Not a sound,  
Not a sight.  
You don't see  
The opalescent incisors slicing  
down  
Until it is too late.

## *Destiny (Chapters 1-3)*

*fan fiction based on My Hero Academia series created by Kohei Horikoshi*

“Maman?” the sound of a soft, gentle call rang with uncertainty through the hallway. Light steps, so light they were almost inaudible, were placed with such delicate care that the squeaky floorboards underneath them didn’t make any sounds. From his bedroom, he could hear the voices of his adopted mother and father yelling at each other and found it suspicious - what could have been so bad that they were raising their voices at each other? Approaching the kitchen, he paused for a few seconds before opening the door, listening to their conversation.

“I can’t do this anymore, Alexandre! I don’t want to see that... that thing ever again!” A high-pitched shriek, so unlike his maman pierced the silence of the house, and he flinched.

“I don’t either, Akari. What should we do with it now?” His father’s tone sounded disgusted, and it took everything in him to keep back the tears threatening to spill. Maybe... maybe they were talking about a... a spider they captured off the windowsill! Even so, he couldn’t lie to himself.

Pushing open the big kitchen door, he shuffled into the room before looking up at his parents. “Maman? Papa? Why are you fighting?” He asked with an air of childhood innocence before his eyes widened. They were glaring at him now, and he took a step backwards, trembling with fear.

None of them answered him for a short silence. Then, everything seemed to move so fast.

“You’re... you’re a monster! All our hard work, stolen last month... it was

because of you we couldn't use our Quirks to stop them! My fine china, our television and my jewellery!" She screamed, spit flying from her mouth. There was a crazy look in Akari's eyes, and she listed all the things that had been stolen from them a couple of weeks ago to her son. Alexandre only stared at him expressionlessly, before crossing the room to open a drawer and pull something out.

A phone.

"C'est moi, Alexandre." He hissed into the phone, still glaring at him. Akari joined her husband on the phone as well. It felt so cold - why was it so cold? He felt empty on the inside. Something was wrong, something was wrong, something was-

From his distance, he couldn't hear what they were whispering clearly, but he could get a few words.

Monster. Abomination. Inhumane.

He was still young, only five years old. His memory was almost perfect, though, and he never forgot that day, the day his life changed.

"Yeah, that's good. Tomorrow." Alexandre hung up, setting the phone on the dinner table. They looked so mad, so angry at him. What did he do wrong?

Suddenly, without any warning, his maman picked up a knife and a rag from the counter and stomped over to the boy. Shoving the cloth in his mouth, she waved her husband over, who seemed elated to comply. What was going on?

Runrunrunrunrun-

His thoughts screamed, but by the time he started to struggle, his papa had his arms pinned against his back and his legs swept out from underneath him. That night, the sound of a boy's pain-filled shrieks broke through the silence as the knife was slowly brought down his face.

---

Fridays were supposed to be the best day of the week. It was the last day of work for the adults, the last day of school for the kids, and the last day

until the weekend. That Friday morning, however, was anything but the best day of the week.

Maybe they were sending her away because of his Quirk. He couldn't exactly control it - all Quirks in a radius around him would be subdued, and he knew it was a dangerous power to have. He used to dare to dream - dream of becoming a hero, saving others that needed help. Now, peeking out the window at the white truck that had come to a halt in front of the house, he realized - how could he save anyone if he couldn't even save himself?

He tried to struggle - really, he did. The boy wasn't very strong, compared to the men pinning his arms against his back. Tears sprang to his eyes as the man in a white coat handed large wads of money bills to his papa- no, father, and he finally understood. They didn't want him around. They only wanted more money, and he was being sold.

That day, they stopped being his family.

He was alone now.

---

The room was dark - so, so dark. He could feel he was chained to a bed, and he pulled his wrists in different directions to try and free them. What had he done wrong? Everything was happening so fast. His instincts were screaming at him-

Runrunrunrun-

Hidehidehide-

Abandoned at such a young age, he was confused, scared, and clueless. Confused on what happened, scared for his life and clueless about why everyone around him called him a monster.

Conflicted on why they sold him.

Sold him to the Villains.

---

(Chapter 2)

Cold, guarded glances and harsh hisses. That's all anyone could get from the boy with messy indigo hair hiding in the corner of the lab. All

Might's signature smile dimmed - it was clear the boy was terrified of them, but he had been pressured in the past to stand up for himself when no one else would.

For all of his life, as he remembered it, there was nothing but sterile science labs he spent his days in or the dark, silent rooms he was chained to at night. Scars littered his arms and legs, all of them from incisions performed on him to extract his tissues, blood and muscle.

Someone inched closer to his figure, and he flinched back more into the corner, arms out in front to protect his vital organs and eyes scanning the Pro Hero in front of him for signs of danger. The guy was muscular - he could probably pin him down without any struggle! His smile was too big, as well. Maybe this man was another one of the people the men in coats would hire to try and get him to co-operate.

The boy could remember how he was lulled into a sense of secrecy by someone tall, and muscular and smiled too. The man would hug him and rescue him from the prying hands that would always chase him in the lab building. He trusted the man, the man with the warm green eyes and soft, silk-like blonde hair.

And then, just like everything good in his life, he left. Left, in the most painful way possible. They'd run away from the lab for almost a week and the man had promised him they would head out to the park, scooping his small, frail body into his arms and striding out the door.

They didn't go anywhere near a park. Instead, they headed towards what seemed like a large office with black-tinted glass windows. Reo-san had pressed his thumb to one of the nails sticking out of the wall before it slid away to reveal a swirling staircase down to the lab.

The lab was where he was mostly kept, and there were more men in white coats that prodded him. The only difference from his first location to this one was that they had small knives here they used to prod him with, that they called "scalpels". The punctures on his skin didn't hurt as much as the feeling in his chest did when he saw Reo-san and a woman in a suit exchange



different types of paper bills, though.

Every time he was deported off to a new location, money would always be changed through hands, and the different procedures kept on getting worse as time went on. It started with little punctures to draw out his blood, to slicing open his arms for inspection, to a final destination where he was put through the most extreme circumstances he could think of to test his pain tolerance. Things like being deprived of oxygen, submerged in ice-cold water, and burned with fire.

The Quirk-suppressing bracelets on his wrists jingled as All Might approached, and he held up a tanto protectively. Maybe it was the way he was pointing an extremely sharp object at one of the Heroes, but another woman with layered dark purple hair sashayed into the room, as if on a cue. Storming the boy, she ripped the sleeve of her shirt to emit a pink gas at him.

He saw black, and then nothing.

---

When he came around, he could see that he was in another dark room. It was probably another cell - that would explain how there were cuffs on top of the bracelets on his wrists and ankles now. Shifting quietly, he strained his ears to try and hear if anyone was approaching. He heard the “click, click” of someone’s shoes getting louder and louder as they seemed to come closer and tensed, ready to run even if his feet were bound together.

A stream of light shone through the crack of the door, and the boy reflectively winced, trying to get his eyes to adjust faster to the new light levels in the room. When the spots cleared out of his eyes, he continued blinking at the man in the tan overcoat and... mouse standing in front of him.

He hissed warily as the man spoke. “Good afternoon, we...” he paused for a moment, “We were hoping that you could answer a few questions for us.”

It wasn’t posed as a question of if he could, it was posed as a statement. Still, he nodded slowly while keeping his eyes on them.

“Wonderful. My name is Detective Tsukauchi, and this here is Princi-

pal Nezu of Yuuei. We found you in the Underground yesterday - why were you there?" His black eyes studied the eight-year-old boy carefully, taking in his defensive stance and cautious glare. "We will know if you aren't speaking the truth, you know."

He cleared his throat quietly. "Ma mère et père gave me to these... men. In coats. In exchange for... money," He whispered, licking his dry lips. Maybe they had water? He would give almost anything for it at this point, even if it was poisoned. "They did experiments... was sold again, too..." he trailed off.

"Experiments?" Mouse-san asked, almost with a tilt of curiosity in his voice. "What type of experiments?"

"They... they wanted m-my blood, and my... Quirk," He responded, a thumb rubbing absently over the scars on his arms. "R-Reo said... he said they were making a perfect weapon. To... to take down the Heroes." He thought back on it now - was that why they kept trying to inject that clear substance into his bloodstream? To make him into a weapon?

"What's your Quirk?" Coat-san queried softly.

"N-Nullify. It ca... it cancels your Quirk." He whispered, eyes widening and feet drawing into an "escape" stance. They would think he was a monster too now, and send him back!

Mouse-san had a calculating look on his face though. "Last question, for now. What's your name?"

"I... Haku."

---

(Chapter 3)

7 years later.

Haku peered up at the tall man looming over the doorway, shaking his head to brush aside a few stray hairs obstructing his eyesight. Upon his desk, sheets of loose paper were stacked up high, teetering dangerously like unstable skyscrapers over empty mugs of coffee and stationery supplies. Call him an overachiever, but Haku wanted to do well in school and make Sasaki-san

proud. He wanted to pay him back for taking him in all those years ago.

“I hope you’re ready for the entrance exam, Haku. Did you catch a few hours of sleep at least?” Nighteye asked, flipping over his warm blankets before laughing maniacally at the face his adopted son made when the cold air hit his skin.

“Of course I didn’t, isn’t it just great when sunset’s at six and then it rises again at eight?” Haku grumbled, throwing a half-hearted glare at the said ball of light streaming through the window. He couldn’t be too mad, though. It kept the temperature on Earth habitable, and he much preferred living and not sleeping over not living at all.

Nighteye grinned a slow, sarcastic smile before it slid off his face, replaced by a frown. “Of course. You’ll have to walk today, I’m afraid we have patrols this morning.”

He responded by rolling out of bed - literally. Flailing to the ground in a bundle of misplaced limbs and tangled bedsheets, Haku let himself relax on the floor for a few minutes, all while internally cursing his ability - well, rather his inability to sleep at night. Apparently, growing children needed eight to ten hours of sleep a day to stay awake - hours of sleep he physically couldn’t get.

Now standing in front of the UA gates, Haku felt his limbs sag with the weights Sasaki-san had forced on him. It wasn’t the first time he’d worn them, though, it was just that they were increased today. The cycle would repeat each week - he’d get used to the new weight, then they’d be increased. They would increase his speed, but he wouldn’t know. He wasn’t allowed to take them off anyways.

Both arms swinging at his sides, Haku surveyed the people in front of him with a fake, cold facade. There would be thousands of examinees today, and he eyed the group of naive students chattering with each other that brushed past his left with a look of disgust. They didn't know how bad it actually was down in the Underground, how many children were kidnapped and sold in criminal organizations, and how many Heroes died on missions because they underestimated their enemies.

Died on missions simply because they were too arrogant to think the other side was strong as well.

Abruptly drawn out of his thoughts, he tripped forward and landed on his shoulder harshly as a boy with extremely sharp teeth, black hair and a name tag that proudly proclaimed his name as "Eijiro Kirishima" crashed into him. The boy immediately bowed in apology, his head slamming down on the ground in front of him.

"That was so unmanly of me! I..." He trailed off, jaw clunking to the ground (and exposing his very interesting teeth) as he saw where his head had landed in his bow.

Y'know, right on top of Haku's ankle, which was probably broken now.

Staring at the boy with a blank look, he spoke. "It is alright, I will simply seek out Chiyo-san before the exam. Good luck, Kirishima-san." Haku nodded at the boy (who still seemed to be in shock that his hardened forehead had broken someone's ankle) before refastening his weights and limping off.

---

Now leaning against the entrance door of the auditorium, testing out his newly-healed ankle, Haku could say for a fact that this exam was biased. Many people had Quirks that affected other humans, but they would be of no use here against giant hunks of metal that had about as much emotion as a blank sheet of paper. He flinched on reflex as Hizashi-san started the introduction.

“For all you little listeners tuning in, welcome to my show today! Everybody say HEY!” The blonde man screamed at the crowd, his hair gleaming in the spotlight.

In the silence that followed, you could hear crickets chirping if you strained your ears enough. Haku twisted his head around, fake-glaring at the loud cockatoo in front of them. His hands were firmly clasped over his ears, but it wouldn’t do much against the noise.

Present Mic cleared his throat awkwardly and laughed. “What a refined response! I’ll quickly present to you the rundown on the practical exam! Are you ready?!”

Haku could hear someone muttering away in the stands, but he tuned them out with practiced ease. You had to be able to ignore distractions when you were on the field as a Hero. Sliding down into a lunge, he continued paying attention to whatever was being said- sorry, hollered at him.

“As it says in the application requirements, all listeners will be conducting ten-minute mock urban battles after this. You can bring whatever you want with you!” Whatever they wanted to bring? He was glad for that because he wasn’t sure his bare fists would do anything against reinforced steel. At least, not without some sort of glove to protect his hands. “After the presentation, you’ll head to the specified battle center, okay?”

Haku already knew all of this information. Sasaki-san valued information and intellect above many other things and had given him an hour-long lecture on the principles and rules of the exam, as well as tips for earning more points and things not to do.

Tuning out what Hizashi-san was explaining, Haku started going through the familiar motions of stretching before any type of exercise. He felt his eyelids droop as he finished, however, and leaned back against the door. Maybe he could catch another fifteen minutes or so of sleep before the exam started.



The sound that Haku woke up to was the sound of a stampede of human footsteps, all pushing their way past him to get to their respective Battle Centers. Drawing out a tanto, he launched it at the ceiling, smiling to himself as the chain that trailed behind it wrapped around one of the metal bars suspended up there. The whirling mechanical sound that accompanied his ascent to the top of the hallway was familiar to him, and he may have internally found pleasure in watching the examinees' faces as he scaled the ceiling using his arms and legs.

God, it was so fun to mess with people sometimes... Haku thought to himself as he swung off the arch of Battle Center B.

**Author's Note:** If there is something you don't understand, try looking it up on the fandom: [https://bokunoheroacademia.fandom.com/wiki/My\\_Hero\\_Academia\\_Wiki](https://bokunoheroacademia.fandom.com/wiki/My_Hero_Academia_Wiki)

## *Tell Me What You Know*

They walked into the small, quiet room, a room was so eerily quiet that one could hear the blinding, fluorescent light above buzzing. They took a seat on a gray armchair in front of the officer. She stared at them, almost as if she was reading their expression and manner while wondering if they were worth her time.

“Where should I start?”

“The beginning”

“Alright...”

“I remember hanging out with my dad all the time, but he always called it ‘boys’ night out’, which made me pretty uncomfortable, since I am non-binary. I remember telling my parents during dinner. They acted fine for the remainder of our meal, but I heard them fighting about it after they thought my sister, Ella, and I went to bed.”

“What do you mean ‘conversion therapy?’ “All we can do is accept them for who they are!”

“He’s confused, Karen, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about! I’m not going to let you ruin our son’s life!”

“Alex is not our son, Matt. They’re our child.”

“No, he isn’t!”

“Then maybe you should leave.”

“Maybe I will!”

“That’s when I heard my dad getting closer to the door, so I raced upstairs to my bed. I was only 11, but I still understood what was going on. They were gonna get a divorce. After it happened, I always felt really bad since I felt like I took part in my divorce, which I did.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well if I had never come out, they never would have divorced.”

“But do you think it was your fault?”

“No, but I still took part in it.”

“Ok, carry on.”

“After a few months, winter rolled around and my mom invited my dad over for Christmas. He refused the invitation though. We did this every year, and every year he refused.”

“You never heard from him before yesterday’s incident?”

“No.”

“I see.”

“When Ella and I moved out and went to college, we were quite dumbfounded by the fact that he was reaching out to us after all these years. I didn’t really want to go, but Ella insisted, so I gave in. I regret it though.”

‘Aw c’mon, we haven’t seen him in so long.’

‘It seems sketchy is all.’

‘He’s our dad,’ she said, ‘what’s the worst that could happen?’

‘I don’t know...’

‘Please?’

‘...Fine’

‘Yay!’

“We went to the address he told us and...”

“How did he contact you?”

“Through text, my mom told me that he had asked her for me and my sister’s number.”

“Ok then.”

“Anyways, we stepped on the porch and knocked on the door, as it didn’t have a doorbell. The house was quite small, and it seemed to be a bit slanted. The paint on the outside was a pale, yet lucid, turquoise, and it was peeling off the walls. Many of the windows were boarded up, with rusty nails sticking out. I pointed this out to Ella, but she waved it off. The roof had black tiles on it, most of which were different sizes and shades. A lot of them

seemed to have fallen onto the ground, for they were scattered everywhere around the house. He opened the door and invited us in with a friendly voice, almost too friendly.”

‘Hey there, you two!’, he said, ‘Long time no see! Last I saw you were just 4 feet tall!

‘We were both 5 foot 7 inches,’ I replied.

‘Stop being so rude!’ Ella whispered, in my ear whilst nudging my leg with hers.

‘Well it’s true,’ I whispered back.

‘Why don’t you two come on in? I’ve got marshmallows, your favourite!

‘We aren’t children.’ I responded

‘Alright’, he said, ‘then how about we just talk? It’s been ages since we’ve done that.’

“Before I could respond, Ella stepped inside. I followed behind her. He pointed us to a couch and told us to make ourselves comfortable before leaving the room.”

‘Ella, everything about him gives me a bad feeling.’

‘What do you mean? He’s so nice!’

‘Too nice.’

‘Oh please, he’s excited to see us! Just toughen up for once.’

‘You know I can’t do that.’

‘Just give him a chance.’

“That’s when he came in with a tray of all sorts of foodstuffs and coffee.”

‘Well, let’s get started then,’ he said. He set the tray down on the coffee table in front of us.

‘Actually, Ella and I were just about to leave for we have some business to attend to.’

‘No, we weren’t,’ she replied, ‘so let’s get started.’

‘I imagine you’re wondering why your mother and I got a divorce in the first place?’

‘Not particularly,’ I responded as Ella nudged me again with her elbow.

‘Well I’ll tell you anyways, it was because of your grandmother.’

‘What?’

‘It’s true, the old hag always hated me, so she told your mother to divorce me, and divorce me she did.’

‘You’re lying,’ I said.

‘No, I’m not, it’s true!’

‘Why are you lying to us?!’

‘What do you mean lying to you, how would you even know if I was lying to you?’

‘Because I was there! I was outside the door, listening to you tell mom about putting me in conversion therapy, about how she wanted to accept me, but you were convinced that you needed to fix me, I heard it all! Why are you lying?!’

‘Alex..., I just had a feeling that you’d hate me for it,’

‘Well you got that right.’

‘I think we should get going,’ Ella said.

‘Well I was hoping to take you two to the old abandoned stadium where we’d go together, like old times.’

‘If it makes you happy, I’ll go with you and Alex can just go home.’

‘Ella let’s both just go home,’ I said persistently.

‘No, Dad clearly wanted to bring us there, so at least he can just bring one of us.’ ‘Besides, I could out-bench press him easily,’ Ella whispered to me.

‘...Fine,’ I replied.

‘Ok then, let’s go,’ Dad said.

‘You better be back at our apartment by 12:00 Ella,’ I told her in a serious tone.

‘I will, I promise.’

“That’s when they left and I never heard from her again since she’s, well...”

“That’s all I need to hear Alex, thank you.”



“Well are they going to look for him?”

“We have already tried to bring him in for questioning and although we are doing our best, we haven’t been able to locate him just yet.”

“What?!”

“We are doing our best to ensure that...”

“He clearly killed my sister! How much more evidence do you need?”

“Alex, we aren’t doubting your claims, there is currently a search going on for your father and that’s all we can do.”

“Fine, I’m leaving.”

“Also remember you are not permitted to leave the city.”

“I know, I know.”

Alex walked down the street towards their apartment, and as they did, they noticed a figure following them. Alex tried to get them off their tail by going into the alleyways. They thought their attempt was successful, for when they looked behind them, there was no one there. Instead of panicking, they continued on their way home, as it was around midnight and they were very tired. As Alex approached their apartment door, they noticed the light was on. Slowly, Alex opened the door, and once they stepped into the room, they stopped dead in their tracks, their heart pounding in their chest, it was beating so fast and so intensely they thought it would burst out. Their legs felt weak, their arms went frail, they thought they would collapse, every part of their body was sweating profusely. They wanted to yell, to scream at the top of their lungs, yet they didn’t find themselves doing so. They couldn’t believe who was looming there before their very eyes.

