

# Synesthesia



Carolina Day  
School

2023 Literary  
Magazine



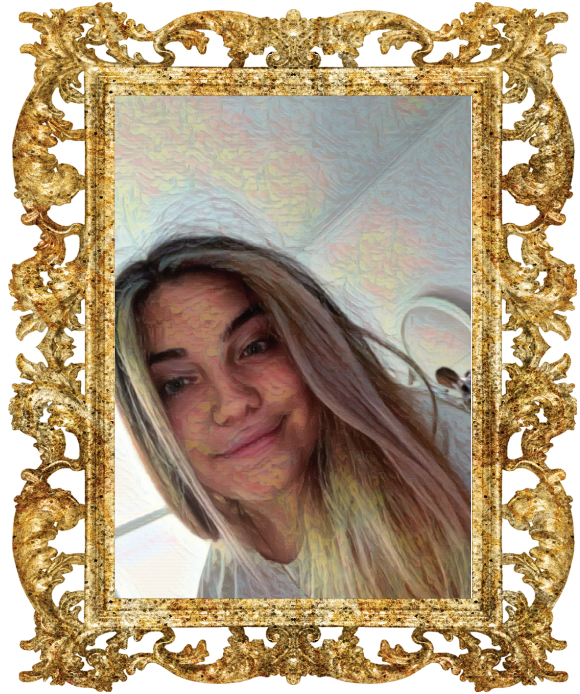
## EDITORS' NOTES

Hey there! We are Mac and Holly, the head editors, and we welcome you to our museum of a magazine—a gallery through paper, if you will. This year we chose to thematically embrace our club—the Society of Literature, Art, Music, and Media (SLAMM)—by creating personas.

Our members worked together to create the characters and their personalities based on each art form SLAMM comprises. (You will meet our characters later!)

We placed each piece with its respective persona. For instance, if a piece embodies a character listening to music throughout the piece—or if the imagery is particularly musical—it will be included in our music section.

This year's theme honors our talented contributors, and we have given our artists', authors', musicians', and dancers' pieces and performances the recognition they deserve. We hope you enjoy this magazine, which we have loved putting together!



Maclane Griffin



Holly Gill

Carolina Day School reveres artistic expression. This literary magazine celebrates students' creations and performances, and its title, *Synesthesia*, honors the sensory intersections of original imagery and the variety of art forms produced by members of such a small—yet talented—upper school. Our faculty and staff also share their artistic endeavors, especially through the Synesthesia project—a nine-month game of artistic telephone (one artistic creation inspiring the next) that our Theatre Director, David Dvorscak, has organized for fourteen years. Just as students share their artistic talents within this magazine, faculty members present their creations during a gala. In the spirit of synesthesia, we hope you savor the words, caress the music, inhale the dance, and groove to the visual art.



# SLAMM STAFF

The editors have put forth much effort and creativity—during lunches, free periods, and after school hours—compiling, formatting, and designing this magazine. Swhite served as our faculty advisor (Staff photos edited by GoArt).



Bella Leet



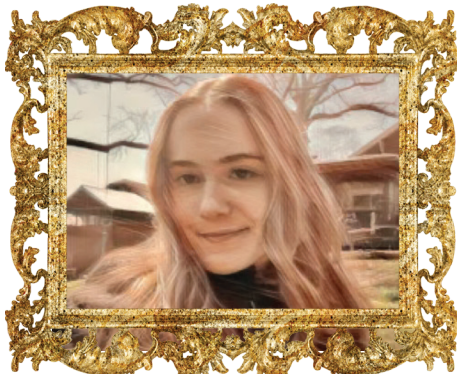
Susannah Owens



Avian Pertiller



Kylie Bacot



Taytum Taft



Grace D'Angelo



Citlalli Zavala



Bella Jazarevic



Elliot Rosse



Mia Irving



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# Meet Rita Book!

Hello there! My name is Rita Book and I can't wait to tell you a little about myself. I Love reading on rainy days with a candle burning by my bedside, transporting me into the worlds I read about in my books! I like to think that I have a sort of dark, academic style about me, but I'm really open to any type of decor and dress as long as it relates to reading. I tend to overthink, but I find comfort in reading to keep my mind from wandering and making me anxious. A pastime I like is to people-watch from my window: I love creating stories and worlds based on the people I see walking on the street, and I simultaneously draw inspiration from the books for the characters I create.

