



CITE, the Conference of Independent Teachers of English, supports the teaching and learning of English, Media Studies, English as an Additional Language and drama at its member schools. We do so through two core complementary projects: an annual professional conference for teachers of English, and the publication of INCITE, an anthology of student writing and visual art.

This is the twelfth INCITE anthology we have produced and we could not be prouder of the student work it showcases.





Michael Christie is the author of the novel *If I Fall, If I Die*, which was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, the Kirkus Prize, was selected as a New York Times Editors' Choice Pick, and was on numerous best-of 2015 lists. His linked collection of stories, *The Beggar's Garden*, was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, shortlisted for the Writers' Trust Prize for Fiction, and won the Vancouver Book Award. His essays and book reviews have appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Globe & Mail. *Greenwood*, his most recent novel, was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. He divides his time between Victoria, British Columbia, and Galiano Island, where he lives with his wife and two sons in a timber frame house that he built himself.

JUDGE'S PREFACE

The theme for this year's anthology is *The Year After*, which begs the question: "The year after what?" Well, in the fine pieces of writing collected here, you're about to be treated to a feast of different answers. It could be the year after a hidden tragedy, or maybe the year after a more public one. Maybe it's the year after a global pandemic first began, or maybe it's the year after an important relationship has ended. Whatever the subject matter, or the form of the author's approach, each of these wonderful pieces of writing attempts to look back and examine the impact of some important shift, and, in doing so, each conjures its own unique power.

During a time of such global difficulty, empathy for one another has never been so integral to our survival. This is the great superpower of writing. It generates empathy like nothing else. The reader does not just see the life of a person who has a different experience of life than they do, the reader actually becomes that person, which can be a radically transformative thing. The best writing reminds us that every other human being's experience of the world is just as vibrant, just as emotional, just as important and valuable as ours is, and that we ought to treat one another accordingly. I'm sure you'll agree that the writing in this collection achieves just that.

Lastly, I'd like to begin this anthology with a thundering round of applause. To all the students who bravely submitted their writing to be read by others, all while enduring what has been a massive disruption of your lives. This has not been an easy time, but one of the things that will get us through, is writing. And my sincerest thanks to you all for sharing yours.

- Michael Christie, INCITE 2021 Judge

A Message from the Conference of Independent Teachers of English

Welcome to INCITE 2021.

This is the second year that we have been living with COVID restrictions. From masking, social distancing, Zoom meetings, online learning and an abundance of hand sanitizer, we have had to adjust to a new world. Students and teachers have had to switch from in-person classes to remote learning and struggle with not seeing friends and family. “Stay safe,” “pivot” and “challenging times” are familiar phrases and ones we would like to forget.



Like all difficult times, however, a silver lining can always be found. Plagues have been around throughout history. These periods of isolation often serve as a time for writers and artists to create and recharge. In fact, lockdowns, masks, social distancing and closures of playhouses were a normal part of life for William Shakespeare. Between 1603 and 1613, the *Globe* and other London playhouses were shut for 78 months! Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra* all in 1606 when theatres were closed.

The past year has seen not only the devastating effects of COVID-19, but a pandemic of another, though not less virulent, type. Spring of 2020 was characterized by an uptick in violence against racialized people and one of the ways we can counter such destructive urges is through creativity - using pens and words to push back against the hate and to give voice to the marginalized. This year's conference theme is in many ways a continuation of last year's focus on "seeing" 20/20, prompting teachers and students to cultivate a vision that is inclusive of those at the periphery.

School offers structure and normalcy while living in uncertain times. We hope that this year's INCITE Competition sparked some hope and creativity during the pandemic; for many students this is the first time their writing has been published. The 2021 INCITE writing prompt was: *The Year After*. Writers could submit a poem, essay, dramatic scene that explores the idea of the year after an event.

A very special thank you to Annette Chiu and the entire English Department at The Bishop Strachan School for planning not only the 2020 INCITE competition and the conference that was sadly cancelled last spring, but also for performing double duty and again stepping up to host the 2021 contest and conference. We appreciate your time and effort when there are already so many pressures on teachers.

Also, thank you to all of the teachers for encouraging their students' love of writing, and to the students for their willingness to share their stories. Finally, thank you to Canadian author Michael Christie, our esteemed judge for this year's INCITE Student Writing Competition.

We hope you enjoy this anthology of thoughtful and daring pieces from the young talented young writers in our CIS Ontario schools.

Sincerely,
The CITE Executive

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THIS YEAR'S COVER

The INCITE 2021 cover illustration is by Mark Ma, a grade 10 artist at *Hillfield Strathallan College*. It is titled *A Breath of Gratitude*. Mark explains: "before the pandemic, people took breathing freely for granted. In the pandemic, it is a privilege to breathe freely. I drew this picture to remind everyone to treasure what we have; even though COVID is still ongoing, people should still get more fresh air, if possible." The back cover illustration, capturing a heroic COVID moment, is by Amy Zhang, grade 11 student at St. Clement's School.

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I've Got You

"I've got you."

That was all he said,

As he caught her when she tripped over her own feet.

That was all he said,

The first time they met.

She looked up at him,

His arrogance shining through his smirk.

Since then,

They would argue,

Send dirty looks in the other's direction,

They would have insults ready,

They would fight,

They would be pushing the other to be better,

Fighting the other as though their lives depended on it,

Giving the other a challenge.

Despising the other as if it were a vow to the gods.

After the year passed, they grew closer.

They forgot their "despise" for the other even if they didn't show it.

But the thing was, they didn't despise each other.

They did not hate the other.

No, it was far from that.

But neither of them realized.

Neither of them realized,

That the small glances,
The playful nudges,
The exchange of smiles,
The comforting words,
The emotion behind the long looks,
The seeking touches,
The way he messed with her hair,
The comforting hand holding,
The way they felt the urge to protect the other,
The devotion that they had for each other.
Neither of them realized,
That it was love.

Neither of them realized,
That there was a fine line between love and hate,
Until it was too late.
Until he was screaming in pain.
So much pain.
Until his eyes couldn't shed another tear,
Until he knew that he would never hear her laugh,
Never see her smile,
Never feel her warmth,
Never feel her love.

Neither of them realized,
Until it was too late,
Until he held her lifeless body in his arms,
Whispering into her ear with tears in his eyes,
"I've got you."

Runner

Running, I always seem to be running.

Since the organization went down, always running.

It's been a decade and a little now it seems, time is running out on my life, and I'm still running. I like to run, though.

I'm old now; I can barely run half as fast as I was once able to, but I'm still faster than those clowns! I can thank the organization for that.

Do I regret what I did for the organization? No, not for a second. Mainly because I can't remember most of what I did there. Could be amnesia, could be from taking a few hits, could be the side effects, the doctor said there would be side effects, I don't remember what they were, that's funny.

I do remember my better memories, I need to keep those so I remember what I'm running for. I sometimes lose them and forget to run, but I only run faster when I remember them. The one I always think of when I need to remember is the one whe-

"SIR! SIR! Your coffee! Hello!"

"Oh, so sorry ma'am, just reminiscing," I always say that when I black out. "Thank you."

I turn around and walk outside. Chilly day, hope they find me. I always

run better in the cold.

I would get my wish.

When I was about halfway done my coffee, two black cars with tinted windows pulled up to the gas stop. I nearly dropped my cup with excitement.

The usual two big guys with guns got out of one car followed by a smaller guy. Not small, just smaller than the other two. The smaller one then took out a tablet and checked something and then announced something to the big guys. The other car then opened up and out came three more big guys.

Amazing how they are so much bigger than me, but I would bash their heads in a fight. Sure, I run because of that but running is fun, even if I'm older.

I'm getting impatient, so I decide I am going to instigate the conflict myself. I walk over to one of the big guys and trip him. The others look up at me and there is a moment of awkward, stunned looks from the big guys, but nothing from the smaller guy. In fact, he might have even smiled.

I then kick the big guy to my left and he falls, hard too. Might have broken his leg, I then take his gun, shoot the one I tripped in the leg, dodge a punch from a big guy and return with a blow to his head, stunning him. I then knock him out with a quick kick to the chest followed by a knee to the face. Half of them are already gone and not even a fight. The last two big guys then try to team tackle me, which I easily dodge, all while stealing the keys to one of the cars.

I jump in and fire a warning shot above the last two big guys' heads for good measure and drive away.

When I say I run, I don't mean I am actually running on foot. It's the thrill of the chase I enjoy. Winning every time is fun, too.

I've been driving for about 25 minutes, and I take a breather. I disabled the tracker on the car, so they shouldn't be able to find me. I pull over and take a nap in the backseat.

I dream of my first day with the organization. Aleksandr and I were young and perky soldiers back then, ready to serve the country.

I was never afraid of needles, but I still have nightmares about that needle. I wa-

"Sir. Hello sir!"

I woke up with a jolt. I looked up. A local man had noticed me in my car.

"We're gonna be closing soon, legally I can't let you stay in the lot past 11:00, there's a motel 'bout a 35 to 40 minutes drive east down the road. You can probably bunk there for the night." the kind man said.

I merely grunted and nodded my head. I wasn't happy about being woken.

I made the drive to the motel easily under 20 minutes because no one is on the road at this time of night. I pull into the driveway and turn off the car.

I consider not even checking out a room and just falling asleep in the back like I did earlier, but I decide against it.

I get up and open the door to the reception and waiting for me is the smaller agent.

He gives me a punch that no regular man could have given me, and I am propelled into a dream.

Aleksandr and I were in quarantine with each other and were getting bored. We tuned in to watch some sports and Alek got mad at something that I can't remember and nearly brought the house down with a punch to the wall.

Literally, the whole house shook.

We were both stunned. The serum wasn't supposed to have affected us until the quarantine was finished. We were excited.

Alek had a sudden burst of energy and started to randomly swing his fists around.

My adrenaline was spiking too, but before I could do anything to test my abilities, our commanding officer walked through the door and yelled at the top of his voice.

All of my energy seeped away, but clearly, Alek's did not.

He continued to swing at random until one of his punches hit the sergeant. He was knocked backwards into the door, and you could hear the crack of bone.

Everyone was stunned. Alek opened his mouth in shock. He had never been so reckless.

I forget what happened next, I always blank out at that moment. I never saw Alek again.

I woke up with another jolt. I was looking up at the smaller agent who was winding up for a punch that also seemed to come in slow motion. I attempted to block it, but I was unsuccessful, and I was thrown back into a dream.

This time I dreamed of my last mission with the organization. It was just after the Cold War had ended. The organization was determined to continue to attack through warnings. We were going to strike an American Armada off the coast of Neah Bay, Oregon.

I was skeptical about the mission but the commander only answered my questions with more questions.

We carried out the mission quietly and quickly with no casualties but it went south from there, fast.

The main ship of the Armada randomly combusted immediately alerting the U.N.

If we were discovered to still be active after the war, we would be hunted down and everything we sacrificed would be for nothing.

That day was a blur from there. Half of the team was killed in action and another quarter was captured. From what I know, I'm the only one who got out.

Something from the inside got us. We were too powerful to be taken

down loudly, it came swift and fas-

I wake up from my dream with a bag on my head. In only a few seconds the bag was pulled away from my head.

I am in a warehouse, all the lights seem to be so bright; I can barely open my eyes without them burning like hell.

When I adjust to the light, I notice a black shape on my forehead, that black shape was connected to an arm, connected to a torso, connected to a face.

That black shape was obviously a gun.

I look up to see the fleeting image of my friend and then my lights go out.

Now, I run no longer.

The Year After

“Everybody wants a happy ending, right? But it doesn’t always roll that way.” – Tony Stark [Ironman] in *Avengers Endgame*, 2019

The year 2020 has been the most disruptive of my entire life. From the global COVID-19 pandemic to wildfires in Australia, Donald Trump, murder hornets, and snow in Texas, it has been easy to focus on the negative events in our world. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating, there have been many positive outcomes from the pandemic that will benefit us all in the future. For example, our environment has had the opportunity to rebound, some animal populations have increased, and humans have adapted to our situation through learning and innovation. All of these positive factors are important for our future.

The coronavirus pandemic has killed more than 2.5 million people around the globe. In Canada, nearly 22 000 people have died, including almost 7000 people in Ontario (<https://covid19.who.int>) as of February 28th, 2021. The people who have been the most affected by the coronavirus pandemic are people with pre-existing health conditions, such as diabetes, lung disease, heart disease, liver disease, obesity, and compromised immune systems. Elderly people, in particular, are at a high risk (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/people-with-disabilities.html>). In addition to illness and death, 63 000 people have lost their jobs as of December 2020. Schools have closed and reopened several times and most students are behind in their studies and are often struggling. Athletic programs, like my karate training, have been only available online. For me, online training is better than

nothing, but it is hard to advance to higher levels without in-person classes. Despite all of these factors that have negatively affected millions of people around the globe, a lot of positive things have come out of the pandemic.

Human activity is among the primary contributors of pollution in our environment. However, our environment has healed in some ways since most people are staying home due to the pandemic. Air pollution, due to carbon dioxide, has decreased by 6.4% worldwide. This means that carbon dioxide has decreased by 2.3 billion tonnes because of the reduction in emissions from cars and planes (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00090-3>). In the United States, pollution has decreased by 13% due to people driving less and other areas of the world like China, Europe and India have also seen decreases in air pollution. The same findings have been found in other areas of the environment, like our water quality. Studies from India and Italy have shown improvements in water quality during the pandemic (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7446619/>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969720325298>). The statistics for air pollution have increased again as regions have reopened but importantly these findings show that we have the capacity to make significant changes in our environment for the better.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has also been a rebound in a lot of wildlife. Many animals that have had decreasing population sizes due to human activity have been able to repopulate. For example, humpback whales that are studied in Alaska are vocalizing more since the boat traffic in the area has stopped. Researchers think that the whales are communicating over longer distances because there is less underwater noise. They have also noted that the stress hormone levels of the humpback whales have gone down and their population sizes started to increase in 2019. There have also been fewer whales who have been injured or killed by boat traffic. These same researchers think that wild bees may also benefit from the reduced air pollution during the pandemic because the bees will be able to smell flowers at further distances. (<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2244359-which-an->

imals-are-benefitting-from-coronavirus-lockdowns/). In Albania, the populations of pink flamingos have increased by one-third. Many animals are also expanding their geographic ranges. For example, dolphins are now being seen in Turkish harbors that are usually full of boats, tankers and cargo ships. Wild boars have been seen crossing roads in Israel and goats have been seen wandering in Wales. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52459487>). More research is expected to show that other animals are also thriving because of lockdowns around the world.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to major scientific breakthroughs and examples of human innovation. For example, many are recognizing the COVID vaccines as the fastest produced in history and “a remarkable achievement of medical science” (<https://connect.uclahealth.org/2020/12/10/the-fastest-vaccine-in-history/>). Before the COVID vaccines, the fastest vaccine to be produced was the 1960s mumps vaccine that took four years to produce. In contrast, the COVID vaccines have been produced and approved in less than 12 months. Another example of scientific breakthrough and innovation is the successful launch and landing of the Mars Perseverance Rover. The NASA engineers and technicians began their project before the pandemic started, and despite all of the lockdowns, the team of several hundred people found ways to work together, even from home, without actually being together. Even though the Perseverance Rover is not the first rover to land on Mars, the NASA team had to work in very difficult conditions and they celebrated a successful launch. When the Perseverance Rover landed on Mars, the NASA team gave a press conference and they were overjoyed, emotional and so thankful to their teams not just because of their achievement, but because their success came at such a difficult time. Between the creation of the COVID vaccine in record-breaking time and the scientific advances from the Mars exploration, these examples show that humans can achieve anything when they persevere and focus on their goals, regardless of the pandemic.

The year after 2020 is going to be an exciting one. While the devas-

tation of the COVID-19 pandemic has cost so many people their lives and loved ones, other outcomes of the pandemic, like a cleaner environment, healthier and repopulating wildlife, and scientific breakthroughs and innovation give us a lot to look forward to. We continue to learn how to adapt to new and changing conditions, like teaching and learning completely online, and how to get together without actually being together. We have found new ways to celebrate with our family and friends. In the words of Tony Stark in *Avengers Endgame* (2019):

Maybe this time. I am hoping if you play this back, it's in celebration. I hope families are reunited. I hope we get it back and something like a normal version of the planet has been restored, if there ever was such a thing. God, what a world. Universe now... Everything is going to work out exactly the way it is supposed to.

A Fireman's Tale

Bed springs squeaked as Reynold Kreed woke up. Like he had done for the past ten years, Kreed reached for his cracked glasses that were laying on his dusty bedside table. He grumbled, then slowly sat up, his back more crooked than a bent pole. Kreed ran his old, wrinkly fingers through his dusty-white beard. Sighing, he got out of bed and slowly walked over to the kitchen, while his oxygen tank beside him made the wooden floorboards creak. He grabbed a fresh tea bag from a box and turned the boiler on. Mr. Kreed's dark, old wooden house shook as the winter winds screamed overhead. The picture of his late wife, Veronica, rattled along with the house. Kreed shook his head as he looked at the picture.

"Why did you have to go," he said to himself.

He poured the hot water into a mug and dipped the tea bag into it. He made his way outside, onto his front porch to sit on his rocking chair and sip his tea. Grabbing a thick blanket, he sat down on the chair and breathed in the icy winter air. The usual group of fourth grade girls walked by.

"Freak!" one shouted. Mr. Kreed ignored her.

"I hope you die soon!" screamed another.

"Yeah, because we are never going to die!" shouted a third.

"Wow Jenny, you really are stupid," said one of them.

"Shut up," mumbled Jenny.

The girls kept walking and Mr. Kreed just sat there silently, listening to the sweet singing of the blue birds in the tree. The girls were nearly out of sight when they stopped in their tracks. Their leader, Lauren, smiled.

"Hello, Ugly," she mocked to a small, blond, blue eyed girl, with books tightly held to her chest.

"My name is Julie," answered the girl.

“Oh, we know,” Lauren said, “but that ugly birthmark on your face doesn’t give you the right to carry a name like that.”

The other girls laughed, and Julie lowered her head. The girls pushed past her, knocking her books to the floor.

“G’bye, Ugly,” Lauren whispered.

Tears flooded Julie’s eyes, but she made no sound. She bent down to pick up her books when a rattling sound grew near. Julie looked up and saw an oxygen tank rolling next to an old, scary man.

“Lemme help you,” Mr. Kreed offered in a gruff voice. Fear clouded Julie’s bright blue eyes. She sprinted off into the distance, leaving her books and Mr. Kreed all alone in the middle of the road.

So, Kreed did what any other decent person would do. He picked the books up off the floor and took them inside his home.

“I am sick of kids hating me,” he mumbled, “sick of it.”

Inside, he sat down on an old chair and turned on the television. An hour passed, and Mr. Kreed was fast asleep. He dreamed of his young days where he was actually useful. He was a firefighter, and helping people was what he was born for. Once he got too old to go out in the field, his picture was placed into a hall of fame and he took a job in teaching people to be a firefighter. He had this job until age 73, when a terrible accident happened.

It was a beautiful summer day, and Mr. Kreed started his walk home from the fire station. Everything seemed normal, but Mr. Kreed didn’t know that his life would soon change forever. The blue skies started to cloud with smoke. People started screaming and running in all directions, cursing, and crying for help. Kreed rushed to the scene and saw this building on fire. He tried calling some of his trainees to help people get out of the building, but none answered. He was on his own.

He rushed into the entrance, smoke filling up his nostrils and limiting his sight. He looked around, but all he saw was raging, curling fire all around him.

“Is anyone there!?” Kreed shouted.

No response. Kreed searched and searched but found nothing. The heat around him was starting to make him weak and sweat was pouring out of his head. But Kreed was not leaving until he was sure the building was empty. He climbed stairs all the way to the twelfth floor. The ceiling was starting to collapse when he heard a small voice.

“Help – me,” the voice whispered weakly.

Kreed turned around and started looking everywhere he could but didn't find anything. The fire was growing larger and not much time was left.

“Come on, we both need to get out now!” screamed Kreed at the top of his lungs.

A small boy slithered out from under a hiding space. Kreed picked him up and rushed downstairs. He could taste ashes in his mouth, and he could feel burning in his hands. Sweating and panting, Kreed's reached the ground floor. The boy jumped out of his hands and scurried off towards the exit, his little legs pushing themselves as hard as they could. Mr. Kreed was tired and hot from the fire and running, so he couldn't get to the exit fast enough. Just as the boy got out, the building collapsed. The ceilings came crashing down, pillars snapped, windows broke, and under it all, was Reynold Kreed.

The accident put him in a coma for one year. It was a miracle that he survived, but in that year of darkness, terrible things happened. His wife, Veronica, passed away and he couldn't even go to her funeral. The accident crushed his lungs, so now he needed an oxygen tank all the time. The doctors didn't think he was going to make it, but Kreed was a strong man. The accident made him highly disfigured, so people, especially kids, are often scared of him.

Mr. Kreed woke up with a splutter. 3:20pm, his clock said. The time the kids started coming back from school. As usual, the grade 4 Girls skipped their way down the street. Again, they shouted insults at Mr. Kreed and as usual, he ignored them. Then came Julie. The girls bullied her while she just stood there silently. Mr. Kreed was fed up with this. He went down to the road slowly but surely.

“All right, you,” he gripped Lauren by the collar of her polo shirt. “I have had enough of you insulting me and this girl over here, you hear me? Stop at once or I will – well, how about we wait and see.”

The girls screamed and ran away as fast as they could. Mr. Kreed snorted, and turned his head to Julie. But she was nowhere to be seen.

“Ungrateful kids,” he mumbled and went back towards his porch.

“Wait, sir,” squeaked a small voice.

Julie emerged from a nearby bush and walked slowly towards Mr. Kreed.

“Th-thank you for helping me sir,” she said softly. Mr. Kreed smiled.

“Why, you’re very welcome,” he said cheerfully. “Would you like to come in and collect your books?”

“Yes, sir.”

Julie shifted alongside Mr. Kreed.

“What’s your name, girl?”

“Julie Thomas, sir.”

“Pretty. You can call me Mr. Kreed.

“Okay, sir.”

Mr. Kreed chuckled and opened the door.

“Have a seat. I will bring your books and make you some tea”.

“Oh, thank you sir, but I really...”

But Kreed had already gone into the kitchen. Julie sighed softly and sat down on a dusty seat.

“Here you go,” Kreed said as he handed her the books and a warm cup of tea. Julie nodded and gulped down the tea, ignoring the burning liquid in her throat.

“Thank you for everything, but I must be leaving now. My mother is waiting for me.”

“Very well, just let me tell you something before you go.”

Julie turned away from the door and looked back at Mr. Kreed.

“I know those girls bully you because of that mark on your face. I have

been through a lot too, and many people look down on me because of my face. So, if you ever need any advice, I am here.”

Julie smiled and opened the door.

“Thank you, sir.” she said, and left the house.

The next day, bed springs squeaked as Kreed woke up. He reached for his cracked glasses that were laying on his dusty bedside table. He grumbled, then slowly sat up, his back more crooked than a bent pole. Kreed ran his old, wrinkly fingers through his dusty-white beard. Sighing, he got out of bed and slowly walked over to the kitchen, while his oxygen tank beside him made the wooden floorboards creak. He grabbed a fresh tea bag from a box and turned the boiler on. He poured the hot water into a mug and dipped the tea bag through it. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. He opened it and there stood a blond girl with bright blue eyes and a birthmark on her face.

“Hello, Mr. Kreed.”

Reynold Kreed smiled.

The Test

‘Come on! Come on! You know how to do this! Just focus. Why are you looking out the window! Kelly! You need to pay attention!’

Kelly Kamble sat across from her tutor, Janine, on a hot June afternoon. She was alternating her gaze between the window and the clock. She longed for that tiny black hand to hit the 4 and the 12 so she could leave this hot sticky classroom. She longed to be out there! The track called to her longingly. She needed to run! All she wanted to do was run! Kelly loved to run. She was on the school track team and won every race. She was fast, really fast! Kelly hated schoolwork but everyday from 3-4, she met with her tutor and longed to be out there! Just a little while ago, Kelly was an online learner for school. This is because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kelly did not have track practice and missed it so much during the pandemic! Now that they are allowed to have practice again, all she wants to do is be out there! ‘Kelly!’ ‘What? Oh come on, Janine!’ begged Kelly. ‘Can’t we leave just a few minutes early? We only have 10 more!’ ‘That really depends, Kelly. Do you understand what we have been talking about for the last hour?’ ‘Uh... ya! Can I go noooow???’ ‘Show me you understand this question and we can pack up. Else, we stay another 20 minutes.’ ‘.....Fine.’ Kelly started thinking to herself: Okay, algebra and fractions. It takes a lot of effort to even SAY that, shouldn’t this be an english test? Okay, okay. Focus, Kelly. What did Janine say, carry the 1? But where and how do I do that? It is on the page, so how do I pick it up? Wait, do I write it as a fraction over two? Uhhh! Lets just say that Kelly did not end up going outside that day.