## *To The Man Who Let Me Go*

Dear Dad,

Hello. It's me, Mia, your daughter that you abandoned at the age of seven. I know you barely know me but I'm just writing to you to tell you that I miss you. Remember the day when you took me to the park and pushed me down the slides? I giggled and I remember being so happy. I never knew that the next morning I would wake up and you'd be gone. I remember running to your room that morning and seeing that there was a tear-stained note on your and mom's bedside table. I looked over at your bed and mom was crying and what I thought was you was only George comforting her. He turned to me and motioned for me to come over. Instead I decided to grab the note and run to my room. As I was reading it the memories of my loving father turned to stone. When I finished the note I saw you as a horrible person that left my mother, brother, and me for some rich family in Dallas. I hope your life has been great for the past five years compared to your life with us here in Toronto. So good that you've forgotten about us and didn't bother to even write to us. I hope you write back and try not to let me down again.

Sincerely,

Mia Smith

Dear Dad,

Hi, it's me again, your angry daughter that you abandoned at the age of seven and won't write back to. Do you know how long you've been gone? It's been six years! Six whole years since you left us and you haven't even written back with a "hey what's up?" or how about "how have you been" or even "don't write to me ever again". Anything just to know that you're alive. It's not like

I'm going to forgive you for what you did, but do you not want to know how I've been? What about George and Mom? George is an annoying 17-year-old and has a girlfriend! What about mom's fiancé! What about me? Did you even know the past few things that have happened in our lives? Like how I've been depressed and having anxiety attacks. Mom thinks that the doctors are right about the fact that I need a father figure in my life. Mom thinks Tom, her fiancé, will help but he's not you. He's not the same man that I loved and believed in six years ago. You're not even that same man either anyway.

Sincerely,  
Mia Smith

Dear Dad,

Hi, it's me yet again writing to you for the third time without a response. I'd like to say I've been having a great seven years without a father but sadly that isn't possible. Tom ended up filing for a divorce just one month after they got married so that's just terrific. What should I expect if my real dad let me down too. I thought I finally had a second chance at having a good father with Tom but I guess Mom isn't good at picking trustworthy men. You'd think I hate you and am so angry at you for leaving us. I should be but I miss you too much to hate you. I am your daughter, I deserve an answer from you, at least a sentence or two. Mom threw out every picture of you so I barely remember what you look like. George managed to hide a few photos of you from Mom but no matter how hard I stare at them it's never enough. I need to see you! I'm not even allowed to say your name in the house. Mom will start screaming if she hears it, I guess she's not as forgiving as me. Do you not feel bad for what you did? Maybe a "sorry Mia" or a "I didn't mean to hurt you that much Mia". But I know that you meant to hurt Mom and me that much because why else wouldn't you respond to your own daughter? But how should I know, I'm just a dumb 14-year-old that doesn't deserve a loving father. I think this may be my last letter if you don't write back because I can't keep letting you let me down. Please, please, please just write back already.

Sincerely,  
Mia Smith

Dear Dad,

Nevermind what I said before about not being able to hate you from missing you so much. I don't think I miss you so much anymore. I can't remember any of our good times together because the thought of you letting me down is clouding my memory. I hope you'll be happy to know that I've gotten over my depression and I am no longer having anxiety attacks. But wait, you probably don't even care. It turns out I don't need a father figure in my life. I don't need you or Tom, I'm an independent young woman like I was forced to be. I don't need you to respond anymore. To be quite frank I don't think I will write to you again after this. Also, as an independent woman I decided to take Mom's last name instead. Goodbye, Father.

Sincerely,  
Mia Miller

Dear Dad,

I know I said I would never write to you again but it's been 10 years since my last letter. I'm 28 years old, I'm married, and I have a son, Grayson Thompson. He just turned one and unlike me, he has a father and one grandfather. Mom has been in many relationships since my last letter but none of them lasted. I really think you should meet my son. I don't think you know this but you are his grandfather. Don't you owe it to us to respond, we still need to see you, I still need you.

Sincerely,  
Mia Thompson-Miller

Dear Mia Thompson-Miller,

Hi, my name is Heather, I'm Edward's wife. We were married for 15 years but sadly he passed away one year ago from cancer. I'm sorry you found

out this way. Anyway, I read your letter and I noticed that these two letters I found in the attic must belong to you.

Heather Goodwin

Dear Mia,

I have never stopped thinking about the day I left you and our family. I've regretted leaving you but I know I did the right thing at the time. In a moment of really poor judgement, I made a mistake. A really big mistake. The bills were overdue and I was struggling to put food on the table. We really needed the money, I couldn't resist. Before I knew it, my fingers were wrapped around a big wad of cash and it was stuffed into my pocket. Before anyone saw I closed the safe and since the bank was closing I got my stuff and left. My boss started to investigate and he was getting suspicious. I was scared that I'd end up in jail and hurt the family even more financially than if I just disappeared. I thought I was making the right decision by leaving but I was wrong. I miss you all so much. I wish I could see you one last time. I am so sorry and I hope there is a way you can forgive me. I do not want you to remember me as the guy who abandoned you and our family and never came back but I was too scared and ashamed of myself. Please forgive me.

Love,

Edward

Dear Mia,

Thank you for all your thoughtful and rarely kind letters. I am so sorry I never answered, I did not want to hurt you. If you read your mother's letter you will see why I did not want to respond. I have been so worried about you for the years I have missed. I wanted to write back so much but I could not do that to you. I am so regretful that I missed precious time with you as you have grown up. I have dreaded not being with you and your brother for all those years. I wish I could go back in time to when you were a little girl and give you one last hug. You mean the world to me and I hope you can

find a way to forgive me.  
Your loving father,  
Edward



## *Gone With the Stars*

Suyeon woke covered in cobwebs.

Tasting dust in her mouth, she winced and rolled onto her side. A world of pain greeted her like buttery, morning light. Her favourite hanbok was shredded to the point where it seemed unrecognizable. A smear of blood crusted her cheek—but she was not further wounded than that. Stifling a grunt, she forced herself to sit up straight. She hardly recognized where she was, but stringing together fragments of logic, there was really only one place she ought to be.

Her prison cell was floored with a layer of hay. Wooden, crisscrossing bars caged her in. Untangling the webs from her hair, Suyeon crawled toward the poles. The atmosphere was disturbingly silent. She peered outside, scanning the hallway periphery.

A wave of nausea washed over her. The prison was utterly empty. Dazedly, Suyeon scrambled back to the corner and glanced at the lattice ceiling.

She suddenly heard the rhythmic stamp of feet marching toward her cell. Fingers prickling with ice, Suyeon's eyes darted to the source of the noise, expecting guardsmen. Instead, her heart nearly stopped.

Half of her prediction was correct. The entire hallway was flushed with men, faces stoic and swords fastened at their hips. However, they were circled upon a prominent figure. On the other side of the bars was the queen herself, dressed in a dark hanbok. The shimmery cloth spilled down from her figure like a waterfall. Pale chrysanthemums decorated the petticoat, stitches so fine that the entire dress seemed like a canvas. Her skin was snowy and her eyes were colder, gazing upon Suyeon imperiously.

A rift of silence flowed between them. The tension, already suffocating Suyeon, threatened to snap.

The queen parted her lips. “You have the Devil’s luck, to be kneeling here before me.” Her voice was a sword of ice, sinking into Suyeon’s chest.

You should have been killed.

“D-Daebi,” Suyeon choked out, falling to the ground into a bow. “I apologize a thousand times.”

Why wasn’t I killed?

“A decision has been made.” The queen’s mouth crimped into a blackened frown. “We have considered all but everything. Flogging, imprisonment, banishment...”

And execution. Stars above, they were going to sentence her to death by a thousand cuts.

But before she could finish, Suyeon started babbling. “Daebi, I beseech of you—please, grant me mercy. I held no knowledge of my father’s schemes, nor his plans on murdering His Majesty. I will do anything and everything to repent—”

A shattering laugh escaped from the queen. “Do not think I will let you go so easily. I care not whether you were involved. You are the child of Han Ahn-Ji-- the daughter of a murderer.”

Suyeon’s limbs wobbled as the room seemed to spin.

“Your execution will take place at first light.”

This wasn’t how it was supposed to end.

“No!”

A guttural cry erupted from Suyeon’s throat. Before thinking, she launched herself at the wooden beams. Gasps arose, and then—thwack! The pain clawed at her battered body. But she was so close, a measly half-pace away. So close she could smell magnolia perfume.

At once, the guardsmen unsheathed their swords. The queen’s eyes went wild and burned with fury as she snarled. However, at that moment, a minister in royal robes leaned in and whispered something faster than she could

order a beheading. The queen's expression immediately morphed, from anger to confusion, and...

"My minister has proposed something intriguing." Her steely gaze unfolded into something cruel. "We offer you a bargain."

The ground fell. A bargain? "What?"

The queen smiled beautifully. "It would be a pity for those hands of yours to go to waste. Perhaps you can use your artistic gifts to save yourself?"

Again, Suyeon was at a loss.

"Ahn-Ji spoke highly of your landscapes, Han Suyeon." The minister spoke this time. "Your work is known around the community. They call you the Blind Painter, for you colour skies crimson and meadows violet."

Of course she knew of her name. How would she not know about her colourblindness, her flaw? Suyeon swallowed the lump in her throat. "What does my work have to do with anything?"

"Simply, you will paint a portrait of the king before tomorrow morning."

Suyeon gawked at him while the queen simpered on.

"It will be devastatingly beautiful," she crooned. "It will be the most wonderful artwork. If you please me, I will spare you. I'll allow you to live as a slave."

But if it fails to do so...your execution awaits."

Suyeon shuddered. She didn't know what to think or feel. A painting of the king? That was no bargain; it was a mockery. They merely wished to crush her, for her to live her last moments feeling nothing but despair. "Your Majesty's grace is immeasurable," she spoke instead.

The queen only laughed.

Surprisingly, supplies were given. But none of that really mattered; she was sure the queen would sentence her to death either way.

Tears pricked her eyes. Gods, Suyeon couldn't even recall the king's face. After an hour of no progress, she sat in the corner to take a break.

That evening, while she was adding butterflies, Suyeon heard footsteps approaching her cell. It was the minister, unaccompanied, gingerly holding a candle. She turned away to hide her swollen eyes.

"Why did you do it?" Suyeon's voice wavered. "Why did you suggest that to the queen?"

After a long pause, he finally said: "We were good friends, your father and I."

"So you tried to save me out of pity?" Her laugh was humourless. "You've only made it worse."

"I urged the queen to make use of your artistry, not—"

"No. Please, just leave me alone." It came out as barely a whisper. But seeing her state, the pained look on her face, the man understood.

And then, without another word, he was gone.

\* \* \*

"Little Flower, why are you out here tonight?"

Her father's hand tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Together, they sat outside on the veranda and gazed at the pale moon.

Suyeon couldn't remember the last time her father had spoke to her so freely. His work kept him so busy, she would not see him for days on end. "I am looking for inspiration."

"For a painting?" he chuckled. A breeze strolled by, grabbing the layers of his willowy hanbok. "You will fall ill staying out here too long."

Suyeon frowned. "I want to see what 'colours' are, Father."

"And why?"

"Because I will never be an artist without knowing 'colours.'"

His gaze trailed up at the sky. "Do not let a label chain you to the ground. Colourblind or not, under the stars, we are all the same."

If he spoke true, Suyeon did not feel a change in her heart. An artist who cannot see colours cannot see anything at all, she thought bitterly.

As if reading her mind, he patted her head. "An artist needs not co-

lours, but dedication. I have faith in you, Little Flower.”

\* \* \*

Suyeon was dreaming.

Her hand still cramped from painting too long. The night overflowed her, prismatic light dancing on her skin. Her fingers entwined with the tendrils. She could feel them; whispers, glimmers in the sky. Everything. It was then, she saw iridescent liquid flow from above.

The tears of stars, pouring into a painting.

At first gong's strike, the queen marched to Suyeon's cell. The hallway trembled with the trampling of feet. When they stopped in front of the wooden bars, the queen strode closer. Suyeon, shivering and pallid, sat in the middle, holding a cream-coloured paper.

Silently, she revealed the painting. A shriek of rage rose from the queen.

It was blindingly beautiful.

A late summer meadow with rolling hills of sweet grass. Birds and butterflies dancing on freshly-bloomed Roses of Sharon, covered in amber sunlight. At the centre was an aged man, his eyes sparkling of youth and a tender smile pulling on his lips. Not the king. Han Ahn-Ji.

Her father.

She heard words and screaming, but they passed in a blur. Suyeon felt the air freeze as the painting began to move. The scenery glowed a brilliant white, scorching into her retinas. She took a step forward...and then another. Suyeon ignored the queen's horrified face. The tips of her fingers brushed the smooth, painted surface.

They dipped in with ease, like a quill pen submerging into ink.

The paper swallowed her whole as a rippling sensation flowed through her body. Suyeon felt a familiar warmth encase her. Down, she fell—and into a pair of arms that embraced her like a lover. A pair of arms, so warm.

It was her father, blinking and laughing and his glittery smile upon

Suyeon. The entire star-strewn sky orbited around them. She felt his heart-beat, his breath against her cheek until everything stilled into nothingness.

The painting glimmered for the last time and ceased to move. In the meadow of hibiscus and milk butterflies were a father and his daughter, embracing each other so tightly.

## *Grief*

Everything is wrong. The sea of mourners swathed in black with their pitying eyes is wrong. The ancient church with its massive stained-glass windows, dusty tapestries and creaking wooden pews is wrong. And the white metal coffin, the one my best friend—now a cold, unfeeling mannequin—is lying inside, is definitely wrong.

\*\*\*

Elaine and I had been best friends for seven years, since fourth grade. She took the flamingo pink colored pencil I wanted to use, so I cut off one of her pigtails with my craft scissors. The ensuing fight broke a sink and flooded the art classroom.

\*\*\*

“Elaine Liang lived a beautiful life, filled with joy and happiness. Even in her darkest hour, she always smiled.”

Wrong.

“She was the best forward the Lincoln High Bucks ever had. Basketball was everything to her.”

She hated basketball. She wanted to be a jazz pianist.

\*\*\*

I pointed my toes to the sky and let my head fall back. My hair fluttered around my face. My swing reached the peak of its arc and fell backwards. I tucked my feet in and lifted my head in time to see her tall, slim figure emerge from the trees. I leapt from the seat, landed off-balance and fell flat on my face. She pulled me to my feet and wrapped me in a bear-hug.

I inhale, trying to recapture the smell of Elaine’s favorite vanilla sugar perfume, but all I smell is blood and the acrid stench of gun smoke.

\*\*\*



I gag at the sickly-sweet odor of the endless white bouquets before rising unsteadily with the congregation to sing a hymn in honor of Elaine. My vision is so blurred from tears I can't make out the words in the hymn book. When I close my eyes, I see black boots approaching. I hear someone whistling "Yankee Doodle."

\*\*\*

At the mall, Elaine and I sat in the grimy old food court on the two least dirty stools we could find. We munched on McMuffins and listened to our joint playlist, sharing one set of earbuds. We were listening to one of my favorites, "Rap God" by Eminem. I shut out "Amazing Grace" and try to hear our music instead, but all I can hear is the pop pop pop of gunfire. All my contributions to the playlist were rap and pop songs. Elaine added Bach, Beethoven, blues and jazz. I'm ashamed to admit I was jealous of her. She was sophisticated, but open-minded. She aced every AP class she took. I was mediocre at everything I did. Everything.

\*\*\*

"Elaine had so many friends and admirers."

What friends, true friends, did she have other than me? I loved her. Did they?

"Her family..."

Her real father abandoned the family. Her stepfather ignored her. The only things he cared about were Budweiser and the LA Kings. Her mother's primary focus was Pilates.

\*\*\*

The ficus branch was uncomfortable to sit on but put me at eye level with her bedroom window. The shade was drawn, but I knew her room so well, I could practically see it. "Psssst!" I hissed. No reply. "Elaine!" I called. I scream, but no sound comes out. I am frozen in fear. Again, nothing. Irritated, I wrenched one of my Nike sneakers off and threw it at the window. Too late, I saw the window open. My shoe hit Elaine squarely on the forehead. "Oops," I said. Elaine rubbed her forehead and scowled. Then she dropped her hand

and beckoned me in, her smile bright and joyful once more.

\*\*\*

Elaine's mother walks towards the podium. Elaine would've made fun of her outfit. She wears a long black veil, a black gown, and a draping black shawl. She looks like an oversized bat.

"My little girl was—" Elaine's mother sobs. "So good, so brave, even at the very end. She was my baby. I have loved her since the day she was born, and I will never stop loving her."

\*\*\*

I lifted the ice pack from Elaine's forehead. "I really am sorry."

She gestured at the growing lump on her forehead. "Please tell me this was worth it."

"Well..."

"Oh come on! There's always something going on you want to drag me off to. Sorry, 'whisk me away' to."

"Okay, fine. I just got tickets to the P!nk concert tonight!"

\*\*\*

It is my turn to speak. I don't think I can. I have my speech written on the crumpled ball of paper now clenched in my fist, but my tongue is as heavy as lead.

My mother pats my back. "You can do this."

\*\*\*

When the security officer finished looking through my purse, he beckoned me forward. He directed me to stand on a rubber mat. His face was neutral, and his voice was monotone. "Arms up. Feet apart." He swiped the wand over my arms, legs and torso.

\*\*\*

"Elaine was my best friend. I was with her in her last moments." It's my fault. "She loved jazz. She loved Frank Sinatra, Friends and Rocky Road ice cream." I swallow a sob. "I don't know... I don't know what I am going to do without her. "She... I... We..." I sob, clamping my hand over my mouth.

Tears stream down my face. I run back to my parents.

\*\*\*

The sound of gunfire peppered the air, growing faster and louder. People dropped left and right. The music stopped. Men in suits swarmed P!nk and rushed her offstage. Screams pierced the air.

I grabbed Elaine's hoodie and pulled her to the ground. All around us, people dropped everything and ran for the exits. Some didn't make it and crumpled to the floor. Together, we crawled away from the fallen bodies. I scraped my knees and elbows on the rough cement but kept moving. I bit my tongue and a warm metallic taste filled my mouth. We'd only made it to the security table when we heard the shooter's wheezy breathing and incoherent mumbling. A dead woman lying in front of our table stared at me with glassy eyes that could not see. My heart pounded. I scooted backwards under the table and dragged Elaine after me. We sat clutching each other, frozen, beneath the table and watched the black boots pace back and forth, listening to every gunshot and hearing every moan and whimper.

Suddenly, the boots stopped. Right in front of our table. Right in front of me. Elaine started shaking and covered her eyes. I ducked behind her. I heard a noise like thunder, and she fell back on me. I could see her choking on blood, but all I heard was a loud ringing, like a fire alarm. The long, black barrel of the gun poked under the table once more. I pulled Elaine's limp body up over me like a blanket. I don't want to die. Another gunshot. Please don't let me die.

Police sirens began to wail. The black boots turned and ran away. Elaine moaned. She tilted her head back to look into my eyes and whispered, "Why?"

## *1 of the 176*

Who knows, and knows that he knows,  
Makes the horse of intelligence jump over the vault of heaven.  
Who does not know, yet knows he does not know,  
Can nevertheless bring his lame little donkey to its destination.  
Who does not know, and does not know that he does not know,  
Remains mired forever in double ignorance.  
Naser al-Din Tusi

How did you find out about him?  
Just like everybody else  
and it broke my heart.  
How did you feel?  
<Chuckles>  
Who cares? After all nobody gives a shit  
Even you  
You pretend to care  
You wanna know how I feel?  
It felt like my heart was shattered into pieces  
I felt like a crumpled piece of paper.  
Wasted.  
Useless.  
The more I yelled, the less people cared.  
It felt like everybody clicked the mute button on me.  
Sorry ...