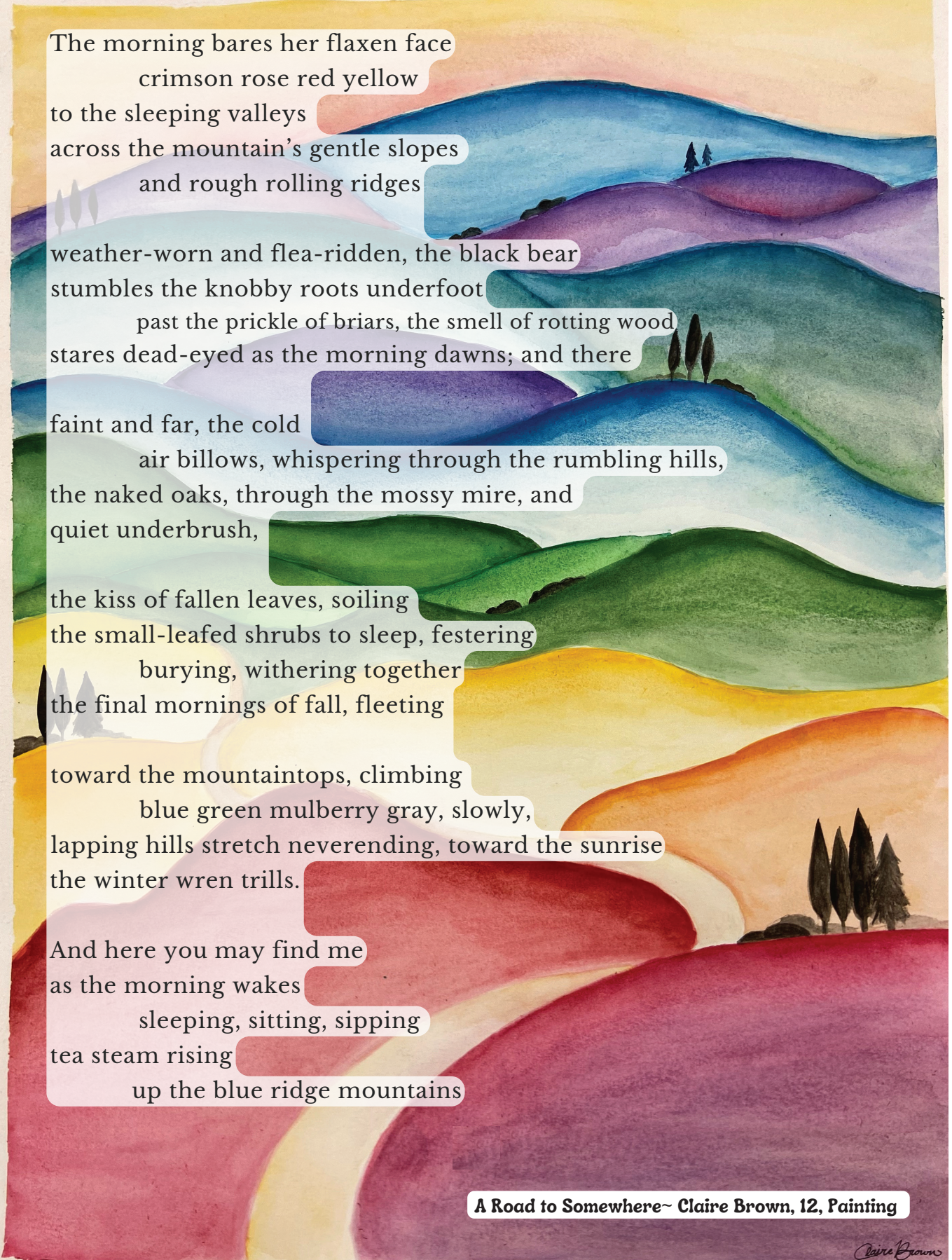
I joined the SLAMM Society after I was searching for a book to read in my college library. One book jumped out; it was gorgeous. The spine was a vibrant yellow with gold gems sprinkled throughout. I pulled the book off the shelf and read and read until I fell asleep! When I woke up, I was in a museum surrounded by book after book. I had entered the society and found my purpose. I hope you'll enjoy this journey of literature with me!