‘Kelly? Is that you?’ ‘Ya. I ran late with my tutor.’ ‘Why?’ Kelly’s Mom thinks education is important. If Kelly doesn’t do well on a subject, she meets with her tutor. Understandable, right? Not to Kelly. ‘Cause I had to

understand some concept or something.’ ‘And do you?’ ‘Yeeeeees.’ Kelly says, sounding very exasperated. ‘Okay... We are going to the Watson’s for dinner tonight! Would you please go upstairs and change out of your track clothing?’ ‘Whyyyyyyy!’ Kelly Whined. She HATED going to the Watson’s for dinner. She liked Mr. And Dr. Watson fine! She even liked their eldest daughter, Abby. So, why would she hate going to dinner, you might ask. Good question. The answer is in the form of their younger daughter Ty. Ty was in Kelly’s class and was good at everything! Whenever Kelly went over to her house for dinner, she would brag and brag. Of course in front of the grownups, she was an absolute and totally polite angel! Kelly TRIED to be Ty’s friend, but nope! She couldn’t BARE her BRAGGING! Kelly moaned and wined but her mother and father won. So, that is how Kelly came to find herself on the Watson’s doorstep in a new dress holding a box of cookies for... TY! ‘Welcome!’ Dr. Watson said brightly! ‘Oooh boy!’ Thought Kelly. Because here came Ty. Kelly knew she was in for a night of BRAGGING!

Kelly sat at the dinner table with her family and the Watson’s. It was weird to go into other houses again. All night long, whenever someone tried to hug Kelly or step too close to her, she wanted to throw her hands out and shout! It was definitely... weird.

The next day at school Kelly had track practice for the first time in a LONG time. She was ready! When she and the other members started running, everyone started to crowd around her. She felt very... weird! She was SO used to having to distance or wear a mask or... something! Kelly kept having this feeling. She felt weird when someone would give her a high five! She felt weird when someone would hug her. She felt weird when she walked into class and her desk was so closed to her classmates. It was... weird.

Then one day, she found out that her family was planning a trip to visit her Grandparents! This meant getting on a plane, which was something that Kelly had not done since the pandemic. It felt... weird. Would things always feel this weird? Kelly did not know. For some reason, she knew what would make her feel less weird...

Whenever she met with her track club, she ran farther ahead of the group to avoid the feeling of being non-social distanced! She got even faster and this made her feel less weird when doing normal things again, and she pushed herself harder when running and ended up winning a lot more races! In fact, she won her track club championship! This meant that she would get to compete in the inter club championships!

Kelly trained for weeks. She worked hard. She still met with Janine but was able to stay afterwards and do laps. She was ready!

Ding Ding! Kelly turned off her alarm and sprinted out of bed. She got into her track uniform and ran downstairs. When she arrived with her family and a few friends to the championship track, she felt excited! Then, people started showing up...

She felt... weird! There were so many people! She spotted a girl who she assumed would be competing and looked just as terrified at the vast number of spectators and competitors. The girl came over and said 'Hi! I'm Vanya. Is it just me or is it really...weird? Weird to have this many people, I mean.' 'Yes!' said Kelly. 'feel the same way!' 'You know,' said Vanya, 'My Dad gave me some good advice for when I am running. He said to remember what it was like before COVID. Act the same as then. Know that the pandemic is over, and it is okay to have lots of people together! Be cautious but not over-cautious.' 'Your right.' said Kelly. 'Thank you. I think I have been a little afraid of what life would be like after the pandemic but, your right! It was okay to have this many people together. And, without the pandemic, this event may not be such a big deal! Since it has been postponed so many times! Thank you, Vanya! Are you ready to compete?' 'Totally!' she said. 'And thank you!' Kelly walked to the starting line. She had mixed feelings about competing against a girl who had helped her feel less anxious.

'Three, two, one, BANG!' The starting gun banged and off they went! Kelly and Vanya were leading the pack! Kelly kept her pace, after all it was a 2.5 kilometer sprint. Three laps to go... two... one! 500 meters left. Suddenly, Kelly looked over to see if Vanya was still there, only to realize that the

athlete had fallen! Kelly didn't hesitate, she stopped running and circled back for Vanya. 'Kelly!' said Vanya who was clambering to her feet. 'What are you doing? You could have won the race!' 'No, We should finish together. Come on!' Kelly and Vanya crossed the finish line last with broad smiles on their faces. Their coaches said it was the best example of sportsmanship they had ever seen! Kelly and Vanya helped each other through their post-pandemic fears and remain friends to this day!

The Blue and White Mystery

The year was 2021. It was a quiet, sunny morning in early March in Northern Alberta. It was the year after something very tiny redefined everything. The nights were cool, and the days were getting longer. Bear had enjoyed his long cozy winter hibernation. He was now awake, hungry, and eager to explore the forest. He squeezed out of his den, stretched, and roared loudly. This startled poor Crow, perched on a nearby tree branch.

“Bear, you’re up earlier than usual this year,” cawed Crow.

“Hmm. Am I? The sun is shining, and the forest is full of activity!” exclaimed Bear as he pointed to the squirrels, chipmunks and birds all around.

“Yes, I do see that!” squawked Crow in agreement. “Maybe it’s just my nerves. Everything seems off lately.”

Crow then flew to a lower branch, looked around to make sure they were alone, and whispered into Bear’s ear, “There’s also something you may not have noticed yet. Increased human activity in the forests!”

Bear lumbered slowly through the forest as crow continued to explain, “Humans have been wearing blue and white objects to cover their noses and mouths. I have never seen these before. They scare me. Humans travel in small groups and practice this strange thing called social distancing.”

“That is strange,” remarked Bear.

He stopped as something blue and white caught his eye. It was folded, dusty and unfamiliar.

“That’s what I’ve been talking about!” exclaimed Crow about the strange object. “They are everywhere! Some humans wear them for a short while and then throw them away in the forest.”

Bear gasped in disbelief.

“Last week little Sami squirrel got his paw entangled in one of the blue

and white things. He thought that it was alive and tried to escape. The poor little guy is still spooked and limping this week,” said Crow sadly.

Bear thought about Sami, looked up at the clear blue sky, drew in a big breath of air and sighed. He then remarked, “The forest does seem quieter. I have not seen any airplanes flying overhead today. The air is cleaner too.”

Crow nodded in agreement. The two contemplated all the good and bad changes that were happening.

“Let’s ask Wise Old Owl if he knows anything about all this,” Bear suggested. “He may be able to explain what is causing all these changes.”

Wise Old Owl was nocturnal and slept in the hollow of an Oak Tree during the day.

Bear and Crow arrived at Owl’s home and were surprised to find him already wide awake. He seemed deep in thought too.

“Wise Old Owl, we are worried about all the changes in the forest.” explained Bear. “What is causing them?”

Owl told the pair that he had overheard on a car radio that the entire country was in lockdown. Everything had stopped. Borders had closed. Humans were scared. A contagious virus had invaded the planet and now strict rules were now in place. Stores, offices and schools were closed, and everyone stayed home.

“Every time the humans get out of control, it seems something bad comes along to “reset” things.” Crow observed.

“That’s true,” added Bear. “The Spanish Flu in the 1920s and the Influenza Pandemic in the 1950s.”

The Owl smiled at this connection and added, “Perhaps it was time for humans to change. To spend less time in their cars or at malls and enjoy nature more. They needed to reconnect with each other instead of their electronics.”

Bear and Crow listened quietly to Wise Old Owl as he explained, “The animals in our forest have always had their priorities straight. They rise when the sun does, they sleep when it sets. They take only what food they need and

make wastes that are biodegradable.”

Crow and Bear learned a lot that morning. While the virus had shut down many things, they noticed many more positive changes that had occurred. During lockdown there were signs of hope and pictures of rainbows. There were blue ribbons on trees and sounds of humans banging pots and pans together to thank essential workers.

In the forest, every animal knows their role. Our actions have always been sustainable. Forest animals realize that we are all interconnected to each other in the web of life. Humans had forgotten this. They have been greedy and by polluting the planet, contaminating water supplies, littering, wasting resources and becoming addicted to technology it took a virus to make them stop.

Never underestimate the power that very small things can create very big changes.

The Things Vaccines Can't Fix

"Freedom. That's what I came here for," Anna pondered as she looked out her window. She saw the busy streets of Toronto, only something was different, no one was wearing any masks. Anna stayed there for a while trying to wrap her head around what happened this week, the government had just lifted all covid restrictions. Everyone had been vaccinated life was going back to normal. Only for Anna nothing would be the same, she'd only been in Toronto for three weeks before lockdown had struck. She stared down at her phone the lock screen was of herself, Dad holding a beer, and her stepmom in the background. She never liked looking at the picture. It always reminded her of the past, and she didn't like thinking about it. As she stared at her phone she heard a knock on the door. "Breakfast time," said Haley. She was Anna's roommate at the hostel she lived in. "Coming," Anna replied. She took one last look at her phone and got up for breakfast.

Anna was eager to leave the Hostel. It's not that she didn't like it, she just wanted to be free and independent which wasn't the case at the hostel. Strict rules, strict times, strict food. She had been there ever since the pandemic hit. Before she had been working as a waitress in a tiny Italian restaurant down the street. The pandemic had caused it to shut down leaving her jobless for the past two and half years, however that changes today. Today she had an interview for a job at a Starbucks, and her plan was simple. Work there until she had enough to rent a small place and possibly get a second job. "ANNA, NOW!" Anna's head sprung up she saw Haley giving her a death stare. By now she was in line for food but had zoned out halfway through.

"You're holding up the line!" someone yelled.

"Sorry," she said as she grabbed a banana and went to sit down.

It wasn't common for people to sit with her during mealtimes, and on

the rare occasions they did, they never spoke to her. Anna had always thought of herself as an outcast, she just never fit in. Everyone else knew all these pop culture idols of whom Anna had never heard of. She was also on the young side; she was only 18 most of the women here were in their late 20s or early 30s. Anna tried to ignore the fact that she was alone and focuses on what she going to do today; get a job and finally get the freedom she'd been longing for. Anna quickly finished her food and sped up to her room. Hanging on her bed were her nice jeans with her most fancy shirt. She threw them on, put her frizzy hair in a slicked-back ponytail, slipped on her nicest trainers and jacket, grabbed her bag, and left her room.

“And where do you think you’re going?” said an old raspy voice, Anna recognized it at once. It was Agatha Heberbath who ran the hostel. Agatha was a tall pale woman with very gray short hair who only wore purple.

“I have a job interview!” Anna explained.

“Oh really? For what?”

“A barista at the Starbucks down the street”

“I thought you wanted to focus on your education?” Agatha said with a smug look.

“I do, but I need money for night school,” Anna replied coolly

Agatha scoffed and left; Anna continued her way to the main exit. No one else stopped her. Before opening the door, she took three deep breaths. “I can do this,” she kept repeating to herself as she pushed the door open.

The sun was so bright, and the noise was so loud that it all overwhelmed her. She could feel her fingernails digging into her sensitive skin as she took another deep breath and began her walk. It wasn't too far, about a two-minute walk, but it took Anna six. She kept stopping to look at everything, a pigeon, the vegetation, even a school. Life in the city was much different than it was on a small farm in Alberta. There were so many people and things to look out for! On the other hand, she felt so free for the first time in ages; she could go wherever she wanted.

Anna happily walked down the street, trying to only focus on her quickly coming interview, in fact, she was so focused on the interview that she didn't notice the cop cars slowing down towards her. "Miss Smith stop walking and put your hands up!" the cop car boomed. Anna jumped at this, she spun around, and her hands shot up. "You need to come with us," said a Caucasian cop, as he lightly pushed her in the car her into the cop car.

For the whole ride, Anna was silent. I didn't do anything, I'm innocent Anna kept telling herself. After what seemed like forever, they reached the police station. Her heart was racing, her palms sweating, her fingernails digging into her palms. As she pushed the police station doors open, she saw the one thing she feared the most, her father.

Goodbye

June 6, 2156, 10:36 a.m.

A layer of thick black smoke shrouds the brilliant blue sky like a black-out curtain. There is fire everywhere. The dancing flames lick hungrily at the tree trunks. The beauty of a once lush forest is replaced by the utter dullness of a few burning trees, standing alone in a barren landscape.

I press a button and the hovercar jerks forward. Today is the day that we leave this all behind. There was a sea of people on the major routes to the launchpads, so I had decided to take a different path. It is a road along the countryside, or what is left of it. I remember driving down this road with my parents every summer break to visit Grandpa's farm. The best part of the whole ride was the path that snaked up the mountainside. I still recall standing at the top of the mountain and feeling the warm west wind caress my face. Those memories now seem so distant, so surreal, like a dream.

I reach the base of the mountain and slowly start up the winding path. Not many people take this road now, so there is no magnetlink to guide the car. I take the wheel and steer it myself. As I drive higher up the mountain, the smoke gets thicker. The burnt trees on the side of the road are like lifeless sticks of charcoal, no more vibrant than the old lampposts in the city.

I pause at the top of the mountain. There is nothing but destruction as far as the eye can see. After a few moments, I start up the car again, knowing that this will be the last time I will be here. Just as I am about to go, I hear a strained creaking sound coming from behind me. I turn around to see a giant tree falling towards my car. In a split second, its blackened body slams into the trunk of the car. The force of the impact sends me into the roof of the car and I feel a sharp pain as my head hits something hard.

The log rolls on down the mountainside, pushing the car to the edge of the cliff. It hangs precariously on a large rock, ready to fall into the deep, dark crevasse below. I slowly force open the side door. The car groans and starts to tilt. I immediately jump for my life, not knowing what will happen. My hand latches onto a small rock and I hold on tightly. With a loud creak, the hover-car falls and I hear a sickening crunch it hits the jagged rocks below.

With all my strength left, I pull myself to safety. I lie on my back and take a deep breath. The acrid smoke instantly fills my lungs. I touch my pounding head and wince. The pain is immense, like a red hot knife cutting into my skin. My hand is covered in crimson red blood. I've just had a brush with death, but I no longer have a way to get to the launchpad. My head starts to spin. I must have a concussion.

Just as my vision starts to blur, I see a tiny green sprout protruding from a crack on the road, its tender leaves stretched out. It seems so lonely in this boundless wasteland, trying to survive, just like we are. It's like a small ray of light in a dark place; a sign of hope in our last day on Earth.

One year earlier

June 6, 2155, 7:00 a.m.

Beep, beep, beep! I groan and groggily tell my robot to turn off the alarm. I look at the bright, glowing numbers on the hologram: 7:00 AM. Why did I have to set the alarm so early? It's Saturday, a day of resting, peace, and quiet, away from the activity of the bustling office. I drag myself out of bed and get dressed.

The solar reflective blinds lift and light streams into the dark room. My eyes adjust and I look outside. The plants are shrivelled up and the soil is dry and cracked.

After cleaning myself up, I slowly shuffle to the kitchen to find something to eat. Rummaging through the cupboard, I find some pancake batter. Mum used to make me pancakes on Saturday mornings, and this brings back

memories of happy times in my childhood when things were mostly normal. She and my dad had died a few years ago from a car crash, and my life has never been the same since.

As I cook the pancakes, I turn on the news on my holovision. The headline immediately catches my attention. It read, “Breaking News: Humanity Bound for Its End.” I immediately stop what I’m doing.

“We are here live at the International Space Agency for a world address by Director Gale Maltine,” the reporter says, and the camera swings over to reveal a big stage. The Director walks to the podium and begins his speech.

“Good morning. As you all know, we have been documenting extremely unusual activity in the sun for the past few years. The world’s best scientists have been working around the clock and have come to the conclusion that the sun is expanding rapidly. Humanity is in grave danger. We predict that the Earth will be swallowed whole in a few year’s time. We’ve always known that Earth would not be humanity’s home forever, so I have to make this very clear: We must leave NOW, or our species face certain extinction. With the collaboration of all world nations, a fleet of starliners will be built within the next twelve months to ferry all of humanity to Kepler-62f, an exoplanet 1,200 light-years from Earth. Please take all the actions necessary to...” The sounds of the broadcast slowly fade as thoughts rush into my mind.

I had known that this was coming, but the thought of actually leaving makes it feel so sudden. Getting on that starliner meant leaving not only Earth, but also the beautiful memories I’ve had here. I look at Dad’s worn-out leather jacket hanging on the back of the apartment door. I suddenly hear his gentle, loving voice in my head, repeating the same words that he has told me many times: the past is not ours to recover, but the future is ours to achieve.

June 6, 2156, 12:08 p.m.

I slowly open my eyes to a dim light shining down on me. Looking

around, I find myself sprawled out in an open stasis pod in a small, bare room. Suddenly, my memories come flooding back like a tsunami. The tree, the cliff. How did I survive?

As I try to figure out what happened, a person in light blue scrubs strides in. "Oh, you're awake, Mr. Phelps," the man says. "I'm Dr. Brighton, the head of medical care aboard this starliner."

"Starliner? How did I get here?" I ask.

"Well," he answers, "A young man brought you here and registered you in the medical ward. Turns out he's also assigned to this ship. He says he found you bleeding on the side of the road. You should know how lucky you are to have been saved. You could've died from blood loss."

I was just about to ask him about my saviour when a robotic voice comes over the speakers. "T-minus 1 minute until takeoff." The doctor checks my medical equipment and helps me prepare for the launch. After everything is ready to go, he quickly leaves the room.

The giant spaceship lets out a low rumble and I feel myself being pushed down into the soft padding as we ascend into the air.

In the blink of an eye, we escape Earth's atmosphere and enter the darkness of space. I unstrap myself and get up. An immense pain starts stabbing at my skull. I slowly struggle my way to the tiny window to get a last glimpse of Earth. I stare longingly back at the place we had called home. Starliners streak away from it like shooting stars, a fleet of silent black ships gliding through space.

The Earth gets smaller and smaller until it is only a tiny grey speck. The first step in our journey is complete. There are still many unknown challenges awaiting us, but we will succeed, because humanity is strong. We will work together and help each other, paving the way for many generations to come. We are prepared to do whatever it takes to survive, just like the small green sprout shooting out from under the ashes. We have faith that we will make it, because this is our last stand. A new journey begins, as an old one ends. Goodbye, Earth.

Earth, The Mother Planet

Earth, the mother planet
Was once a vast nourished land
Filled with greens and emerald
Now, deserted
A sahara desert
Mars is our new goal, our new prize
Move to Mars is our only option
Just to restart and live this dreaded circle?
Pollution in, pollution out is our motto
Cutting trees, forgetting about original inhabitants is
Our life's goal
I hear the roots of the trees
They scream in agony
The clouds of the sky tell a story
Only the victims can know
Can understand
As we descend into the next year
What has our human race come to
Is this the new normal
Suddenly, the brain recalls a distant memory
As the leaves danced in the sky
The sky meets the clear blue waters
Feathery creatures are surrounded by
The never ending
Aboundleses fruit of the earth
Only for my eyes to awaken

And see the chaos we have caused
We, as a human race, have
Disappointed

Wrecked

I stretch my arms out, feeling the breeze flutter against my ragged clothes. My ceiling of trees casts shadows all over the camp me and my father set up a year ago now. I take out the makeshift comb I created out of sticks to try to take out the knots out of my long blonde hair. As I brush, I take in the supernatural noises of the forest, the forest that I have been on since my plane crashed when I was on a March break vacation.

Exactly one year ago, my late father and I were flying in a private plane -- courtesy of him working for the government -- to go visit my extended family in Europe for my thirteenth birthday. But as we flew over the breathtaking Atlantic, something went horribly wrong. The first thing I smelled was the gas, then the smoke building up from the right wing of the plane. I heard a loud siren blaring into my ears from the speakers, interrupting our peaceful flight. Before I knew it, we were in the water, and the Atlantic was pouring into the plane. I remember my father calling my name, "Wesley! Get out of the plane!" I remember hoisting myself out of the safer side of the plane, and to my horror the pilot's body rolled out of the plane and stayed afloat only a few feet away from me. I remember the plane starting to sink, and the pieces of burning debris flying towards my face. I remember hearing my father's course cough, before he flopped out behind me, landing right in the red water that had been stained by the pilot's leaking corpse. I remember my father starting to sink, watching him flail as he struggled to swim in the violent waters. I remember me being extremely grateful that my mother made me take swimming lessons since I was 4. I remember taking a breath, holding the air in my lungs, and then diving down to where my father rested in the water. He was sinking at a rapid speed, but my strokes were faster. I remember latching onto his flailing arms and pulling him back up to the surface, feeling

my lungs scream for air. I remember us breaking the surface of the water, only to be swallowed up by another violent wave. I remember my father grabbing onto a partially intact life raft that fell off the back of the plane. I pushed him onto it, feeling my head being swallowed up by yet another wave. I remember struggling to get up to the surface, and then feeling the coolness of his soaked palm as he pulled me onto the raft while I coughed coarsely, feeling my lungs burn. I remember the raft drifting off away from the plane, being carried by the waves, until we reached the island.

All of these thoughts swim through my mind in an unorganized jumble. I have some moments I can remember perfectly, and others that are blurry in my mind and that I long to make out clearly. I put my brush back onto the wood stump that is my bedside table, and walk over to the main area of our camp, passing by a big stone on the ground with small engravings on it. Even without looking at the stone, I know what it says, Alvin Ray Schwartz, then underneath, it says, April 1975 - March 2021

It was only a few months before my dad couldn't handle the island anymore. He was trekking through the thick jungle early in the morning, before I woke up and got out of our bamboo beds. Later that day, I was calling his name, but he never answered. I kept my hopes up until I found his body, with a venomous snake wrapped around his ankle with his sharp fangs piercing the skin above his foot. My father must have tried really hard to kill the snake, if the venom killed the both of them. I remember dragging his body back to camp, not letting a single tear drip down my face. I was already much thinner than my usual one hundred and fifteen pounds -- already higher than average for a thirteen year old boy -- and I couldn't risk losing any nutrients or energy through crying. As much as my tear ducts yanked at my eyelids, I wouldn't let it happen, and I hope my father will know that when he watches from up in heaven. I sometimes think of him now, but I never let a tear cross my face.

I kiss my fingers and touch the stone where I worked all night the day he died engraving all the letters of his name with as much control as possible. Sometimes I wonder if his body has decomposed yet, or if it still lies

intact under my bare feet. My clothes are getting smaller for me now even though I have lost so much weight. I have had to cut parts of them every day to extend their life. The only thing I was able to salvage from the plane was a small flare that I have not dared to use. The last thing I want is to waste it on making a fire when I could wait until an aircraft flies overhead, looking for me. I'm quite surprised they haven't found me yet. I would have expected that my father and I would be found almost instantly after the crash, and I could get back to celebrating turning thirteen. But now, as I sit on the chair I made out of twine and sticks, a year after the plane crash, I have no reason to celebrate turning fourteen. This day just marks a year since the terrible tragedy that set my life off track.

I walk over to the small kitchen I made, with two bamboo and grass stools and a wooden island. I take out a basket that I have wedged under the counter and against the muddy floor. I feel the woven blade grass scratch against my palms and even open a new small cut on my thumb. It rests right next to another cut I got on my index finger while taking the basket out yesterday. I take out one of the coconuts that I harvested from the beach and split it open by hacking at it with a sharp rock for almost ten minutes. I feel the sweat running down my face as my stomach growls, begging for the food. I down the coconut in half the time it took me to prepare it and my hunger is immediately alleviated.

I sit on one of the stools, looking at the empty one beside me that should be holding my father. Then through the silence, I hear a whirring sound cutting through the air. I raise my head, and to my shock, there is a helicopter flying right over me. Surprise, excitement, and determination start coursing through my veins as I jump up from my seat and snatch the flare that rests under my bamboo bed. Then, in my bare feet, I take off towards the beach. My legs take me faster and faster, and I feel the wind in my hair. The adrenaline pumps through my whole body, pushing me to go faster. As the helicopter starts to pass over the island, that's when I get to the beach.