Tell me more about him.

\*\*\*

When I was a child, you signed me up for piano classes.

You told me, don't be one dimensional.

You danced around the house while I played "Autumn, Autumn, Autumn" for you.

Happy, like today is your last day.

You taught me math.

Telling me math teaches you to think systematically,

Math is more than just a bunch of equations.

On Sundays, we played chess with no timers

While drinking tea with Persian nabat

Took hours to finish

You always won.

You read Hafez and Shahnameh to me.

I'm twelve years old now,

preparing for a science test.

You see me memorize formulas

You get angry,

Take away the book

You tell me, never ever memorize a thing in your life.

Instead, understand it.

Digest it.

Then it will be stuck in your mind forever.

Every year,

You take me to the tomb of Cyrus The Great  
Preserve the culture.  
We are not Iranians, We are Persians.  
We have written the Charter of Cyrus  
The foundation of today's Western human rights.

Persia,  
The place where tradition is respected,  
Where there is no slavery,  
Where the oppressor is punished  
Where there is freedom of religion.  
Sadly, it's not like that anymore.

You taught me physics with patience.  
What is acceleration?  
You answer with love.  
What is acceleration?  
You never tired.

You have a heart as big as the universe.  
Thick arteries, filled with streams of rich blood.  
Filled with passion and love.

You work day and night  
To provide a better life for me  
I ask why?  
You tell me,  
One for all and all for one  
It took me five years to find out it's not your quote  
Of course,  
I'll never send you to a retirement house.

You kneel down,  
Use your bare hands and tore your chest open  
I see your heart  
Pounding like a timpanist playing the timpani for a Prokofiev symphony  
Allowing me to feed on you.  
You allow me to live.

Without you,  
The world would crash  
Collapse to emptiness  
There would be no difference between day and night.  
There would be no hope.  
Without you I would be nothing.  
This is what I call true love, the rest is just affection.

\*\*\*

"Only two more days." I said, "Mom could we talk with dad?"  
She sighed, "Let me see, right now it's eight am. Eight plus eight is sixteen, minus twelve is four. It's four pm, he is working, but you can try!"  
<Ringing>  
"Hey Farnoosh, could I talk with dad?"  
"Oh hey, Aria. Yeah, you can. He is not seeing anybody right now."  
"Hi dad, how is it going?"  
"Hey, ooh trivia question: how many hearts does an octopus have?"  
"Umm, one?"  
"Boo, it's three. Are you going to school?"  
"Yeah, when is your flight time?"  
"It's 1 am, and I believe I have a stop in Ukraine. Anyway, I have to go.  
I'll see you guys soon!"



“Bye.”

The smell of baked goods has filled the school. Christmas spirit. Everybody smiling, singing “Jingle Bells.” Inviting me to sing. I refuse. I will not smile back. Maybe I’m crazy, but I’ll never become affiliated with such a thing. I shall be an outsider in this so-called home. I’ll never give in. Not like those Iranians who come to this country, put aside their past, and call themselves Canadians. Their parents make sure to send their kids here at least by age ten, making sure their children will lose their thick Iranian accent.

They’ll say, “Oh, when did you send your kid away?” Fifteen. They’ll say with pity, “Uh, don’t worry. Hopefully he loses his accent. See, I sent my kid at age nine. She speaks just like Canadians.” Oh look at you, you are proud of yourself. You think others will not see that she is Iranian. The funniest one is the Persian kid with her fake British accent. Pretending. Don’t worry your secret is safe, but just a hint: make sure to change your last name as well. Try “Evans,” sounds British enough.

Huh. They think they will fool me. I don’t need to see your thick black hair, or your Persian eyebrows to see you are Iranian. I can smell you from a mile away and tell. I hate those people. They are traitors. They are the ones who kill my culture. I will not be them. They will pity me, but I will never ever give in.

Others, one day tell me I’m a terrorist. Another day, they ask me to say allahu akbar. I’m Persian. I speak Persian, not Arabic you fool. It means God is great anyway, so just chill. They force me to learn about Halloween. The traitors tell me, “What’s wrong with you, why don’t you just embrace the culture? Do you know how many Iranians want to be in your place? You are living in a developed country. Don’t be spoiled!”

Why would I embrace yours when I have my own? You have Christmas, huh? I have Nowruz. You have Halloween, huh? I have the Festival of Fire, Charshanbe Souri.

You practice yours, and I will practice my own.

What happened after?  
Then the plane crashed.

Let's take a break. What class do you have next?  
Math.  
See you next week, at the same time?  
Yeah.

\*\*\*

We had enough money to at least survive. We were one of the lucky ones.  
Here are some true stories:

"What the fuck should I do? My husband who was supposed to be a doctor in two months just passed away. The government. No word exists for me to show my hatred for them. I now have to pay a 300k student debt, I am a housewife and I have one young child. How am I going to live?"

"Curse all of you! My child with her husband just came here for a wedding ceremony. They were leaving to get on with their lives. Damn the government. They were good, smart people. Damn you!"

"How is 50k gonna save my life? I have no job, and got children to feed."

"I lost my whole family, they were coming to see me. No one will even be at my funeral. HOW CAN I LIVE?"

\*\*\*

Hey dad, where are you? I need you man. Mom doesn't say a word. I got no one dad. What should I do? WHAT SHOULD I DO? <Sobs>

Mom at least said a few sentences this week. "The best way to survive is to go back to the normal life. You should go to school." It is not the time to argue. She said, "the school emailed me today, they want you to go to Guidance once a week. I agree." I sighed, "What are they gonna do?"

And now we are here.

I feel your grief

<Chuckles>

Sure.

What are you going to do?

I honestly don't know.

Do you have any friends in the school?

No.

Why? You seem sociable.

Why not? Canada is such a diverse country, can't you find one person?

Maybe.

How do you feel right now?

I just want to be normal,

Just like everybody else.

\*\*\*

I walk into the cemetery. The gloomy silence gives me comfort. I pass tombstones, one after another. Dozens have sobbed on each one of these. I understand why others thought that way about me. Why the traitors acted the way they did. I understand now. I kept telling myself you and I are different. I didn't give them any chance. I am ready now. Don't worry, I won't erase my culture, neither should you. We will co-exist. We will include each other in our lives. I will give you Persian food and you will give me some of yours.

Hello dad, I forgot to tell you:

I can play Chopin's Fantasie-Impromptu, thanks to you.

I can play chess, thanks to you.

I can understand, thanks to you.

I can think, thanks to you.

I have confidence, thanks to you.

I am living, thanks to you.

One for all and all for one.

## *I Spy*

“Yousef! Come bring the cow. She needs to be milked,” Umi called from the chicken pen.

“Inaa qadam, Umi!” I said, and grabbed the metal pails and headed to the old wooden stalls. Amira, our cow, was getting thinner each day and was providing less milk. She no longer stood up with the strength she used to have and was slumped against one side of the stall. Her big bones protruded under her no-longer silky, brown coat. We tried to breed her with the neighbour’s bull, but it didn’t work.

After milking the cow and cleaning her stall, I went inside to cool off. Through the cracked, dusty window I could still see Umi feeding and tending to the chickens. How easy it would have been if Baba were here. He should not have left. “Umi! Come inside, it’s hot out,” I shouted from the screen door. She put down the heavy pail of chicken feed and wiped the sweat from her dirt-smudged face. Her gentle face had grown coarse and rough from years of hard work, but she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She had green eyes that resembled that of an Arabian emerald sea, fair olive skin that gleamed in the sunlight, and long golden brown hair that reached her waist that was always covered by a white scarf. “I am going to rest for awhile, habibi. Can you go to the market?”

“Nem, Umi,” I responded and grabbed whatever money we had left. Before leaving, I took Umi to her room and covered her with the old Afghan shawl Baba gave her when they were newly married. “Rest well, Umi,” I said and kissed her forehead.

The sun beat down on our backs as we played soccer in the dusty court-

yard with a ball made of rags. It wasn't much; but it was fun. There were many times where we played until sundown, completely unaware of the darkening sky and the birth of radiant stars above our heads. Each of our mothers would come up the hill with a sandal ready to beat us for staying out too late, and we would laugh, trying to dodge them. Eventually, we said our goodbyes to each other and walked back to our homes, our mothers chiding us for the hundredth time for staying out late.

Omar, the oldest of all the boys and the best player, kicked the ball so hard, it flew like a nasir over our heads and bounced down the alley between two blacksmiths shops. "I'll get it," I said and jogged to the alley.

The ball was moving downhill so fast, so I sped up, trying to catch up to it. A street was coming up so I sprinted harder, trying to reach it before it bounded into the streets. Before I could stoop down to catch it, a stray trash bag with a mind of its own caught my foot and I tripped, heading straight for the busiest street in Yemen. Fear coursed through my body as I neared the passing cars. I closed my eyes, but I didn't feel it; I was caught in mid air somehow. Was I dead? I opened my eyes and looked into the busy street, but I hadn't collided with anything. I looked to my right, and a young boy who looked exactly like me, was gripping my arm with an incredible strength, and had the naughty ball trapped underneath his foot. "Are you okay?" He asked with eyes that mirrored exactly mine.

"Nem. Thank you, shaiqi." I said as I righted myself.

"You're welcome. My name is Yacoub," He said and extended a long hand to me. I shook it.

"Yousef," I replied. For a young boy in this part of Yemen, he seemed pretty clean and put together. His clothes were nicer than mine and there wasn't a single speck of dirt on him.

"Who are you? Where are you from?" I asked, eyeing the silver pendant that hung around his neck, the exact one I was wearing. "I'm from Dubai. My Baba owns a business there in which he makes robots. We came here to visit someone, but he hasn't told me who."

I knew my Baba owned a robot business. This boy sounded and looked exactly like me. His green eyes matched mine, his dark brown hair tousled in the same way mine was, and his brown skin shimmered the same as mine under the sun.

I gasped in disbelief. “La! It couldn’t be. My Baba owns a robot business, and look,” I pulled out my silver pendant and yanked out the rest of his to compare. They were the exact same. We looked up at each other, goofy grins spreading on our faces at the same time. “Twins!” We exclaimed at the same time, and burst into a fit of giggles.

From that day on, Yacoub was my best friend. We did everything together, from playing soccer with the other boys to chasing our kites into the sunset. I would be lost without him.

The day before Yacoub left with Baba, we were laying down on the warm rocks next to a pond, watching the sun slowly sink down into its crib. I turned my head to look at Yacoub. “Yaky, what is Baba like? I want to see him.” He suddenly became tense, as if talking about Baba made him feel uncomfortable. “Er.. he’s really funny. And smart for sure. He doesn’t have time for me often though.”

“What kind of experiments does he have? Do you have your own robots?” I said, excited for his response. He didn’t seem excited however. “He makes cool robots is all I know, shaqiq. He’s busy and doesn’t have that much time to tell me about them.” He turned over then, as if he were to fall asleep. Perhaps Baba wasn’t that great of a man as I had thought.

“Come on,” I said, changing the subject, “Let’s go swimming!” I took off my shirt and shoes and dived in, making a big splash. “Okay,” Yacoub said, laughing and followed in step.

“Let me put my necklace back first. I don’t want it to get ruined.” I stepped back onto the rock and removed the necklace. Then I heard it. A sizzling sound, like the sound when Umi cooks meat in the big pot, then a pop, and a metallic explosion.



I turned to the pond and saw Yacoub, twitching and quivering in the water, sparks flying like fireworks and crackling sounds erupting up into the air.

***Translations:***

*Iinaa qadam - I am coming*

*Shaqiq - brother*

*Nem - yes*

*La - no*

*Nasir - eagle*

## *The Masked Girl*

We sit in a circle laughing and talking

We're all ok.

All fine.

She's fine she says as she pulls back the crinkling plastic to check how  
many evil calories are in her cookie

She's fine she says as she looks at the dark circles under her eyes

She's fine she says as she notices she hasn't smiled

since that last time she ate,

since the last time she spoke,

Since the last time she loved herself

since she stopped taking up space.

She's fine she says

Over and

Over

Until her face is a mask of fine's and ok's

Clinging to her skin like droplets of water

Scared to fall

Girls wearing this mask.

sitting in silence

Not daring to admit that they're in pain.

Not daring to explain why they throw these harsh words at themselves  
That cut the skin on their wrists  
And empty their stomachs.

Because it's all so normal.

Girls believe that it's normal to starve themselves.  
It's normal to feel tired and empty all the time.  
That it's normal to feel like they're walking on a tightrope, just waiting  
to slip and fall.

Each day we paint on our red smiles,  
Put some pink on our cheeks to replace the life that once rushed  
through our veins,  
We put away our silence,  
Hiding it in our books,  
In our backpacks,  
In our pencil cases.

We are not all fine.

We are not all happy.

We are not all silly.

We are all different and individual people  
blades of green grass on one giant field

We look uniform, but each blade has its own curves and cuts

We deserve to have feelings  
And we deserve to express them.  
We should get angry, and sad and mad.

As I write these words I sit in my room.  
with my mask hidden beneath my bed  
A corner just peeking out  
I very rarely let it force its way onto my skin,  
But  
The cold looks from other girls with the same dreadful mask,  
The perfection that I strive to uphold,  
And the fear of this perfection wavering

Make that mask creep out

I walk my tightrope every day,  
Just managing to hold my legs steady

I try to wear my heart on my sleeve, because the warm love and comfort on my skin keeps the mask from sticking.

But most girls aren't aware of their masks.

They don't know how to turn their insides out.  
How to live in colour  
With feelings,  
And hearts  
And minds

How to fall off that tight rope  
And have a field  
of soft  
green  
blades of grass waiting to catch you

The funny thing about loneliness is that we all feel it at the same time

All the crushed blades of grass in that field feeling the same pain  
That same judgment  
Each walking their own tightrope  
Slowly turning to brown husks

With their masks

Firmly

Gripping their faces.

## *Our Bodies*

I love food. I love the way food makes me feel, and I love the way food brings people together. My relationship with my dad in particular is complicated, but through every debate, every discrepancy, the kitchen is no man's land. The dwelling of food is always the sight of a truce, and is always where we make up over a batch of precious chewy chip bars. As I get older, however, my friends and I deal with classic high school dilemmas, and my love of food is increasingly repressed. When I was a little girl, I felt such a high from all the flavours presented in all of my favourite meals, and I ate quickly, wanting to consume as much as I could as soon as I could, but nowadays, I find myself scrutinizing every bite I take.

How many calories is this?

If I only eat half, I'll be fine.

Did she eat more or less than I did?

I don't think this is any one person's fault, but I know for a fact that I am not alone.

Anorexia, Body Dysmorphia, Bulimia. These are scary words, and because of the incredible volume of stigma surrounding them, they are avoided indefinitely when describing the alarming eating habits of so many teenage girls. I am not suggesting that we diagnose everyone who thinks about what they eat with an eating disorder, but I do believe that more effort has to be put into teaching girls at a young age that practices like starving yourself, should not be normalized.

Sometimes, when I look in the mirror, I see a petite, blonde girl. Av-

eragely pretty, short torso, thin straight hair. Blue eyes, and freckles scattered across my nose. I see that I am strong. I have a line protruding down from where my ribs meet, indicating that I have partially defined abs. When I turn to the side, I am satisfied with the curve of my stomach, and the little dents giving away my ribs reassure me that I'm not putting on weight. I see someone who I truly believe is good-looking. Well, sometimes...

On a much more regular basis, I look in the mirror, and I see how wide my rib cage is. How I barely have a waist because the distance between my hip bone and my bottom rib is only a few, puny inches. I see my randomly-placed thigh gap where it looks so wrong that I am constantly attempting to pull it even wider. I see a huge forehead, every possible imperfection on my face, and elf ears that protrude so far from my head that I can never put my hair up in a ponytail in public without my childhood nickname "Mousey" haunting me.

Most days, I don't like my body. I don't like it at all. But no fourteen-year-old girl, at least not the ones surrounding me, likes theirs either. So it's normal? Is it normal to cry after someone takes a so-called "ugly" photo of you? Is it normal to be terrified of wearing the same top as your best friend, just because you think she'll look better? She'll look skinnier. She's prettier than you. You're gross. You suck. You, are worthless.

And how do we deal with this never ending conveyor belt of self-doubt, you might ask?

We stop eating. We binge and purge. It's simple.

Food becomes the enemy. It's normal.

What is normal? What should be normal? Should our insecurities as young women push us so far that we genuinely, with our whole hearts, hate ourselves?

If not, then why is it a reality? We could blame it on the media. The stereotypical image of the perfect girl. But from my perspective, having to live in the climax of this world every single day, I don't believe that is the root of the problem.



All over the world, girls are silently screaming for help. Every day is a struggle. Because every day we all deal with the never ending pressure to fit into a certain box that has been shaped and compacted by every single expectation we are subjected to. Now picture finally squeezing into that box, just to be crushed by a massive Whirlpool aluminum fridge, filled to the brim with absolute self-hatred. That's what it feels like. It feels wrong. It feels particularly abnormal if I'm being honest, but we don't talk about it. We don't talk about this immeasurable weight that is forced onto our shoulders every day, because it creates discomfort. We don't talk about this thing that is so evident, so saturated in the sea of teenage being, because we are scared to make each other "uncomfortable."

What I'm trying to say, is that from my perspective as a teenage girl, the self-deprecating behaviours of so many girls and young women are much more of a reality than society acknowledges. The first step we can take towards combating this issue, is by beginning to abolish the stigma that surrounds conversations about our bodies. That is the only way to even begin to break down the concrete wall that is firmly planted between girls' minds, and the idea of self love. And if we don't? If society continues to ignore it? Girls will start to believe that it is normal to hate your body, and eating disorders, already the most fatal type of mental illness, will only grow. We need to shine a light on this issue, and really start talking about it, or else the hatred of our bodies will become normal. Our immense insecurities should not be avoided in conversation because of the fear of discomfort. We may fear asking for help, but we truly need it.

See us.

## *Newspaper Clippings*

The best sound on earth is that of kitchen scissors cutting through newspaper. It's sharp and strangely cold—the embodiment of December air nipping at skin. I'm certain my thoughts make their way back to that sound practically every afternoon, a discovery I fail to ignore over and over. Is it strange to admire a sound? To savour it as if I was listening to a new song? Maybe. I pour my attention into not snipping any words.

It's quiet. I notice because it normally isn't. Imagining this office without the accompaniment of buzzing machines, ringing telephones and jumbled conversations taking place over desktops is practically impossible. Right now, it sounds empty and unused. Like a nursery that belongs to an outgrown child. I place my scissors on my lap and cock my head to get a better listen. A hum emanates, low and soft—maybe it belongs to the overworked lights or a generator. What I don't hear are coffee mugs placed down on wooden desks or the click of dress shoes walking briskly down a corridor. My suspicions are confirmed: the clippings are left spread out on the coffee table. They minimize my shock when I walk out and find the room deserted.

I stand in the doorway for a moment—my hand perched on the frame—and just look. The office is by no means a huge area. Multiple grey and red desks pushed together in different areas of the room, leather chairs placed awkwardly around them. The dividers were a second thought. You can tell by the way our heads peak over the top even as we sit. An areca palm with drying tips is propped up with a stake. The water cooler has paper cups strewn along its base. For a place that looks chaotic, it's strange to feel the absence of people.

My hands reach up to rub my face before I can stop them. It's a natural reaction I always have under stress or exasperation, but boy is it inconve-

nient right now. I cringe. I realize immediately that I've smudged my makeup. I spent the morning applying copious amounts of foundation, only to destroy it in a matter of moments. Considering the force I used to massage my face, I also know that the mark is visible. That's bad. Awful. Someone sees it, and I'll be smothered with concern and questions and prodding.

It's empty in the building, which means that, potentially, I might not be seen at all. Still, knowing that someone could is too risky. My thoughts wander back to the foundation I keep in my purse. I turn back to the lounge to grab my belongings before pushing my way into the bathroom.