# To the Mountains

Louisa Koon, 11, Poetry



The morning bares her flaxen face  
crimson rose red yellow  
to the sleeping valleys  
across the mountain's gentle slopes  
and rough rolling ridges  
weather-worn and flea-ridden, the black bear  
stumbles the knobby roots underfoot  
past the prickle of briars, the smell of rotting wood  
stares dead-eyed as the morning dawns; and there  
faint and far, the cold  
air billows, whispering through the rumbling hills,  
the naked oaks, through the mossy mire, and  
quiet underbrush,  
the kiss of fallen leaves, soiling  
the small-leaved shrubs to sleep, festering  
burying, withering together  
the final mornings of fall, fleeting  
toward the mountaintops, climbing  
blue green mulberry gray, slowly,  
lapping hills stretch neverending, toward the sunrise  
the winter wren trills.  
And here you may find me  
as the morning wakes  
sleeping, sitting, sipping  
tea steam rising  
up the blue ridge mountains

A Road to Somewhere~ Claire Brown, 12, Painting

Claire Brown



# A Single Scene?

Ella Henegan, 11, Nonfiction

A single moment, a single motive, a single scene captured into a single storytelling, meaningful, moral, point-making, narrative. So many options for what your scene, story or point is, yet so specific as to what officially puts it into this category. This one dreaded category where every word must make the story move forward but not so fast as to where the point is lost, bobbing up and down between the places where the period ends and the next capital starts. But not so stagnant that the story is sowed in such a way that the reader is feeling sleepy and the whole meaning slips down the stream. That perfect sweet spot, a late summer breeze, the warming rays of the sun in the dead of winter, the porridge at just the right temperature. How is it that people can create these pieces—so thoughtful, intricate, and woven with what appears to be a golden thread? It stays entertaining at an appropriate length with meaning and glamor. Each word makes a punch, a prominent impact on the scene as a whole. Each metaphor and kenning, each punctuation mark, and careful word choice brings the point to the right place. Making sure it never marches past or gets stuck behind the finishing point. Oh how I wish I loved to write a vignette, the word itself bestowing such mystique to the world of literature. Yet here I sit, wishing to be done, be over with it already, hoping the point is made.



The Park~ Mackenzie Thies, 11, Photography



# Always Look Behind You

Elise Waters, 11, Fiction

You know you're being followed. The gloomy, deserted street is illuminated by the dim headlights of a battered, black pickup truck, slowly creeping behind you. Heels clicking rapidly on the cobblestone, you glance back. Do they know you know? Would that even make a difference? You're alone at night on a vacant street—there's nowhere to run. Your hand shakily reaches into your handbag, closing around the neck of a glass bottle of tea—the closest thing to a weapon you have. Your mind flashes to all the possible horrors that could happen—all because of one ill-fated walk. The next time anyone sees you could be from a tiny, grainy picture on the news. Just one in a sea of a million other tiny, grainy pictures of people who will never be found. The truck increases its pace, headlights cutting through the darkness like knives as it reaches you. Your heels click painfully faster, but it's not enough. This is the end. Eyes squeezed shut, you pray not to be kidnapped or killed or something even worse. As your eyes open, the truck passes by and slowly drives off into the night. You stare, engulfed in relief and disbelief. You were never being followed. You were just a woman, alone on the street at night.



What You Can't See~ Ansley Blackford, 10, Photography

# WANTED: SWIMMING OR FLOATING

Katie Ahern, 12, Nonfiction

I think most kids' parents required them to play a sport, I was actually required to play three, one sport for each season to avoid falling into the pit hole of middle school drug addiction. It seems my parents and their worries were a driving factor in keeping me busy.

It wasn't until 8th grade that my adolescent rebellion entered my bloodstream, which I strongly believed to be a rite of passage for any teenage girl, especially after your menstrual cycle tells you to rebel. I was finally an 8th grader, top of the middle school pyramid. Walking to class had officially turned into my runway; it felt good, so good that it had given me a whole new sense of self-confidence. I was a woman, a powerful woman, and what else do powerful women do than protest against their parents about whether or not they should have to play a school sport.