I quickly locate the pile of leaves that I collect daily and get the flare ready in my hands. I pull the white cap that rests at the tip of the thin red

cylinder and see it light up in flames. I toss the flare in the pile of leaves, noticing a second too late that to my horror, some of the leaves are still wet from the morning dew. As the flare starts to burn out, I waste no time sprinting back into the jungle to collect more leaves and sticks. I pick up anything flammable that rests on the ground, and cradle the materials in my arms as I sprint back towards the sandy beach. The helicopter now stands over the top of the island, moving faster than I would like it to. I throw the materials over the fire, and see the flames grow instantly. Before I know it there is a raging inferno in front of me with smoke flying up to the level of the aircraft. I see the helicopter swerve, the whirring getting louder, before they start to descend towards me. A smile spreads wide across my face as I think to myself, I can't believe it, I am finally going home. When the helicopter lands, I hop into the passenger seat with no hesitation. But as the helicopter rises into the air, I realize that by leaving the island, I'm leaving my father forever.

For the first time in a year, a tear streaks down my face, as the smoke trail chases us away.

The Heart of the Galaxy

Emptiness lurks,
Breaths come short,
Heart beats run,
As 2.5 million hearts go missing
From a single sickness.
7.7 billion smiles have been tossed,
As cries ripple through the darkness.

Many things can happen in a year,
What will happen in the year after?
What will it damage,
What will it glue back together?
Unique voices pierce through the air:
Lune, Terre, Soleil.

Empty figures are pressed against the corner,
My shadows wrap around quivering bodies.
As they softly hiss,
Lune.
My night sky conjures darkness
As it starts to attack.
Fog sweeps through peoples vacant thoughts,
As there is no such thing as human contact.
I watch tears shed,
Each heavier than the other,
But not one echoing a sound.

Corners of mouths turn down,
Erasing smiles off faces.
Uncovering pain,
Streaking through eyes.
Now a mask covers more than a fake smile,
Disguising people's hearts.

Green muck clawing up my neck,
Suffocating my clear fresh waters.
Thick oil coats my skin,
Threatening my life down until it is thin.
Wildfires tear up my name,
Terre.
Every day I have to witness a part of me wither away.
Lives flash before my eyes in a heartbeat.
5 trillion sheets of plastic drift about inside me.
A single piece of plastic can swallow an entire life,
Just
like
that.

Every ounce of dignity is stripped away,
From a creature's possession.
Eyes nothing but stare,
As money supersedes the souls,
Of my irreplaceable animals.

But light breaks through,
Soleil peeks from
The crooked cracks of the past.
As hope rushes throughout people's veins,

And eyes glow to illuminate the dark vast sky.
Eyes will meet familiar faces again,
Laughter will dance in the air,
And bonds will fly high.
Shells will be broken,
Tears will be wiped away,
And smiles will be unveiled.

Glassy eyes reflect my beautiful waves playing peek-a-boo,
My murky green water can be changed into a tranquil blue,
So you can see the sand below my feet.
People will finally realize,
Nature can never be bought.

As I wrap my arms around people,
They will feel a small warmth of hope,
Kindle deep inside
Their hearts.

I turn to the year after and I see,
Laughter like a swan spreading its wings in song,
Happiness like a gentle butterfly brushing against eyelashes,
A path like a long adventure ahead of me to find pure happiness.

Lune, Terre, Soleil
Walk,
Hearts connected,
Hearts in harmony,
As they take
A bold step,
Into the endless Galaxy of possibilities.

The Change We Seek

March 14th, 2022, exactly one year after releasing my first single. One year after I was free. That morning, when I awoke, I felt new. I told myself, today is the day. I heard the rough cut spew out of my phone speaker and slide into my right brain. It needed to be released. I scurried to the studio as fast as I could.

“Today is the day” I blurted at the door.

“Yeah?” said the man at the computer.

“Yeah,” I copied.

Fast forward to now. I’m on my first world tour. I perform nearly every night all around the world. I have fans from every corner of the globe. I’m interviewed in every city I go to, having just released my debut album.

I always knew I’d get here if I wanted to, but did I want to? If I could meet the girl I was before releasing my first song. If she could see what that three minutes of sound would give her, would she still release it? Did she want this? Or was she simply looking beyond the fence of ungratefulness?

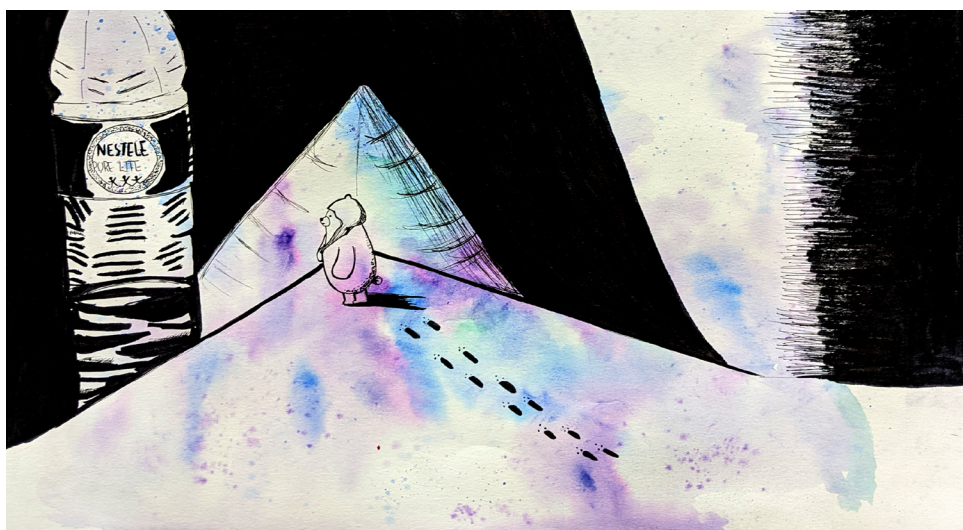
Everything is different now. I feel like I’m being held down by a boulder, and only let out when on stage. When I’m performing the songs I wrote on the floor of my purple bedroom in front of thousands of people, everything goes away. I’m left in a room with all my friends, singing along to the worlds of pain I created. I look around and see the people I love most. They all have a story, families, and are going through something, existence that is. I feel an urge to take them all in. I want them all to feel accepted and loved under my arms. I’ve never even seen most of the faces that adore me beyond anyone I’ve experienced before. I feel blind to the people that gave me the life I have. I want to be reachable like I am with them always, but the guards and

the walls and the blockades shield me from the truth that is...I am millions of miles away in their heads.

Fame is one of the rarest, and crazy occurrences for a human to experience. Only a year ago was I able to go out alone without flashing lights in my face. There is so much it has taken away from me, so much I can't do. I used to only look at all I was missing. But what about the things I can do? This platform allows me to speak out, and help the world with all of its biggest issues. One post can reach millions upon millions of people that await a better future just like me. I have all the power in the world. What will I do with it? I'll aid and care for as many as I can. I'll donate and create for more than myself, but for them. So, maybe this isn't all bad. Maybe, this is for the better. Maybe this girl writing on the floor of her purple bedroom can be the change we seek beyond the blind eyes of today.



Taija Sta Maria



Victoria Yan



Grace Geng



Quincy Okubasu



Kamyi Lam



Luke Pridgeon



Sam Basek





Parsa Eftekhari



Brandon Namgoong



Evan Dinniwell



Jumee (Kate) Lee



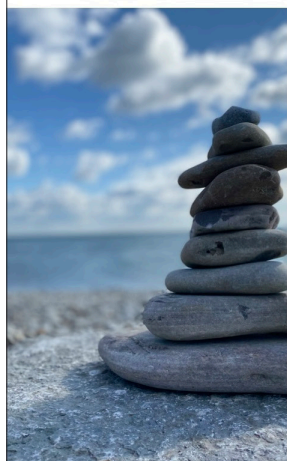
Qianqian (Lucy) Feng



Saif Boraei



Christina Wang



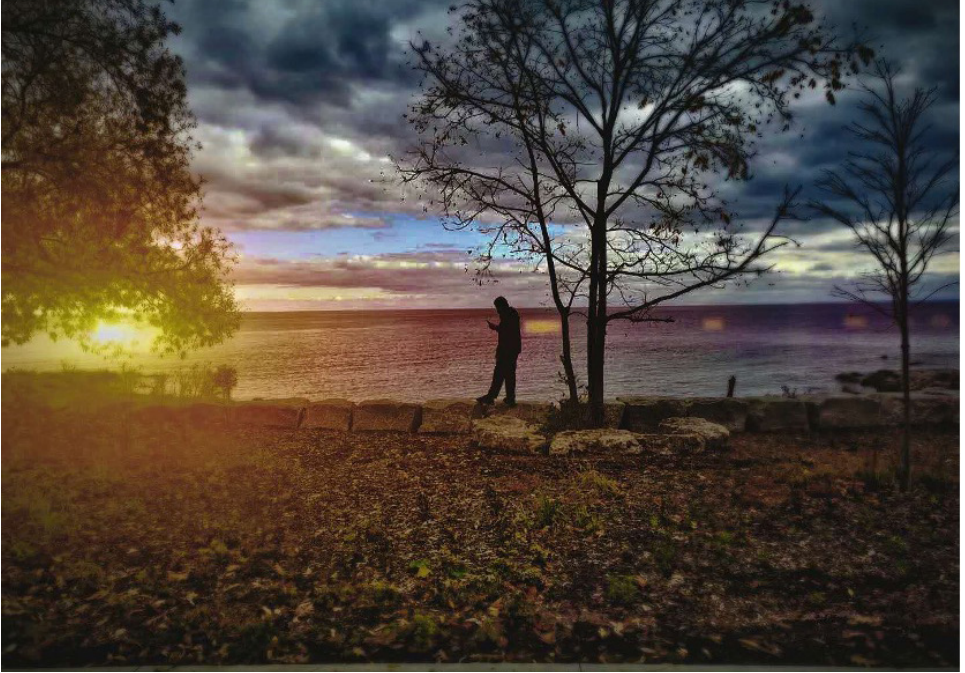
Tara Abouzeid



The Lute Player
By Frans Hals



The Yuke Player
By Alice Chandler



Shurwei (Jacob) Zhou



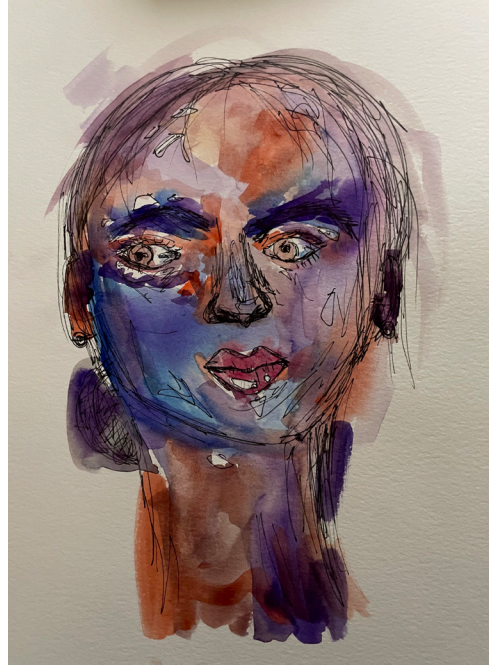
Sareena Choudhary



Valerie Pito



Abigail Harris



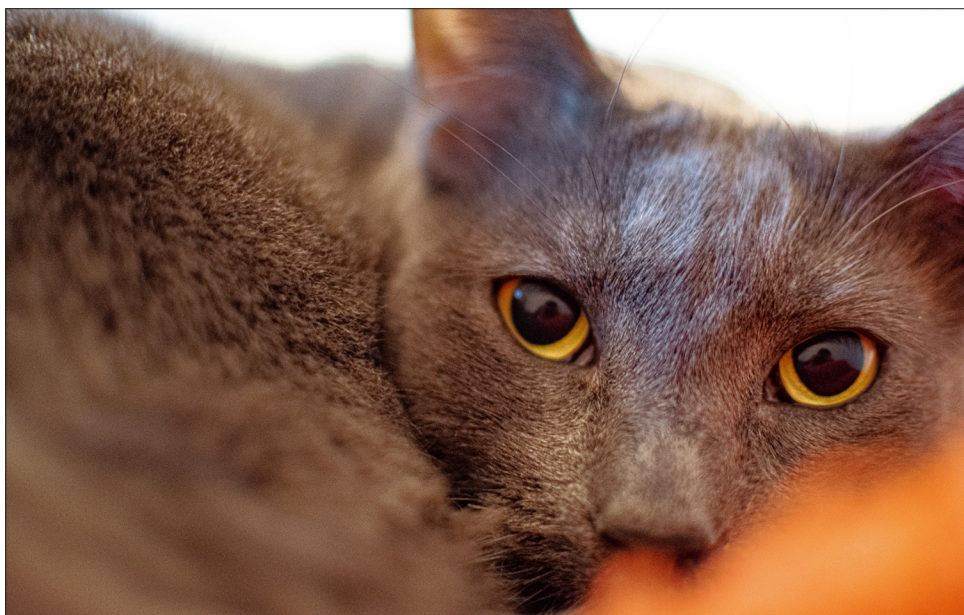
Amaris Turner



Emily Shin



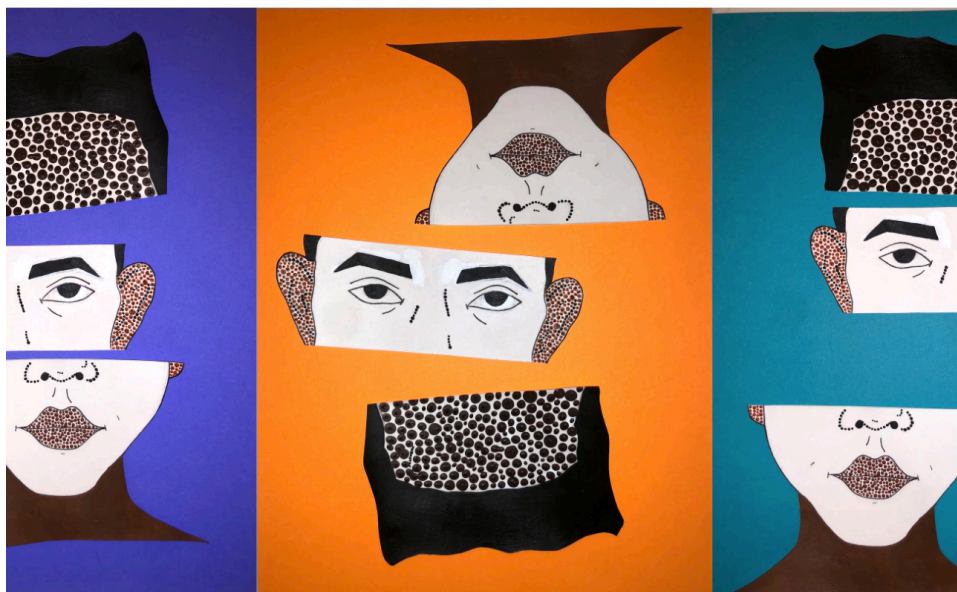
Amy Zhang



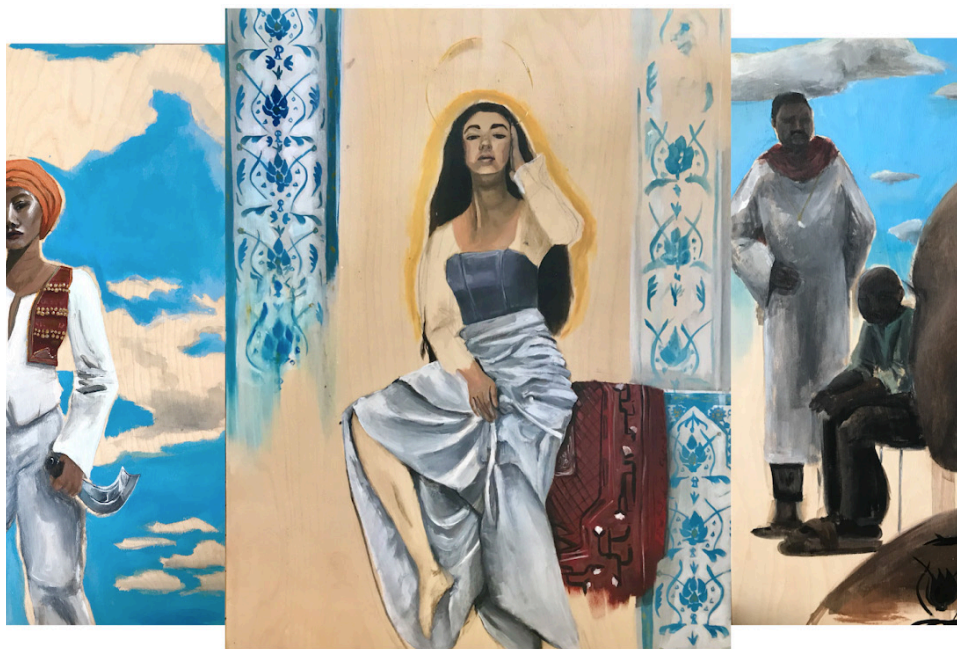
Sarah Zaarour



Lauren Holmes



Claudia Copeland



Milena Pappalardo



Hayley Mun

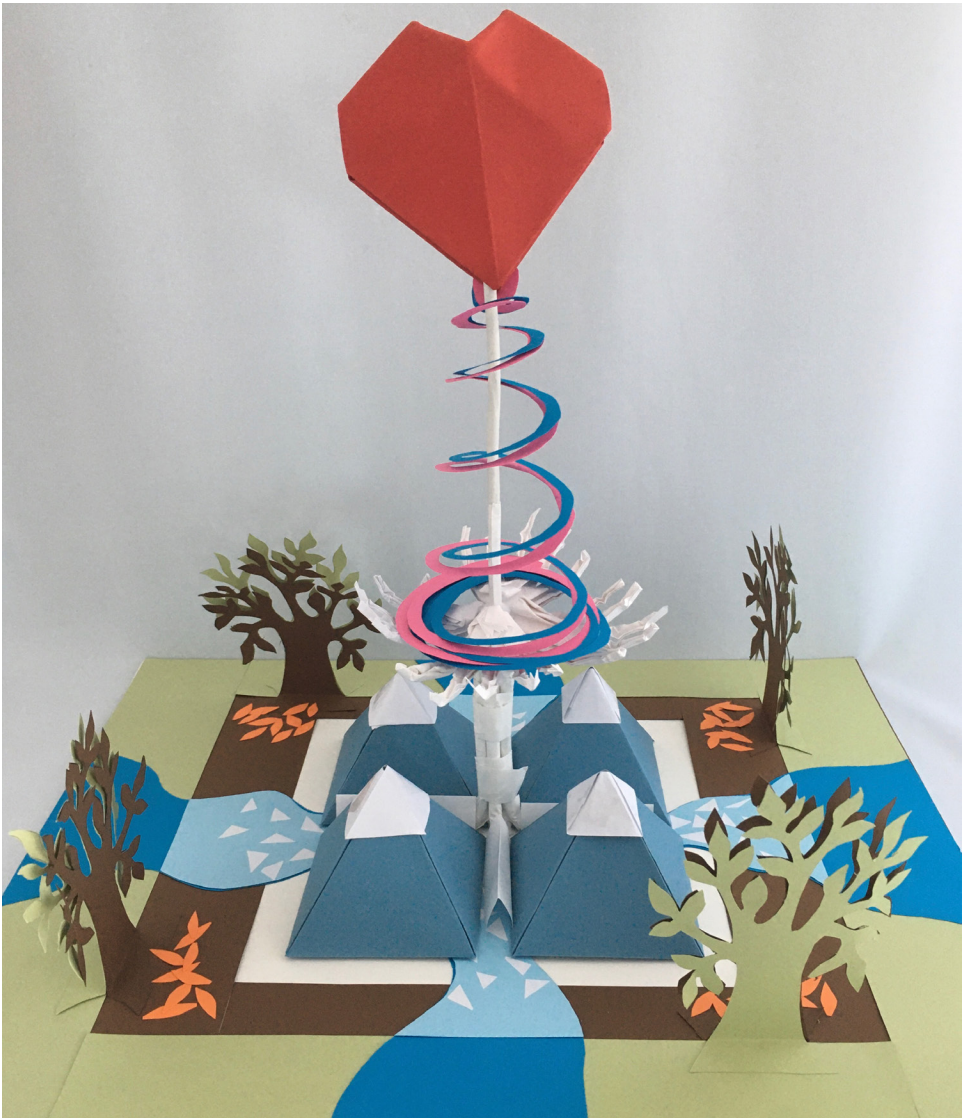


Katherine Bot



Chanel Sheng

Katherine Bot



Stephen Morgunov



Valentino Vinod



Emily Wei



Victoria Watson



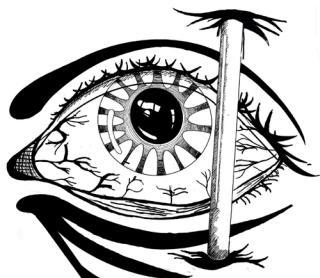
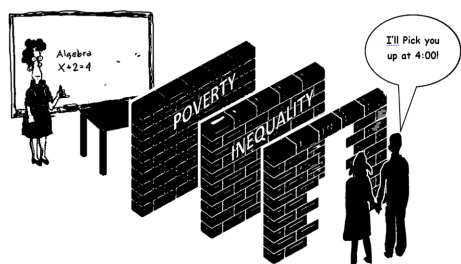
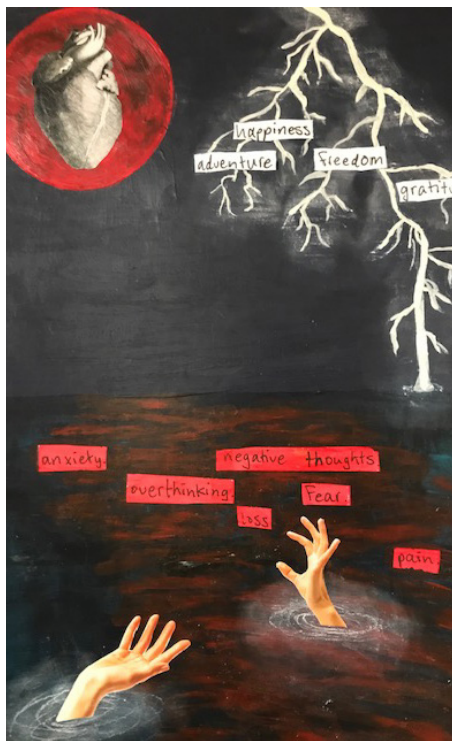
Hannah Prno