It's small. Two cubicles, a mirror and one rusted faucet. The lighting is stained a dandelion yellow, but the sky will dim soon and no one will pay enough attention to notice the harsh lines. My fingers caress the bruise lightly, but even the innocuous touch makes it pulse with soreness. The unwanted mark stretches from my right cheek up above my brow bone and turns an ugly shade of purple. Even I'm taken aback by its brutality. I know that it's bound to fade, so makeup will have to be my saving grace for the time being.

It takes several coats before I can put down the tacky brush, satisfied. If I really focus, the right side of my face gleams an unnatural hue of lavender, but it's only visible from certain angles. My weight shifts from one foot over to the other. Being alone is such a strange feeling. It wallows in my lower abdomen—a strange mix of butterflies and emptiness. I hold my scissors firmly.

The sound of gentle humming is replaced by brush scraping against tile. Marissa's laugh is full, her hands resting on both sides of the doorway. She gazes at me with her bright eyes.

"There you are," she begins, the happiness still practically oozing out of her words. I feel nauseous. "How many times has this happened this month? I'm convinced you live here or something." My anxiety dries out my mouth and I'm embarrassed to recognize how trapped I feel. My tongue is sandpaper.

"How did you even find me here?" It's curt, I know. I didn't mean for it to sound that way, but in the struggle to keep my voice steady I grab at any-

thing that comes to mind. My heart sinks into my shoes the moment her lips press thin.

“Cass, I was only joking. I saw your tea still on the desk and the bathroom light on. Didn’t take much detective work after that. Really, what are you doing here?” Now she feels bad. Fantastic. My empty laugh bounces off the stalls.

“I’m fine, just scatterbrained,” I say, my hands waving above my head. “Really, I just lost track of time. I’m actually about to leave.” To show what I mean, I gesture towards my scissors and the awaiting handbag, hoping she’ll take the hint to go. Instead, she clears the newspaper off the sink and props herself onto it.

“Okay,” she settles with the answer, waiting for me to reveal more before she starts prodding. I clench my clammy hand around the scissors. “Job offerings?” she asks.

“Not for me,” I reply. His memory intrudes my already disoriented thoughts. “Davie.” Marissa leans over uncomfortably at the mention of his name. She always does. I don’t think she ever liked him. From the moment they met until she watched me walk down the aisle. For the most part, she keeps it to herself, but from the way she bites her tongue I know his nickname is still in good use. David the Douchebag.

“Is everything fine?” She picks non-existent dirt out of her acrylic nails. “With him, I mean?” The panic rises in my chest again at almost double its previous weight.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I...don’t know.” She has to pause for a second, consider the response. I need to dig my toenails into my socks so that I don’t bolt. “You just became weird all of a sudden. Different. You hardly even talk anymore, not even to me.” The humming that used to be a background noise crescendos, almost like it’s trying to embody the tension of our conversation. I wish it would stop. It’s giving me a migraine.

“I told you, nothing’s wrong.” The tone of my voice is notably per-

sistent, viciously cold.

“No, you’re not,” she shoots back, her words equally competitive to my own. “I know you’re not. I know so much better than you realize, and I can tell that he’s the problem. You do everything for him, Cassidy. You’re like his dog or something. This isn’t you.”

“You don’t know me.” My hands are trembling so much the muscles start to cramp. Her glare is sharp, mean. It jumbles my thoughts, making it hard for me to think at all.

“Yes, I do.” A painted fingernail jabs into my chest. “I’m not an idiot, despite what you might think. One day I’m going to come here and find out that you’re gone because he’s done something bad. Something disgusting.” Her ugly mouth keeps talking, spewing out accusatory lies, but I’m not listening. I just focus on her ridiculously straight teeth and plant my feet into the ground. I remember those teeth. When they were crooked and my only qualms were about my social status. When she understood me. Why doesn’t she get it now? She’s selfish. So selfish.

I examine my hands and try to ignore her ringing voice and that yellow light searing into the nape of my neck. My knuckles are blotched with white dots. I try to pour my attention into counting them, but my hands are shaking and I lose track. My blurred reflection stares back at me from the blades of the scissors. With every moment, every word that I fail to process, that humming increases, a pounding in my head that resembles a twisted song. A hymn I can no longer block out. I just want it to stop. I want it all to stop. An anguished yell, disembodied and brimming with pain, breaks through my thoughts. It doesn’t feel real. In my mind, it sounds distant—a strained echo—but I know there are no windows in our bathroom.

My shirt is damp. All my attention diverts to that instantaneously. I can feel the liquid soak through the polyester and wet my skin. I have to drag my eyes down to look closer, time trailing slowly and with no seeming end. It’s such a deep red. It reminds me of a lipstick I used to wear, a colour such a rich crimson that the lightest application would leave a stain for hours. My

right hand feels empty. The scissors are notably absent, the blades no longer digging into my hot palm.

## *A Journey*

My feet sank slightly into my carpeted bedroom floor. I took one last look around at the blue walls covered in posters and the small lamp that lit the space with a faint yellow glow. I closed my eyes and began my journey as a gust of dust-filled wind blew my collar against my cheek. The form I had chosen, that of a tall man with indistinct features and clothes, stood strikingly against the infinite sand and darkness of the wasteland that surrounded me. Before me stood a gate, carved of bronze and copper, that seemed to stretch endlessly upward. From behind the gate emerged a figure at least ten feet in stature, cloaked in purple cloth with a black key hung from his neck. His skin that became visible with the passing gale was porcelain white. His eyes, like the endless starry sky, locked with mine, and he spoke in a voice that sounded at once like that of an elderly man and a young girl.

“This is the realm of dreamers. Why have you come here?”

“I seek passage to that which lies beyond. I come on a mission,” I responded, producing the glowing orb I carried with me. It shone like a lone star in an empty sky, illuminating the small patch of desert where I stood.

For a second, I could almost see something glint in his empyrean eyes at the sight of the small object so pure. He took his key and inserted it into the great lock.

“What lies beyond this door few men have passed,” he whispered as he opened the lock. “I wish you luck.”

The great barrier groaned and slowly cracked open, allowing me to see into the void that lay behind it. I walked forward into the dark beyond. For a moment there was silence, broken only by the loud slam of the bronze door closing behind me. Then came the screams. As I marched, I watched a man being torn apart by a variety of fluffy balls armed with razor-sharp

teeth. I saw another inside of a coffin bursting into flame. A child sat being tormented by a tall man in a black cloak with long claws and a top-hat that seemed to stretch his impossible proportions even further into the strange. This was the realm of Fear and Nightmares, scourge of the dream realm and home to all manner of horrors.

My path was lit only by the orb I held in my outstretched arm. As I walked, more and more black figures danced in and out of the glow, gathering behind me. Suddenly one of them leapt and clawed at me, slicing through my coat sleeve. Within moments, thousands of nightmares were upon me. They tore through my clothes and conjured flesh, grabbing at my false eyes and feasted upon my fabricated innards.

“Stop!” I yelled to deaf ears as the torrent of blackness consumed me. The orb was snatched from my grip. Its fading illumination was immediately replaced by a crackling streak of electricity that jumped through the air. The creatures screeched as the bolt tore through their small bodies, reducing them to something between ash and nothingness. Lightning surged forth from my gloved hands, destroying the monsters that tried to rob me.

As the harsh blue light of the blast faded, I was able to locate the treasure taken from me not thirty feet from where I had been attacked. I lifted it and continued until I found myself at a grey door with a small ruby handle.

I entered the stone cavern decorated with five thrones. Upon them sat a one-eyed man with a raven at his shoulder, a man with a large golden hat with gilded linings along its sides, a white-bearded man with a laurel around his head, a woman in a white and red kimono with tomoe beads around her neck, and a boyishly handsome man in a tight blue suit adorned with a red cape and a perfect black curl hanging over his forehead.

“Who has entered our chamber?” boomed the one-eyed man.

“It appears to be a mortal,” said the man with the strange hat.

“What brings you here?” asked the woman.

“I come on a mission. I request passage,” I said.

“You wish to bring that object beyond our realm?” asked the blue suited



man.

“Yes,” I responded.

“I don’t see why we should let him pass,” said the bearded man.

“Very well, we shall put it to a vote. I, Odin of the Aesir, do not wish to allow a mortal to pass through the realm of the pantheons.”

“I, Zeus of the Olympians, agree with Odin of the Aesir. I shall not allow this mortal to pass.”

“I, Amaterasu of the Kami, see no reason not to let the mortal pass.”

“I, Osiris of the Egyptian Gods, wish to allow the mortal to pass as it is the right of all mortals to have safe passage.”

“Kal, what of you?” asked Odin.

The handsome man leaned forward in his throne, rubbing his perfectly chiseled chin, lost in thought.

“Kal. The time has come to decide,” spoke Zeus.

“You know what I will say, Zeus.” Kal spoke standing to his full height displaying an “S” emblem upon his chest.

“I, Superman of the Superheroes, will allow the mortal to pass.”

An angry look passed over Zeus and Odin’s faces as they stepped aside. I walked with Kal to the doorway in the back of the room.

“I wish you luck,” he said, shaking my hand with his incredibly strong grip.

Turning my back to Kal, I found myself looking across the green hills of the slope of heaven. Understanding my journey would be easier in a new form. I closed my eyes.

I began to shrink while lengthening my arms. My feet changed to talons as feathers began to bloom from my fingertips to my shoulders. Shorter ones bloomed across my body as my mouth changed shape to that of a beak. Within moments, I became a swallow.

Wind rushed beneath my newfound wings as I soared into the air. Below me passed the infinite fields of paradise. Countless men and wom-

en ate fruit beneath the shade of the great mangroves that grew from the celestial earth beneath them. Fountains sprung from the lush grass spurting water more pure and clear than any that could be found on earth. People and animals alike drank from them, paying little mind to the foreign creature that flew above them. I continued to rise higher and higher into the sky until the gardens could no longer be seen. The sky changed from an azure to a deep purple, then black. I flew toward the small white spot that floated in the blackness. As I drew closer, the details of the speck became clearer and clearer.

Great pearly towers stretched forth from the argent platform they were built upon. The Silver City. I resumed my human form as I landed on the sterling ground of the city. Two beautiful men with great white wings stretching from their backs came down to me. I removed my hat to greet the two angels.

“I am Uriel, and this is Xapham, my brother. Our father told us of your approach.”

“It awaits you above,” said Xapham.

I walked past the two divine figures and started up the silver staircase that climbed even higher into the sky.

Eventually, I broke through the darkness and found myself surrounded by white clouds. Before me stood a single old wooden door.

I stretched my arm forward and grasped the golden handle. I turned it and walked into a massive library. Rows upon rows upon rows of books and scrolls lined the shelves of all different colours and designs. At a small desk worked a man with a pen.

“Yes?” he asked. “Are you just going to stand there? What have you brought?”

I reached for the orb. The idea I kept in my pocket, but as I withdrew it, I saw it had changed. In my hand, I held a book.

“Yes, that tends to happen.”

I looked at him, confused.

“You are a writer, like me. It is our duty to carry ideas to this place and to do so, we are given incredible power beyond that of most. The ideas we carry, however, are shaped by our journeys. They take on aspects of everywhere we visit and we, in turn, give those ideas to others.”

“But aren’t all ideas the same by the end, then?” I asked.

“That is what is so incredible. Even though they are all changed by outside forces, they still add something, and so will the next idea, and the next. Just like us. Your idea will, in turn, inspire others, and they will inspire others, and this cycle will continue forever.”

“Then what makes ideas special if they just serve to perpetuate a cycle?”

“You.”

## *Surreal*

Sunday

Ever since moving into this apartment, my memory has smudged and blurred. I started to feel claustrophobic in this... “space”. Maybe that was the problem. I had chosen the cheapest apartment, the only one in the basement. The lack of windows down here made day and night slip seamlessly. At this point, I can’t even distinguish the two.

That’s it.

I went outside to get some fresh air. The stench of my so-called apartment is a bit too intense for my liking. I hadn’t noticed how rancid my apartment had become over the past couple of days since I’d been concentrating intensely on a programming project.

I looked into the mirror. My white shirt had been tinted a light beige. I slowly opened the door to my apartment, emitting an unpleasant creaking sound. The basement was pitch-dark, illuminated with only the dim glow of the soda machine. I began to climb the polished, stone stairs that led up to ground level. As I ascended, the natural glow of daylight intensified, blinding my eyes. The light slowly dwindled and I eventually regained my vision. It was dark. I checked my watch, 11:30 pm. The night sky was speckled with countless stars, so vibrant but yet so subtle. “How strange,” I thought to myself.

I decided to call Vanessa. Her voice was one of the only things that still brought me life.

The phone ringed.

“You have reached the voice mail of... Vanessa Davis. Press one to leave a message”

I called her once more, no answer. There was something disturbing

yet replenishing about her voice. Eventually, I was only calling her because I wanted to hear her say her own name.

Tuesday

I've gone mad. This has to stop.

Instinctively, I found myself sprinting up the stairs and calling her. I don't know why I was like this. The desperation in these actions must have had a reason.

Wednesday

I barbarically bolted up the stairs, hungry for the reception so that I could call her again. I desperately fumbled the phone, dialling her number as fast as I could.

The phone rang, followed by a vibration. This time, I heard a reply.

"Jordan?" she asked.

I was speechless; countless thoughts flowed through my mind. I wanted to reply, but my words couldn't form in my mouth.

"Hello? Anyone there?"

"H-h-hi, Vanessa." I stuttered. "Where have you been?"

"I was camping with a group of friends. Anyways, why did you call me 200 times? Is everything ok?"

A sadistic smile formed on my face. Deep down, I knew that nothing was ok, but at this point, I could only pretend.

"Yes," I replied.

"Are you sure you—"

I hung up. She had known too much about me, the secret that I've been hiding, and the loneliness. The loneliness that kept me awake at night, fearing my own very existence.

The conversation with Vanessa haunted my mind. At times, her name would chime and ring inside my mind like the tolling of a church bell.

A shadow resembling her figure had been cast onto the walls. As I

approached this figure, it gradually disappeared, leaving me staring blankly at the walls of my apartment.

Friday

“Come with me,” said the shadow.

It’s been like this for God-knows how many days. I can’t take it anymore. I’ve tried to sleep but I can’t close my eyes. Every time I try, her name burns my mind like the hellfire that torments the dead.

The shadow approached me. Its cold, bony hands grabbed my face.

“Come with me!” it shrieked.

I complied. Its frozen, cold palms embraced me. I took off my shirt, feeling its gelatinous skin.

It kissed me. At first, the kiss was unpleasant, as if I had kissed a slug. As the kiss lasted, the cold, clammy feeling started to resemble flesh. Its warm and tender lips pressed against my bloody, blistered mouth. Its tender skin pressed against my abdomen.

I pulled away.

“Vanessa?” I asked the figure.

It didn’t respond but instead bit into my neck, revealing a fresh wound. It was painless, but buckets of blood poured out, leaving a metallic taste in my mouth. In the heat of the moment, I felt relieved. Though lightheaded, I decided to carry on.

The pulsating feeling of blood rushed through my veins as we carelessly knocked over countless objects.

There was a knock, but I carried on. The figure began to evaporate, regaining its gelatinous form, disappearing into thin air.

“Hello? Jordan? Are you there?”

Confused, I knocked the debris off my body and dusted myself off. I looked through the peephole, seeing the figure of Vanessa, I was tempted to open the door.

I hesitated. How could I be sure? How could I be sure that she

wouldn't vanish into thin air?

"Hey, could you answer something for me?" I asked. "Tell me something that only we know. Just to make sure that you're... you."

A doubtful look appeared on her face.

"Umm, alright," She replied slowly, thinking. "After that Christmas dinner, we slipped on the sidewalk and you broke your hand." A teardrop formed in her eyes, flowing down her cheek.

I placed my hand on the knob. The blood running from my neck had stained my body a crimson red.

No. It can't be. This was all too real. I screamed in denial, denial that any of this was real.

Maybe I'm the only real one. It all started to come together, the torturous phone conversation, the vanishing of the figure, followed by Vanessa behind the door. It was all a dream. No. A nightmare. I was never alive, but a soul being tortured for eternity.

The knocking on the door grew louder, who knew what was on the other side.

I must free myself. I ran into the washroom, disassembled my razor, and held it against my wound. Without a second thought, I—

## *Parasite*

“Leave me alone!” I exclaimed racing up the stairs. Sadness, and raw fury consuming me like an infectious disease. My body shaking uncontrollably like a punk before his first gang fight.

“Savannah Stone! Get your ass back down here!” Her voice bled through my eardrums making me want to hit something. I grabbed a pair of scissors I kept on my desk and met them to my wrist. Bursts of pain exploded through my arm like fireworks on the fourth of July. A scarlet ribbon of blood snuck around my wrist like an intricate ruby bracelet. I dragged the scissors across my wrist again and again. The pain reminded me I was truly alive no matter how dead inside I felt.

“Savannah Stone! If you don’t get down here, you will be sorry!” Blood dripped from my wrist, splattered across the floor, following me like a trail of rose petals as I walked downstairs.

My mom’s face turned a ghostly white as she saw me walk into the kitchen. I hid my arm behind my back and rubbed it against my sweater.

“What have you done Savannah! Why did I find weed in your pencil case?”

No point in lying now. “My friend gave it to me.”

“Do you get high frequently, Savannah?”

“No, I’ve only done it once and it made me even more suicidal.”

“Who did you do it with?” she asked.

“Sam,” I replied

“Why? Why did you do it?” Her voice quivered.

“I thought it was the lifehack I needed, to make me happy.”

My mom took a step towards me grabbing my bloody wrist. “Did you do this to yourself? Have you been cutting again?”



“No, it was an accident. I cut myself with my razor,” I mumbled.

“We both know that’s not true,” she stated. “C’mon let’s get you cleaned up. We’ll finish this conversation later,” she said, grabbing my arm and dragging me over to the sink. Once she finished I spent the rest of the evening in my bedroom watching TikToks. After about two hours my mom came into my room.

“You really should spend less time on social media. Doctors are speculating that this new parasite called Veronae can affect brains that have been changed by too much social media use. Be careful,” she stated.

“Okay, I’m sorry mom I’ll try to use it less.” I replied.

I walked into class scrolling through Instagram the next day. School was hell! It wasn’t as bad in elementary or even middle school. In high school, the girls got judgy, boys got weird and everyone was addicted to social media. Guys acted like kids in a candy store chasing after girls’ bodies like a cheetah hunting down a gazelle. Girls would judge you if you didn’t look, act or post pictures like the popular kids society has deemed cool.

My emotions were draining away, like a parasite slowly sucking away my happiness day after day. I got to Math already wishing I could go home. I let my thoughts carry me away like a dandelion dancing in the cool summer breeze.

“Ms. Stone, can you tell me what you know about quadratic equations?” My math teacher Ms. River asked me, startling me out of my reverie.

“What?” I yawned.

“Somebody needs to spend less time on social media and more time sleeping tonight. You don’t want to catch the Veronae parasite.” Ms. River stated and my class giggled. This school really was hell.

Once the bell rang and the class was over, I exited as quickly as possible. Rory and Christian were chatting right outside of the math class. Christian winked at me trying to intoxicate me with his charisma like a spider luring in a fly.

I avoided his gaze then ran away to find my friends, Carrie and Maya.

While we ate lunch in the courtyard I kept thinking about Christian. Christian flirted with everyone, I had to keep reminding myself. He'd flirt with a rock if he could. I was not special to him.

I managed to get through the day. I didn't feel like I was even alive by the end of it, just a shell of a girl taking up space. Once I got home I scrolled through my Instagram and TikTok feed until I received a Snapchat notification from Christian Ramirez.

I opened it to see his side profile with the words: 'You're really cute' written over it. My body felt like a live wire, electricity radiating from every cell inside me. I replied with 'you too'. He kept replying, opening snap after snap. Then he started sending videos of him blowing me kisses.