I didn't hate sports; I loved them, which I feel is necessary to add. If there wasn't competition, I wasn't interested, unless I was competing for the swim team. Pruning myself every afternoon only to peel the disgustingly tight, wet layer of nylon from my body was far from my idea of fun. My skin, soft and squishy from hours of soaking up pool water, would stick to the nearly see-through shower curtains in the UNCA women's locker room. So I did what any barely pubescent teenage girl would do: I hung two towels on either side of the curtain to cover the small openings that any unwanted eyes might peer into. I hoped to separate myself from the naked sexagenarian women who spent hours floating on the pool's surface for a water-to-body connection.

After my anxiety-ridden shower, I'd make my waddle of shame over to a corner in the locker room. Where I would shimmy my cotton, Lands' End leggings up my body while holding my towel up via my armpits to create a portable changing room. That was something else I believed to be a rite of passage: using your towel as a changing room—at least it was a swimmer's right of passage. It was a brutal, sticky, shameful passage.

Every practice ended the same, finally lugging all of my stuff out of the locker room, finding Brandon Diamond, no longer in a speedo, outside in the lobby waiting on our departure. My family was big on carpooling, but after Brandon had beat me in the iMessage 8 ball game for the 36th time, I was pretty over the whole carpool thing. Either we crammed into the back of my mom's mulch-blanketed car or we filed into the narrow middle row of the eldest Diamond's car, everyone's hair frozen from the journey from the gym doors to the car seat.

The scent of chlorine acted as an air freshener, the smell of chemicals burning everyone's nostril hairs. It was clear what I needed to do. My plan was set:

"Mom. Dad. I don't want to do swim team this year," I exclaimed, after returning from what I hoped would be my last practice.

"So what events are you going to be swimming on Saturday? First meet of the season, pretty exciting stuff, huh K," My dad chuckled, after giving me his I-am-your-father-and-you-listen-to-me stare.

"The usual, freestyle and relays." I replied bluntly, plopping on the couch, "Ya know I don't enjoy swimming, I like soccer and volleyball, but seeing the guys in my English class in tighter clothes than my own underwear isn't my thing," I murmured, sinking into my mom's pottery barn pillows.

"The season only just started. Don't be a quitter, even if you had the choice," my dad huffed, not looking up from his phone.

My mom added, "Katie, you are a great swimmer, and it keeps you active. We can discuss this again at a later date,"

"Yup, and as a reminder, my sweet girl, you live under our roof. Now, take the trash out."

It wasn't going to be as easy as I thought to convince my parents that I shouldn't have to play military mermaids every day. So I crafted another plan.

I needed a large, white piece of paper and a handful of colored markers. I sat down on my pink, shag carpet in my bedroom, scribbling and drawing my genius plan into reality. After all my blood, sweat and shit-colored palms, my masterpiece was posted. My fathers, handcrafted, very own, wanted poster, officially Scotch-taped to my bedroom door. The animated yet accurate depiction of his face greeted family, friends, and work consultants of his that walked past my cave. So did the big letters that spelled, "Wanted, dead or alive, for making his very own daughter do swim team." To the right of the villain was a list of why else he should be arrested if he were to step foot in my room: cauliflower nose, spiky hair, snores, hated happiness, ugly feet, routinely asks for said feet to be rubbed, uses 2 in 1 shampoo, his name is Mike, and has a bigger middle toe than his long toe. For the next month and a half, my dad said goodnight to me from my bedroom door frame.

In my efforts to persuade my parents, I would have weekly community meetings to discuss the trials and tribulations of my fruitful teenage life and the fruit fly in my life, swim team, during which I sat in the middle, surrounded by as many of my stuffed animals as I had the patience to lay out. I'd always make sure to leave the door open during meetings so my dad knew when he was being talked about. I'd raise my voice and change the subject from talking about things like what stuffed animal was getting an unfair amount of cuddle time to the severity of chlorine effects on dental hygiene every time I heard his footsteps. Months passed and, eventually, I got to celebrate.



“So how’s it feel to have a new personal best in your last meet of the season?” My dad tooted, patting me on the back.

My body flew forward a little more with every pat. “Feels fine, it’s a good way to end my swimming career,” I said, picking up my backpack and slipping on my Under Armour slides. “Can we stop at Starbucks on the way home?”



Pomona~ Sarah Wren Robinson 12, Digital

# Crumbling Castle

Wilson Vest, 11, Fiction

## Part One: Crumbling Castle

"Have you heard of the 'apple in a box theory?'"