Hannah Prno

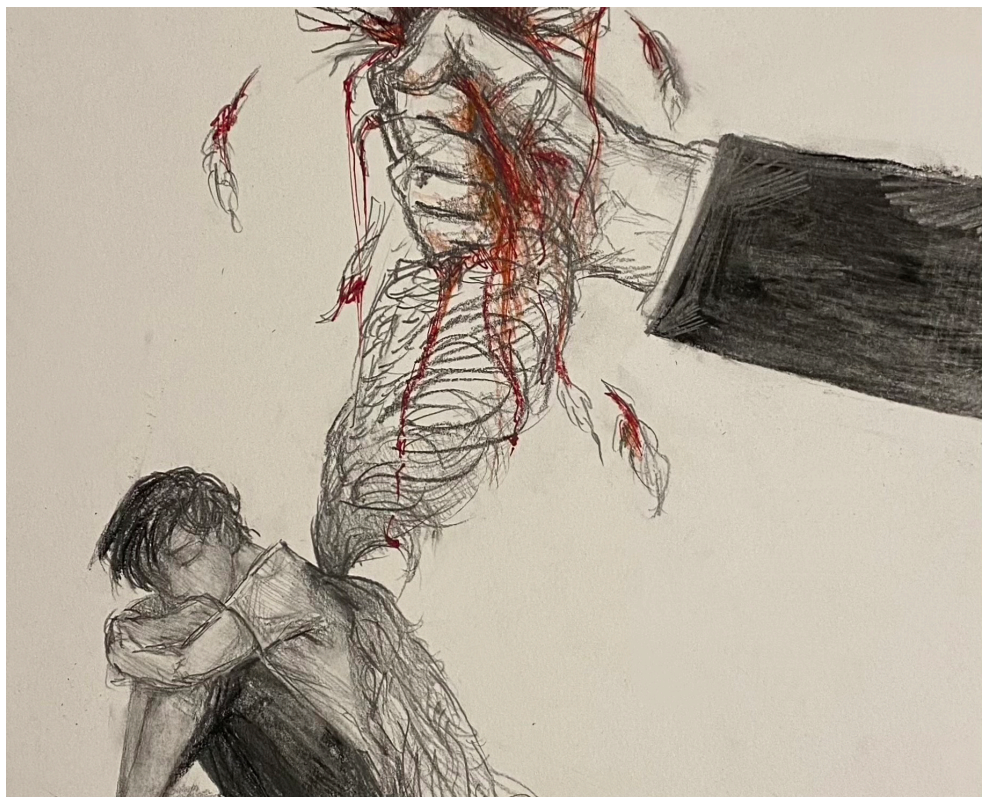


Ann Gao





Jason Ma



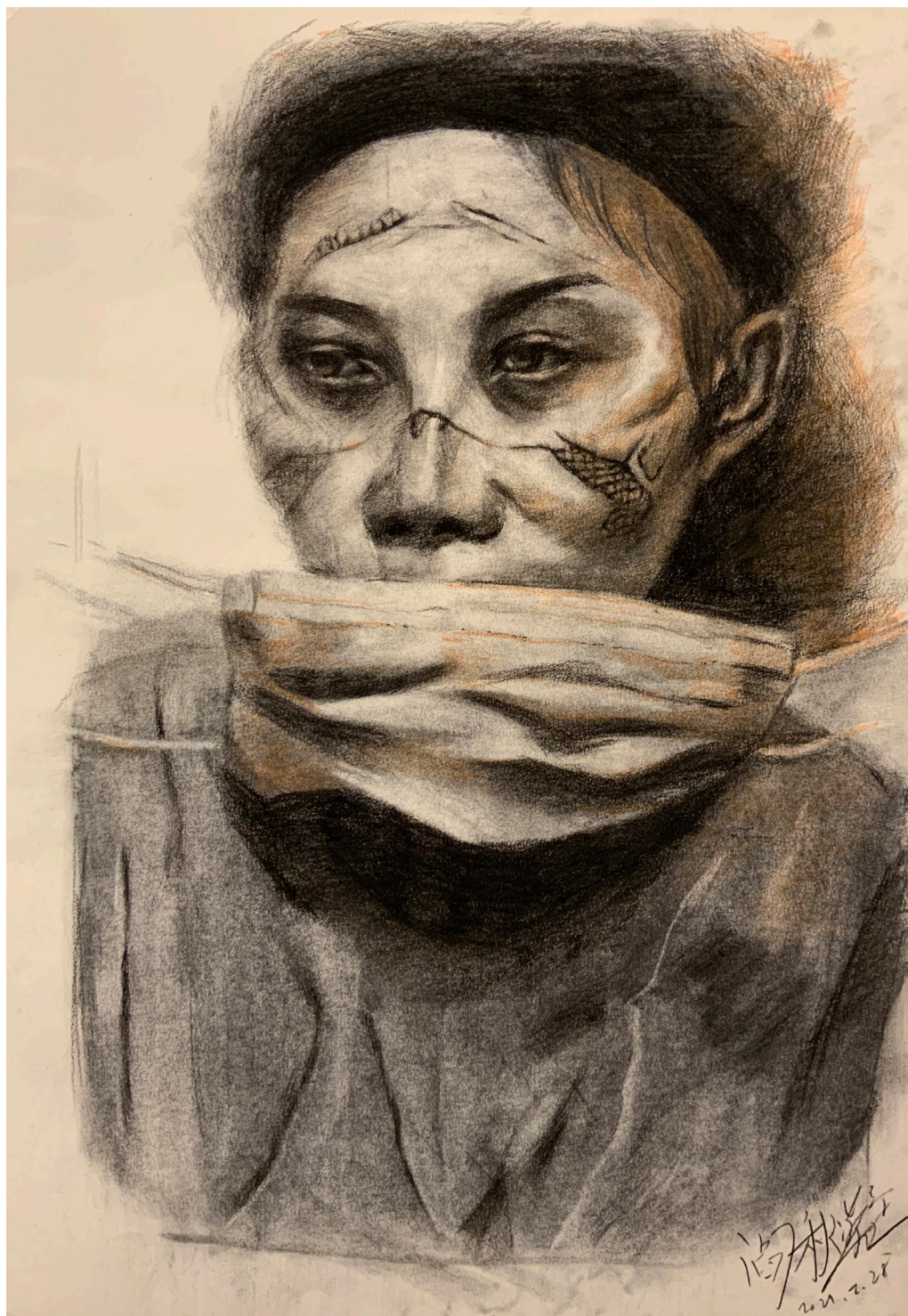
Manli Yang

Menu

The Screens will be serving fried
eyes for lunch today!



Kate Coito



Caroline Yan

Adam Paul

As Adam Paul woke up next to his broken television, he felt a huge headache. The last thing he remembered was pouring that powder into his beer at the party the night before. Walking to the kitchen, he saw that most people had left already. He struggled to avoid the piles of beer cans and empty bottles of spirits when he couldn't even balance. When he opened his fridge, all he saw were empty pizza boxes and crumpled up bags of potato chips. With an empty fridge and an empty stomach, Adam looked for clothes to wear to the beer shop. As he checked his phone, he was reminded that he had his audition at noon. No time for breakfast!

Looking at his home screen of him and Ellie reminded him of the thrilled look she gave him when the man on TV had called out the same numbers on his lottery ticket about a year earlier. They were 19 at the time. One year later, a decade had seemed to pass. To that day, Adam didn't understand why Ellie left him. They were young, in love, and now they were rich. Adam even quit university after they won the lottery to be with her and start a life of acting. Apparently, it was something about money changing him that broke her heart. Adam claimed that he had moved on from Ellie, although his search history said otherwise.

It wasn't just Ellie though. Over the months, Adam's brother, sister, parents, and best friend stopped talking to him. All of them felt entitled to a cut of his winnings and blamed Adam for every problem they had. Adam wouldn't stand for this, moved away into a party house in California, and made tons of friends. Yet he felt like the loneliest person in the world.

Adam picked up clothes from the floor. They were soaked in soda, but they would have to do. He wasn't tipsy anymore and no longer had the taste of beer in his mouth. More importantly, he could think properly. The last time

he felt like this was before Ellie left him. Everything seemed to change after he won that lottery. When Adam left his house, he noticed a hooded man who seemed to be walking toward him. He didn't pay attention to the man as his stomach rumbled. As Adam walked down the street, he spotted a few homeless people. One of them noticed his soaked-up clothes and grimaced. Adam mumbled, "Rough night." The man nodded knowingly. Adam knew he was infinitely wealthier than them, but he felt a strange connection. He felt alone and had forgotten what happiness felt like. He thought of sitting down with them but remembered his audition. As he neared the beer shop, he saw the hooded man was still following him and was picking up speed. Adam ignored that as he had a very weird thought. Everything fell apart after he won that money. Maybe money was creating these problems. Maybe that ticket worth millions of dollars was actually worthless. That was Adam's last thought before he heard a gun cock behind him.

As the police were zipping the body up, a young officer asked, "Where was the bullet wound?"

An older looking officer responded, "Right through the back of the head. Just another junkie though. It's a real shame. They always end up this way."

The younger officer frowned. "It's sad this happens to them. They're poor and can't do much, so they turn to drugs and alcohol. Wouldn't happen if they just had more money."

Playing on the Snowy Hills

My fondest memory occurred a year ago today. Beautiful flurries of snow nipped at my cheeks, leaving behind a tingling sensation. I stuck out my palm and watched the droplets melt. I admired the shrubs—the snow protected them from harm like a shield. Even I, Death, cherish a nice, snowy day.

I progressed to a narrow basin in a clearance of the woods where I was to pluck up the soul of a teenage boy. Another young life taken too soon. He had short golden hair that stretched down, framing his narrow face and defined cheek bones. He had detailed, intricate grey eyes filled with wisdom, kindness, and sensitivity. I heard his cries, felt his pain as he begged me not to take him. He banged on the ice sheet that lay overtop him, knuckles bleeding. I felt his suffering and grief, his head getting weaker, his spirit waning. He tried to hold on, begging for a miracle.

Oh, how I wish I could save them. Remove them from my deadly clutches and place them back on their miserable, destructive, magnificent world. I've always been fascinated by humans and the world they constructed; I could never decipher how they're capable of so much unpleasantness, yet so much beauty.

I felt, as he gave up any hope of surviving, his lungs filling with swampy water as he lost consciousness, sinking deeper and deeper into the water. In his last breaths, he whispered, gurgling underwater, little promises of how he would change, what he would do differently.

Oh, how many times I have heard:

“Please, I promise I’ll be nicer,” or

“I’ll be a better friend,” or

“I’ll never swear again,” and

“I still have so much to live for.”

Despite what humans believe, it saddens me to see people die—children most of all. What they think of in their last breaths, who they'll miss, what they regret. I'm not cruel. I don't decide who lives and who dies. I just lead them into their so-called afterlife.

"Please God, I'm too young, I don't want to die. There are still so many things I haven't tried, so many places I want to go."

I must admit, he sounded genuine. They often do. I was now at the edge of the basin, peering down at the figure at the bottom. In their ultimate moments, I send them memories of their past or their lost future. Frequently, it's their happiest. Or saddest. Or the moment they regret the most. For the nameless boy sinking to the bottom of the lake, it was the image of his mother's grief. She was curled up in a ball against the headboard of his bed with the new, dark-blue-and-green duvet cover that he so proudly chose himself to match his grey walls. Beside her, a pack of white and orange pills. She looked devastated. Salty raindrop-sized tears boiled up in her eyes, ready to spill over. She reached up to his bedside table and clutched a photo of him, his mother and father, who were all making silly faces at the camera. Her face in immense pain as she painted a finger across the dusty oak frame.

No words were needed. I understood. He was all she had left. The only thing preventing her from giving up. Rarely does the image I show change the outcome of someone's death; however, with his final burst of energy, he pushed off the bottom like a bullet fired from a gun of hope. Ice shattered above his head. He took a huge breath, like a marathoner crossing the finish line, and pulled himself up to safety.

His muscles ached, his teeth chattered, his breath, timid. He had never been that cold in his life. He couldn't stand, left paralysed. I collected his soul that cold, deadly, gorgeous afternoon, and as I did, he looked up into my featureless face and whispered:

"Please, tell my mom I love her. I'll always love her, with all my heart. Tell her I died with a smile on my face, that I was brave and tried to get back to her. But I just couldn't fight anymore. Please, tell her I'll be fine. Tell her

I'll see dad soon." The boy was terrified, as much as he wanted to look strong. I nodded my head in compliance and carried him into the light.

Now, a year later, I'm back in his bedroom to greet his mother. I sit on his cold, bathroom floor beside his mother's colourless body and meet her soul. She's happy to come with me. In her final moment, I share with her the image of her son's death. How brave he was, how much he loved her, how hard he fought for her, to get back to her.

She smiles and imagines seeing her beloved son playing on the snowy hills with her family again.

“Global warming, you say?”

Those simple words were ignored at first,
Overshadowed by opulent yachts.
“Global warming” will not have us cursed,
My wealth shall untie the knot.

I have caught a whiff of mountains on ablaze,
It is nothing but the permeating aroma of freshly roasted chickens.
I have heard the rumbling of glaciers as the Arctic sways,
It is nothing but the distant roaring of the train as its pace quickens.

No more coffee in the morning served on a tray.
No more apples to keep the doctors at bay.
What am I to do?
Most of us are hidden and cocooned.

Environmentalists will take actions,
Perhaps in the year after.
Save the Earth before its ultimate consumption,
Or all my plans and aspirations will splatter.

It is not my problem nor my concern,
That the oceans rise and cause havoc with its push and pull.
And when the icebergs disintegrate and overturn,
I proffer no aid, my pockets are full.

As the year unfolds,

Someone will render climate change null and void.
I shall reward you with gold,
The Earth shall not be destroyed.

“Your beginning, my beginning”

It was not even the beginning of the end.
But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.
Delivered in 1942; by whom, my memory serves clumsily,
As for now ‘tis nowhere near Canadian chronicles.
Near me?

The casual symptoms of a murderous lull,
Were artificial tranquilizers for me.
The incertain certitude, of a certain incertitude,
Was a castle in Spain, for my fears to unwind.
And hope?

When your smiles thrive, speakers go on strike, childlike.
I figured I’ll wait until the next day, until May, until the year after.
Positivity, dangerous demeanor for mortals like me,
But venerable for you lionhearts, you who live with such anguish, such
agony, stubbornly brave.
What mere words were there to say?

January loomed.
Ding!
Green the delivered were,
Grey the returned were.
Farewells?

How serene.
I wondered, good Teddy,
If we could go on a trip,
The year after,
Fantastic?

The feverish summer heat,
Melted away,
Bit by bit,
The delivered.
Love ?

Timelapse for my false fancy of joy;
Slow-motion for your torment, of teeth twisting and tearing apart,
from the beast inside you,
Which you bury with your corpulous thinness,
To always deliver, and preserve, my decent dystopia.
Forever young?

By and by, time for the falling fall.
Leaves were safety yellow, yellow as you were.
You shoot to the ground, naturally, somewhat lightly, drifting in the air,
before embracing your already fallen siblings.
All the saccharose produced, much apprised'.
For your sacrifice?

Close, closer, closest to home ground.
Few, fewer, fewest "delivered".
Poor, poorer, poorest video, and audio qualities.
Birthday for you, then for Christ, at last the moon, my lovely Teddy,
perhaps reborn.

A new beginning?

Thanks to Einstein who squandered centuries on ghastly fungi,
I was able to sit here and cry, in my room, yellow light above me, sitting
on a wooden chair, playing my old loyal piano, some classic pieces, fin-
gers as soft as my yellow Teddy, who watches me with its round, watery,
static eyes, but heavy as a missile.

But consolation struck me, opening the door to my utopia.

Mourners are but cowards, showmen, gratifying the happily alive's
bitterness, losing face to the soul's wills, wasted, ashamed.

Relative reality?

Now, chipmunks chase each other, playing, or mating , or fighting, or
all of them.

A nutritious caterpillar, on its chartreuse leaf, becomes a songbird's
meal.

Overhead stands a solemn yet majestic figure, its hazel fur must be
pristine, no worries.

Its keen eyes of lofty sight look satisfied. Sorry, it said.

Fascinating n'est-ce pas, the orders of nature?

Indeed an honorable liberation o veteran, not of, but from Dante.

We will love you by loving who you love.

We will deliver on your wheels, to the same good Teddy I kept for you.

We will reunite, with no apologies to make. Right, my dear Teddy?

Maybe, in the year after.

Yellow Clouds

One minute of pure genuine love before my whole world collapses and everything in my horizon is absorbed into an enormous explosion of tears. I'm left in a universe of endless stars, alone.

The glimmering sun illuminates a warm golden aura surrounding my Dad's smooth and slightly dampened hair as it swiftly drifts through the biting wind that gradually increases its rage. The day churns greyer and greyer into a pool of waveless sea. That final image of him, one that will never leave my memory, is watching the once bright energy surrounding him flip like a light switch to a smoky ashen message to me, that this was the last second of my romantic childhood world in its finest virtue. The tides sharply rise up cutting our gentle quiet breaths into tense snippets of air. They harshly thrash against our neon orange raft creating a shared wind of ascending panic. The waves weaken our raft like each time a Jenga block is removed from the tower. Eventually the tower collapses and you restart but Jenga is just a game. The freezing air whirls into a charcoal mist of terror. The last Jenga block is painfully removed while my heart sinks to its deepest dimensions. I watch my Dad lose himself to the tide, looking for answers in his eyes, I somehow grab hold of a rock with the water washing away my infinite tears. I survive alone.

Throughout the past year I've felt everything from the highest points of stress, to the lowest points of excitement. Now every day feels like the bitter, vacant middle. I was once taught the concept of a romantic world in what appeared like any ordinary afternoon English class with the rolling hills of fatigue laying heavily over me. In my personal dictionary a romantic world is a term for the rosy, childhood lens I never realized I used to look through every day. The hard part is you'll never know that you were living in

a romantic world until you're not anymore. I remember the way my romantic world felt, I can sometimes even feel parts of it. Maybe I just need someone to spark the friction in my lighter and set my world on fire.

Today I'm sitting in my English class and although the light shines a little dimmer, the smell of friendships arising, youthfulness swirling, excitement building and fresh cinnamon apples still belongs. My Dad was one of the few people my brain painted a shining, yellow cloud around. My world has shifted from the sun to the moon, both are equally as beautiful but different. An electrifying current of hope flows through me today and in this English class I am determined to find something to light up my world with ecstatic sparks. I call my friend Abby, another irreplaceable yellow cloud in my imagination.

"Hey, you going to that party tonight?"

"Mmmm, I was thinking about it but I'm not sure, I'll go if you go. Ok?"

"You know what...Let's go!"

We laugh with a relaxed happiness about us. One that tells us that each of our own versions of yellow clouds are currently being painted in and around each other's comforting smiles as our favorite songs play. That feeling like you're in a cheesy 2000s movie standing on top of the world, breathing in the fresh air of the bright blue limitless sky. Yes, this is the feeling of laughing with your best friend. I have a new dazzling beam of light shine through me as excitement races through my veins. Abby texts me the location of the party and I see it's in a forest near my house, Westland Woods. It's a pretty big forest with a lot of ground to cover so I'm somewhat confused as to where exactly the party will be but Abby will know, she just knows stuff like that.

Countless wondrous thoughts flood my brain and I start to feel that same on top of the world feeling when Abby picks me up, and yes of course she knows where in these vast woods teenagers can be found on a Friday night. We giddily approach the party and step over numerous beer cups. The fall leaves have begun fading into thin golden sheets of opportunity float-

ing across the skyline. We inhale the scent of new beginnings, sweet soft air, glowing purple skies and surrounding sunsets sinking into the night. I feel a forgotten bliss I haven't felt in the past year and I feel the warm arms of the sunset wrap over me like I'm a present being prepared to be opened by the world. Some mindless boys from our school hand us a couple drinks of god knows what and we kick back in our nostalgic yet uncomfortable soccer chairs, absorbing the moment while our chair legs sink into the dewy leaves below us. The world feels bright and large until the memories of what you've lost have already found a way into your heart.

My whole world encloses and it feels like doors of hope are repeatedly slamming in my face until the only one I can open is the thought of my Dad. I start to feel the raft violently swaying as the tide shakes me into the unknown. The smell of fright strangles me. I abruptly rise to my feet and I breathe in and out. One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four... Everyone stares and for a split second it feels like they're the weird ones out of place. I urgently escape deeper into the forest hoping for answers the further I go. It all looks the same as the bristles roughly brush against my naked arms. The silence builds into a symphony of fear. Alarming thoughts intrude my mind as I cling to my sweater in the shivering night. The moon is my only light in the endless sea of trees. I start to hear noises hoping it may be my classmates yet I quickly conclude it's coyotes howling in the distance. I have no idea how far or how long I've been walking all I know is that I am LOST. My breath becomes unbearably loud as I tremble and quiver in my path. I do multiple 360's hoping for some direction or to spot somebody in sight but no one is to be seen or heard. My vision starts to blur. The feeling of the raft drifts into my emotions and I remember the feeling of something so great shattering into pieces within seconds. My breathing vigorously thickens, I pant and I gasp until my screeching cries for help reassign my lungs. I scream and yelp until my body defeats my heart and I uncontrollably fall. A glimpse of losing everything again invades my thoughts. I feel my heart plummet yet I don't have enough energy and will to catch it as I descend into the damp fall leaves.

I breathe unbelievably heavily until it fades into a dwindling helpless sob. Tears stream down my frozen, red face. I feel more and more powerless with each unanswered cry for help. I'm overcome by exhaustion and I slip into the night without a clue if I will ever see the morning light again.

The frosty air entrances me deeper into my sleep. I grasp the leaves in resentful pain as my head is scratched by the razor sharp sticks digging into me. Fearful I am waking in a vivid dream or worse, I open my swollen irritated hazel eyes to a group of teenagers far in the distance.

"ROSE! ROSE! ROSE!?" I can hear them searching anxiously. The morning light greets me buried under leaves and dirt, while the gleaming light of the forest urges me to scream once more. I let out a final cry filled with pain and relief. Abby races immediately to my side with her curly brown hair and warm eyes meeting my gaze. In disbelief I conclude that everything didn't crumble within seconds instead someone FINALLY heard me! The sun has floated back from the moon. Although my shaking body aches I have found my romantic world. I see the yellow clouds, the joy, the hope and most importantly I see happiness. My vision is crystal clear and I see the beautiful world surrounding me. I smile into Abby's safe eyes, knowing my Dad is watching over me.

The Year After

How much difference would three hundred and sixty-five days make? Grown taller? Matured a little? Perhaps someone got accepted into their dream school, or maybe a lucky person had hit the jackpot and won a lottery. Then, of course, everyone's added another unit to their age. As for Justin, if he could choose to, he would never have wanted to gain a year older.

A figure slumped by the side of his bed. It was morning, but early enough that the stars were still out. A thin ray of the rising sun peeked through the curtains that had a gap, hitting a coat rack that stood beside the window. The object casted a long shadow across the dim room, its shape forming a human-like silhouette. The boy looked at the shade beside him, nothing moved but his eyes.

Justin sighed as he reached out a pale hand towards the outline of a person, but pulled back as soon as the shadow of his hands messed the shape up. He clenched his jaw, getting upset over something as small as this.

"Lucas, do you really hate me that much?" Justin breathed as he pulled something out from his pocket, a broken watch.

Justin brushed his fingers across the shattered glass, the cracks of its wrecked surface dyed red. Suddenly, the grip he had on the object got tighter, his knuckles turned white from the pressure.

"I said I was sorry already," Justin forced an emotionless chuckle, "then again, you're always the one to hold grudges."

Justin's gaze shifted again, this time landing on the sun that was starting to fly higher. The sudden brightness turned his vision white. Justin squinted to adjust to the light, by the time his eyes finally got used to everything, Justin was standing in a different room.

"Take it." A cold voice rang behind him.

Justin turned around and froze immediately. A young child around the age of seven stood in front of another that was on the ground. His tiny hand held out a napkin towards the boy that had fallen on the pavement.

Seven-year-old Justin beamed at the person helping him, but he didn't seem to smile back.

"I'm Justin, do you live around here?" Justin didn't grasp the fact that his helper didn't want to talk.

The small Lucas turned away after seeing that Justin wasn't injured and walked off in silence, leaving Justin sitting on the concrete, dumbfounded.

The scene changed again, this time Justin was standing in a classroom, the loud chatters made it hard to hear anything.

"Lucas! You got the homework?" Justin seemed older this time, maybe thirteen or so.

"You're late." The boy responded without much emotion.

"You should get used to it. Anyways, give me the answers, I'm going to get fried if I don't submit this."

“Why don’t you wear a watch? Maybe that would help you be on time.” Even though his words were cold, Lucas still handed a stack of papers to his friend.

“Why don’t you buy me one?” Justin took the worksheets and copied the answers rapidly.

Lucas didn’t answer. He took his work away as soon as Justin was done writing the last sentence.

“Thanks! Owe you one,” Justin grinned at him and slapped his back.

“When will you ever return the favors?” Lucas didn’t hesitate to call him out.

Justin awkwardly rubbed his nose and looked away, avoiding the question.

Justin’s vision blurred up once more. This time he was standing on the side of a road. As soon as he recognized the highway, his heart stopped. It was the day. Justin’s 17th birthday.

Justin already knew what had happened here, but he’s never seen the whole scene in person, nor does he want to.

Justin thought of the day before the incident, when he forced Lucas to come to his gathering.

“Lucas, I’m telling you, you better come tomorrow. I’m depending on you.” Justin reminded him for the seventh time.

“I have the exam at that time.” Lucas sighed.

“Exactly, so hurry up and finish it. You’ll make it on time if you rush.”

Lucas didn’t say anything afterwards, and that was the last conversation the two friends had.

A sudden honk knocked Justin out of his memories and back to the cars that were speeding through the road. Then everything happened as if it was sped up. A black vehicle turned away abruptly to avoid collision with another car that was recklessly switching lanes, but instead flew off the tracks and landed upside down after ramming into a pile of boulders.

The loud screech of the brakes and the impact between metal and stone made Justin’s ears burn, even so, the world seemed quiet, too quiet.

“No!” Justin ran towards the accident, forgetting that there were moving cars all around.

He flinched as one was about to smash into him, but the pain never came. Instead, it drove past him as if he wasn’t there.

Right, all of this happened already. Nothing is going to change, I’m invisible to everyone here. Justin realized.

By the time he reached Lucas’s car, the entire automobile was smoking. The windows shattered and there was a body in the driver’s seat.

Blood flowed out from all places, his head, his arms, his legs. Lucas was practically covered in red that it was hard to tell where he got injured. His

eyes were shut tight and his chest didn't move, Justin would've thought he had passed out if he had not seen the tight fist Lucas had in his right arm.

"Someone help him!" Justin called out, even though he knew no one could hear, "dial 911, anyone!"