We kept chatting frequently for the next week. He slowly tore down my walls and I thought maybe he even liked me. I was completely delusional and drained. Deep down I knew it was too good to be true. I was right. About a week and a half after we had started chatting more frequently I got a snap that evening.

I opened it to find his smiling face with the words 'Send nudes' written over top. My skin turned ghostly white, blue veins cascading down my arms like waterfalls. This could turn out really bad. Butterflies danced in my stomach as my phone called out to me. "Send them! Send them!" I knew deep down there was a super high chance they'd get leaked but I was naive. I made a huge mistake. I replied 'Ok, as long as you don't screenshot.' He instantly replied, 'Of course, I won't.' I walked into the bathroom, took off my clothes and took a picture. There was a voice in the back of my head screaming don't hit send but I ignored it. It was done, I thought. There was nothing I could do now.

The next words that appeared on the screen stabbed me in the throat like icy daggers. 'Christian Ramirez took a screenshot'. My blood began to boil.

'I told you not to take a screenshot! Snapchat just notified me you did!' I texted him. 'I'll delete them after. I just need to do something with them

first.' I knew exactly what he had to do with them. Jesus Christ, boys were so horny. Why couldn't they just go on Pornhub!?

The next morning as I walked into school, I overheard Christian talking to his friends. "Savannah Stone sent me nudes last night. I didn't even ask for them. She just sent them. She's so weird. You guys wanna see them?" A lump in my throat formed. I knew he'd saved them! I walked up to the herd of boys and screamed, "You're such an asshole Christian! You were the one who asked for them!"

I couldn't face them anymore. I ran for the bathroom as fast as my legs could carry me. "Slut." They all kept chanting from behind me. Once I reached the bathroom, I couldn't stop the tears from falling down. Tears clung to my eyelashes sparkling like crystals in the pale bathroom light. That was when my phone started to ring uncontrollably.

A text appeared on the screen: Nationwide broadcast; A new parasite called Veronae has been spotted in teens and young adults across the nation. It is speculated to be contracted through the overuse of social media. Social media weakens and controls the brain causing it to be susceptible to the Veronae parasite. The parasite causes you to act zombielike, apathetic and constantly crave social media. The parasite has continued, spreading too quickly for the government to control. Stay away from anyone you think might be infected. All social media platforms have been suspended until further notice.

Suddenly the lights began to flicker and I heard ominous shrieks coming from outside the bathroom. This had to be a joke! I needed to investigate. I forgot all about what happened with Christian. I left the bathroom and scanned the halls. They were empty aside from the students huddled in the corner of the cafeteria. They all had their phones pressed right up to their face. I checked Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok; all the platforms would shut down as soon as I opened them. This couldn't be happening!

That was when it hit me. Social media doesn't cause humans to

be weak and contract the Varonae parasite; social media was a parasite. It infiltrated your brain and caused you to crave followers as an alcoholic craves a glass of whiskey. You needed to document your life like you need air to breathe. The way I caused myself pain, felt worthless and lonely didn't make me dead inside; it made me human. Social media dehumanizes you to a single post, number of likes and followers or single status update. It was like I was seeing the world in a new light. New colours and ideas exploding from my eyes like fireworks. That's all your worth nowadays. It all made sense. The Veronae parasite had been within all of us all along.

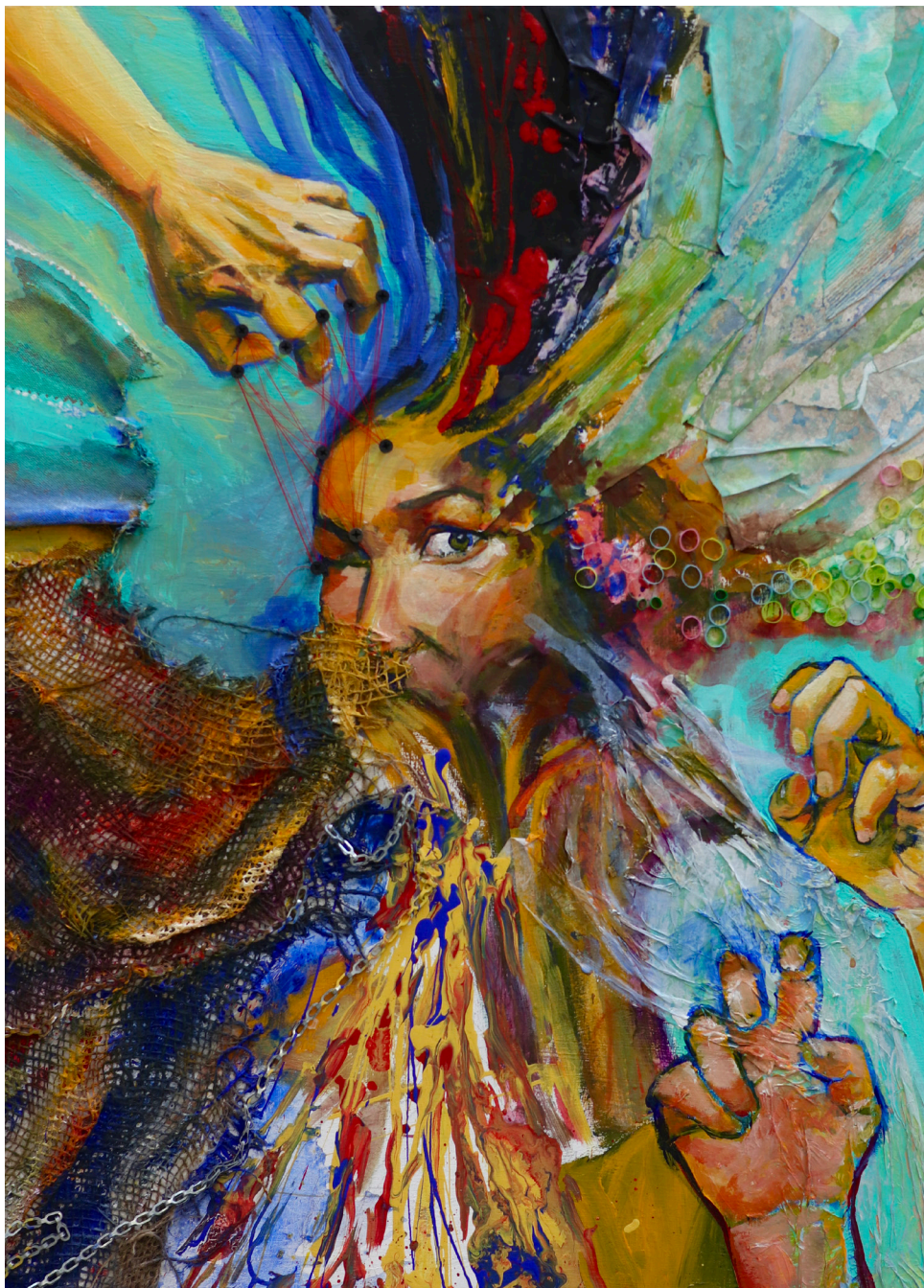


*aidana abdykerim "Mona Lisa"*



*alessa munge "Untitled"*





*sarah kim "Untitled"*





*faith yuchi "Alone With Sharks"*



*kathy he "Self-Portrait"*



*meg torisawa "Self-Portrait"*



*jacq ternan "Another Mirror"*





*lauren kader "Ava"*



*micaela montemarano "Untitled"*





*braden marshall*



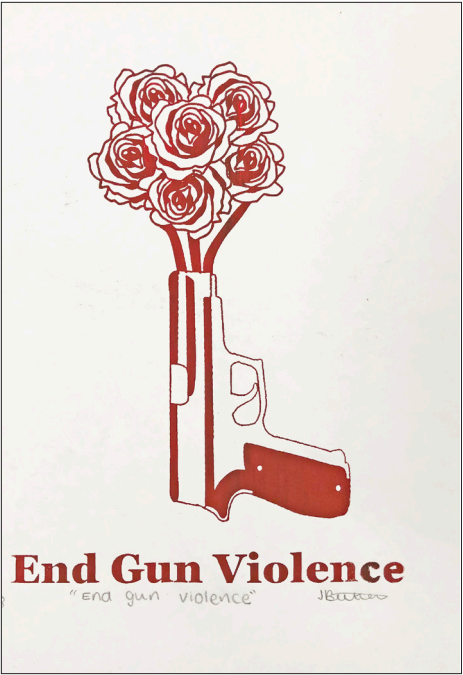
*katherine bot*





*anne-marie bassi*

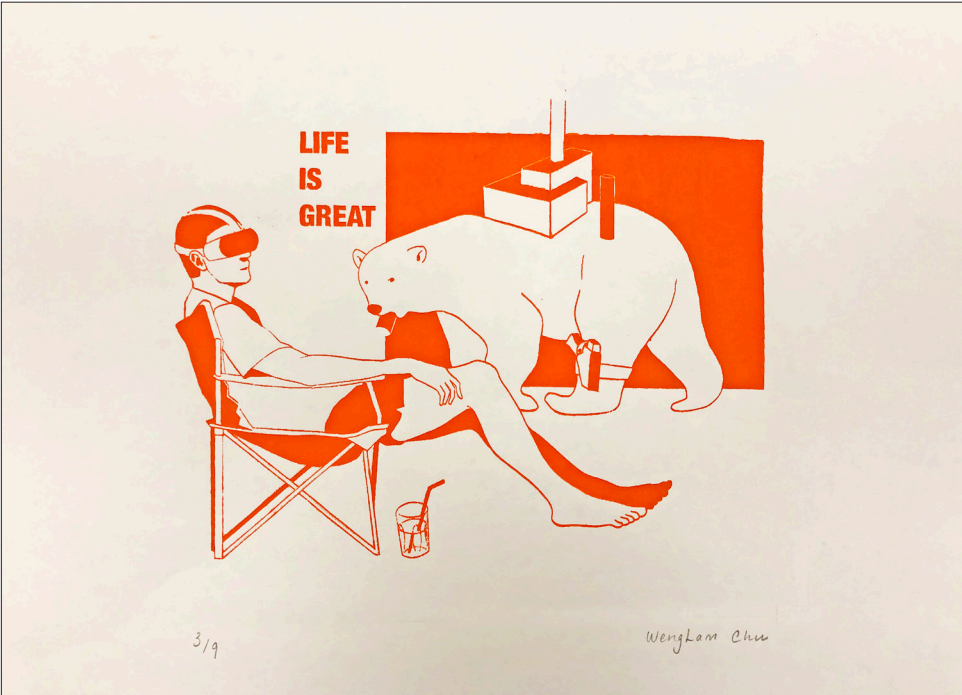




jordan butler



maddy djuk



jessica chu



*emily mun*



*max reimschneider*



*laurel catalano*



*emily matsumoto*





*tanyisa bobechko*





*sydney young*



*ariana akbarieh*



*christina chkarboul*



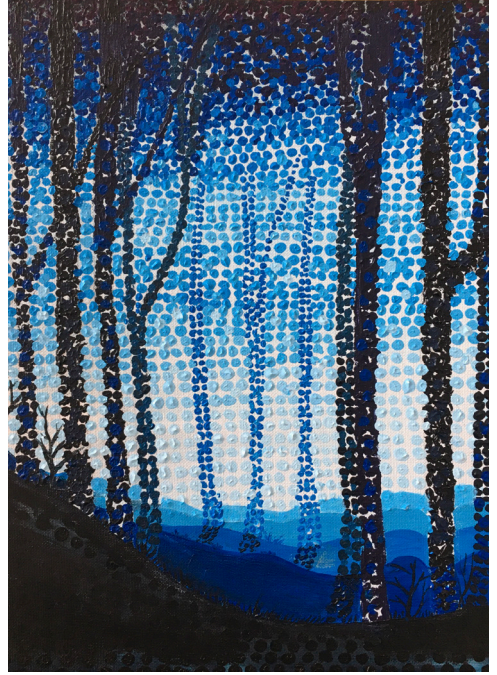


*olivia calbeck*





*lauren holmes*



*hannah prno*

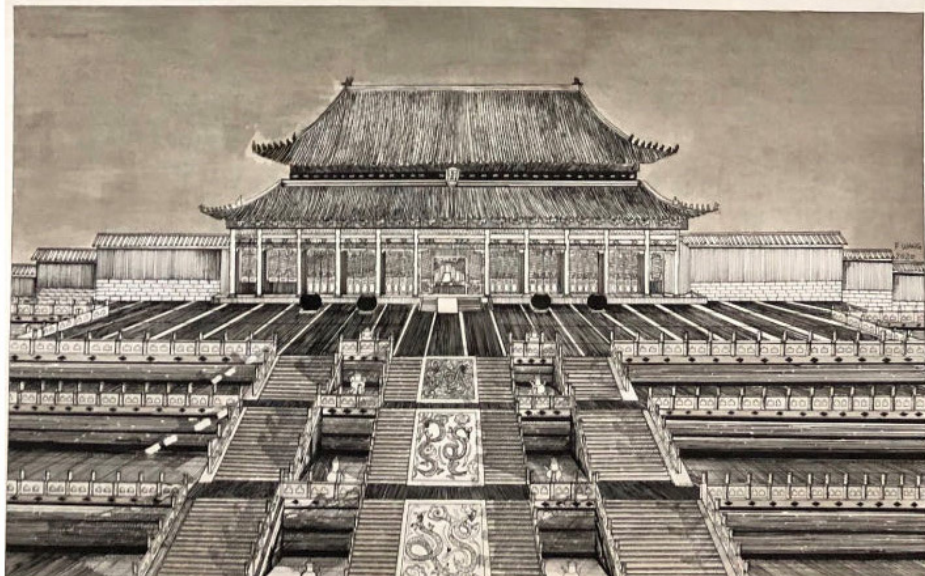


*graydon clarke*



*naseem anvari*





yiduo wang "The Eternal City"



*victoria soares "Extinction"*





*emma penka*





*luke pridgeon*



*saif boraei*



*tom zhao*





*lucas wurstlin "Reflection"*



*luke mccutcheon "Hope"*



*matteo forgione "Confinement"*



*peter yusishen "Untitled"*





*bryn mercer*



*steven morgunov*





*fern nan*



*kevin shi*



*emily mun*

## *The Tale of Two Horses*

The time-worn rooster hollered, the grass smelled of the earth awakening, and the dim-witted flies did what they did best. It was the ultimate setting for another ordinary sorta day. As I heaved myself off the stable floor, I paid no mind to the persistent bits of hay clinging to my belly. The young ‘uns had been up before the sun and were frolickin’ around like a bunch of silly goats. The hired hand, wearing a red mop on his head, forced the rusty gate open, and it screeched in protest. He shoved us all through the gate and we moved as fast as a herd of turtles.

When I made it to the far fence, I switched from drive to park and glanced over my shoulder. No followers. Manoeuvring my head through the rails of the fence, I broke through the crippling wiring to stuff my muzzle with drool-worthy, crisp lettuce. Just then, something caught my eye. Two chestnut stallions were over yonder in the field haulin’ their plows. One was checking this way and that, lookin’ like he was trying to take the whole world in at once. The other had his blinders on, paying no mind to the other horse until they started knockin’ heads.

The clank, clank, clank, of a cowbell sounded behind me and I yanked my head back through the fence quicker than you can say giddy-up. It was that too-big-for-her-britches Betsy who could start an argument in an empty barn. Betsy struggled to hold back her smirk—resulting in her face becoming more twisted than a toad with a mouthful a lemon water. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re hiding something from me, Gertie.”

“Oh no, Betsy, never from you.”

We gave each other a long hard stare until our milk started to curdle.

Turning away from that goody-two-shoes, I made sure she'd keep her eyes off my lettuce. "I'm just watching them two horses. The one charging straight ahead wouldn't remember which way the sky is; he's never taken his eyes off the end of his row. The other's all over the place, making 'is rows uneven. He'd follow any butterfly, even if it was a mile away."

We both jumped out of our hooves as the second horse smacked right into the fence. Betsy glowered at the two horses, as if she had just discovered two rats emerging from the pigs' slop. "Never associate myself with horses—more pompous than all get out. Got it hammered into their brains that they've got a more demanding job than we do. Crazy, stuck up half-whits."

"Ya 'aven't 'eard?" a voice trilled. Just then, a whirl of feathers whooshed in and perched itself on the fence.

The little sparrow cocked its head to the side, nailing us with his beaded eyes, "Those horses are special cases. The ones ne'er worn blinders in his life. Others' worn 'em 'is whole life long."

"Hmph." Betsy rolled her eyes so dramatically I could'a sworn they just got a glimpse of the emptiness inside her head. "You couldn't breed a perfect workhorse any more than you could train a human to use his noodle."

"Even so," twittered the sparrow, "it'll be a waste of 'is time. Can' teach an old horse new tricks. Been that way since the cock crowed. Well then, I'm off."

With that, the sparrow flittered away to the trees. The matter of the horses was an odd 'one and the gossip on this story could be thicker than flies in a pigsty. It was really none of my business, which was exactly why I was fixin' to stick my nose right into it.

Betsy turned and flicked her tail in my face. "Nothing good'll come of it, if you ask me. Nothing good will come of it." With that, she clank, clank, clanked toward the other end of the pasture.

Come noon, I settled in the cool black shade of the shed next to the pigs. I got a big whiff of the farmer's nearly rotten table scraps. The mud



was churning as a sounder of swine treaded through its depths. Being a lady, I wouldn't normally associate myself with such revolting beasts, but it was all worth it for some private shade. No other cow—especially the likes of Betsy—would dare come near creatures born in mud. In the cooling shade, I couldn't help but be smug as a cat in tree with a mangy mutt 'neath her...but the humidity would be the death of me come soon.

Trying to distract myself, I made the gut-wrenching decision to strike up a conversation with the swine marinating in the muck just across the fence. Before I could get a word out, the pig flopped onto its fat belly and what came out of his mouth was a mixture of muddy bubbles and sputters.

"Top of the morn's to ya. But a humid day, in-it? Nuttin beats the mud though, ain't that right?" Eventually, he realized the reason I was making a face was because his snout was still in the sludge and managed to pull the thing out, "No? Well, I s'pose its a pig thing..."

If you've ever seen a pig grin, then you knew exactly what this one was doing at the mention of mud; he was as happy as if he had good sense. I had half a mind to flip my tail in his face and leave without a second thought, but I wondered if he soaked up as much gossip as he did mud.

"I reckon you've heard of the two horses." I did my best to use the simplest words possible so the small-minded creature could understand them all.

"Yup. Yup. Talk of the pig pen. You shoulda heard ol' Napoleon goin' on 'bout how horses seem to be gettin' dumber than the goats 'emselves.' An you 'n I both know there's nuttin stupider than a goat." the pig snorted.

I could think of quite a few creatures that were so dumb they could throw themselves on the ground and miss. "Common knowledge. Tell me somethin' 'bout them I don't know."

The swine shook the flies off his hide, his ears flapping like a pair of towels when the missus is laundry flickin'.

"Well...did'ja know the farmer has two phil-lo-so-phies?" The pig made sure he got every piddlin' syllable in there. "First is that keepin' blinders

on a horse all the while will keep him from gettin' distracted." He paused for a moment to dunk his nose in the slop. "Horses—'specially the young 'uns—do that a lot ya know. Second phil...philos...oh, ferget it. The second horse never wears blinders 'cause so he can see everything that's goin' on at once. So then he can get more done at once, 'stead a just doin' things one at a time..."

His attention was stolen by his revolting meal, which the rest of the hogs had already gone wild over, so the conversation was over.

The sky darkened faster than a greedy man's heart in a room full a gold. The moon gleamed overhead as the chilling wind rushed in faster than words fly after a toe is stubbed. The hired hand closed the gate behind us and we all hit the hay with a thud, thawing from the freeze. In simpler terms, night turned up like it always did and brought the cold along with it, so we were herded back into the barn.