"Nope."

"Well basically, it says that if you put an apple in a box where nothing could come in or out and leave it in there for eternity, the atomic particles would have to break apart and reconstruct in every single possible configuration an infinite amount of times. So that means you could open up the box eons later and find the skull of a six-month-old kangaroo mouse inside."

"Ok?"

"Do you think that will happen to us?"

"..."

"Does immortality make you impervious to the forces of entropy and eternity?"

"No idea, Simon."

"Do you think being immortal will mean experiencing the entirety of the universe's expansion and retraction back to another initial singularity and on to the start of the next universe? How will we exist as a single point? What will happen to our consciousnesses when everything converges to one single time and place? Will our lives end? They can't because that would contradict the meaning of immortality. Maybe just—our 'lives' as we know them will be—different." He picked up a rock from the cobblestone and skipped it across the grass like you would skip a rock across a river. It hit a tree across from us after a few skips, and he punched his arm through the air in defeat. "Maybe our lives could become the new life of the universe—because the universe always lives on in its cycle, even when the lives in it end—just like how we live on after our cells die. Maybe that's what 'god' is: the eternal life force of the universe. Do you think we will become 'god'?"

"Why did I have to get stuck with you?"

He smiled obnoxiously into the sky over the ocean and, after standing there for a moment, he turned around and walked back through the courtyard to the stairs leading to his chambers, waving me goodnight before closing the door behind him. It was only our first week staying there.

I remember nothing about how I got there or what my goal was in getting there; all I know is that we had to stay in the castle, and if we left, we would die. Simon was smart and brought his books with him to re-educate himself about the things he was passionate about, but apparently that bastard never told past-me that we would lose our memories—if I even knew him before this.



“So you really don’t remember anything about how or why we are here?”

“Nope,” Simon said with way too big a smile on his face. And after a moment, “It’s amazing, isn’t it? We don’t have to worry about anything. We are free of the concerns that all other living things are bound by.”

With no personal needs that had to be met for our survival, there was little reason to get into any altercation with each other, so we didn’t say much; we just watched the beauty of the ever-changing world take shape around us and waited. As time passed the years began to feel like they were passing at an ever-quickening pace.

“Well in relation to forever, any amount of time is infinitely small. As we move closer to infinity, the amount of time we have experienced is perceived as going by faster and faster,” Simon said after I brought up the notion to him. It made sense. I guess it would be nice not to have to wait so long feeling each year dragging on just as long as the last.

Lifetimes passed, trees grew and died, new trees grew in their place, birds shot across the sky like arrow volleys, wars started and ended, civilizations formed and were destroyed or just simmered out on their own, until one day, sitting with Simon, he said to me, “Okay. That’s all I wanted to see.” Then, he upped himself and walked toward the vine-covered rusted gate at the entrance of the courtyard.

“Wait, what are you doing?”

“Leaving,” he said nonchalantly, looking surprised I should even be asking him something like that.

“You know what will happen if you leave. What about all those things you were talking about—entropy, singularity, the apple, becoming god?”

“We weren’t meant to know about those things,” he said and stepped readily through the gateway.

## **Part Two: April, Come She Will**

Simon came to visit me in my lone citadel every once and a while, but by the time I could even come to terms with being by myself in the castle, Simon had married, had kids, lost his wife, remarried, and lost a child. Though he never forgot about me, every few months, even in his late decrepit state, he would stop by and tell me about his life. Early on, he talked about how he had met a woman “who is just as beautiful as the rise and fall of the sun in the sky as the seasons change<sup>2</sup>, and almost as sharp as you!” he said to me enthusiastically. “I met her in this magnificent town in the mountains—remember those mountains we would always watch where the trees would die and we’d see the snow fall and melt and the color reemerge from the grey of winter? There’s this town up there I found after looking for a place to settle.

I always loved those mountains, and I'm glad I thought of them because while I was looking for somewhere to spend the night, I smelled this smell, not unlike the fires we used to make together, and another aroma that filled the air with such an enticing sweetness that I couldn't help but seek for its source. I followed it to this lovely place called Paisley Park Inn, and inside that inn was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen! I rented a room from her. Her name is April. Do you think I should invite her out?"