But other people must've noticed without his help because he didn't need to wait long to hear the sirens.

Justin moved to the side to make way for the paramedics that were rushing in, despite the fact that they could've easily passed through him. He watched with little emotions as they tried to sort everything. The first thing they did was take out Lucas's fragile figure and ran a small test through him. Justin already knew the outcome, but it still pained him to see the staff shake their heads.

Justin stood by Lucas as the crew were busy with other damage, his eyes focused on the shiny object that was in Lucas's palm. As his breath got shallower, the grip he had was starting to loosen. Finally, with the last heartbeat, Lucas's fingers dropped the thing he protected until the end. The wristwatch fell to the ground, shattered. The hands already stopped moving and the birthday gift was deformed. A ripped piece of paper was attached to it. "Happy 17th Bir-" it read, the rest of the sentence torn off.

"Lucas ..." Justin whispered, "I'm sorry."

He's said this countless times, but never once did Justin find relief in saying these two words.

Lucas's cold body was carried away, so was his torn-up car. A young nurse was the last to leave the area, he noticed the wristwatch and picked it

up, taking it back to the hospital. Nothing was left at the scene, except for the bloodstains and a dent on a large rock.

Justin closed his eyes and opened them to see the sun high up in the sky. The curtains too thin to keep the light out.

He stared down at the watch, the time froze from when he first saw it. Justin looked beside him, expecting to see the shadow of the coat rack, but it was gone since the light shifted.

Justin tried his best to forget that day when he waited hours for his best friend to come to his party, but Lucas never showed up. He went against his promise of staying by Justin's side till they both have grandchildren.

Millions of questions came like bullets at Justin. What if he didn't invite Lucas? What if his party was set at a later date? What if Lucas had taken a different route? What if... Justin was never friends with Lucas?

Justin closed his eyes in an attempt to block out the thoughts, he wasn't sure what the outcome of these decisions would be. Maybe in a different universe, everything would be fine. All Justin knew was that if he could travel back in time, he wouldn't pick to go travel a year back, but ten, before he met Lucas, and never became friends with him. If one has to go, let it be Justin.

"I'm sorry," Justin apologized again, "for meeting you."

A Spring Without You

The warm sun radiated on my face as I lay on the prickly grass. The whistling wind blew gently onto my cheeks and my jacket fluttered in the calm gale. When I inhaled deeply, the smell of the fresh air penetrated my lungs and the strong odor of the earth combined with the sweet, floral fragrance delighted me. The lovely flowers began to bloom, bringing cheerful colors into spring. Above me was the intense blue sky filled with scattered clouds that looked as fluffy as cotton candy. I could hear the faint laughter of children in the distance who had come out to play after a bitter winter.

Happiness, joy, bliss; the emotions of spring.

A nearby piano was being played and the sound was beautiful, like a 24-colour palette. The melodies danced in my ears. The once dead leaves on the thin branches of the trees have become lush and vivid green.

Renewed, rebirthed, resurrected, rejuvenated; the symbols of spring.

Why can't I forget? Why can't I move on?

Grey clouds began to form, covering the bright sun. The storm started with crazy, chaotic droplets of rain and the gusting wind carried them in wild motions. Suddenly, my throat began to tighten, and I felt a shortness of breath. My body started to tremble, my vision blurred, and my chest was throbbing fiercely. I fell onto my knees in pain and cried out to the skies hoping some higher power could end my grief and sorrow. Without warning, cold tears streamed down my face violently like a river evading a dam.

At the end of the day, I watched as the glowing sun dipped below the horizon which left behind a bloody sky and its light distributed itself over a burning sea of redness. The nearby blooming blossom tree was planted majestically displaying spring's grand arrival. The explosion of its pale pink petals was a euphoric sight to witness. Not only was the cherry blossom known for

its beauty, it was also known for its enduring symbolism of life, death, and renewal.

The spring without you is coming...

Birds

Prison life is pretty shit. Days bleed into months... locked away. My life has become an endless cycle. My guilt follows me like a moth drawn to a flame. Slowly a year passes. A year since I'd committed that horrendous crime. The crime that brought me here. Stuck in jail, I've lost all hope. It's kind of funny how in just one year I went from living my ordinary life, to painfully awaiting my death. I've had enough of the flashbacks and nightmares. I am giving up.

Then, in an instant, the world changed. A single ray of sunlight peaked its way through the storm clouds: Jasmine Brookes. I saw her, sitting on a small patch of grass six feet away from the giant barbed fence keeping me in here.

She turned and noticed me. Her jet black hair cascaded down her thin back, like a dark waterfall. Her eyes are endless pools of blue. Placid and warm like a vast ocean. She had the same warm smile that I'd seen beside me on so many sleepless nights. She had my mother's lips, and it seemed her spirit.

After studying me for a bit, she shyly asked, "Why do you always look up at the sky?"

I was caught off guard by the question, so it took me a second before replying, "...the birds."

She laughed spontaneously at my response.

I laughed and expanded. "I know this sounds really stupid - birds give me hope. They look so free. Bright, crazy, coloured ones, soaring through the sky like shooting stars. If those little birdies can find freedom and happiness

in this cold, unforgiving world, maybe I can too!”

“You one of the weed smokers, aren’t ya.” She smirked.

“Nah, ...guess I’m just a philosophical guy. They call me Alex.”

“I’m Jasmine.”

“What are you doing here anyway? People ain’t allowed back here.”

“My daddy works here. I drive him home most days. I’m waiting for his shift to end. He’s one of the guards. They let me roam around these grounds, they don’t give a shit.”

Back in my cell, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. The next day I looked for her again, but she wasn’t there. Or the day after. I started to get worried that I had made her up in my head. Then, on the 4th day, she appeared!

“Hey!” I burst out.

She looked directly at me as if she was waiting to resume our conversation...

“It must get so lonely there. Is it scary, knowing you gonna be..executed and all?” She blurted out before realizing that might not be the best thing to ask.

I nodded. I felt a rush to connect, and before I could stop myself, I blurted out. “Ya see the thing is, when I was a teenager, I constantly wished for death. Now that it’s been handed to me on a silver platter, I don’t want it. I realized that I don’t want to die, I just wanted to be loved! The world made me think death was the only option to stop me from feeling so fucking alone.” I paused, “I mean everyone dies... I just got my death planned out for me. I gotta accept it and reflect on the horrible shit I did. I got to look for love instead of dreading death.”

“I see you ain’t a pot smoker. You one of those acid junkies!” She said jokingly. “I can tell you like to talk a lot. I’m not sure if it’s because you think your words are helping people or you just like the sound of your own voice.” She bit her lip.

“Fuck you.” I loved her already.

"I'm just playin with ya." She smirked. "I think a lot about death too. My mama - she gone and got herself killed when I was 15. I was all on my own, too. You know since my daddy's so busy with work and all. He doesn't care about me, only his job." She paused. "But this feels good, right now, talking about our shit." She squinted up at me.

I felt a rush of connection and familiarity. It was as if we had known each other when we were little and we had stumbled across one another again.

I revealed, "My old man was a washed-up son-of-a-bitch, too. I am here because of him. He was beating my mama....worse than usual. I didn't know what to do. He looked like he was going to kill her. So I shot him dead."

"That really sucks, man. You got no one looking out for ya. It's so lonely." She sighed.

"Damn right, it is. I got here a year ago, and I feel the...cold. The jury, judge and prosecutor on my case were racist assholes. They used me as their scapegoat. They hid evidence that proved I shot my Pa to save my Mama."

"Fuck the system. It's horrible." She stuck her middle finger in the air shaking her head. "Yeah! Fuck the system!" I chimed in after her.

The next few weeks I would wait by the fence to talk to Jasmine. The days became a little less bleak, and I started to lose the dark, lonely feeling that had followed me throughout my life. But that hope was crushed, one cold, November night.

I had a meeting with my Lawyer. "I'm sorry, Alex. We have to stay the execution...but all the appeals I've requested have been turned down. All of my efforts in getting you pardoned have been unsuccessful. Although, you should also see all the petitions people have been writing about you! You have caused quite an uproar recently."

My Lawyer showed me a document.

"Stop the execution of Alex Jones".... Beneath were 502,120 Signatures.

Why did so many people care what happens to me? I couldn't help but be blown away. Then I remembered the bad news she was gonna tell me.

"Say it! It's still gonna happen, right?" I stared coldly

"Your execution date has been confirmed. You will be executed in two weeks. I wish there was something I could do. I will keep trying but it's looking pretty grim. The president is trying to finish a lot of executions before he leaves office." I knew it was coming but I didn't think I'd hear those words so soon. I'd only spent just over a year on death row - one of the shortest times in history.

Back in the Rec Room, I couldn't help but stare at the people on the TV behind him. They were holding giant signs, such passion in their expressions. Black Lives Matter protesters. Just as the world was finally changing for the better, I was gonna have to leave it. These people can't save me. I felt numb.

Later in the yard, I saw Jasmine through the fence.

"I'm gonna die in 2 weeks." I choked out and watched the colour drain from her face. "Don't miss me too much!" I joked feebly. "You'll be able to find an even sexier man out there somewhere!"

"I wish things were different." Tears began to form in her eyes.

"Look who's going soft on me," I said laughing and crying. I shook my head and started to leave...but turned back around. I couldn't leave like this. "Jasmine. You made this time here so much more bearable. Thank you."

Jasmine smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes. I reached my hand through the small holes in the fence. "Reach out to me."

I tried to touch her and she began to sing me the lullaby that my mom used to sing me when I was in her arms. My eyes widened and I exclaimed, "How did you know that my mom used to sing that to me?" Just as she was about to answer, I heard a voice behind me. It was the prison guard.

"Psycho! Get your hands away from the fence! What are you even reaching at? There is nothing there. You going crazy, man?"

In another lifetime, I wished I could have explored the world with her. We could have met somewhere else. Such a naive dream! That's not how the world works. Guys like me ain't treated fairly. Guys like me don't get what we want. Guys like me don't get to be happy.

I shook my head. Fuck how the world works. Maybe I could change that, just for a few minutes. Maybe I could be happy. I closed my eyes and imagined cupping her cheek with my palm. I dreamed of kissing her and a spark of pure euphoria shot through my body like a firework. When they began to strap me down, she was all around me. She was wilting flowers on the warden's desk. She was the pencil laying on the stone-cold floor. She was the bird perched on the prison window. I could hear her singing. Singing in hope.

In the End

A year ago today I met death.

And I thought it would be okay, because in my mind I had already laid you to rest. My world didn't stop spinning like I'd read about in novels, it didn't collapse or fall to ruin like in the movies. It was drained, drained of everything I loved, so empty and hollow that every time I looked at someone they were already a ghost.

I didn't talk much about you dying. Neither did you. Our silence was filled by the sound of your heavy, hoarse breathing, the doctors pumping the black liquid from your drowning lungs, your slender fingers, once so elegant, turning skeletal, white as snow. I had never known you without your wig, without your smile and your knitting, but now your hands were too stiff to hold a needle, your head too weak to hold a wig.

All those nights and weekends in the hospital became a sort of routine. Wake up early, grab some food on the way there, sit with you for hours in the rooftop garden watching the Toronto skyline until it became too cold to be outside, until you became too frail to move from your bed, even with a wheelchair. And then it became days sitting in your cramped room, nurses at all hours, the sun shining in from the windows, golden and warm, even in the darkness and short days of winter. But when you become even more frail, so frail you couldn't even stay awake, it was just hours of sitting there, alone and bored, watching you drift in and out of a confused consciousness. For all the years of brain bleeds, of cancer and surgery, I had been preparing myself for you to die. It sounds so crude and cruel when I write it down and put it into words. But then that Thursday night came, and there stood the spectre of death I believed I had conquered, piercing a hole in the accepting, organized existence I had built to watch all the air pour out, like a deflating balloon.

All my memories of you were tainted by your death. All the cakes you baked, all the stories you told, all the picture frames you had with the stock images left in them because the models looked “happy”—all were contaminated and stained and poisoned by the cancer that killed you. I didn’t love you any less. Maybe I even loved you more than ever, but my love had somehow turned painful and ugly. Of all the things I’d say to you if you were here, I would say I’m sorry. I’m sorry for letting your love turn hideous, and I’m sorry for letting it hurt me. If I could look into your eyes again, before they became clouded and foggy and watery, I would say that I’m sorry, and that I love you.

And now, now what? Now a year has passed. 12 months, 52 weeks, 365 days, which seems like such a long time, even though you always said to me how short the years felt, how it was no time at all since I’d been born.

I still miss you. I still miss visiting you. I still miss the way you laughed. But now each day has become beautiful again, beautiful in your memory: spring’s bright green grass and blue sky, fall’s crisp wind and falling leaves; the people, the way they talk, the way they love each other; and the sun, the brilliant, glowing, shining sun that once illuminated all the corners of your room and lines of your face.

I love you.

Nodus Tollens

Hello Old Friend,

Did you miss me? Well, I'm back. It took a while to track you down, you've changed greatly since our last encounter. Did you do something with your hair? Are those new shoes? Have you redesigned yourself externally to match with your redesign internally?

You're mad at me, I can tell. You were hoping to not hear from me again. You hate me. But remember, I wasn't the one who abandoned ship.

You left me behind. Not the other way around.

Was I not good enough for you? Not fresh? Do people say fresh? Frankly, I don't know, and even franker, I don't care. But I'm sure you do. I suppose you now care about those things.

I've done my research, and I have to admit, I'm not impressed. This is why we needed to stay together. This is why you needed me. I never wanted to see you like this.

You found some parasites to replace me with. They drool at every word you say. Praise you for everything they think you are. Your (forced) smile makes the sun look dull.

You should be applauded for your performance.

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

Congratulations. I'm sure you're so proud. I don't know what exactly you're proud of, but I have no doubt you'll find something. And I'm sure you'll exclaim it so the whole world will hear, and so they can celebrate your ever important achievements. Do you remember what an important achieve-

ment is? How many have you falsely claimed?

I annoy you. Why? Is it because I'm holding up a mirror, and you don't like the image? Darling, remember. That's your reflection.

Do you remember, in the darkest hours of the night, when we couldn't fall asleep. You remember telling me that even though things weren't always easy, hard work was worth it, because at least you had me. Because even though everyone else had left me behind, I would never be alone. Because I was essential, and important. Because I was necessary. You told me you'd never let me go.

How does it feel to be a hypocrite?

I am essential, and I am important. I am absolutely necessary. And I'm sorry that you are blinded to my worth, but that does not diminish my value.

Even if no one in the world can see it.

Don't ever say I didn't do anything for you. I came back, even though you don't deserve me. Even though you made it so very clear life is still very operable without me around. But remember, when they leave you all behind, and trust me, they will, I would have stayed with you.

I would have gone through anything with you. I would never have left you behind. But I will not stay in the shadows until you deem me covenant to you. I am not a convenience. I will not be treated as one.

You're not happy. We both know this. Who's fault is that?

But hey, look on the bright side. It's not all bad. At least you don't have to be alone anymore. Now you can just be lonely.

You became everything you said you would never be.

Was it worth it?

Sincerely,

Your Humanity

Autumn's Last Breath

To those who dream of stranger worlds,
in sonder passing of lives unfurled.
To those who burden the curse of imagination,
who drink the poison their minds pour in oblivion.
a year enslaved in present time,
anxiously waits for autumn to die.

In the end it's all the same:
the ultimate debt we must pay.
So why do we long to live,
when we could simply run away?

The moon was but another light in the dark - soon to be diminished by
the clouds that stand guard.
But on this found hour,
the tristful autumn evening brought a broken breath,
for the moon did not show its light, in all the darkness that embraced
its death.

As autumn exhales, four seasons pass, the year after what we said would
be the last -
we will forget our time in grieve and remember what it was to be naïve.

When the world continues to speak while no one ever listens,
as we pass through the days without a thought or a given.
When we go back to
our summers, our springs
our music, our laughs,
Will we still remember the bitter taste of autumn's last breath?

Marshmallows and Missed Friends

“... and yeah, now I have to go find those vegan marshmallows. Where did you used to get them?”

“What?” I blink in confusion, descending from my cloud of fantasy.

“For Malloween,” Elise draws out slowly, like she’s talking to a child. I stick my tongue out at her.

“From Lucy’s,” I say automatically. “Aisle four, on the left usually.”

“Could you text that to me so I don’t forget?”

I roll my eyes but grab my phone and begin to type. “Wait... you guys are doing Malloween?”

“Yeah.” She looks at my face, quickly adding, “But it was Kiara who insisted.”

“Oh.” Malloween is my thing. Not to be possessive and take all the credit, but it really is. And they were doing it without me.

Two years ago on May 19th I was bored and had just come back home

from Lucy's with a bag of vegan marshmallows. Three weeks earlier my dad decided that the whole family would go on a vegetarian diet for the next few weeks. I didn't mind, but it was coming to the point where I needed comfort foods, so I scoured through the candy aisle. When I finally made it to my room after hours (really an hour and a half) of grocery shopping, I decided to dress up in order to properly taste test the marshmallows.

I opened my closet and went to the left half of the shelves. Despite having no real need for all of them, a good portion of my closet is filled with costumes, hence the name Costume Quarter. From Halloween, that one time I was in a school play and went all out with my villager #6 outfit, and impulsive online purchases, the costumes took up a good quarter of my whole closet.

Pulling on my concoction of an outfit of what I called "medieval pirate prince" I ripped open the fancy paper bag and inhaled (almost choking) on the sweet smell of marshmallow. I popped a marshmallow in my mouth and it actually tasted really good. Eating candy in a costume became an obvious reminder of the five months until Halloween. I began to wish that there would be a good excuse to run around in a costume on a random day in May, when I suddenly called Elise. We talked and decided to meet up at the park with all our other friends to enact the plan I had. I sent out a group text and told everyone to dress up in their costumes and bring candy.

Despite there being a ton more candy than just the vegan marshmallows, they were the true star. When we all arrived at the park, the first thing we did was sit in a circle and try them. From there, we played games, ate a lot of candy, and in the end just spent a lot of time together. We designated the day as Malloween, a day to dress up in costumes, eat candy and have fun.... basically Halloween but in May, for just the six of us.

“Yeah, we’re just going to do something small though. It won’t be as big as when you hosted it,” Elise reassures. “We didn’t know if you would want to come, and Kiara said she’d host it and kind of sent the official invitation to us on the group chat.”

“What group chat?” I ask. She holds out her phone. “Flying Fish Fans” with a series of fish emojis. My jaw drops. Other than two extra fish emojis, the group chat has the exact same name as the original one I created. I voice this out loud. “Oh, and other than that the other difference is that I’m not on it.”

She winces, “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I get it.” I really did, even though it hurt. After moving schools last year I had grown apart from the group. I only really spent time with Elise and texted Issac and Sasha once in a while.

“Did you want to come?”

“I mean yeah... but I don’t want to intrude or anything.”

“You wouldn’t be, we all really miss you.”

I miss everyone too. “Oh, but can you ask Kiara to invite me?”

“Yeah, of course....could you also bring the marshmallows?”

“Ha, sure.” I was going to see my friends again, it’s been a while.

“We’re going apricot picking this weekend. Wanna come?” asks Bea.

“Sorry I can’t, I have something this weekend,” I say apologetically. I already bought the marshmallows so there was no turning back, plus I wanted to go despite what the butterflies said in my stomach. Although, I really love apricots... It was a bit of a rocky start when I moved schools this year, but my new friends have been great, and I wish I could spend time with them.

“Aww,” she pouts as Marie sighs dramatically. Naveen traces a fake tear down his face.

“I know, I know. Bring some for me on Monday though?” I ask, giving my best attempt at puppy eyes.

“Ha, no way!” Marie snorts as Naveen says “Of course.”

“Ah, you’re here!” Sasha giggles as she races towards me in her fairy costume to give me a hug. I smile and wrap my arms around her.

Once she lets go, we walk over to the group where they’ve secured a picnic table in the shade. Evan, dressed up as a magician, is setting up hula hoops and Kiara is organizing the candy on the table. I see that she’s left a space in the centre, presumably for the marshmallows.

“Guess who!” I wave as I cover Issac’s eyes. There’s a flurry of excitement as everyone notices me.

“Woah, save that excitement for the real stars,” I laugh as I dramatically pull out the paper bag from my backpack. Everyone oohs and ahhs, playing along. I step around the table to set the marshmallows down.

“Thanks for coming, I had no clue how to do all of this.”

“Of course, this is basically my one great achievement. What’s your costume?”

Kiara did a little spin, showing off her tulle skirt. “Maybe a fairy without wings? I had to borrow stuff from my sister. What are you dressed up as?”

“Um, a goblin cobbler.” I never expected to be a main character in a fairy tale so here I was, dressed up as a shoe-making creature, in a park, in the middle of May.

As per ritual, we begin by sitting in a circle and eating the very precious vegan marshmallows. Elise, as always, is late, but comes right in time for the sweet treat. I feel a buzz from my phone and see that Bea has sent me a photo but I don’t open the message. Right now, I want to spend time with my friends...who are all talking about a new show I’ve never even heard of.

Half an hour passes and I still don’t know what the conversation is about. I’ve said maybe two sentences to Issac and played a few rounds of silent rock-paper-scissors with Elise, before I suggest playing a game like how we always used to do. No one hears me.

I sigh internally. It’s only been a year since I’ve moved schools. Has that much changed? I know they’ve had great adventures that I’ve missed out on (Instagram stories never lie), but really how long did it take for them to forget me? Not more than three months if I was being honest. Maybe it was my

fault that we hadn't kept in contact. But I did text them all for a while, I was the one who started all the conversations. I put my hand to my chest, rubbing away the lonely, achy, beating there.

My phone buzzes again, this time a message from Naveen. I put my phone away and try suggesting again that we play a game. They finally hear me and we all get up. After a halfhearted round of tag, we try having a hula hooping competition. Sasha is out immediately, followed by Evan. My hoop drops and soon so does Elises. Issac and Kiara keep going and Evan starts filming as we all cheer and laugh.

Issac is declared the winner and everyone has their phones out now. With such a beautiful day, pictures and selfies are a must. Sasha and Evan are the designated photographers while everyone takes turns posing for the cameras.

As they're busy, I check my messages. I open the photo Bea has sent me. It's the front sign to the apricot farm and in front posing are Marie and Naveen with empty baskets in their hands, grinning wide. I smile and open the message from Naveen. He's taken a picture of his basket now full of juicy, orange apricots with a text that they miss me. My smile becomes sad and I look up.

I miss my friends.

Freedom's First Handshake

A year can be a very long time. For her, the 52 weeks of 1946 are malleable, inconsistent, expanded by mundane moments slid sloppily between cracks of time, like futile white paper scraps in the Western Wall. Those moments – impatient rumbling of cars in traffic, crinkling grocery bags, endless stacks of dishes in the sink – are all signs of life in her new and strange world. It's made of white, suburban houses, tiny sticky hands, husbands with jobs in the city. The 52 weeks of 1946 are simultaneously short, elusive, each moment never lasting quite long enough.

Decision elongates her year. Death's shadow shortens it.

Braha Nika Kohn is her name when her eyes meet dry land – American land – on February 14, 1946. Her heart is melting with joy and clenched in fear. Braha means blessing – the Blessing that danced through Death's rain drops – large ovoid shapes, cupping the reflections of starved faces and large, yellow stars. She's dripping wet, coated in a thin layer of Death, but unfathomably, not drowned.

Nika steps off a boat, several souls draped over her tired arms. One is her mother; the second is her father; the third, her brother, the fourth, her friend, and the fifth, an unidentifiable soul with hundreds of once-known faces, superimposed upon each other's pained, disfigured expressions. Her legs shake as her feet meet freedom in the form of solid land. She smiles, and blissfully releases the dead weight from her grip. Her mother gives one last stern, playful smile. Life is beginning, she thinks. She's 26. Her eyes stare,

unblinking, sparkling in the refractions of the lustrous sea at the edge of freedom.

Her newfound life is a quiet, incendiary triumph in the face of Tragedy's cold eyes. Freedom greets her on city streets, in loud bars. Blessing and Freedom shake hands. Freedom teaches her what it is to dance, to sing, to look up at a sky of untethered blue. But Tragedy does not go quietly. He is relentless and unpredictable.

Braha Nika Kohn Fleissig is her name seven weeks later, on April 5th, 1946. Today is her wedding day, because when life has been merely survival since age 19, seven weeks of this year is an eternally long wait for happiness. Rings are exchanged, and papers are signed. The Blessing and her blessing's names, Nika and Alfred, are scrawled in permanent ink on Freedom's pages.