Again, the sun rose over the hills gushing out its delicious light. The rooster was hollerin' so loud my dead Aunt Sal could hear 'um; the stupid pigeon thinks the suns comes up just to hear him crow. I had no intention of steppin' in the dew-heavy grassy fields any time soon so I let everyone else pass me up. Lucky for me, they were all slower than a Monday mornin'.

By the time I made it out to pasture, the girls had formed a bit of a cluster over near the far fence—the one right next to the lettuce that was meant to be mine before it got a glimpse of sunlight. If they were stuffing their muzzles with my lettuce...ooh. Sometimes those biddies could make a preacher cuss! Huffing and puffing over to see if there was any left, I realized none of the lil' thieves had even seen the greens. The lot of them was drinkin' in the scene across the fence as if this was the first field they had seen. I was about to ask the clique about their sudden liking for rows of dirt, when I noticed the two horses from the day before. The farmer was out there taking the blinders off the first horse and fastening them onto the other!

I couldn't help myself but to ask, "What's he think he's doin'?" The kind of gossip this story had attracted could ruin my whole lettuce scheme.

It was Hannah who answered. “He’s switching their blinders,” she said dumbfounded.

“I can see that, but what for?”

“It’s a part of the experiment I s’pose.” Hannah looked at me as if I said her milk was sour. “He wants to see how the horses’ll react when they experience a new way of seeing the world.”

“Humph.” I muttered, turnin’ round and walking away, hoping they’d lose interest and follow suit. “That farmer...the porch light’s on but no one’s ever home. What does he think he’ll accomplish with that sort of thing?”

Apparently, someone had heard that, and I was being followed. It was Betsy and the little guttersnipe was eavesdropping. Betsy trotted right up beside me and looked me dead in the eye.

“Oh, Gertie! Some of us could use some blinders of our own so we can focus on the details of the world and appreciate the little things...but maybe you should take your own blinders off! See, even though none of us are saints, all of us aren’t as horrible as you let yourself believe. You always see the worst in everyone ’n hardly ever see that there’re good things about them too!” Betsy spun around and headed back to the others.

I felt as though she had kicked me in the muzzle. Now I’m more sure than the sun comes up that my Aunt Sal had heard that, and she would tan my hide if I didn’t turn things around right away.

So now I try my darnedest to see things differently—a better, more understandin’ kinda way.

## *And She Was*

On Monday morning, her alarms blares at seven, a maddening thrum that pierces through her sleep. (The pitch of the ringing is a high F sharp—she downloaded a tuner app on her phone one day and found that out herself.)

She presses “snooze” once, twice, thrice, until she finally works out the kinks in her back, drags herself out of bed, and draws open her curtains, an off-white fabric adorned with cappuccino roses. (“So dull,” her friend commented once, before promptly receiving a flick to the forehead.)

I hate mornings, she thinks to herself, not for the first time, and certainly not for the last. After trudging to her bathroom as if stones were chained to her ankles, she studies her bleary eyes and chapped lips in the mirror, then takes out her retainer, grimacing at the bitter taste in her mouth. Her toothbrush is red, the bristles worn and weary; her face soap smells of berries; her hairbrush has seen better days. The outfit for the day is a sky-blue blouse that feels like sandpaper against her skin, black pants that have a stubborn stain where the knee bends, and a dark blazer that swallows her figure.

She skips breakfast, something she’s done for so long that she’s forgotten the reason, though she prepares a cup of coffee. Three milks, two sugars. If she’s feeling particularly bleak, she’ll only have one of each. The woodsy, warm scent of brewing coffee cleans her head, nudging her awake more than her alarm ever could.

Snagging her keys off the kitchen counter, she whisks her coat off the rack next to her door, slings her leather purse over her shoulder, and strides out of her apartment onto the cobbled streets of Markeville. The clouds have devoured the sun, casting the city in grey light, a monochrome scale. A gentle

wind blows her ponytail to the side, and she makes a mental reminder to tie it again once she arrives at work. The steady thrum of the city coming to life—of heels clacking against the sidewalk, of bells ringing as people enter stores, of the drone of car engines—lifts the lasting hold of lingering sleep off her mind.

To her left, the grocer, a man with skin like parchment paper and the kindest smile, restocks his pears and peaches. She waves at him, he waves back, as they do every day. The salesperson at the corner of the street clutching a bundle of travel brochures to his chest offers her one, and she politely declines, like she always does. (She feels bad every time.)

A little past eight o'clock, she arrives at a brick building fifteen stories high with stainless windows and thin beige walls, where she works as an accountant. It's all right, she supposes. The pay is fine and her boss is fine and examining financial records for nine straight hours save for lunch is fine. She's been doing it for twelve years and she likes it. She likes it.

Her desk is located on the seventh floor in the far-right corner beside her colleague Terry, who's twice her age and has been trapped in that building for twice as long as her. (On her first day, he told her, "You're smart, for a woman," and she decided at once that she didn't like him.)

Time is a blur as she shuts her brain off, her fingers flying over her keyboard, preparing balance sheets and summarizing financial statuses and recording payments. It's muscle memory, mechanical, robotic. She could do this in her sleep. She stops for lunch, then again when Terry makes a remark about her pants being too tight, and she mumbles something back under her breath that he doesn't hear.

Work ends at five. Her shoulders relax, her back cracks, and her eyes are finally able to move after being glued in place for hours. Packing up her things, she bids Terry goodbye and walks back home. Waves at the grocer, declines the salesperson again, and stops for a honey cruller donut at Tim's, like clockwork. When she gets home, she prepares boxed mac n' cheese for dinner, decides to be a little healthier by eating a bowl of overripe strawberries for



dessert, then flops on her couch to watch a movie. She decides on Tangled and watches Rapunzel sing about her daily routine, watches her mourn at how everything's the same every day.

"When will my life begin?" Rapunzel repeats like a mantra, looking longingly outside her tower window to the rest of the world.

The song ends. She laments, I should've made popcorn.

--

Tuesdays are the same as Mondays. So are Wednesdays, and Thursdays. She wakes up at seven, makes coffee, goes to work. Waves at the grocer, shakes her head at the salesperson with a sheepish smile, rolls her eyes at Terry's sexist comment of the day. Goes home, stays up late watching TV, sets her phone alarm for seven again. It's a movie that replays itself, endlessly, tirelessly.

Fridays are a little different, because she goes out in the evening. Sometimes, she's with friends from work. Other times, she's with her boyfriend, Eric. He's tall in the awkward kind of way, with sharp, bony limbs, big teeth, and tousled brown hair. Their friends introduced them to each other three months ago; he asked her out the next day. He looked so nervous, which made her feel kind of bad, and he's a nice enough guy, so she said yes.

This Friday, she goes over to his apartment, which is a bit bigger than hers and always smells like pine and something warm. He makes curry and they eat on his bed, eyes glued to his computer screen playing a show.

"How was your day?" Eric asks as the opening theme song plays.

"It was good," she answers. "Yours?"

"Good."

They stay silent for the remainder of the episode, and still as another one plays, then another. The show is truly horrible. The dialogue is shallow, and the charm of the cast poorly salvages their flat character arcs.

"This show sucks," she says through a mouthful of chicken.

Eric laughs. "Yeah, it's pretty bad."

"There's literally no conflict. Every single episode is the same. It's too

repetitive.”

Eric laughs again. He mostly laughs in their conversations.

As another episode ends, she remarks, “I just feel bad for the actors. I mean, they must know how awful the show is, right?” She takes another bite of her curry. “I can’t imagine how tortured they must feel, being stuck in the same show.”

Eric shrugs. “Maybe they don’t realize it’s bad. Maybe they think the show’s good, that’s why they keep doing it.”

She snorts. “Anyone can discern for themselves how boring this show is. Nothing interesting happens. A literal toddler could accurately predict the plot of each episode. Seriously.”

Eric shrugs again. She finishes her curry. They go back to watching the show, and they’re halfway through the season finale when she remembers offhandedly to set her phone alarm for seven in the morning.

## *Beauty of Physics*

feel the harshness of short violet waves crashing against my face  
then, as they dissolve through my eyes,  
I am reminded that my favourite colour is  
made up of everything except for itself.  
What we can see is a reminder of all that we can't.

I watch as a car speeds through the intersection,  
appearing and disappearing in one fatal swoop  
and bursting in an out of existence.  
Even the stopped car to my right sways and trembles slightly,  
reminding me of the miniscule fluctuations  
that act on the fields forming the world.  
It becomes possible to imagine  
the fleeting, ephemeral existences of its basic particles  
in constant swarm comparable to that of the crowd in which I am  
embedded.

I watch as the traffic lights count down  
8-7-6  
Time is my own creation, yet it slips past my fingers.  
I tally it as it leaves;  
the time is kept through the signature of itself, looping once more  
In 5-4,  
a perpetual state of *rallentando* and *accelerando*,  
erasing itself as it ticks on.

There are 3 seconds remaining;  
although the silent tune of time beats solemnly in the background,  
every process waltzes alongside its neighbours in  
accordance to its own tempo,  
unable to be ordered amongst a common succession of instants.

The accumulation of all of the city lights,  
every small wave indicating human life  
looks like a galaxy of multicoloured stars  
and we can see all of the ways in which we are similar  
to our universe;  
as we do not live in it but as a part of it.

Aesthetic beauty is derived  
not only from the action of looking,  
but also of seeing.  
From the quark to hyperspace,  
from the car speeding through the intersection  
to the one waiting patiently under the light,  
there is a great abundance of wonders in this boundless and glowing  
world,  
so long as it is explored.

The world is not in short supply of fascinations  
yet we are in short supply of attentiveness,  
often forgetting to put in the work that awe requires.

## *Silence Me*

Soft enough to melt into pieces  
to feel everyone's pain  
every insult stinging like a bee  
swelling my entire body.  
You're too vulnerable  
too weak to have an opinion.  
So quiet down.  
My voice was no longer mine  
silence me  
you did before  
holding my mouth shut  
when my insides were urging to speak.  
Soft enough to melt but  
strong enough to set fire.  
I was not born like butter  
my body was born strong  
enough to run miles a day  
to fight for myself  
to voice my opinions.  
My heart melts  
but my voice sets fire.  
Let me speak  
I am more than  
you think I cried.



## *And so we return...*

In Egypt,  
Bound by Pharaoh's chains.  
Whips, blood and scars endured. Objects, we were.  
And then only a river of blood, frogs, lice, flies,  
Disease, boils, hail, locusts, hail,  
A slaying of the first born sons,  
And the splitting of the sea, could set us free.  
Let my people go, that they may serve me!  
And so we followed  
To where G-d would take us next

In The Desert  
Our covenant established at the burning bush,  
Set in stone and in the tabernacle, guarded.  
And then after an abandoned promise,  
A forty-years' trapse  
Before finding home,  
Our prophet left behind.  
Because you believed not in me.  
And so we returned  
To where G-d would take us next

In the Holy Land; our home,  
Our temple built,  
Twelve tribes well-established.  
And then the siege of Jerusalem,

Our temple devastated, burned.  
A horrific slaughter.  
Our people expelled, dispersed.  
Remember, G-d, the day Jerusalem fell!  
And so we fled  
To where G-d would take us next

In Spain,  
A people rebuilt, families grown.  
The works of Maimonides, Ramban.  
And then the Inquisition.  
We were to be squashed, eradicated!  
As we were pests; vermin.  
Burned at the stake as such.  
With the Help of Heaven!  
And so again we moved on  
To where G-d would take us next

In Europe  
A renaissance; the Golden Age  
Of life, of community, of simchas.  
And then came the Pogroms,  
The smashing of glass,  
The Yellow stars, The final solution,  
Trains, chambers, crematoria.  
Arbeit macht frei, they said.  
And so again we marched  
To where G-d would take us next

In the New World,  
Hell left behind,

A brighter, freer future ahead.  
And then we found hate,  
Death threats, Boycotts of our nation,  
Ravaging of our institutions,  
Swastikas drawn.  
We are the scourge of the world.  
And so now we must return home  
To where G-d will finally free us.

## *A Conversation with My Optometrist*

“I don’t have 20/20 vision.

Well, I do, actually. I have very good eyesight. I mean that I don’t know what’s going to happen in 2020. Anything could happen and I am incapable of predicting a single minutia of it; for all I know, a respiratory virus could wipe out the entire population if climate change or World War Three doesn’t first.

I know nothing about what will happen over the next year. I do know, though, that being queer has given me a different perspective on what could happen.

I don’t have 2020 vision, but I know our history.

When I was younger I used to live in a bubble, one where the first time I heard the word “gay” it was being spat venomously from my classmate’s mouth as he stared down my friend whose only crime was having a higher voice than his peers. It was like he had dirtied his tongue with the word and couldn’t wait to get rid of it. There was something in the way he said it that made me recoil in fear, and so gay was cemented in my mind as something that I could not—would not—be. I still didn’t even know what it meant. I wouldn’t know for several more years, until stumbling across the proper definition of this supposedly dirty word online.

I am guaranteed to mention I am queer very soon after meeting someone, which I do for two reasons. Number one: I’m comfortable with this label. It’s something I spent twelve years feeling and another five embracing. It was cathartic, when I stumbled upon that word, like meeting a

familiar friend. One I've known all my life. Number two: I want others to be comfortable with it. Most know the word queer as a slur first, and as a term LGBTQ+ are taking back second. But its simple definition to me—an umbrella term, used by me to mean attraction to anyone regardless of gender—is one I'm used to. I want to encourage acquaintance with terminology, and if someone is not comfortable with my being queer I would rather they knew now than months down the line.

This level of safety is a privilege. Many before me did not have to worry about simply losing a friend, and many around me still do not have that privilege.

I pride myself in being a part of something as beautiful as the LGBTQ+ community. Still, this community has a rich, tumultuous and often tragic history, one that I felt was my job to educate myself about as I'm lucky enough to not have had endured many of the things those before me did.

It's 2020 and I will probably attend pride this year. It will be a celebration: a cacophony of music and myriad of rainbow flags swirling across my vision as people dance their way down Church Street. It will be a celebration, but it will also be a mourning.

My first pride was in 2016, mere days after the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida where forty-nine people were murdered. I remember vividly how I danced with my friends as we watched the floats, and then throngs of people around us went silent. It was eerie. We were all overcome by what we saw in front of us. People marched in lines and each of them held signs with forty-nine names, each emblazoned above pictures of smiling young faces and emblazoned equally into my mind.

I don't have 2020 vision, but I will not forget our history.

I have been told many times that I make my sexuality into a social justice issue too often. Once a friend leaned over in history class as I mentioned that many LGBTQ+ people were imprisoned in concentration camps during World War Two and whispered, "Why do you always have to make it a thing? If you don't want people to treat you differently, you sure don't act



like it.” At the time I was only just coming to terms with my identity—year one of meeting the term queer—and so I laughed and shrugged, agreeing with her.

I look back now and curse myself, wishing I had said something, because I still possess that privilege of saying something. The fact of the matter is that believing in human rights has become a political issue. Believing everyone has the right to freedom has become the waving flag of the far-left, and I was struck with a thought just a year ago.

My existence is inherently political.

It is 2020, and still, whether I deserve to marry, or whether trans people deserve to serve their country, or whether we deserve to exist at all will continue to be debated. I am a topic of political debate.

It’s hard to forget our history when it’s all around us.

It’s happening every day. Stonewall happens again and again, round and round until the echoes of Marsha P. Johnson and Bob Kohler and Stormé DeLarverie and and and and are ringing in my ears too loudly to ignore.

I’m reminded of them in smaller ways, too. I think of them when I celebrate the fact that my school’s Gender and Sexuality Alliance finally has more members than just me. I think of them in times of adversity, too; my friend gets misgendered and Marsha whispers in my ear, “There’s no pride for any of us until there’s liberation for all of us.”

Being queer is just another fact about me, yes, but it is 2020 and we are still not at the point where the act of coming out isn’t necessary anymore. That will only come when people stop automatically assuming the straightness of others, and it is 2020 and we are not there yet. So, for now, my existence is political. I simply have Marsha and others to thank for giving me the power to speak about it.

I don’t have 2020 vision, but I know that the world is too big for hate and too small for anything but love. That bubble I used to live in felt enormous when I was young, but now that I’m seventeen and looking back it

just seems suffocating. Hindsight is 20/20. The world is so much wider than I ever could have imagined. There are so many people like me. We need each other. It's as simple as that. Or, at least, it could be.

I don't have 2020 vision, but I think I know two words to summarize 2020. It's simple, and cliché, but so intimately true.

Rise up.

Protests and social justice are cornerstones of my generation, and it will continue to be over the next year. There is so much to fight for, especially as a generation so commonly unheard in the political sphere. When one door closes, a window opens, so to speak. Rising up is our window.

Anything could happen this year, but I know we will continue to fight for what is right. We have to. I have to.

I have been politicized too much not to.

2020 is our chance to have a voice. To fight for what is right. To lift one another up. To use our privilege for good. To be kind.

Rise up. It's 2020, after all."

"So, uh—back to your eye exam. Which is better: A ... or B?"

## *Negative Space*

In the human body, there is a space to the left of the ribcage where a heart should be. There was no fanfare when I discovered the little woman who occupies that space in my chest instead.

(I took a photography course at a summer camp a few months before she arrived. They taught us about the idea of negative space—the blank area around the parts of the picture you’re supposed to actually focus on. All my pictures seemed to turn out blurry.)

I was twelve, and when you’re twelve there is nothing more important than being the same as everyone else. You’re suddenly blessed with the knowledge that you’re a being with thoughts and feelings that only you might have. When you’re twelve this is awful news. Nobody could know about the little woman.

(A few months into our time together, I dreamt that I was on an all-American road trip to Las Vegas with a girl in the other Eighth-grade class. There was a lightness inside me as if my chest was full of helium, silence in the way that a full arena can sound like the ocean through layers of concrete. The little woman wasn’t there.)

The woman who lives inside my chest gets unbearably sad sometimes. It’s not her fault; it seems that there are just days she wakes up radiating gloom like a space heater in a crawlspace, filling up my entire chest with a suffocating warmth. There are times when I’m cold, when her sadness becomes an incredibly comfortable place to rest; the little woman is a very courteous host who never tells me if I’ve overstayed my welcome. I’ll find myself resting there in the comfort of her sadness for ages, lounging until I feel numb. If I’m not careful, I won’t even notice it when the heat she puts off becomes suffocating.

(I tried to tell my mother about the little woman once, and she took me to a doctor. The doctor told me that everyone gets sad sometimes. I tried to explain it wasn't me who was sad, it was the thing in my chest, but he didn't understand.)

There are other days, far removed from the sad days, where she insists on checking all the locks twice and analyzing every inch of space we take up together. In loud, crowded rooms she loses all semblance of reality and gets so worked up that it gives us both tunnel vision, and she makes me want to go shake in a corner with no regard for how the time passes.

(My older sister started to take medication for anxiety when she was in university. I tried to ask her about the little woman and she looked at me like I was crazy.)

It's worth mentioning that she helps some days as well: she helps me get out of bed and makes me wash my face when I'm exhausted by the things she does. She makes me listen to pop songs, and she makes me dance. She likes dancing.

(I started thinking constantly about how I could get her to leave. My friend from my Eighth-grade dream got really into film photography, and she seemed to want to take pictures of everything but me. Amongst other things, I blamed that on the little woman: she made me blurry.)

I go to Paris on a school trip a few months after I turn sixteen, and I let the woman who lives inside my chest decide where we visit. This is a blessing due to my indecisiveness; this is a curse because I'm on a set itinerary, and I'm never supposed to be without at least two of my classmates—a formality the woman who lives inside my chest never personally agreed to and thus does not respect.

(She loved *Little Women*. I don't know how she knew this: I hadn't read the book at the time, which I used to assume meant she hadn't either. She said I'm an Amy: caught in a shadow; attention-seeking; ambitious. I took a quiz online that told me I'm Jo: a storyteller; an unconventional thinker; ambitious.)

I get sick and the pharmacist down the street from Notre Dame sells me double strength paracetamol. I walk through the Palace of Versailles with a head cold. The paintings on the ceilings move when I look at them. I don't see myself when I look in the mirrors.