Unable to repress the smile from spreading across my face I said, "If you like her that much I think it's obvious." We laughed, happy about the newfound love Simon had found. Then, we recounted more of our lives since we had parted, he excitedly told me about the dish he had ordered, which had given off that enticing smell called the "Midnight Special," and then he said his thanks and ran back off into the mountains full of life and excitement. How could he be so happy now that he had just guaranteed his own death? I didn't want to ask him. I was glad he was happy though, I was just-unable to understand.

More visits passed until one day, Simon returned to me without the same shimmer in his eye. I had never seen him like this in the entirety of our hundreds of years together.

"I don't know if April is going to make it."

I was too shocked to respond. All of the things he had said before this were all so grand, but now, this was just so sudden.

"She—" his voice was shaking and his breathing was shallow and uneven "a little girl was playing by the well—and—she fell in it. My wife heard her cries before anyone else and ran to the well—and pulled the girl out." His voice cracked "See, it turns out, this little girl had the plague—she died a couple of days after anyways, and—and now April has it."



Infection~ Winston Bauer-Wolf, 10, Pottery

“Shit.” I couldn’t think of anything to say that could console him. I couldn’t even imagine the extent of grief and dread he must have been feeling.

“What will the kids do without their mother?” he asked, tears streaming down his face. “What do I do? What do I do?”

After that, he didn’t visit for a while, and when he did, it was never with the same look in his eyes, his poor eyes, why did he leave?

April’s life passed and soon enough Simon’s and his next wife’s life did as well. I saw his children grow older than he had lived to see them, and I saw his children get married and die and their children get married and die. After some time his family tree had grown so much I could hardly keep track of it anymore; it was kind of beautiful—all of this life and joy and pain and death all started because Simon left the castle. Maybe that’s why he did it. Even though his life ended, so much more life, joy, and pain came from that sacrifice.

### **Part Three: That’s All Right**

Now that my major fixation for the past few thousand years had served its interest, it was time for me to come to terms with something that had been concerning me for a long time: the castle was on its last legs. To begin with, the tide had risen to almost the ground level, and at night, water would leak through the walls of the castle onto the bricks and dirt. Though I guess I could live in a submerged castle, that would be less optimal than not living in a submerged castle. Next, time and weather had greatly worn away on the structure of the citadel, and many of the walls could not be called that anymore. I spent countless cycles of seasons in the castle trying to find the answer to one question: “Why is this castle keeping me alive?” Eventually, I went into a room I dared not enter for a long time—Simon’s room. His room was very nice and tidy. His bed had fine sheets with a beautiful red quilt, and on the walls, were paintings that I assume he had brought with him because my room had nothing like them in it when I got there. On his bedside table, he had a fancy feather fountain pen and an inkwell filled with dried red ink. Next to these, framed, was a handwritten letter, from his mother. In the card, his mother had written to him about his youngest brother and how he had just excitedly brought home a new stray cat named “*Loverboy*” that she didn’t know how she would convince the kids to take care of rather than making her do all the “gross stuff.” She wrote about how she was sorry that he had to be all alone on his seventeenth birthday and that she hoped he would return home soon. And she wrote that she loved Simon “so so so so much” and that she was excited to hear all about his stories from the places he had supposedly gone. I guess that was how he knew what his name was—we never knew mine. There was no address or name associated with his mother on the card, however, so maybe that’s why he never expressed any desire to go back to meet her or see where she lived.



Also in the room, across from the bed, was Simon's desk, and on Simon's desk was a notebook filled with that red ink. He wrote poetry about his time in the castle and the things he saw in the world, leading me to tears for the second time after being in that room; however, toward the end of the book Simon had written about something else; "within the foundation of the castle," he had written "one of the load-bearing beams, contains a small brick only a couple cubic centimeters in size, which is wrapped in a special binding parchment that brings immortality to anyone who resides within the structure that the brick is a part of. If any of the characters on the parchment are tampered with, the power will escape the brick and be lost." Did Simon write this for me, knowing that I would find myself in this scenario? Had he always known the castle would fall apart and that only one of us could survive once that load-bearing pillar neared its collapse? Did he leave for me?