The darkness elongates, thins, and slips away, around a tunneled corner, as if Nika stands on the caboose of a speeding train.

In a sudden seven weeks, her life is a negative print of itself, an overexposed photograph. The familiar, ebony emptiness is filled by brilliant sunlight, snowy winters, a house in a town called "White Plains." Neither world feels real. Starvation and torture were a nightmare indeed. But she woke into a dream – a somnambulant shadow of her former life. Happiness, she thinks, is far less simple than it seems.

46 weeks of 1946 pass. She's still blinking, adjusting to the light, when a child enters her strange world. Nika now wishes she had four arms; while one hand clutches the unthinkable beautiful child, the other grabs onto death's black coattails, whipping around a corner.

She is stretched between two worlds. After tasting the sweetness of

life, tempestuous guilt swirls about her still-receding belly. The Blessing had let go of those souls – her souls, who had patiently sat with her in the dark, who had wrapped her in golden memories, whose love had shielded her from death's cold rain. On her first day of freedom, she had abandoned them. But they hadn't let go of her. Time is malleable. It stretches, contorts, and she returns to the memory of her old life just to keep it a bit longer, like a friend at a train station, waiting till the last moment to leave a comfortable bench. Nika can't wave goodbye, for who will be left to greet her at the end of the journey?

Her train, a blessed train, has followed the haphazard tracks of survival for so long. At 19, she watched her family's car bend around a different corner, saw their loving faces stained with ash. She wants to leave it behind – of course she does; the whole world wants to forget. But the darkness is her only home; bewilderment, its familiar smell. Familiarity is easily confused with comfort.

Now 51 weeks of the year are gone, and one remains. She must choose: survival or life, darkness or light? How can a person live in two worlds so different? One soul is not strong enough to bridge the gap between a world of dead bodies upon bodies, and another of dinner recipes, of grocery receipts, of soft, vanilla-scented infant cheeks.

Braha Nika plants her feet, grounding her body on the speeding train. She closes her eyes to try and recall the sparkle that filled them 51 weeks ago.

A shining, cerulean sea stretches beyond the back side of her eyelids. But the sea looks different now. Still beautiful, it is not unflawed. Perhaps there is room for her to carry her souls. She can let them rest, like folded clothes in a comfortable wooden drawer – safe, and quiet. Their distant, familiar faces smile, eyes full of such love; tears sprout from her own. Braha

Nika breathes, filling her tired chest with sweet, biting air, and stops, quietly pausing in a miniscule, infinite moment.

A cracked, burdened smile tickles the corners of her mouth.

Life dances in her eyes – a blended life, with darkness and light reaching across worlds, shaking each other's hands. Her heart fills with a buoyant feeling, too complex and indescribable for words. She turns away from the dark tunnel and steps off the train. Freedom stands on the platform, and greets her with a small, tender wave.

The 52nd week is here, and the Blessing has made her decision.

Spoken Word Poem – One Year After

It's the year after and what have we learned?
What have we gained from all this pain
How have we fought this sickness with a funny name
Where are we now?

It's the year after and we are inching closer and closer to disaster.
I remember my laughter,
When they announced that school was going to be pushed back,
My joy, my excitement, my pleasure, my lack,
Of concern.
For I did not know how ugly things would turn.

I felt unwelcome in the new normal.
A world that was unusual,
A world that is ruled by fear
“How are you?” the most asked question of the year.
How are you feeling? How is it going?
I try to smile from ear to ear, as I hold back tears
I am anxious.
I am tired.
I am sad, stressed, scared

The invisible killer still lingers in the air
Causing panic, division and worldwide despair,
We were not prepared

For the multiple waves that came and went.
We were not aware
The whole world would experience this event.

I wish I could pretend that I'm not
Scared of being alone
But also, of reconnecting
Scared of missing major milestones
But also, of attending
Scared of going broke
But also, of working.

Scared of isolation,
Scared of separation,
Scared of medication,
Scared that this is the beginning of the end.
Scared that March 2020 is the last time I'll see my friends
When will we hug again?

I yearn for better days,
I long to feel the sun's rays
How long do I need to wait?
When is the next chapter?
When will things get better?
When will it be safer?
I deserve an answer!
But no one knows,
Time moves faster and I continue to grow.

Days turn to night,
COVID is still in sight,

And we continue to fight.
See things in a positive light,
Even when the future seems blurred.

It's the year after and what have I learned?
What have I gained?
What have I earned?
I've learned that no moment is ever returned,
That there is a reason that things occur,
I've lost persons and gained lessons,
There is a blessing in every second.

So, I feel grateful for the beauty that has come from something so
hateful.
I feel thankful to have lived through times so unstable.
Yes, I'm still scared
But I'm also prepared,

There is no disaster that can cause me to fracture.
It's one year after, so what's another?
In this past year, we've come together,
We have to continue to be there for each other,

Face the tumultuous storm,
And push through this life that isn't the norm.
Our reality was transformed,
But we are strong.
We are tough.
We have grit.
And this is it.

This is the trial,
This is the test.
In order to thrive,
we must do our best.

We can either run from the experience of hardships
Or move forward in the face of adversity.
We can survive!
As long as we have hope.
I will survive,
Because I'll never lose hope.

The Scars We Bear

We galavant through life
With our heads held high
With a burning hope of all that is to come.
Never would we imagine that there would be a biting cold
Or a stabbing knife
Awaiting to strike at any moment
No hesitation and no regret.

Still we remain hopeful
We remain strong in the face of destruction
When all seems dark
We shine a light.
Although, after each attack
Pieces and shards of us slowly chip away
And fall where they are irretrievable
Never to be seen again
Also known as scars
They haunt us mercilessly.

We parade through life
As if we are invincible
As if we are untouchable and secure
But one small tragedy can destroy us
All of our own false promises
Can disappear in an instant
As we take what is given

And find some incomprehensible way to handle it.

It is not something that is taught
Or spoken of
Sometimes it is written down
The pain and agony that has been inflicted
Poured out as if it were bloodshed onto these blank pages
Onto the simplicity that we once thought life was
We unleash some of it to relieve the anguish
In order to finally breathe again
To partially liberate what has been imprisoned.

We walk through life
With this all on our shoulders
With no relief and with no mercy
We handle it in whatever way we can
Sometimes we do need help
Sometimes it is too much
But these are the scars we bear
No way to get rid of them
No way for them to heal
So they remain with and within us
Worn on the outside and in.
The scars we bear.

Valentina

I remember a hot summer evening, the fan sputtering while twenty-one sweaty girls thumped a grand allegro. Flying, you seized death's eye, and Rebecca's;

"There was only one person in this room who was dancing, and that was Valentina."

Jaws dropped. This was the teacher who glided through rows of pink tights, suffocating each girl she passed with a casual glance. Francesca smiled painfully- the class crown had such an obviously inferior owner again.

You sparkled until *révérence*. Even in the fading light, you stepped off the bus home glowing red hot as the sun was devoured by concrete.

The train we all ride is desperate to destroy you. I tumble backwards through time as you dangle from the last carriage. For you, Vale, my memories run like a spool of burgundy thread. I hammer the empty spindle with the tip of a pen until the ends explode, wishing for time to braid a rope and drag you back to life...

Only plastic fragments remain.

I took your wit and talent and light and laughter for granted, knowing I'd read about you one day, an up-and-coming Italian ballerina. We'd meet on my annual pilgrimage to London, ride a double-decker to Farringdon again as golden wool intertwined with the dusty glass, bathing each seat in warmth.

Instead; 'Death rates of children from meningitis vary from 3-20%.'

A statistic. Valentina Sanna, a number caged by a gridlocked spread-sheet. Roll of the die, they say. Luck of the draw. Only the card you picked was black.

A thousand worlds away-

The train trundles on. I stumble to the open End through each carriage, screaming your name. Clumps of my mascara run faster than I can while the wind wages war against my flyaways, but I stagger ahead. You won't go this way, not yet. Thrown from seat to seat in a twisted game of catch, each purple, swelling bruise of mine is worth five points. Finally, I clutch a ceiling strap, my knuckles white. And I see you! Wild eyes, bun greasy, sweaty palms weakening as you swing from the train edge. I inch through the last carriage.

Stone-cold London could never compare to your quaint little Italy. You counted down the minutes until your escape to a dance school nestled in winding streets and vibrant storefronts, framed by glittering water and stitched together by a red patchwork of rooftops. At fourteen, you learnt those minutes might be your last.

Game over?

"Never," you sob, your fingers edging closer to certain death.

"We can win," I cry. "Beginner's luck, remember?"

A fleeting stillness helps me heave you by your broken wrists to an empty seat. Your bodysuit is stained red, your tights scarred, your shoes unravelling. I hug you, inhaling the malted scent of Tesco's sushi.

"Why me?" you manage between bloody coughs.

The wind presses us against the cool glass as I shake my head, determined to never let you go.

I can't comfort you as I suppress the aching lump surfacing in my

throat. We need to run.

“Can you make it?”

You have to try. Glued to the carriage walls, I prop you up and we slide through each thundering compartment, battered by violent gusts. There are two of us this time, so in a couple short minutes we’re nearing my carriage. Squeezing your hand, my eyes widen as your scarred fingers reciprocate; your strength is returning. As we near the border, our glassy eyes meet and my heart soars.

“I missed you,” we both say. I snort at our perfect timing, slicing the rigid tension in a second. Before we know it we’re weak with laughter. One foot over the threshold...

NO! Your hand is wrenched from my loosening grip and you’re howling, scrabbling at the train floor as you’re dragged towards the End. My face crumples for a second, then I’m sprinting after your ragdoll body now thrown from wall to wall until you’re hanging by a single hand again. I race towards you, one second too late as your hand slips away and my tears fall on your upturned face now plummeting into a white, white nothingness while the train whistles away, sending an avalanche of broken tracks to bludgeon your lifeless body. Collapsing, I rock back and forth, breathing frantically through heaving sobs as my nails etch red railroads into my skin.

A year after and the burgundy thread is frayed, your face a little blurrier each time I revisit photos missed, laughs unrelished.

That day in class, you were marked for destruction, a time bomb slipped under the elastic of your ballet shoe. Now, silence.

Francesca cried

When you died in Italy.

Six

It was, it is, it will be April 2nd, 2021. Time and tense don't matter really, since this is a place where time does not exist. No time means all time, I thought-think-will-think. I went-go-will-go out for a walk in the neighbourhood. The sky was-is-will-be grey, as the clouds strove-strive-will-strive to squish all of the blue out of the planet.

"I'm not grey," the clouds said-say-will-say, "'Tis called cloudy-grey."

"Just because you say 'Tis' doesn't make you Shakespeare." I replied-reply-will-reply slowly to the sky.

The pedestrians looked-look-will-look at me strangely, as if they were-are-will-be looking at Godzilla chewing gummy-bears: Scary, weird, but not life threatening.

"I probably look like a harmless, innocent psychopath to those pedestrians." I said-say-will-say to a maple tree on the sidewalk.

A carpet of green leaves speckled with black tars barely hooked-hook-will-hook onto the desiccated branches, swaying with the wind. Is it a tree? I wondered-wonder-will-wonder. If a tree must have-have-have-must-have-have green leaves, then what should we use-use-use to refer to a tree with leaves that were-are-will-be not green?

"The Form of Tree has green leaves, but no physical tree has leaves that are absolutely green," the clouds laughed-laugh-will-laugh at me, and said-say-will-say, "Your philosophy teacher just talked about this tomorrow."

I don't-didn't-like Plato because his name sounds like potato. I love potatoes, and I hate anything that tries to copy or mimic them. That was-is-will-be why I burned-burn-will-burn all books about him in my parents' bookshelf. The clouds stopped-stop-will-stop talking this time. I won-win-will-always-win the debate. Haha!

I walked-walk-will-walk a step closer to the tree, and the tree also jumped-jump-will-jump a step closer to me. We kept-keep-will-keep walking towards each other, until a loud and annoying noise pierced-p-w-p into my ears. My head just hit-will-hit the trunk of the tree.

“bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonnerronntuonnnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohohoordenenthurnuk-----!!!”

I saw-see-will-see some white flash shooting down from the sky the moment before I hit-will-hit the tree...was-is-will--be it a tree? No, those clouds were-are-will-be wrong, as this thing in front of me was-is-will--be not a tree, but a trigger for flash and thunder. Since I could-can manipulate the environment so easily by hitting a tree, did-does-will-do this make me a God?

I didn't-don't know. I will---

“This is not an essay,” she said after a deep and long sigh.

?

“You can't just type me three letters 'six' and say it's an entry for a writing contest.”

Why not? For some reason, my English teacher is trying to prevent me from submitting an entry to the OutCite writing contest. What a confused logic she is using... ‘You just can't’? I don't understand.

“You are supposed to give me pages of writing relevant to the topic. If it asks you to write something about ‘the year after,’ write something about that.”

“This is about the year after,” I said, still not getting the point that she's trying to communicate, “see, I wrote ‘six’ on the paper.”

“So?”

“...6=2+0+2+2. Six represents 2022, which is next year. It also represents 1023, which was the year after Otto, Count of Savoy, was born. There are also many years with important events that this number represents, and these years are all very different from the year before them. Using one word, I can describe so many different years, each being ‘the year after.’” I took a

very deep breath, and continued my glorious speech, “I don’t understand what problem you have with it. It’s one of the greatest pieces of artwork in human history, I believe.”

The faint light from the window disappeared, leaving a clear and bright shadow on the floor.

I went-go-will-go back from the past to the timeless place. I opened-open-will-open my eyes under the trunk that I hit-will-hit, started-start-will-start walking along the sidewalk. The clouds went-go-will-go away, convinced that they were-are-will-be defeated and wrong. They were-are-will-be. As I walked-walk-will-walk for another brief moment, approximately 365 days and 6 hours, another tree appeared-appear-will-appear in my sight. Well, this one indeed looked-look-will-look like a tree, I thought-think-will-think. It had-has-will-have green leaves made of tissue papers, and a brown trunk of used car tanks.

I loved-love-will-love tissue papers. The soft feelings that they gave-give-will-give were-are-will-be the true sensations of heaven. Trees should all be converted into tissue papers, I thought-think-will-think.

A loud and monotonous noise blared-blare-will-blare out from a car. The sound was-is-will-be sharp and metallic, spinning around liked-like-will-like a bullet---

I was-is-will-be shot. A police car emerged-emerge-will-emerge from thin air. The noise gradually disappeared-disappear-will-disappear, turning into a conical copper inside of my body. Air condensed-condense-will-condense outside of the car, forming a man with a pistol.

“What’s that...?” I murmured-murmur-will-murmur like a piece of six.

“You’re not a piece of six,” the man said-say-will-say with a soft and comforting tone, “You are a criminal who cut down all the trees on earth for making tissues and paper towels. And by the way, my voice is not soft nor comforting, and I don’t know what makes you think that way.”

My consciousness started-start-will-start to fade as the beautiful

green tree started-start-will-start to spin around me. Lime, pear, crocodile, pine... Leaves disappeared-disappear-will-disappear and reappeared-reappear-will-reappear every second, giving one new colour each time.

Air is the arche. Anaximenes was-is-will-be right. If one thing was-is-will-be in common, it was-is-will-be to be found in all the trees; it was-is-will-be air. Some trees had-have-will-have thicker trunks, some had-have-will-have larger leaves, but they all liked-like-will-like to fight each other, as if the discolouration of their leaves were-are-will-be caused not by fungus but by each other. Some trees refused-refuse-will-refuse to use chitinase against fungi, just like how some humans did-do-will-do not wear facemasks. Some others loved-love-will-love to digest insects though. A bright wheel of light also spun-spin-will-spin with them, 365 times around me. 365 of 365 of 365...cycling endlessly.

The clouds went-go-will-go back again, as another sharp noise, totally different yet surprisingly familiar to before, broke-break-will-break into the pandemonium of silence.

And---

“husstenhasstencaffincoffintussemtoossemdamandamnacosaghcusagh-hobixhatouxpeswchbechoscashlcarcaract-----!!!”

I sat up in a white-sheeted bed. Everything in the room was white: the ceiling, the walls, the desks and the chairs. Surrounded by a subtle smell of antiseptic, I suspected that I was in a hospital. I tried to remember what happened: debating with my English teacher that morning, arrested the afternoon for hitting a tree with my head...then a police car came to send me to the station, but it crashed with a truck, and my consciousness then shut down.

“...A police officer has shot...” lethargically, I found a radio next to the bed, one with a grey top and green sides. The sound was fuzzy despite the clear azure sky. Next to the radio was a note with a vigorous calligraphy.

“Oh!” a woman with a brown blazer opened the door---my mother.

“It’s been a year now...!” she cried, surprised with joy. She said that I

was unconscious in the hospital for a year, and excitedly told me about all the events that happened during the year.

Familiar. I started to remember the dream that I had before I woke up: the one with clouds, trees, and everything. All the events in the “real” world also happened as abstractions in my dream. It was a dream of the year 2021, a gallery of human history, a map of the world, and a gate connecting illusions and reality. Douglas Adams said the answer to the universe is 42---I say it’s 6. $4+2=6$. Both necessary.

The hospital room was both a nutshell and the universe. I was bound in the small space for a year, seemingly unaware of the outside---yet I also knew it all through my dream.

What is a year? What is after? Is time real, or just illusion?

A year is neither a real object nor just an abstract measure. Before and after are of the same origin, but after indeed has its uniqueness. The difference between reality and illusion is vast, yet they are all one in nature. The way up is the way down is one and the same. Air is the arche; Fire is the arche. Some call it Dao.

“By the way, what did you do to your English teacher? She seems kind of strange since that day.”

“Well, I showed her this.”

I looked towards the window and pointed at it. It was white, but its frame was poorly painted. My mother turned her eyes towards it.

Silence.

Outside of the window was the sky. Clouds, thunder, and flashes were all present. It was-is-will-be there: it can become clouds, thunder, flash, air, fire, and even the year after.

It is the year after, but it is also much more than the year after. I call it six.

Love Alone Perseveres

Love. We learn of it from an early age. From stories of princes and princesses, from tales passed down from grandmother to grandchild; from a childhood crush; from an enduring first love.

Hinduism, my religion, is full of stories of love. Radha-Krishna, the sacred lovers, are the patron deities of lovers in love, and much of Northern India. Radha, a gopi, or cow herder whose beauty surpassed everyone else; Krishna, a mischievous boy whose flute playing swooned all around him, and who's valorous deeds made him renowned. One day, Krishna came upon the gopis, and was quickly enamored by Radha. Many swooning ballads of Sanskrit song and mischievous pranks passed as a courtship developed. Both were devoted to each other. Despite all that stood in their ways, there was still that bond, that devotion between the two. Philosophers have claimed Radha to be an allegory of humanity, and Krishna representing the Supreme Lord, always devoted, and searching for each other. I see it more humbly, more humanly. I see it as two lovers who loved each other with a burning passion still felt to this day.

'Stop looking at those photos of her. You'll go insane,'

'No... I just can't... I miss her so much...'

'This is New York, Vijay. We are no longer in Lahore. You need to forget the past and look towards the future. It's not every day us Indians have these opportunities,'

'But... but...'

'But what Vijay?'

'She was my sister...'

'Emphasis on the was Vijay,'

He rose his head and glared at his wife, Varsha. His glare was a mixture

of hatred and fury; tempered with an emptiness only created by mourning and months of sorrow.

‘I... I’ll bring you some tea...’

Vijay stared back at his desk, littered with books and schematics and half-burned cigarettes. On top of this mess was a photo album, with a photo of a girl, secured onto a cream coloured, gold embossed sheet.

The girl was beautiful, with dark shoulder length hair and piercing hazel eyes. The sari she was wearing was a deep purple with a golden trim; silk, Vijay remembered. The expensive sari covered her long, slender frame. In a delicate hand, in classic nashtaliq, was written,

Sapna Devi Bansal – 1945 – Vijay’s weds Varsha

Vijay could clearly recall that day. He was 25, just graduated from Cambridge with a PhD in mechanical engineering, and a taste of Western life. His grandmother, Gayatri Devi, had arranged his wedding to the daughter of a rich advocate who was one year his junior, Varsha Devi Garg. The Garg family sent over saris for each of Vijay’s six sisters. He hand-picked the purple one for Sapna. While staring at the neat handwriting, Varsha returned with tea.

‘I’m so sorry... what I said was so wrong...’

‘I know you didn’t mean it. You loved her as much as I did,’

‘Yes... I did. She was so innocent, so sweet,’

‘Yeah, she really was. Do you remember these photos?’

‘Of course. They’re from the day I met the love of my life,’ she said with a coy glance and blush.

‘Well, look here, at this photo,’

‘Aha, our house back in Lahore, not even house; palace! – Divya Mahal, the divine palace.’

‘So many memories there... before it became Pakistan.’

‘That partition really did a number on the subcontinent, didn’t it?’

‘Especially our family. Look here,’

Vijay showed Varsha the family tree he made, cutting out photos

and pasting them into an ornate image. The nine children of Madhav Kumar and Megha Devi. Prakash, Geeta, Vijay, Meena, Mahindra, Veena, Sapna, Poonam, and Asha. All nine of them so different, yet so alike. The family was a mixture of cultures, like India itself. All of them spoke Urdu, a mixture of Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, and Punjabi. However, they also spoke English and French, Hindi and Punjabi. The men wore suits and ties, and women wore fitted western dresses.

‘I love the family. I’m so glad my parents agreed to your grandmother’s offer of marriage,’

‘So am I. to be honest, I thought that my going off to Cambridge would be a deterrent for possible brides. I was too modern and rebellious,’

‘In other words, you would not be willing to bottle up your wife?’ she smirked.

‘Indeed. Oh my, remember that mess Mahindra created at the wedding?’

‘Of course. He was drunk, and with that tawiff, Nazuk. I didn’t see her, but I recall.’

They proceeded to talk about the prostitute and lover of Mahindra, Nazuk. In Urdu, it means delicate. her name a homage to Lahore’s Mughal past. Vijay recalled how Mahindra left home in the evenings after completing his law work for the University of Lahore, disappearing into the unknown.

‘Prakash and I had to track him one night; mother had been especially upset with Mahindra that night. Why are you always out? Why do you reek of tobacco? Why have you not... to which he retorted what ma? I’m a perfect student and support this family by doing odd jobs – there is nothing you can say, I’m going!’

‘I remember, when we were just married you told me this story,’

‘So, Prakash and I followed him, and we entered the old city, and followed him into a brothel! A brothel, of all places!’

‘Oh my... what a disgrace,’

‘That’s what we thought, so we stormed in, and lo and behold, he’s

teaching the prostitutes English! Furthermore, you could see he was in love with Nazuk – with her dusky complexion and slim yet curved figure...'

'What did her eyes look like? They're the window to the soul, you know,'

'They were this vivid brown, full of hurt but love...'

'That reminds me of Jaya Bhabhi... wait...'

'Yes... it appears you figured it out,'

'So, Nazuk is Jaya?'

'Yes – a scandal if it ever came out. We would be killed by Hindus for defiling our ranks with a lower caste woman; Muslims would kill us for marrying into the Islamic ranks. Thank God they live in Delhi, nothing will get to them there,'

'The entire family is so dispersed – we were happy then, a year ago. But you could feel the country tearing apart. Hindus and Muslims always toed a dangerous balance between love and war. Jaya Bhabhi and Mahindra shows we can love each other; 1947's partition shows we can't,'

'I know, it's awful – the 'diamond of the British Empire' looks like a broken shard of glass – it can shimmer, sure, but it shimmers with little of its former glory.'

'Yes, yes... Oh, what happened to that missing spot in the album?

'I have no idea. I don't know what belonged there...'

'Well, you better finish up your tea, we have to go to Idlewild airport to pick up Poonam, she'll be here in an hour.'

'Vijay looked to the flight confirmation on his desk:

August 25, 1948 – Delhi to London

- Departure 10:00 GMT – Arrival 22:00 GMT

August 26, 1948, London to New York

- Departure 10:00 GMT Arrival 18:00 GMT'

He drank his tea while brushing his wavy black hair and straightening his navy-blue tie which contrasted against a cream-coloured shirt.

'Navy, Poonam's favourite colour. Nice choice,'

‘We need to welcome her to New York! Try to instill a sense of normalcy... something she hasn’t had in a year,’

‘We can always move on, but you can’t forget what’s changed you. The sword always remembers the fire that made it.’

‘Well said. Anyway, let’s go!’

New York’s wide avenues and sprawling skyscrapers were diametrically opposed to Lahore’s cramped and littered streets. Back when Vijay and Varsha left, it was littered with corpses and flooded with blood. They arrived at the airport and waited near the international terminal. Thoughts of the last time he saw his little sister bombarded Vijay’s head. Poonam was one of his only siblings left.