(I told her a story once; how my mother used to visit France on business, and would come back home with new charms for bracelets she'd gotten for me and my sister. I tried to, but I couldn't seem to find the time to go to the store and pick something to bring back for my mother.

The little woman wanted me to. It was hard to see her as wrong.)

I'm put in the same tour group as my friend the photographer at the Louvre. She takes fourteen photos of the Mona Lisa from the same terrible angle in the crowd. She asks me to move out of her shot so she doesn't waste any film.

(It wasn't a big deal to me at the time, but the little woman thought it was cruel.)

And the little woman starts to put off heat, and pace in circles, and mutter incessantly.

She tells me it's my fault, though she doesn't say why. I stand and stare forward in front of

Liberty Leading the People and try my hardest not to shake or cry.

(I used to think that if I could get the little woman to leave, the area she took up inside me would all become negative space, and I'd come into focus.)

I manage to calm down by breaking away from the tour and pacing purposefully around the museum alone with my head down like I'm participating in a competitive walkathon. I barely speak for the rest of the day. I'm exhausted. I get the sense the little woman is as well.

(I didn't come into focus, not straight away. It would take years for that.)

I buy a disposable camera in the gift shop while I wait for my group to leave so I can climb up the Eiffel Tower by myself and avoid some of the

noise. The little woman jumps off when we get to the top.

(She still visits sometimes; there's still no fanfare.)

I get my pictures developed a few weeks after returning from Europe.

None of them turn out blurry.



## *soft violence*

that's the thing - it's all the same.

it's all the same, the moss and the river and the rich soil between my fingers,

the canoe slicing through the lake and the dog barking at my heels  
the green stain of fresh-cut grass smeared on my knees and elbows  
in the summer sun.

it's all the same as the boning knife and the fish and each drop of blood,

each blur of a body on the side of the road,  
small legs, small face, all of it dead.

all of the beauty is the same.

all of the ugliness.

i don't get how people like the prettiness,

the crease of each leaf and the smell of ash in clear evening air,  
but not like the rest of it.

the rot, the dance of it,

how death slips itself into everything in this earth inextricably,

how each tree grows out of carcasses,

how each deer grows out of harvested sustenance

from something that did not want to be harvested.

yes, i love the antler in the woods all the more because of the rough  
end to it,

where it fell from an uninjured head,

a simple shedding rather than a vestige of a skeleton  
made of a hundred assembled pieces going back to the dirt.  
but that's different.

i take no joy from all the ugliness,  
it's just the knowledge that you can't get all the beauty without it,  
but also that the line between them is hardly a line.  
it is a river, and rivers are flowing and they take from both sides of the  
shore.  
you cannot rule it the way you would rule something concrete.  
it just doesn't work like that.  
there's a reason life is a cycle and not a line.  
it's all tied together, all of it, and it always has been.  
that's part of why i love it.

how can you not love something that complex,  
that will always have room for you?  
each tree in the book a treasure to find,  
each fish a lesson in thankfulness and delicacy,  
each frog and stick insect and swamp a singular beauty,  
in all of its strangeness, all of its inhumanity,  
its seeming incompatibility to the human condition.

when i am old,  
when my bones are brittle and i have lived through decades of change,  
when i have skin so thin and so fine  
that to shake my hand is to hear a whisper of sound like cotton against  
linen,  
when i am all full up and i have seen and lived and heard,  
when Mary Oliver's bear comes, his purse full of coins to buy me,  
i will go,

and there will be a place for me in the soil.

there is nothing else like that, like this, in the universe. the earth.

sentimental, maybe, but also-- factual.

nothing else so wholeheartedly welcomes your body and your mind and  
your soul,

all of what you consider to be yourself,

to all that it is.

i don't know.

i guess it is just difficult,

knowing that it is unwanted, all the ugliness,

every poem I write about bones in the dirt

because i can't seem to explain that all that ugliness

and all that beauty are not separate things.

it makes me feel very fractured.

it makes me think i shouldn't write that ugliness after all,

but i can't not write it, and i especially can't write any beauty without it.

i don't even really know which is which.

you see?

i can't write beauty because i don't know what it is -

i don't know where the line, the river, the demarcation between it and  
ugliness is.

it hurts when people take the ugliness i write and tell me that is what it  
is,

when i thought it was beauty all along,

when i thought that everything was beauty.

is it not?

## *We, Us, Them*

we sped through seas of yellow and orange and green  
as fast as humanly possible he drove us  
Home  
gripping the steering wheel with the weight of his past  
the head of the house  
a lion stretched out in the grass, eyes surveying his kingdom

in the rearview mirror, she discovered her slouch  
she never used to slouch  
when she thought about her childhood, she remembered her father  
they would chew sugar cubes together over the kitchen sink  
now, she sat in the passenger seat  
watching him turn, frantically  
circle after circle  
around her life as it passed by

it was hard to watch  
because they were stuck  
they had been stuck since the day they met

in the backseat, their children  
wide-eyed, waiting  
we were waiting

# *Zombotron*

## Scene 1:

INT. Andy's bedroom - morning

(Alarm clock goes off.)

Mom:

Wake up, Andy! It's time for school.

Andy:

(tired)

Can't I just sleep a little more?

Mom:

Sorry, kiddo. Your principal is not going to take that as an excuse.

(Andy brushes teeth, gets dressed, eats breakfast, etc.)

(Mom enters.)

Andy:

Mom, I think I'm sick.

Mom:

(gives stern look)

Get going.

Scene 2:

INT. School - morning

(Andy walks into school. Two bullies, Chester and Buster, approach him.)

Chester:

Where do you think you're going, Dumbo!?

Andy:

Leave me alone.

Buster:

Why should we listen to you? You can't do anything.

Andy:

(afraid)

What do you want?

Chester:

The usual. (smiling)

Andy:

(Hands over lunch money.)

Chester:

Thanks, Dimwit. (pushes him to a locker)

(Bell rings)

Buster:

You better run! Don't wanna be late for class.

(Andy runs to class, bullies laughing behind him.)

Scene 3:

INT. Andy's home - afternoon



(Andy comes back home. Throws bag on floor.)

Mom:  
So how was school?

Andy:  
(sarcastic)  
Great!

(Andy runs down to the basement where there are  
several gadgets.)

(Andy turns on T.V, starts working on a gadget.)

Scene 4:

INT. School - morning

(Andy is walking down the hallway at school.  
Chester trips him.)

Chester: Oops!

Andy:  
What's the matter with you?  
Why can't you just leave me alone?!

Chester and Buster:  
Hahahahahah!

(Bell rings.)

(Andy is upset and pushes Chester.)

(Chester falls down the stairs.)

Buster:  
Now you're gonna get it!

(Andy & Buster have a scuffle.)

Principal:  
Both of you, in my office. NOW!!

Scene 5:

INT. Principal's office - afternoon

Principal:  
Now Andy, explain what happened.

Andy:  
Chester tripped me.

Chester:  
It was an accident!

Andy:  
No, it wasn't!

Buster:  
Yeah, it was. Sir, I was with Chester. He was just stretching out his legs as he was talking to me and Andy happened to walk by. Chester tried to explain himself and then Andy pushed him.

Andy:  
That's a lie!

Principal:  
Andy, that's enough! Now why did you push him?

Andy:  
Because he tripped me!

Principal:

But that doesn't mean you should push him, right?  
Words speak louder than actions.

Andy:  
I know--it's just that these guys trouble me every  
day, and I've had enough of it.

Principal:  
But you pushed him down the stairs. You could've  
killed him!  
Here's what I'm going to do. Chester and Buster,  
you guys have a detention after school, and Andy,  
you have a one-day suspension.

Andy:  
But-

Principal:  
That's it, Andy. End of discussion. And if I see  
you guys fighting again, you're both going to be in  
serious trouble.

Buster:  
Alright, Sir.

(Buster looks at Andy, smiling; Andy is upset.)

Scene 6:  
INT. Andy's home - night

(Mom finds out about suspension)

Mom:  
You pushed someone down the stairs! Andy, what is  
the matter with you?

Andy:  
He was bullying me.

Mom:

Then you should have told the principal right away.

Andy:

(grunts)

Mom:

You are old enough to understand what is right and  
what is wrong.

Andy:

(walks away - muttering)

You are too.

(Andy is sitting and thinking in his bedroom. Night  
falls, and he has a flashback of the bullies)

Scene 7:

INT. Basement - morning

(Andy is working on a machine. Sam calls.)

Andy:

Hey, Sam.

Sam:

Hey, Andy, I heard about your suspension. Is it  
true?

Andy:

Yes.

Sam:

You're so lucky! Now you don't even have to go to  
school.

Andy:

But it wasn't even my fault. I just pushed Chester  
because he was bothering me, yet I still got in  
trouble!

Sam:  
Yeah, that's awful.

Andy:  
I wish there was a way I could harm them, without  
me actually harming them.

(Andy has a realization.)

Sam:  
Yeah, well Andy, I'll see you tomorrow. Bye.

(Sam hangs up.)

Scene 8:  
INT. Basement - afternoon

(Andy starts working on a robot, putting pieces  
together.)

Andy:  
(Andy turns robot on.)  
I hope this works

Ztron:  
(Boots up)  
Hello, Andy.

Andy:  
(In awe)  
Hello, robot. Yes!

Ztron:  
I will be your assistant from now on. Just tell me

what you want, and I will make it happen.

Andy:

That's awesome! I'm going to call you . . .  
Zombotron. Got it?

Ztron:

Zombotron... My name is Zombotron.

Scene 9:

INT. Classroom - morning

(Andy walks into class, Chester beside him.)

Chester:

I haven't forgotten about what you did to me.

Andy:

I haven't either.  
(smiles)

Chester:

You better watch your back.

Andy:

Listen punk, if you wanna settle this, let's meet  
at the parking lot. (leans closer) You better bring  
your loser of a friend.

Teacher:

Andy, be quiet!

Chester:

Deal.

Scene 10:

EXT. School parking lot - afternoon



(Andy is waiting at the parking lot with Ztron.  
Chester and Buster show up.)

Chester:  
Alright, let's settle this- Wait, what the hell is  
that?

Andy:  
My friend. I call him Zombotron.

Buster:  
Zombotron?! What is he here to do, watch you get  
beat?

Andy:  
Not exactly.

Chester:  
Whatever, let's get him!

Andy:  
Zombotron, attack.

Ztron:  
Attacking.

(Ztron knocks down Chester and then kicks Buster)

Andy:  
Zombotron, stop.

(Ztron stops)

Andy:  
Next time you guys wanna pick on me, just know  
what's going to happen.

Chester:

Okay, okay, we won't mess with you anymore.

Andy:

One more thing- you tell anyone about what just happened, and you won't be alive the next time I see you.

Buster:

Don't worry, we won't tell anyone. Please just leave us alone.

Andy:

(smirks)

See ya.

(Andy walks away, smiling.)

Scene 11:

INT. Andy's home - afternoon

(Andy is relaxing on the couch.)

Andy:

Ztron, can you get me some chips?

Ztron:

Yes Andy, getting chips.

(Ztron gives him chips.)

Andy:

Oh yeah, and a drink.

Ztron:

Yes Andy, a drink.

(Ztron gives him a drink.)

Andy:  
Could you also turn on the TV? The remote's too far  
away.

Ztron:  
Yes Andy, turning on the TV.

(Ztron turns on TV to a scene where robots are  
disobeying humans and taking over. Ztron observes  
closely.)

Andy:  
(calls Sam)  
Hey Sam, can I come over to your house and hang out  
with you?

Sam:  
(on phone)  
Sure.

Andy:  
Alright, Imma be right there.  
(Hangs up)

Andy:  
Ztron, turn the TV off.

(No response)

Andy:  
Ztron...

(No response)

Andy:  
Ztron!!

Ztron:

Yes Andy, turning the TV off.

Scene 12

INT. Andy's home - night

(Andy hangs out with Sam. Both decided to go to Andy's house to watch a movie and have a sleepover. Sam sits down on the couch.)

Andy:  
I'm gonna get some snacks for the movie.

Sam:  
Cool.

(As Sam is sitting, Ztron slowly walks up behind him and grabs his head.)

Sam:  
Oh my God! What's happening?!

Andy:  
Ztron!

(Andy walks behind Ztron and tries to take its hands off of Sam.)

Andy:  
Ztron, stop! You're hurting him.

(Ztron pushes Andy. Andy falls to the ground. He gets back up and disconnects Ztron. Ztron turns off.)

Sam:  
What the heck was that?!!

Andy:

Nothing, just a friend...or was a friend.

Scene 13

EXT. Front yard - morning

(Andy disassembles Ztron and throws him in the  
garbage.)

Andy:  
Well, he's destroyed now.

Sam:  
Are you okay with that?

Andy:  
What do you mean?

Sam:  
I mean, you never said goodbye to it.

Andy:  
Well, I- that's alright. He never meant that much  
to me.

Sam:  
Alright . . . um, I'm gonna go home now.

Andy:  
Please don't tell anyone about this, okay?

Sam:  
Yeah, don't worry. I won't.

Andy:  
Thanks.

Sam:  
But please- don't ever make anything like that

again.

Andy:  
(laughs)  
I won't

Sam:  
See ya.

Andy:  
Bye.

Scene 14

INT. Andy's home - morning

(Sam leaves. Andy goes inside his house, sits down  
on couch, and turns on TV.)

Andy:  
That was one crazy day.

(Andy hears the door open from behind.)

Andy:  
Hey Mom, Sam just left. Could you make me some  
breakfast?

Ztron:  
Yes, Andy. Making breakfast.

(Andy shows face of terror.)

End



# *SELF-DISCOVERY: A FILM MANIFESTO*

## *THE PAST, THE AUTHENTIC, AND THE UNKNOWN*

### *THE VOW OF EXPLORATION*

1. CINEMA is SELF-DISCOVERY since it is a quest for AUTHENTICALLY EXPLORING oneself. Lying is forbidden as the filmmaker is RETREATING towards COMFORT to avoid confronting the truth. The creator is obligated to

have the courage to explore the UNKNOWN parts of themselves to make self-discoveries!

2a. The filmmaker is in the DIRTY LAUNDRY

business. He or she must be brave enough to EXPLORE the darkest parts their soul on display for the world to see to make an HONEST

self-discovery.

2b. The filmmaker must explore a PERSONAL PROBLEM that takes them out of their comfort zone. Consequently, they are DISCOVERING something new about themselves. The audience relates their own life to the creator's exploration of the problem.

Hence the CONNECTION between the audience and filmmaker is formed by how both are exploring themselves to make SELF-DISCOVERIES through the problem.

2c. The filmmaker must allow the audience to form their own discoveries. It is banned for the filmmaker to bash the audience over the head with their self-discoveries. The creator must invite the audience to explore the problem for themselves.

3. The filmmaker must express the problem as a METAPHOR. It allows them to take a complex hard to understand idea into a CONCRETE well understood idea. Or it will make the audience view an old problem in a new way.

4. The filmmaker must use MEMORIES, FANTASIES, and DREAMS as their main method of research for exploring their problem. It is more fulfilling since they develop a CLEARER sense of how their problem caused many of their past experiences.

5. The filmmaker must carefully use TECHNIQUES which express their ideas. By purposefully choosing each ARTISTIC CHOICE they can cinematically ARTICULATE their ideas. The ideas must not be explicitly told in the image, sounds, and pacing instead they must be READ IN BETWEEN

THE LINES. This makes the audience more engaged because they are an ACTIVE PARTICIPANT in interpreting the film's techniques.

6. The filmmaker is forbidden to COPY what someone else has already said. The discovery does not come from within hence there is NO AUTHENTICITY to the creator's exploration. This is not useful as since they LEARN NOTHING about themselves nor to the

audience since it has already been communicated to them.

7. The filmmaker must NOT create a film that the AUDIENCE would like to see. The creator must create a film that THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE.

8. The filmmaker must discover how they will GROW after finding the solution to their problem.

They will apply their solution towards their life to DISCOVER how it will help them get closer to their ideal

FUTURE 3-5 years down the road. Not only for their existence, but also to all of their loved ones as they are affected by the filmmaker's changes in life.

## *Only a Redbone*

“Hi, I’m Alizea,” I say, extending my hand.

“I know,” he laughs nervously, “and I’m Unys.” He shakes my hand.

“Yes, my mom told me.”

“Of course she did.”

We keep walking side by side, feeling the weight of formality slump our shoulders forward.

“So, what grade you in?” He asks.

“Grade 8. I’m fourteen.” I look around and try not to stare at the dog passing by that has three legs. I can see his hungry ribs underneath his papery skin.

“You getting so big. My little girl turnin’ into a young lady,” Unys smiles sadly.

“Yeah.” I have nothing to say. On the way here, I started to think of conversation starters but I have none. I feel like asking all of the questions I’ve saved up in my head since I was young- what’s your favourite book? Do you eat sandwiches with or without the crust? Do you ever think of me, at all? All of those questions seem silly now.

It’s strange seeing so many black people all in one place. And they’re not all maids like in my city! I watch them cooking in their shacks, hanging out laundry to dry, burning garbage in big tin cans on the side of the road. It stinks but I don’t dare cover my nose. I want to feel like I belong here. I want to feel a connection to these kids on the street splashed in mud, playing with a football made of cloth, but I don’t. I’m an outsider with my straight hair and pale face. My clothes are too nice and my hands have never scrubbed anything to the bone in their lives. They are soft.

"I have a dog now. His name's Adiel. I'd been begging Mama to get me one since forever."

"That's nice. I know your mom is tough but she love you. More than you know," Unys sighs.

A woman passes by and she gives me a dirty look.

"Redbone," she mutters under her breath.

I don't know what that means. I turn to my father and he looks away. Redbone must not be a nice word.

"Wanna sit down?" He asks.

The sign on the bench says COLOURED ONLY. I hesitate.

"I guess we should just head to my house then."

"Okay," I say. "So, what do you do?"

"I'm a painter. I mean, not a painter painter," he laughs, "I paint signs."

"That's nice." I say this even though it's not nice. I think back to all the things I've imagined him to be- an explorer, a chef, a pilot, a musician. I'm embarrassed. As we walk to his house, I can't stop thinking about my new leather shoes that are being splashed by mud and I reprimand myself. Who do I think I am? Someone that's too good for this place? I march on. We finally arrive at a small shack that he calls home.

Once I enter, I'm relieved that it's clean. There's a kitchen with a stove and a refrigerator and his bed is on the opposite side of the room and the bathroom is in a nook at the far back. I wonder how someone could live without a library and a big bathtub or fragrant lavender candles to warm one's spirit at night. This studio is uninhabitable and I don't know where to sit. There are no chairs. Unys goes to a corner and brings me a fold out chair and he sits down on his bed.

"What do you want to be when you grown up? Ah," he chuckles "I forgot, you already grown."

"I think I want to become a marine biologist. I really like pointed sawfish! Have you heard of pointed sawfish?" I ask and Unys shakes his head. "It

has a rostrum, like a beak thing, that has teeth that come out of it! Unbelievable. If I had to study one fish, it would be that one," I gleam.

"Well, you seem very smart, Alizea. Just work hard and I'm sure you'll get to study that fish you like."

I hear police sirens and pots and pans clashing from neighbouring houses and I wonder if this is what it sounds like at night. Do these people manage to sleep even with faraway shouts and police dogs barking at their windows? Do they really live like this?

My father talks a bit about his life. The neighbours are getting a divorce and his best friend just opened a restaurant and I try to care. But I don't know this man, this Unys, someone whom I'm supposed to love. When it's time to leave, it's raining outside.

"Do you have an umbrella?" I ask.

"No. Why you need an umbrella? We can just run fast. I'll race ya!" He laughs it off but his back is stiff. I think it's because he's embarrassed he doesn't have something as basic as this. He must guess that we have four umbrellas at Mama's house.

"Unys, my face, my hair. I can't get wet."

"You're right," he hands me a jacket, "here you go."

"Thank you." I tuck in my hair and zip it up.