‘Prakash, Geeta, Veena, Sapna, and father. All of them lost to that goddamned partition. Prakash and father beheaded by terrorists; the rest desecrated then slaughtered. Meena lives in Amritsar with mother; Asha lives with Mahindra and Jaya Bhabhi in Delhi. Poonam is coming to live with us. We’re all we have...’

‘I know Vijay... well, look at the bright-side – all of New York is in our hands. This can be a new start for us all,’

‘I guess so...’

‘VIJAY BHAIYYA!’

‘POONAM! How are you?! It’s been such a long time!’

‘I’m great! Wow, you’re much healthier than when I last saw you in Amritsar. New York has really helped you out! Varsha Bhabhi, how are you?’

‘I’m doing well Poonam, it’s been too long,’

‘I’m glad to be here! Look, I have this for you Vijay,’

Poonam passed Vijay a photograph – one he had never seen. The missing photo. The entire family together. It was taken days before their family was torn apart by partition.

‘A year after partition, so much has changed. Death, wars, and destruction. Only love perseveres Poonam.’

‘Agreed, only love perseveres.’

One Year

“Mr. Danvers, how are you doing today?” a man dressed in white and blue asked as he entered, dabbing his cigarette in the tin ashtray next to me. His face was familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

“They tell me your recovery is going well.”

“Yeah I- I think so,” I replied, my voice wavering.

“That’s good. And, your memory?”

He seemed to sense my uneasiness, adjusting in his seat and smothering his cigarette.

“That’s alright, it’s what I’m here to help with. Mr. Danvers, I would like to speak to you about the evening of your accident. What can you tell me about the evening of August 24th? Can you recall the details of that night?”

“I think so, um, it’s a little fuzzy.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be here to help you through it.”

I paused for a moment, gathering my thoughts before speaking.

“There was a party, it was, um, it was for graduation. My parents threw it. I’d had, I’d had a rough year—we all had.”

“Who’s we?” the man asked.

“My friends and I. They were there, I remember. Annie, Jack, god—those two were in love. They’d been seeing each other for a year. Well I guess nobody had really seen each other for a year, but you... you get it. And... and there was someone else. I can’t, I can’t remember...”

“Jane,” he said, checking my file. My mind suddenly filled with images of a girl’s blue eyes.

“Right, Jane. God, how could I forget?” I reminisced.

“It’s alright, continue.”

“Right, right, Jane. God, she was stunning. I was there for ten minutes before I saw her. She was wearing this red dress, and these thick soled tennis shoes. She liked the height heels gave her but hated how uncomfortable they were. She saw me and gave me this smile. It was the kind of smile that made you know everything was okay. That no matter how bad life seemed, somehow it was going to get better... I think I was in love with her.”

“What happened next?”

“We, uh, we talked. She was going off to med school. She wanted to be a doctor. She wanted to help people, figure out what their problem was and solve it.”

The man seemed to falter for a second, producing a second cigarette and lighting it. He took a long drag and encouraged me to continue.

“Someone offered me a drink I—I turned it down. I was leaving first

thing in the morning, and I was driving myself home that night.”

The man looked down at his file, then back up at me.

“You did drink that night.”

I froze, thinking for a second before the memory came back to me.

“Right, sorry. I figured I could have a few. Then I remember Jane came up and asked me to take her home.”

“Yes,” the man said, flipping one of his papers over to check.

“But I-I-I said no,” I stammered, the moment fuzzy in my head like there was static over it.

The man took another drag of his cigarette before looking me dead in the eyes. “Mr. Danvers, this test only works if you tell the truth.”

My breath caught, my hands shook. I pressed my eyes closed as a wave of pain went through my skull.

“Do you need some medication? I can ask them to bring it up,” he offered.

“No, I’m fine,” I half yelled, slamming my hand in frustration. “I said I’d take her. I remember now I brought her out to my car. I think Annie and Jack were with us. We started down the road and Jane asked me to slow down, so I put my foot on the brake a little.”

“You didn’t,” the doctor said, no longer needing his notes.

“I-uh, sorry I didn’t slow down I... I.” I could feel the pain filling my head again, agony pulsing behind my eye sockets. “We rounded a corner and there was nothing.”

“There was a car,” the man corrected.

“I swerved to avoid it.”

“You were too drunk.”

I felt a lightning bolt of anguish run down my forehead like it was being cracked open. My throat felt sore and dry. I reached for the plastic cup of water he had laid out for me on the aluminum tabletop, but he placed a hand on it to stop me.

“Finish,” he said.

My ears filled with pounding and grinding noises, the ringing I’d drowned out subconsciously becoming deafening. I could feel my throat tearing open, dry flesh being torn apart with every strain. My mind was filled with clouds, lights, shadows. The harder I pressed it to remember that evening-- that horrible, horrible evening--the thicker the smokescreen in my head grew.

“I... I don’t remember the rest,” I choked out in suffering.

There was quiet. He lifted his hand from the cup and I drained it into my mouth. The liquid was cold and sweet, feeling nearly like it repaired me as it passed through my throat. My breathing steadied, and the pain in my head subsided.

“Then allow me to finish,” he muttered. “You crashed into an oncoming vehicle at sixty miles an hour. The front of your car smashed through their chase, forcing the entire block into the driver and passengers’ seats. The driver was killed instantly, but his pregnant wife survived. By the time she was found, it was too late, and the baby was lost. Jack’s head slammed into the back of your seat, the impact of which caused serious brain damage, leaving him in a catatonic state. The airbags failed to deploy, and Annie was launched from your passenger seat through the front window, cracking her twenty first and twenty second vertebrae, causing paralysis of her lower body.”

I froze, nausea climbing through my stomach like a giant centipede, each of its hundred legs poking into my intestines as it climbed to my throat.

“Jane?” I croaked out.

“Jane sat in the back of the car with Annie’s seat crushing her ribs into her lungs for four hours as she cried out for help.” The man’s voice was choked with anger.

A cold hand gripped my heart as the clouds in my head faded. I was there, sitting in the car. My leg felt like someone had broken a thousand glass shards inside of it. I was confused, my mind scattered, but I had the wherewithal to drag myself out of the car.

“I-I-“ I stammered

“You ran,” He clarified, his eyes filled with loathing.

He extinguished his cigarette and rose from his seat. He made his way around the table and placed a painfully tight grip on my shoulder.

“You left my daughter to die in the back of that car, and not a single day has passed over the last year when I haven’t taken a deep morbid pleasure in waking you up to this hell each and every time. Happy anniversary, Michael. I’ll see you in the morning.”

The door clicked closed behind him, and for a moment, the room was silent.

Almost immediately I could feel my memory fading, mist and smoke obscuring my thoughts as the events of that night faded into a miasma of repression.

As my chair was brought back to my room, I could scarcely remember my name, the only thing clear to me being my own reflection mirrored back to me by the dark hospital window.

Walk Away

“Help!”

You close your eyes

Forest Fires

“Someone!”

The water reaches your chest

World War 3

“Please”

Protests

“I-”

Bryant Gone

“Help!”

Impeachment

“Someone”

“Please”

“I’m drown-”

You sink

The world shuts down

Wear masks

6 feet apart

Don't touch your face
Stay home
Stay safe

Your grandparents are in danger
Your parents are in danger
You are in danger

Confined to your home
Drinking frothed coffee and eating homemade banana bread
Playing board games with family and having conversations you never
had the time for
Through all the pain and hurt you persevere

Sit tight
Camera on
Pencil in hand
Stare at your screen
Pass those exams
And you wish someone would give you a break
A global pandemic and yet you carry on

And just when you think everything is getting better
Another black man dies and the world reacts
As they should, because enough is enough
And you see your friends posting black screens on their feeds and think
Is this what solidarity looks like?
No, you see, our solidarity comes from our actions and our beliefs
Not our Instagram feeds, this is not how you lead

And wait

Your phone rings and the headline reads
“The vaccine is on its way”
And you finally feel someone carrying you
Someone breathing life into your empty soul
You exhale and look at the water-- the water that made you sink
And it looks--
It looks almost as if it isn't capable of doing what it did to you

You stand and walk away
Away from the water
Away from 2020

The Hallway

Poem A

Peering down the hallway,
only met with darkness
I continue forward despite



I must be floating in space,
disconnected to the world below me
But even astronauts have starlight
& know how they'll return home

If the hallway led to a garden,
Could I pluck a flower?

Would its fresh aroma dance in my nose,
Or would it crumble to dust in my hands?

No beauty, no savouring, no love.



If the hallway led to a winter forest,
Could I go for a walk?
Would I hear snow crunching beneath my feet,
Or would I turn to see no footprints behind me?
No impact, no legacy, no meaning.

The empty echo of my strides maintain,
even with no destination in sight
As I've been in this hallway before,
but I *always* find a way out

Poem B

Peering down a hallway,
there's a glinting ray of light
Nature's symphony hums in the distance

Infinite darkness melts with the ease of butter,
the single hall now stemming like the roots of a tree
The cement in my lungs begins to crack,
Breathing is no longer a chore



The hallway leads to an early morning,
where the city groans like an alarm clock
Car horns are now proof of life,
Soft sheets against bare skin are proof of me
Gratitude for existence.

The hallway leads to a gathering of friends,
mistakes once considered glaciers we laugh at like icicles
Their company like screws and bolts,
securely fastened so I don't fall apart
To them I mean something.



I collect souvenirs for my next journey in the hallway,
which looms like the moon in the sky
When I inevitably find myself in the darkness again
I know I'll again find a way out

The Young Man and The Sea

The trees waddle with the horizon as the boat rides the swells. The icy breeze of the Pacific carves its way through the evergreen hillside and brushes my face.

Perched in front of the centre console, I notice the starboard side rod plunge its tip towards the water. I launch myself to extract the rod from the downrigger. With the rod in my grip, I plant the heel in my thigh.

“Grip and rip it!” Greg, my guide, exclaims. His grizzly beard moves with his lips: lips that had been chapped by the salty, frigid air.

Hook set. Game on.

My hands frantically grasp at the reel. I haul on the ten feet of shimmering carbon with the force of a Mack truck. Just as I gain momentum, I sense another pull. I release the reel. In a fury of mist the reel reverses. Water scatters off of it as the mechanism screams.

“Keep the rod tip up Matty!” calls out Greg.

“Seals over there,” exclaims Grandpa, pointing to the thick kelp bed not far from the boat.

Arching my back and bracing my knees on the hull, I catch a glimpse of the blubbery gray devils in the distance. The seals love to pick salmon off your line. The worst part is you can’t stay mad because they’re so adorable.

Determined to pull this fish in the boat, I wait for an opportunity to once again grip the reel.

The fish lets up for a minute. I pinch the small peg of the reel between my thumb and index finger. Leveraging the rod tip in the air, I reel furiously. The adrenaline rush has started to hit hard. I see no seals. I hear no noise. I feel no breeze. It's me and that fish.

For nearly a half hour the battle continues. I reel, he runs. I reel, he runs. My left bicep is begging for relief at this point. We continue the dance. Greg chucks herring in the opposite direction to distract the seals and keep the fight going. The disappointment we would both feel if, after all this, I hauled up nothing but a mangled pink head would be immense.

With my arms cramping and sweat on my brow, Greg readies the net. The end is finally in sight. As Greg dunks the net, the marvelous black and white scales flicker at the surface.

Greg knocks the fish out with a thud and slits the gills with his worn fillet knife. The relief doesn't set in until the latch shuts on the cooler.

"Nice fish Matty. Looks like a twenty five or thirty pounder," says Greg.

We return to the lodge and weigh in our catches. The needle slides around the clock-like face. Bouncing like a metronome, it finally settles. 25lbs. Not bad for a Chinook. I hoped for thirty.

A thirty pound plus fish is what the locals call a Tyee. This means chief in Haida. Catching one is considered a lifetime achievement. Nonetheless, the feat remains impressive, especially for a child only 13 years of age.

Days later, Grandpa and I stare back at the dock as the helicopter spools its rotors and lifts off. The lodge fades as we descend into the West Coast flora. I'll be back for the Tyee. One day.

26th of September

The year was 2014. It was the 26th of September. The time was 10:23 PM. The wind blew against a small home in the town of Fryazino, Moscow, on a freezing night. The moonlight glittered across the snow. Stanislav Petrov, former lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, sat in a chair with a bottle of wine in his hand. The rough noise of an antiquated television dug into the wood of the walls. He took a sip of his Sibirskoy as he closed his eyes and leaned back into his chair. The creak of the aged wood momentarily cut through the voice from the television.

“Now, some of y’all might not know, but there was actually a pretty big incident quite a

while back, you know... uh... you know, when Soviet Russia was still a thing. There was a nuclear—”

The television cut out for a moment as Petrov thought of the things he had done and the

things he had ordered. The world was suddenly still for Petrov. The wind stopped blowing and the wood stopped creaking, if only for a second. He let out a sigh and took another sip of his Sibirskoy, one of the few joys left in his life. As he got up with a grunt to turn off the television, The memories flooded back. Things he did not wish to remember.

The year was 1983. It was the 26th of September. The time was 10:23 AM. The wind blew against the jacket of Stanislav Petrov, lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, as he stepped out from his train and into the brisk air. Petrov took out a cigarette as he walked through the rough, stone-cobbled pathway. Every now and then, he could hear calls from boys in oversized clothes handing out Pravda newspapers, the perfect thing to read

if you needed to trick yourself into ignoring the Union slowly dying in front of your eyes, or if you needed yet another reminder of how evil the West was. His cigarette painted a streak of grey against the blindingly white view. It was a Cuban import brought in under the noses of bribed guardsmen.

He entered the command center for the system of protection created for the betterment of

the Union. The seeing eye, Oko. The greatest representation of Soviet superiority over the world: a wonder of surveillance technology that would protect the nation from assaults that may threaten her, created by the finest scientists and researchers the Soviets could muster. Or at least, that's what the Union always told Petrov. As long as he kept his family fed, Oko could be a capitalist god for all he cared.

"A good day to die, eh? Working hard, I see." Petrov greeted his colleague as he poured himself a cup of brown coffee, a pleasant drink that rejuvenated his weary body. A drink hard to get for the average citizen—but pulled string here and there was enough for a box or two. His colleague looked at the cup with wistful fatigue.

"Hardly a good day, Petrov, but death isn't something I would reject right now. My back

is going to be the death of me long before those idiotic Americans will."

Petrov chuckled as he went back to his papers, glancing over them quickly while finishing his drink. Today was going to be a good day.

The year was 1983. It was the 26th of September. The time was 1:52 PM. Today was not a good day, after all. Stanislav Petrov, lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, stared with his mouth gaped open at the disheveled courier now gasping for breath.

"The Eye has reported five missile launches from the west, sir. From the Americas." Upon the courier's words, the entire command center fell silent for a brief moment, then exploded into Russian speech, like a silent flash of

lightning before its roar strikes the world.

“There were no sightings from our scouts? No reports?” Petrov put his head in his hands,
trying to think.

“No, but there was direct confirmation from the eye that the missiles had launched, sir.”

There were somber murmurs among the uniformed personnel as indistinguishable voices carried throughout the command center. Petrov knew that they would have to retaliate. Each second reaching for the phone felt like another decade.

The year was 1984. It was the 26th of September. The time was 8:21 AM. Beady eyes stared at Stanislav Petrov, Lieutenant Colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, as a drop of sweat rolled down the side of his face, his expression anxious. He stood before a man of rank so high he wasn't sure if he was permitted to even breathe the same air. General Yury Votintsev, Commander of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, looked at him with burning eyes.

“Lieutenant Colonel Petrov, I understand you know the reason for this meeting.” Petrov

gulped in response to Yury's raspy voice. The general's medals clinked against each other on
his uniform.

“I've called you here today to discuss the consequences of the actions you took on this very day one year ago, Colonel. We are not here to discuss your innocence, this is simply a trial.”

The year was 1983. It was the 26th of September. The time was 2:03 PM. In a building in

Moscow, one man was frozen in time. This man had the power to end the world with one word. Stanislav Petrov, lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, put down the phone. He leaned back with his eyes closed

as uniformed men looked at him with nervous eyes.

“Sergeant Anatoli.” He called the name of an aged man, a good worker.

“Yes, sir?” The man’s voice quavered.

“Would you trust your fellow man here with your life?” Anatoli’s eyes flooded with confusion, unsure of the intent behind Petrov’s words.

“Say, for example, would you trust Dmitri over here to catch you if you were falling? Could you trust him to save you from imminent pain?”

Anatoli stuttered, “I-I, uh-”

“Well, hurry up, now. This is important!” Petrov snapped his fingers, the click reverberating through the air and cutting through the murmurs.

“I- yes, sir. I suppose I would.” Anatoli blinked with confusion. The man never did like talking in front of everyone.

Petrov heaved a sigh. He walked back to his desk as he gave what he hoped

would not be his last order.

“You heard Anatoli. I trust every man here feels the same. I will trust every single one of you right here, at this moment, and every single one of you will trust the work of our comrades.”

Petrov’s back strengthened. He stood taller as he continued, “There will be no retaliation, and there will be no missiles. I ask you to trust me when I say that no missiles will arrive. Everyone, back to your duties.”

As he sat back down, Petrov muttered to himself. “Let’s hope they truly can catch a falling man.”

The year was 1984. It was the 26th of September. The time was 8:31 AM. Today was going to be—hopefully—a good day. General Yuri Votintsev, Commander of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, chuckled as he motioned for Stanislav Petrov, lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, to sit. Petrov exhaled as he sat down. Yuri poured Petrov a cup of tea. He’d never really been a tea man. He accepted anyway, he felt it would be rude not to.

“You and I both understand that what happened then cannot leave this

room, for the sake of the Union's reputation." Yury's grim expression slowly curved into a sly smile as he poured his own cup.

"On paper, of course. Stopping that nuclear retaliation, I don't know what would have happened if you'd have let it go through. The Eye turned out to be quite the mess, eh?" He chuckled, gesturing towards Petrov with respect.

As Yury took a sip of his tea, Stanislav Petrov, former lieutenant Colonel of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, opened his eyes. The year was 2014. It was the 26th of September. The time was 11:01 PM. Petrov opened his eyes, the aged wooden ceiling stared down at him. Glancing right, Petrov gave a click of displeasure at the empty bottle of Sibirkovy beside him. Tonight would be a long night.

The wind blew across the town of Fryazino, Moscow, on a freezing night. The moonlight glittered across the snow. Beneath the snow and hazy smoke lay a cabin that was home to a man who enjoyed his coffee and cigarettes.

Deciding To Survive The Tidal Wave

Scars last. The pain disappears, the cut slowly fades, but something will always linger. A faint, white trace along your body, a map of all your mishaps and experiences laid across you like a warrior's paint before battle.

Scars heal, but never fully. Sometimes what's underneath heals itself in all the wrong ways, leaving a hurt that lingers no matter your carefulness. Sometimes what's directly underneath is fine, but traces of a memory you try to bury jumps right in front of your eyes anytime you look at the white lines. Something that could not be erased, would not be erased.

I've never been comfortable in the dark. Lying awake at night, staring up at the ceiling while my imagination spun the most terrifying thoughts I could think of. A distorted figure hovering right outside glass panelled doors, delightfully waiting for me to turn my back so it could chase me to my room. Even now, shadows morph themselves into figures with wide smiles and white eyes, tilting their heads in inspection of my small and weak body.

Eventually, I found a way to silence my thoughts and sleep through the night. It was simple: I would tell myself that if that evil figure was actually there, I would die right now. When I was still in fact breathing, a sense of calm would pass over my body.

But that small, little what if would still stick, no matter how hard I tried. It would quiet down, dwindling into a murmur beside my heartbeat, but it could never be erased.

I have always been too sensitive, too fearful of things that could never happen. Everyone made sure to tell me. My mind would drift like a sailor lost

at sea, the waves never ending and crashing over and over and over. Things I should have enjoyed slowly became terrifying, my heart racing as fast as the images that passed through my mind.

Around two summers ago, I went tubing for the first time since a surgery that tore my Achilles Tendon in three different spots. I have always adored tubing, but the second we started to move, I knew I wasn't going to enjoy myself. I hadn't realized the shocking amount of strength I had lost from being immobile for too long. Every turn I was holding on with all I could, my heart beating faster and faster from the fear that I would hurt another part of myself.

I fell a couple of times, the water feeling more unforgiving than soothing. For the few seconds it would take to register up from down, I could almost forget where I was, that all there was in my world was this never-ending, dark green abyss. The weight of the world wasn't aching against my body. With nothing else to compare myself against, I could pretend everything was normal. My head was quiet, calm. But then I would break the surface and gasp for the air that I couldn't breathe before plunging below, and everything would be right back to where it painfully belongs.

I haven't gone tubing since, and I doubt I ever will. Every time I think of it, I can feel an ache down to my bones, a haunting of the pain from that day.

Since that surgery, and my diagnosis, things I used to love have become a burden on my chest. There's a cavity inside of me that is no longer filled with things that were once my life.

Some things I'm glad I'm slowly losing. Some habits are better lost than kept in your heart. When I started to have difficulty doing things that should have been effortless, a part of me felt lacking, useless. As more things became increasingly difficult and I couldn't do anything about it, that feeling festered. I felt the need to show that my pain was real. I would push myself to an extreme, exercising until I was vomiting in a bathroom sink, working until I couldn't move. It was my way of screaming to everyone that I wasn't lying.

I don't necessarily blame any of the people who didn't believe me. But that quiet, unintentional pain healed itself into a section of scar tissue over my heart that made me believe I had to prove myself to everyone around me. And that feeling has lasted for over ten years, no matter how hard I try to rid myself of it.

As years have gone by that need to prove myself has slowly dwindled, like the last embers of a late night fire. I'm not going to try and tell myself that it will disappear completely, nothing that traumatizing ever could. It will stay a part of me like ashes of the embers, but I have hope that it will take less and less space, a thought that barely surfaces beneath the blue waters of my mind, calm and still.

I could go on and on about what I've lost, and I reopen closed wounds more often than I'd care to admit just to be sure I still bleed, the blood dripping like salt water from my eyes. But writing from the heart is the most terrifying thing a person could do. It strips you bare. And some wounds are too fresh, just barely scabbed over, to be reopened yet again. I know in my core they'll never heal properly, and will continue to be ripped and torn open either by my own doing or others. They will be cuts that always bleed, the scar tissue of my heart to match that around my Achilles Tendon. Those wounds are still too raw to discuss openly. My ribcage shakes from terror, unable to handle what's been thrown at my useless body. Even writing this now, I can feel my heart pounding against its cage, my eyes unable to focus on the page right in front of me.

Half the time, the world feels like it's too much, that I'm too breakable. There's so much constantly running through my head I feel like it'll burst from me like a tidal wave, but every time it just comes out empty. I want to scream my pain as loud as I can, I want to write it all down in a speeding blur so that it can leave my body, but every time the page comes out blank. Because no combination of words, nothing that I will ever write could ever express how this murky green abyss feels.

Scars heal, but they never fade.

I recently went skating with my dad on a small lake as the sky turned from blue to pink to midnight black. As we walked down to the ice, the water below an impossibly dark blue, I could feel my heart dully pounding against my chest with every step I took, replaying the last time I had gone skating, my freshly torn tendon being ripped over and over. The pain felt fresh and raw, but I urged myself forward. Standing on the lake, my breaths were shallow, all I could stare at was the thin sheet of ice holding the two of us above the water. I didn't think that I could move without collapsing.

Reluctantly, he brought me onto the ice, trailing slowly behind me as I attempted to skate through my raging heartbeat. The ice popped and cracked underneath us, making me swear that it was going to crumble and leave us to the icy depths of the water below, but it never did. I was slowly able to stand straighter, to glide more on each foot.

I fell three times, each time thinking of all the ways I was going to hurt myself, but every time the ice acted like a cushion. The cold from the ground would slowly make its way to my bones, but it didn't bite. My dad would help me get back up and start again. The final time I fell, I pulled myself up.

Scars always haunt you. But when I was skating with my dad, I didn't stop. I once read that being fearless doesn't mean the absence of fear, but doing the things you're afraid of nonetheless. And maybe that's what I've been forgetting, what I've forgotten for a while. Maybe I've been slowly reminding myself.

Scars never fade, but maybe you can slowly stop looking at them so often. Stop letting them define who you can be, what you can do. Maybe being terrified so easily means I live stronger, love harder.

And maybe the dark blue waters of my mind can bury the ashes of once scorching fires, soothe them until they become grains of sand. Still there, never erased, but changed until they are not what they once were. The thoughts and hurts and scars barely surfacing, a sheet of ice keeping them below forevermore.

I can do it.

The Michelin Man is Watching

We change our menu every day.
Somewhere in the world some habitat dies
as 20,000 litres of water trickle past thirsty throats
(although that will have to change,
sustainable is the new expensive)
to create a whole new menu a day,
on cotton fibre paper.
Tuesday's amuse bouche was pickled bermuda onions
soaked in sea brine.
If you were to read Tuesday's cotton fibre menu
you would see in fine gold paint
"Tastes like bad breath and a broken salt shaker."
Last year on a Tuesday
An arrogant man
sat in our dining room
and raved about the golden yukon potatoes,
the size of his thumb,
and cut to fan out like
greasy, unplayed accordions,
laying bare
on a barren plate,
thumb sized and yet
the only appropriate size.
He gave us a thumbs up.

He complimented our handmade candles,
and original art deco table set,
and the origami roses
pinned on the chests of tired teenagers,
shuffling from stomach to stomach,
reciting their own poetry
about the name of the cow
and the farmer who raised it
and its birth day and death day
and why they should eat away their own green paper just for the mere
pleasure of one nibble of its slow-cooked tongue.
By the end of his ranting,
after a kopi luwak,
a deconstructed lemon meringue,
and a complimentary mint
(as well as a much needed breath)
he left.
He left a star.
This year, I want two.

Transplanting a Life

She would have turned ten this year. Double digits.

It's been a year since she passed and not a day goes by that I don't hear her laughter echoing in my hollow heart. Everyone says there's nothing I could have done but I know that isn't true.

Our lives are so different now. Devon was a lawyer, and I was a doctor but now we've both devoted all our time to this cause. Organizing protests, pushing petitions— this has become our life. Our sole goal? To legalize government-regulated organ trade.

Devon and I are driving to our event. I look over at him and think about what we used to be like. About if we can ever go back to what we were. After she died, I was racked with unbearable guilt and any effort he made to comfort me always enraged me more. We could never seem to talk about anything else, and after a while, we stopped talking altogether. I like to think that after we accomplish our goal things will fall into place, but each day, I feel less and less sure.

I step up to the podium.

“Thank you all for being here with us today. Exactly one year ago, our daughter, Amisha, died in a hospital. Her kidneys failed, and we were unable to get a transplant in time. I know many of you here have family members on a waitlist, and I know how unbearable the waiting is. Many parents have asked us how we can continue to work after what happened, but I can only say the same thing that so many others have said before me: I would never wish our fate upon anyone else.”

I finish by talking about how far we have moved in our efforts and

remind everyone that the road to legalization will undoubtedly be long and filled with obstacles. Government work can take decades and a change like this will require a lot of push. Then, Devon comes and talks about our experience looking for a transplant. I can never do this part. It hurts too much.

That night, I sit down beside Devon on our couch. He's watching reruns of *The Brady Bunch*, Amisha's favourite. It feels strange watching without her; I half expect her to bound down the stairs unceremoniously and get mad at us for starting without her. I want to cry myself to sleep again, but I can't keep walking away from this boulder between us.

"I don't want to watch without her."

Devon glances my way. We have not said a word to each other since the event this morning.

"Do we have to do this right now?"

"Well, we have to do it sometime, don't we, Devon? I can't keep this to myself anymore!"

Devon gets up and walks across the room. He's getting angrier.

"That's not fair, Lia. It's not. You're the one who hasn't been saying anything, you can't pin this on me."

"What should I say when talking never gets me anywhere with you?"

"Look Lia, I don't know what to tell you. Sometimes I feel like you don't even acknowledge that I lost my daughter too. I'm always supposed to be strong for you? Well, I can't. Not anymore."

I look at Devon. His hair has started to grey, and he always seems worn out. Is this how he feels? Is this how I've made him feel? He leans on the armrest, defeated.

I'm tired of trying to make peace.

"Fine. Why don't you sit here and watch TV, and I'll go to bed, okay? Because I can't stay here anymore."

Upstairs, in the darkness, I wait for him to come to me, but all I can hear is the Brady children laughing and my uneven breath.

It's Sunday today.

I start my weekly one-hour journey to Zara's house earlier than usual so I can leave before Devon wakes up. We haven't spoken since last night, and I'm not sure where we stand.

Zara. The 52-year-old woman who was a receptionist at my clinic. She was filled with stories of her experience as a refugee and the most hard-working woman I had ever met.

When she needed a kidney transplant and our blood groups matched, I did not hesitate to donate. Little did I know that years later, my own daughter would need one and I would have no way to help her.

Zara and I kept in touch even after I had Amisha and worked less. When she found out I needed a kidney, she insisted I visit her every week. I was uncertain that I wanted to see her at first; I knew that if I hadn't donated my kidney earlier, Amisha would still be alive. Zara knew that too.

When Amisha died after years of remaining on the waitlist, after Devon and I had explored every option to save our little girl, after we thought we had made our peace with the fact, I had grown accustomed to meeting Zara. The idea of stopping the one constant in my life was unbearable.

I think Zara knew how much I would need her. She told me once that no one should ever regret their decision to do good for someone else. I keep telling myself she's right.

I stay at Zara's house until late that night. I tell her about Devon and the event and how nothing seems to be changing. People are dying around the world, going through the same things we did, and I can't do anything. She tells me to be patient, that all good things take time.

As I step out the door with tears drying on my cheek, she pulls me in close for a hug, and says, "don't push Devon away, Lia. You have suffered together, and you will only be able to come out of this if you work together. The sooner you realize that the duller the pain will get."

I walk in our front door and Devon looks up at me from the kitchen counter, sipping what I can only assume is peppermint tea. We had been prescribed some after her death, as if hot water could numb what we felt.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” I say, nodding at him.

“You were at Zara’s for a long time today. Is everything alright?”

I nod again, mulling over what she said. The words slip out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“She told me not to push you away.”

I look up at him carefully, watching for any involuntary reactions. There are none. It is moments like these that I am reminded Devon used to be a defence attorney.

When he does not respond, I continue. “I told her it wasn’t as simple as it sounded and that Amisha’s death has changed things between us.”

I stare into a face still void of emotion and give up. As I start to make my way up the stairs, he replies.

“I used to think you blamed me for what happened.”

“What do you mean?” I know what he means, but I ask anyway. I want him to say it.

“If I hadn’t screwed my life so much when I was younger, she would still be alive. Our blood groups matched, and if I didn’t...” His voice falters but I refuse to finish the sentence for him. I need him to say it.

“And if I didn’t drink, they would have accepted my kidney. I know that.”

His hands rest on the island, supporting his body weight. His eyes well up and his shoulders hunch over. He is right. I did blame him. Sometimes, when I go to kiss Amisha good night and find a cold bed in her place, I still do.

“I never thought much of drinking when I was younger. It was just something we did.” He looks me in the eye, “sometimes the most random

actions come back to haunt you.”

I know why he looked at me. Although we had never talked about it, he knew about Zara. He knew how to make me understand what he was going through.

Devon walks toward me cautiously. “I know things are different without her. I know they’re...harder. Sometimes I feel like there’s no point in doing everything we are. She’s gone. And nothing will change that.”

I stare at him and I know at that moment that I was wrong, that there was nothing that could be done to prevent her death. The decisions we had made in our past could not be undone.

“It isn’t our fault, Lia. We need to understand that to move forward. To do what needs to be done so other parents will have the option we did not.”

He wraps his arms around my waist, and I rest my cheek on his shoulder. We can never go back to how we were. I know that now. But maybe that’s not such a bad thing.

The Year After: Party Girl

Every time I'm calling, she say she gon' call me back,
I told her call me Rocky, she say she not gon' call me that
You say you come with a lot, well baby I want all of that
L'il mama a party girl,
She just wan' have fun too,
They say you ain't wifey type, but I don't care I want you
Two raindrops race down the windowpane. Sliding, slowing, stopping,
then starting up again. I watch them silently.

My mind kind of wanders, but not really; it's a little game I play sometimes. I focus really hard on one thing, like that's all there is in the world, and see if I can get myself to forget everything else. I focus extra hard today.

It's not until a sharp pain flashes on the back of my hand that I realise I was almost completely out. I've been scratching it. It's a bad habit I've picked up, one that now leaves an angry red rash in its wake.

Nursing my hand, I catch my phone flicker on and reach for it. It's more instinctual than anything though, because when I open it, I don't immediately check my messages. Instead I scroll through the bottomless notifications, simultaneously ignoring them, and searching for a specific one.

A dm from my manager catches my eye first. No message, just a winking emoji and a video attached. One of those new Instagram "reels". I click on it, starting in my seat when the volume comes on full blast.

"LOOK CYNTHIA, LOOK, WATCH US!",

"WHOOOOOOO!"

"JUST DO IT ALREADY!"

"PARTY, PARTY, PARTYYYYYYYY"

"F*CK 12222222"

“EFFF YOU RONAAAAAA”

“*drunken crying sounds*”

The video plays, a bunch of clips mashed together with some song playing abrasively overtop of it all. All clips of teenagers, screaming, hurling, crying, dancing, drinking, smoking. All videos of me.

The last clip is the kicker. Me, in a cropped “New York Rangers” jersey and biker shorts, performing a 30 second choreography. My best friend Emily is dancing too, in a matching jersey and ripped jeans. But she was behind me, and to the left a little.

No further than 5 feet.

At the very end, the screen fades to black with text in stark white. It reads ‘party girl’, the words flashing across the screen in time with the song lyrics.

I suddenly can’t breathe, a massive weight crushing my lungs. The open sky, rain drops and any guise of forgetting reality vanish as I’m transported to that night. The night we filmed ourselves with our jerseys cropped way too short, and pants way too tight. Emily had begged me not to post it, but the second she’d left, my desire for those ten seconds in the spotlight and spontaneity overcame me.

So, I posted that video. 3 million views, one night. It blew up. And so did the next, and the next, and then pretty soon things were moving faster than I could process them. Invites to parties, festivals, fashion shows, flooded in and I was in L.A. every other week. My house phone was ringing off the hook, and school was becoming lower and lower on our priority list. (I say “our” because as soon as my parents caught wind of the numbers I’d bring in just for dancing with an energy drink in my hand, good grades became an afterthought). Pretty soon, like everyone always says, with all the flying and sleeping over, and hotels, it just became easier to live out here.

So, I moved to Los Angeles. 16 years old, without my family, I moved to the city that makes or breaks everyone. Leaving all that I knew back in the suburbs of New York State. Leaving my best friend there.

And tonight, we're celebrating. Not me, of course. One of the girls in the house, Jess, is turning 19, so we're having an all-out bash; and honestly, by now, I've come to expect nothing less.

In a couple hours, I'll doll myself up. Burn and twist my hair into submission, scrub my skin raw, drench my body in perfume, and put on just enough. Then I'll smile and giggle about "body positivity" the whole night, while silently begging for no one to look at me. Begging for someone to turn the abhorrent music off. Begging for it all to just stop—

I take a calming breathe, then another, then another. Relax. Breathe. Smile.

It wasn't always like this, not at first. When I first moved to Los Angeles, everything was all bright lights and glamour; smiles were genuine. But at the end of the day, we're all chasing numbers, and those last a lot longer than friendships.

I pick up my phone, letting my eyes glaze over as I scroll through my replenished notifications, a weak attempt at distracting myself.

Again.

And right near the bottom I see a text that almost tears me up inside, yet would have crushed me even more to not have received.

Sent at exactly 9:00 pm last night, 12:00 am. EST. "hey, here's to officially becoming a celebrity".

Sent from Emily.

•

The music is so loud, I can feel it. More importantly, I can't feel anything else. But that could be in part due to the mix of Pink Whitney that feels like it's replaced the blood coursing through my veins. My body sways and jumps and bumps to the music, sweating and surrounded by too many people to count. I close my eyes and tip my head back, tossing back my drink with it.

PERFECTION. BLISS. EUPHORIA. Hahahaha, am I shouting in my own head? A giggle escapes me—out loud—which only serves to make

me laugh harder.

My ecstasy-fueled vibe is interrupted by half-drunken shrieks of a boy not fully done puberty, calling for everyone's attention.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY JESS! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ALL YOU MOTHERF*CKERS!!!!!!".

Bryce screams from the edge of the infinity pool, teetering on the 7th story of the modern mansion. The crowd roars back, something primal and approving. Crazy.

I scream with them.

"NO ONE CAN TOUCH US, WE'RE F*CKING CELEBRITIES!!!!"

We give another deafening roar, louder this time if that's even possible.

"WE'RE ON TOP OF THE F*CKING WORLD DDDDD!!!"

He jumps into his sea of disciples, their screams thunderous now. I grab the arm of the girl closest to me, raise our hands to the sky, releasing my own maddening shriek.

As the party returns to normal, I hear them cue up the next song. Someone I don't know refills my cup.

And I hear the lyrics of the song. The same ones that I danced to in a New York Rangers jersey in another life.

In the middle of the crowd, in the middle of the city, in the middle of the world, I look up at the stars. Music blares in my ears, alcohol surges through my body. And I think about how tomorrow, I'll wake up. And, alone, I'll watch the raindrops race down the window, against the big, grey sky.

And I'll wish that 365 days ago, I'd pressed delete.

Every time I'm calling, she say she gon' call me back,
I told her call me Rocky, she say she not gon' call me that
You say you come with a lot, well baby I want all of that
L'il mama a party girl,
She just wan' have fun too,

They say you ain't wifey type, but I don't care I want you

I'll Do It Next Year: My Thoughts on 2021

It's always comforting to remember that time flows linearly. No matter how viscous it may seem, we don't get stuck, even in the uncomfortable swampy bits. Time can be an inconvenience, sure, but at least it's consistent. It keeps moving forward, albeit unpredictably, bringing about new events. Although Heisenberg's uncertainty principle makes the future uncertain (I'm so freaking observant), we can still guess, for certain happenings are more likely than others. For example, in February 2022—a year after I write this—I will be eighteen years old. After all, I probably won't find the philosopher's stone in the next 365 days. I could, of course, be dead, but now we're getting a tad too morbid for the innocent high-school writing competition. Assuming I survive, then, I wonder what next year will look like. I hope there are balloons.

Even though death is probably not the theme that'll get me published, it's still an interesting consideration. If I compare two alternate universes, one of a mundane year and the other identical but for a tragic end, the incoming-death scenario makes my hobbies seem more significant. A happy ending excuses the doldrums because it guarantees another year. If nothing happens in 2021, it'll be okay, because I'll get to try again. Plus, there's also the next year, and the next decade, until I reach my life expectancy of 82 years. I'll lose my potential then, I think. An eighty-two-year-old death is no great loss. They'll say it was time to move on. It would seem greedy, after a full life, to demand more from time, but that's a later issue. Today I'm young. I have sixty-five years left. The deadline for accomplishment is still in the distance, and I'm a serial procrastinator. I'd prefer to spend another year living frivolously.

I don't mean to sound contemptuous of humanity—I'd spend 2021 curing cancer and saving babies from burning buildings if I could. I'm not a monster, but I'm also not a hero. I'm just a small human bean in a big bucket. Earlier this year, I tried that argument with my world issues teacher. When I complained of my insignificance, she replied that Greta Thunberg probably felt the same way years ago. Instead of procrastinating, though, she worked, and now she's significant. She's managed to wriggle her way out of the nasty bucket and sprout. We're the same age, but our next years will be very different. I wonder if she enjoys what she does. I certainly wouldn't, and that answer bothers me. Should I really neglect the weight of the world over personal preference? She probably hates it, too, but does it anyway. But, selfishly, I'm in no mood for heroics. It's not my job. Actually, I'd rather frolic in the shadows for a little while longer, if you don't mind.

Ninth-grade careers class taught us that career paths should be catered to personality type. My MBTI result was INTP—the all-knowing computer has discouraged me from the dental hygienist lifestyle. World Leader is probably also on the no-no list. Next year, when I'm off to university (pending any disasters), I'll begin my career. It's currently leaning towards the sciences, allowing me to comfort myself with fantasies of saving the world using math. Although I genuinely enjoy the topic, I wouldn't mind a different path. Even a horrible job is only a job; the day ends, and the night will be mine. Even now, I'm more than a student: I bike, draw, and read in my spare time. Hopefully next year will spare me some time to goof around. I'll admit that some projects can be fascinating, but they always lose their lustre when they become all-consuming. I wonder what Ms. Thunberg does when she's not being a hero. Does she have time to bike, and draw, and read? I'm afraid of being the tired worker who hates his job, his wife, and his life. Just thinking about the dreary possibility is miserable, so I'll feign nonchalance instead. Next year, I'll do whatever. There's no need to be serious just yet.

Follow your dreams, they tell me. When I was much smaller and more annoying, my favourite picture book was about a baboon who went to the

moon. This monkey tried so many things, like firing himself from an arrow and building a set of leaf-wings, to get to the moon. He didn't give up, and eventually found a working rocket. Even after he builds himself a home among the moon baboons, the moon isn't the end of his journey; the book ends with him wondering what life's like on Mars. While this is a cute message, it makes me feel inadequate. I have no great goal to guide me through 2021. I'm happy as I am. But nobody writes books about peaceful domesticity—if they did, nobody would read them. Struggle is interesting to our morbid minds. I prefer stories where the protagonist is unwillingly pushed through an adventure, like the hobbits in the *Lord of the Rings*. They're more relatable. The hobbits taught me that it is not dishonourable to be uninteresting. I can live in a hole, eat seven meals a day, and be happy. Whether or not that hole is on the moon is of no consequence. If the world needs me, it can knock.

In conclusion, I don't know. Next year will happen with or without my consent, so I might as well flow with it, even if it's a dead end. I'll be a passive observer. Hopefully, I'll have a clearer vision of the future then, but I've got loads of time. I'd rather daydream than have dreams. Goodbye.

A Year After the World Turned Gray

I'm going to be honest with you, I have no idea why I chose this topic. Maybe it's a form of catharsis for me, or maybe I'm doing this to make other people who have felt the same way feel less lonely in this mess we call our lives. Regardless of why I'm doing it, I want you all to know that you are not alone. Don't be like me and internalize your emotions, take the mask off (metaphorically of course, we're still in a pandemic) and talk to someone. I promise you there are people who love and support you.

Throughout my childhood, colour and sound played pivotal roles. As a heavy consumer of art and music, I began to associate certain colours and sounds with specific emotions. When I was a child, my world had consistently been bright and loud. The dazzling blue sky laid above me, the bright white snow hugged the dark green trees with the strong brown trunks, and the pavement I walked on seemed to glow. I heard the birds sing to each other every morning, pop music played everywhere I went, and all seemed right in the world. I never thought that I would see my world change for the worse, but as I got older, the trees lost their vibrance, the sky became dull, the birds became quiet, and the music stopped playing. My world had lost its colour and its sound: it had all turned gray.

Depression isn't a topic that has ever been easy to talk about, especially when it is about the experiences of young kids. It took me a long time to figure out what exactly was happening because I thought it was a part of the teenage experience. Ah yes, the teenage male experience, everyone knows how it goes. Our voices get deeper, we start to find interest in the members of the preferred sex, and we start thinking about killing ourselves, am I right guys? Guys? It's just me? Okay then. In all seriousness, I didn't understand how I was being affected. I was in denial at first; although I knew what I

wanted to do, I couldn't understand why. Was it the expectations of my parents and peers crushing me? Was it my insecurities regarding my appearance making me feel like I wasn't worth being around? It could have even been my devout (at the time) faith, making me feel like I wasn't a good enough Christian. I longed to find the answer, something concrete to point to and say, "Yes this is why I'm depressed." Once you find a problem, you can go about the process of trying to fix it. But in my case, and in the cases of a lot of others, there wasn't one problem that led to me feeling like this. So, instead of reaching out to a guidance counselor, or my parents, or even a friend, I internalized and tried to deal with it myself. If you know me at all, you shouldn't even be surprised that I would do this. For God's sake I have too much pride to cheat on a formative MCQ for Biology, what makes you think I would ask anyone to help me when I didn't even know what needed fixing? This was easily the worst decision I have ever made in my life. As I kept my mask on during the day, the world became more and more colourless. The hottest day in July and the bleakest day in December became indistinguishable to me. I was too stubborn to ask for help, and, by the time I realized I needed it, it was almost too late for me.

At the start of this topic, I told you all not internalize your feelings and to take your masks off. Nothing good ever comes from internalization; it just adds to all the pressure that is already being placed on you. Your mental health is like a balloon, and the external pressures are someone's hands squeezing it, while the internal pressure you give yourself is water simultaneously filling the balloon. If you don't untie the knot and open up yourself, one day you will burst, and you might not ever be the same. No matter how strong the external pressure can be, you won't ever break. I wish there was someone to tell me this at that time. As time went on, I allowed the balloon to fill up with water, as the outside world crushed me. I had nothing to help me through the hard times. The birds and singing had stopped completely, the sky had lost its colour – even the voices of people around me became nothing more than whispers as my mind plunged deeper into the dark. I was

stuck, and I saw no safe way out. Actually, there was one thing. If I weren't around anymore, then maybe the colour and noise would be wherever I ended up. So, at 15 years old, I decided I was going to do it. I was going to leave this gray world behind in hopes of finding the colour again.

The funny thing (by funny I mean “weird” funny not “ha-ha” funny obviously) about planning to exit stage left is there was a purpose given to my life. I had to devise a way to execute my plan without getting caught and without making a mess. I wracked my brain for weeks. Researched ways people have killed themselves and tried to find the least painful methods. I rooted around my house for a sharp object, then it was cleaning equipment, but finally, I found what I needed. Looking in my medicine cabinet, I found a container of pills belonging to my dad – they were for back pain. Suddenly the plan formed fully in my mind. I quickly placed it back in the cabinet in the position I found it to remain inconspicuous. The next time I was home alone, I knew it was my time to act. I rushed downstairs and saw the bottle. Freedom, colour and music I had lost seemed so close. All I had to do was swallow the pills and take a nap. Nobody would know for hours. But as I poured the pills into my hand and filled my glass of water, I couldn't make myself do it. My body wouldn't listen to my commands. I thought about what would happen after I went to sleep. My mother finding my body, the screams of my family, every person who saw me that week wondering if they were the reason I did it. I couldn't put them through that pain. So, begrudgingly, I poured the pills back into the bottle, placed it back in the cabinet, and when my mom came home 20 minutes later, I acted like nothing happened.

One year after the bottle, one year after the world turned gray, I began the process of questioning why I almost did what I did. I was once again trapped in the gray, with my guilty conscience tethering me there. I realized that I wasn't capable of finding the answers myself, so I went against every fiber of my being, and I opened up. I finally let that water out, and once I did, I never felt more relieved. It took me another year to muster up the courage to tell my parents, but as soon as I did, I was able to gain access to profession-

al help. I have made strides that I never thought would be possible, but I am nowhere close to where I want to be. The colour and the music of my past has slowly begun to make a reappearance. The sun shines a little brighter on some days, and the world sounds a lot clearer than it used to. This isn't some major comeback story. Some days the world feels just as bleak as it did when I was younger, but I have the resolve to push through and take my life one day at a time.

I think I finally understand why I chose this topic, aside from getting my thoughts onto a page. I want to make sure that all of you are loved, you are cared for, and you are valid. No matter what you're feeling, whether the world has turned gray or it is as colourful and noisy as you like, things will always get better. If you're not okay, then that means things aren't over yet – I swear on my life. Okay, on second thought, maybe swearing on my life isn't the most appropriate use of words at the moment. I am the weakest, most stubborn person I know, but if I can survive what I did, I know you can as well.

This Year's Winning entries

Grades 7 & 8

1. "A Fireman's Tale" *Raul Gare, MacLachlan College*
2. "The Heart of the Galaxy" *Bryony Chan, The Bishop Strachan School*
3. "Goodbye" *Patrick Bian, Country Day School*

Honourable Mention: "I've got you" *Emily Esperanzato, Albert College*

Grades 9 & 10

1. "The Year After" *Carol Chen, Hillfield Strathallan College*
2. "Valentina" *Sophie Farkas, Branksome Hall*
3. "Marshmallows and Missed Friends" *Lauren Chia, The York School*

Honourable Mention: "Nodus Tollens" *Madelyn Tuns, Crestwood Preparatory School*

Grades 11 & 12

1. "The Michelin Man is Watching" *Miki Simkins, Hillfield Strathallan College*
2. "A Year After the World Turned Gray" *Akintade Asalu, Villanova College*
3. "Six" *Charles Jian, Crestwood Preparatory College*

Honourable Mention: "The Year After: The Party Girl" *Simi Ogunsola, Appleby College*