"You know, you come visit anytime. It's an open invitation. Really, anytime Alizea." His eyes are watery.

"Ok."

He accompanies me to the entrance of the city where my driver is waiting for me. The car looks out of place here. Children have stopped to stare. I give Unys a hug. He holds on too tight and too long, like he's trying to make up for all of the bed times he's missed. He could never make up for them. I get in the car. Outside, the woman who called me redbone is looking at me. She's wiping her bloody hands on her apron. Her eyes look dead tired. A boy comes from behind her and she puts her arms around him. Holds him tight. He is one of those football boys, dressed in rags. She mouths traitor as I drive



away.

I think of the times I've wished I could live in the coloured areas. I could have stopped putting on beige powder every day and stopped putting lye in my hair. I contemplate every time I've savoured this dream of freedom. I was innocent then, no more than a week ago. Now I know that I'd been dreaming in technicolor. I am a redbone but I am not those boys in the mud and I am not that mother with the bloody hands. I am not the rich white man nor the extravagant blonde housewife. I exist in this middle ground of not good enough for my own people and too good for my own people and what does that make? That makes a redbone, an outsider from everyone. My friends don't understand why I can't go tan with them and my father doesn't get why mud on shoes is such a bad thing. I wish my father could come to my city and we could rewind the timer to zero. We could restart my childhood but with a dad included. Unys would be there to watch me grow up and win the Lexington Collegiate spelling bee trophy three years in a row and attend my spring flute recital. We would talk about pointed sawfish but he can't come to Orania. It's all white here.

*instead,*

write me a story.

One where the hero  
is human, and the villain  
is human, and there really  
is no hero and no villain,  
just you and me, sitting  
beneath the lilac bush  
while the flowers tumble  
sweet and dizzy in the breezes,  
where Apollo plays discus and  
his lover doesn't die, where  
there is catharsis at the end of the  
tragedy, where it's formulaic  
and poetic and not real. I want  
you to stop it with your  
big-money news-headlines, with your  
live-on-Mars-forget-Earth initiative, with your  
middle-eastern-war dinner-table-talks, with your  
politics. I know it's real, I know it's           there  
but you don't know what  
you're talking about... so don't speak.

Just write me a story.

Another where the ending  
is happy and the beginning  
is sadder but there really  
is no end or beginning,  
just birth and death,  
you and me, lying on our  
stomachs in the clover patch,  
trying to find a four-leaf,  
lying through our teeth  
when the teacher asks if  
we've thought long and hard  
about the grass stains  
on our uniforms. Oh, well,  
lecture me until I go deaf,  
I'll still stand here clutching  
a dried bit of luck, in a time when  
Tom and Huck never grew up and  
Peter Pan's Lost Boys knew the secret  
the adults don't know:                      they weren't lost.  
But— I dread to admit— you're all grown up  
now, and you won't shut up about your  
new raise, new boss, new suit.  
Wait, what's new?  
My raise, my boss, my suit!  
Oh, please—  
My car, my drink, my wife!  
Stop—  
My—My—My—  
Have you heard about the — crisis?  
No, I don't want to—  
Let me tell you...

You don't know what  
you're going on about... so don't talk.

Please write me a story.

The type where the climax  
is exciting, where the denouement  
is a slow exhale, where there really  
is no climax and denouement,  
just me and my memories

of you,

that summer day when our  
smiles were sticky with melting  
candy, and the sea was scintillant  
as the sun danced on every wave  
and the salt was strong and heady

not alcohol

and you were seventeen, or just born,  
or just naked, forget your suit... won't you forget your suit?  
You said to me, "Let's never grow up,"  
and then you emerged from the waves  
in full Stuart Hughes, gone with the wind.

And— you talked politics to me. And—  
you asked if I wanted to go for drinks      No, thanks. I'll just have  
water. (precious water) And— you cracked a joke like an eggshell, yolk  
sticky and yellower

than the sun. But

you don't know what you're saying... so don't joke.

Write me a story,  
instead.

## *Passcode*

“This is not the time for jokes, Agent Williams,” Crystal growled silently as the intercom at her ear buzzed carelessly, “what’s your status?”

“Fine,” Williams’ voice relented, “I’m close to the main room. It’s been quiet... I think Matrix may be up to his old tricks again,”

“I knew it,” Crystal hissed, peeking around the corner at the steel hallway swarming with criminals. “How long do we have?”

“Not long... they just set up the weapon in the main room... it’s only a matter of time,” Williams’ voice rang robotically through the intercom. Crystal let out a quiet breath into the tense air and shook her head in disapproval. This was the fifth time this month alone. Agent Crystal and her partner, Agent Williams, had been on this case for far too long... they had chased around Matrix for years, trying to get ahold of his doom weapon... they had gotten close before, but it was useless without a passcode.

“We need to find a way to get into the main room without being seen...” Crystal whispered, brows furrowing thoughtfully, “any ideas?”

“Hmm,” Williams’ voice mused, “that depends on whether you have your stun device with you... otherwise the only route quick enough to get there in time is through the maze halls to your left.” Crystal let out an aggravated sigh and ran her palm over her face in annoyance.

“I guess we’re doing this the hard way, then,” Crystal sighed as she patted her empty holster, “if I don’t make it in time, take cover,” Crystal advised before reluctantly turning to sprint towards the maze halls.

Crystal turned a sharp corner and screeched to a halt at a series of twisted hallways and corridors. The Matrix sure liked to overcomplicate things... and the maze halls were probably his most chaotic creation yet. They

were a series of unguarded, labyrinth-like tunnels that led, in a very confusing and riddle-bound manner, to the main room. A cluster of wildly mismatched hallways that were now getting on Crystal's last nerve.

There were crooked signs everywhere with distorted clues and directions, but Crystal didn't have time to think... she just ran. She ran headfirst into what looked to be sheer madness without a second thought. Crystal dashed forward, heels thundering as they bounded down the slick, silver floors.

"I'm in the main room. It's still empty, but the Matrix will be here in less than forty-five seconds," Williams' voice signalled warningly, "I'm trying to deactivate the weapon, but the controls are crazy complicated!" he exclaimed with a huff, loud beeping sounds ringing through as incidental music to his voice. Crystal growled in frustration and continued to sprint, pulse beginning to race as her footsteps pounded harder and her adrenaline coursed faster.

"Can you, I don't know, help me then? You have a digital copy of the building schematics on your watch," Crystal pointed out with a huff, yelping as she swerved to the side to avoid tripping on an abandoned laser gun.

"It's glitching, I can't get a reading!" Williams' voice yelled frantically, "twenty five seconds!"

"I'm trying, but I'm lost and I keep slipping on this stupid metal floor!" Crystal exclaimed, emerald orbs flaming wildly as her panting rang loud and heavy in her ears.

"Ten seconds!"

Crystal yelped as she ran straight into a dead end. Her momentum wouldn't allow her to stop in time, so she hit the wall with a loud 'thud'. Crystal grunted when she bounced back from yet another steel surface in the building.

"Are you okay?!" Williams' concerned voice chimed in her ear. Crystal let out a slow breath as she shut her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

"Yeah, I guess so-"



“Because in a few minutes, your partner won’t be,” a booming voice roared through the intercom maniacally. Chrystal stopped cold. Her head whipped up and her eyes narrowed into slits.

“Matrix.”

“Let him go,” Crystal ground out dangerously, finally standing at the entrance of the main room with her fists balled hard at her sides and her expression screaming alarm. The Matrix turned around slowly and stepped to the side to reveal Williams hysterically slamming his fists onto the wall of a glass tube that he was encased in. Crystal faltered, eyes flickering to her partner and the odd contraption he was in. Matrix cackled wildly, a clatter of broken notes that rang sourly in the air and fell limply to the floor once their melodies’ ceased.

“Crystal, I’m okay! Save yourself!” Williams’ yelled, pausing his efforts at escape to glance at her pleadingly, a desperate wish for her to run. Crystal wasn’t going anywhere. She turned to face Matrix with gritted teeth and a solid resolve. The man simply smirked, a venomous grin that could only be compared to a clean sliver of a crisp, crescent moon shining stark in the darkest of nights. His orbs shone with insanity.

“Not until you give me the code,” Matrix snarled, smug expression crawling away to reveal a dangerous look now etched across his features. Crystal simply growled and stepped forward, a threatening way about her clenched fists and grounded position.

“I won’t fall for your tricks!” Crystal countered angrily, about to charge at him when he held a hand up, stopping her dead in her tracks.

“I wouldn’t,” Matrix sneered, lifting his other hand to poise it above an array of controls attached to the glass tube, “this device can create a controlled stumani so treacherous that it will thrash your partner around enough to... well, let’s just say he won’t make the company barbeque this year,” Matrix glowered at her, toxic grin beaming down at her with pride and triumph. Crystal gasped, eyes blowing wide as she stood rigidly in her spot.

“Look, I don’t know what code you want,” Crystal tried again in a less

threatening tone, holding her hands before her in a retreating manner to convey her honesty. Matrix roared thunderously in fury. He sucked in a deep, shuddering breath of aggravation, then stared straight at her with a brooding expression.

"I'm not in the mood for games, princess," Matrix ground out slowly, hand shaking with fury above the control panel, "now, give me the code!"

"I don't have it, stop!" Crystal yelled in terror, watching his hand lower slowly, "I really have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Oh, but don't you?" Matrix asked, raising an eyebrow at her inquisitively. His horrifying smirk stretched wider and psychotically across his face to reveal every last gleaming incisor. "The mission number from that case in Europe, 2010. You reprogrammed my weapon years ago, it took me all this time to figure out where to find the code!" Matrix thundered, anger pooling onto his features. Crystal frowned in shock, glancing at Williams helplessly. Her partner shrugged.

"I don't remember--"

"It was in Venice," Matrix ground out silently, "the year I blasted you both with my amnesia device. Big mistake on my part, but it was my only chance of escape," he snarled, "but now I'm getting that code so I can unleash my weapon of mass destruction," Matrix spit out in fury. Crystal froze, a series of memories flashing before her rapidly. He was... right... she remembered. That mission number... she couldn't recall it. It was locked away somewhere in the agency vault.

"I don't know that by heart!" Crystal yelled, "even if I wanted to, I couldn't--"

"Wrong answer," Matrix growled menacingly, hand slamming onto the controls. The glass tube began to shudder violently and flash crimson, sirens screeching from the device. Crystal's eyes widened.

"No!"

"Christina! William! Lunch time!"

The kids groaned, expressions drooping at the words.

“Mom, Christie was about to save me from Matrix!” William whined childishly. The four-year old crossed his arms before him in frustration as he glared up at his mother who had just entered the room. She chuckled, glancing around in amusement. William was sitting in a cardboard box with red crayon scribbled all over it while Christina stood a few feet away, a pair of ebony earmuffs placed on top of her rose headband. William’s giant crimson teddy bear lay beside him, the television remote placed in its lap.

“Can Matrix wait? Dad just came back with pizza,” she said, smiling knowingly as both kids shot up in excitement.

“Yay!” Christina squealed, “can we have orange juice, too?” William’s mother chuckled and nodded at the young girl.

“Of course,” she agreed.

“Wait, mama, can we watch a cool spy movie after lunch?” William pleaded, eyes wide and glassy, “pretty please?” His mother smiled.

“I did promise I would order you a movie, didn’t I?” she mused, “did you figure out the passcode like you said you would?”

“No,” Christina pouted, lips puffing out as she huffed in frustration. “I think we just locked it even more...” William’s mother laughed and grinned.

“Sure, one cool spy movie coming up after lunch,” she nodded at them, “now come on, lunch is getting cold.”

## *Belonging*

My parents once asked me to decide my future. They gave me two options: become a Canadian citizen or go back to China after graduation. I replied to them with the most classic answer, “I don’t know.” This conversation led me to consider the word “belonging.” Whenever people see me, they think of two countries. My Chinese friends think I am more westernized because I have been in Canada for three years, while Canadians think I am more Chinese because of my language and habits. The feeling of being sandwiched within the two sides makes me think “Where do I belong?” A seemingly simple question leaves me with a deep thought.

In September of 2017, I first came to Canada with a student visa. It is a friendly country which can provide me with many opportunities to study in the top 100 universities in the world. Last weekend, I went to Niagara Falls with my friends. It has beautiful scenery, and I experienced a unique culture. Simultaneously, I was also fatigued from the journey. While driving on the familiar road to Toronto, I felt the warmth of coming home! I couldn’t wait to have some home-made food and lay down on my bed. For the first time, I felt a strong sense of belonging to the city. I am thankful that I have met the best human beings: my homestay mom who prepares every meal for me; my roommate who can understand all my feelings; my teachers who provide extra help to improve my English, etc. They all have helped me to better fit into this unfamiliar country. Nevertheless, all these things cannot replace my yearning for the country across the Pacific Ocean. I still doubt, from time to time, whether I made the correct decision to study in a country that is so far away. Once and a while, I will suddenly miss the hot soup that is made by my mother, although I can whisper to you that it is tasteless. Before I came here, I imagined what my life would be like: speaking fluent English to a group of

Canadian friends. Three years later, I finally realized the difference between ideal and reality: I can't speak English as fluently as a native, and it is difficult to have a bosom Canadian friend. Not only because it is hard to make the leap but also because joining a new group means that it will keep me away from my Chinese friends. I can't deal with breaking the pattern successfully and keep the balance between the two different sides.

From the other perspective, every time I fill out a document, in the nationality column, I always spell C-H-I-N-A. No matter how long I have not been home, you can see the shadow of the Chinese in me. When I was a child, there was no doubt that I belonged to my parents, and naturally, I belonged to where they are. There is a saying in China, "Fallen leaves return to their roots." It means that no matter how far you go, home is always your refuge, and my mood is affected by all the news of the motherland. Nevertheless, the years living in Canada have changed me a lot in terms of culture, living style, and mentality of life. I am conflicted because every time I return to China, the difference between the two countries are exaggerated in essence; students in China barely have any spare time; more subways and high-rise buildings are under construction; people have to line up everywhere they go. Compared with freedom in Canada, I feel a sense of restraint and pressure in China. It is as if the whole city has pressed the fast forward button: students hurry between different crammed schools, and workers bow and check their phones all the time. When I went back home last summer, my vacation was arranged fully with different extracurriculars, and I was cramped into crowds. From time to time, I found that I could not get used to the transition from a slow life to a fast pace. Although I was born in China, after years of polishing, the city I knew best was covered with smog. The questioning voice at the bottom of my heart came to the surface, "where do I belong"? It was like I was stuck in the middle of two worlds.

China is the motherland for me, but I have already changed my living habits based on the experiences of Canadian customs. The struggle with the disorderly question "Where do I belong?" made me confused to define

my identity and truth. There is a quote from Sharon Maas, “She might be without country, without nation, but inside her, there was still a being that could exist and be free, that could simply say I am without adding a this, or that, without saying I am Indian, Guyanese, English or anything else in the world.” Every time we go from one city to another, it’s a distance of time. At eight o’clock, I listen to the voice of a city that is not new to me but that does not belong to me. In fact, people everywhere have three meals a day. Just a geographical gap, makes people become strangers. Now I start to realize that it does not matter wherever we wander, we only belong to ourselves. Instead of worrying about where you belong, with concern for your hometown, with gratitude to those who have helped you, follow what you feel, do what you want to do and go where you want to go. No matter what university you attend or work you will go to, how far away from your home, do not change your original mind, do not forget your ultimate dream, and do not violate your boundaries due to others’ influence, expectations and pressures.

As for refugees, the helping hands makes them feel a sense of belonging; As for babies, the family support makes them feel a sense of belonging; As for lecturers, the applause from the audiences makes them feel a sense of belonging; and as for me, my sense of belonging comes from my perception of myself. Now, if you ask me “where do you want to stay after graduation?”, my answer will still be the same, “I don’t know,” but this time, I start to understand that I am in control of my own life: I belong to myself!

## *The Family Next Door*

There is a home behind my house. There are many homes behind my house, but this one home, its a real home.

I know. I see people, I see a family.

I see their feet walk around the kitchen. A dog scuttles around, visiting person to person. A woman with black hair set plates around a table. It must be the mom.

Its weird that I'm watching them. I shouldn't be. But I can't not. You'll understand. You'll know.

This home is more traditional, a breath of fresh air for me. It makes me think of my old place in Ohio.

This home even has a backyard. In Toronto, seriously? No one in my entire neighborhood has a backyard. I miss the earth. My friends and I used to talk about getting out of Ohio, what were we thinking?

I think about the river which trickled through my backyard.

I miss the two story treehouse which my mother constructed.

I miss the music which blared through speakers in my town on a warm Friday night.

I miss the stars.

I miss the possibility of aloneness. A feat virtually impossible with a city of 3 million people.

I miss the vast forests. Ones which I adventured with my friends, enchanted by fictional characters -- yes, the most magical of moments.

I hear footsteps ascend the stairs. My trail of thought... broken. My dad.

He walks in my sister's room. It's right next to mine. I can hear everything. I



don't want to.

He asks her a question quietly, in that disappointed tone, you know -- the "I love you but seriously?" tone. It works. It's so much easier to get mad at someone that's mad. It's so much harder to get mad at someone who's disappointed. My sister, journeying through her teenage years cries out in a defensive manner, words which will stay with me.

Their conversation is one which has been re-enacted hundreds of times. It's not special. It hums to the tune of an overplayed song -- predictable and tiring.

Then it ends with a shout, a hug, and a cry.

Then a sorry and it's okay.

And then I wonder when the song will next be played again.

I look back into their house. I think smoke rises from their chimney. Maybe they've set a fire in their living room.

How nice?

A ring at the top right of my screen, my mom texted me. "When will you be over again? I miss you." I feel the bags under my eyes sink a little deeper.

My dad leaves my sister's room.

He closes the door softly.

I type madly on my keyboard,

hoping he hears,

hoping he picks up some kind of cue and comes in.

I hear his footsteps descend down the staircase.

I sigh.

I look back at the home.

Now the family sits around the table.

I can't help it, every time I enter my room I walk to my window, wondering if this family is home. When they're not there,

I feel a pang of disappointment.

When they are there,

I feel defeated.

The home behind my house.  
The house behind my house is a home.  
It's a TV show. With endless episodes.

But this part sucks.  
My sister sobs quietly, my father's footsteps recede away from me, my mom texts me asking me to come home.

Home?

The show might end.  
Maybe they'll move? Maybe I'll move? Maybe my mom stops drinking?  
Maybe I wake up and I'm back in my bed in Ohio.

My parents are together again and laugh as I put my puffy jacket on, getting ready to trudge through the woods with my friends, we're unstoppable.

The show hasn't ended, not yet.

The family has since split from the dinner table. I can see a little girl and boy run across the couch. A light flickers on upstairs, maybe the parents are settling in? I turn away. My mom texts me again, "make sure to pack for my place tonight!" I laugh, briefly. Yes, a place indeed.

For the house behind my house is a home.

Congratulations to the winning entries and honourable mentions:

**Grades 7/8**

1. *A Dream* by Graham Tomori
2. *Through the Eyes of Mother Earth* by Bryony Chan
3. *Ripples* by Tiffany Tse

**Honourable Mention:**

*Dear Quinten, Love Evelyn* by Kumkum Anugopal

**Grades 9/10**

1. *Gone With the Stars* by Olivia Choi  
& *The Tale of Two Horses* by Kate Chandler (TIE)
2. *I Spy* by Hiba Khan
3. *One of the 176* by Kian Torabi Ardakami

**Honourable Mentions:**

*Our Bodies* by Maryn Rice  
*Parasite* by Bella Melardi

**Grades 11/12**

1. *Negative Space* by Kaitlyn Maddox
2. *We, Us, Them* by Tofunmi Oluwajuyigbe
3. *A Conversation with my Optometrist* by Em Merchant

**Honourable Mentions:**

*Beauty of Physics* by Kate Reed  
*Belonging* by Kaidi Xie

Thank you to each of our contributing students and to the teachers who encouraged our aspiring authors.