I was lucky to find that the brick and wrapping remained unscathed, even though the pillar was now partially exposed to the elements for who knows how long. I carefully removed the brick and, as per Simon's instructions, sealed the brick in a small obsidian box and then tied it around my neck as a pendant. Now, for the first time in my conscious experience, I was free from the shackle that was the physical boundary of the castle.

#### **Part Four: The Fool on the Hill**

I spent my next eternity living among different people and traveling the world. I got married, had children, got married again, had children again, but I never felt that love that Simon had talked about, and I only lived past my kids and their kids. I watched my family tree grow and end right in front of me, and then I just started another one. I tried all the activities I could try, mastered all the skills I could master, saw all the places I could see. But at some point, I decided I would stop trying, mastering, and seeing, and I found a tree on a hill where the Brown-Eyed River ran into a waterfall, and I sat, looked into the sunset, and I stopped.

...

By the time I returned to consciousness, the world had become a very different place; the sun streamed through the sky, looking more like a massive shining river of light than something that would be setting and rising. It still was. I had just been unconscious for so long that multiple years, relative to the amount of time I'd been alive, were now maybe a couple of seconds long to my conscience. Now, the earth had become a very lonely place. No grass crunched under my feet as I walked, and the river bed was now hardly discernable from the rest of the dry dirt and rocks that spanned the entirety of my vision. There was a new mountain range in the distance and, looking toward the ocean, it looked as though the water level had lowered by about a third.

I was lucky that my body was moving so slowly in comparison because my legs recovered from the rest literally in the blink of an eye, which was probably a few hundred revolutions on Earth's axis. I thought to myself that I should make my way back to where the castle was, I trudged through the barren wasteland, over the mountains, through the ocean, and, finally, back to shore. It was the shore where Simon and I used to sit together and watch over together from the citadel, though, of course, the castle no longer existed.

### **Part Five: Do You Realize?**

As I was on my journey, I noticed an even more concerning scene: the earth was growing even warmer, and red light shone from the stream of light in the sky, which almost spanned horizon to horizon across the sky. The light grew redder, and the stream larger, until one day, there was a flash, and the earth was consumed in a sea of fire and plasma, and I closed my eyes.

When I opened my eyes, I was surrounded by darkness. I grabbed the amulet around my neck that held the brick. I had felt it pulling me, up through the earth's atmosphere and into space, probably more to protect itself than to protect me. A couple of million kilometers to the left of me, there was a little glowing white sphere. It was the Sun; it had completed its life as a star and was now cooling down and taking a long-deserved rest. As I slowly spun aimlessly through space, I watched as stars moved through the black, and galaxies spiraled further into themselves. Galaxies collided and merged into black holes. Black holes fizzled out and other black holes collided to form even larger abysses. Soon enough, an immense loneliness filled the cosmos. The Sun had long since fizzled out and become a black dwarf star before evaporating into a gas of hydrogen and helium particles. For a while now, everything appeared to be drifting together in a way and most everything had been consumed by black holes. Eventually, one supermassive black hole had established itself as the massive center that everything in the universe would begin to steadily spiral into. This was the end. The black holes would consume everything and then consume each other until everything was one. This was the return to the singularity that Simon was talking about that first week that I met him.

For some reason, after not thinking about the earth for eternities, I was reminded of something, Simon left. Simon was happy, Simon was sad, after having the opportunity to become god, Simon denied it because he knew ...

Floating around my neck was the box that contained the brick, which had kept me from dying all this time. I took a breath of the non-existent air around me, and I grasped the box. I twisted, took the seal off, and I watched—as slowly, falling through the emptiness—a crisp, red apple drifted gracefully out of the box and into the cosmos.

# Ocean

Amaya Harris, 12, Nonfiction

When I was younger, I loved to swim. Any body of water, whether it be a lake, a pool, a river . . . I loved it. And my absolute favorite place to be was the beach, either swimming in the ocean, splashing in the water, or relaxing in the sand—building king-sized sandcastles. I loved the feeling of my hair flowing through the water as I floated through the waves, the warmth of the sun as it lingered on my skin, painting me a few shades darker than I was in the morning, and the small bits of sand that crept into the PB&Js we ate for lunch. When at the beach, I was free to do whatever I wanted. And I didn't care what I looked like.

Now that I'm older, I don't like to swim. I despise swimming. I hate the knots that tangle my hair, I hate the way the water washes out my hair dye, and I hate the way none of my bathing suits seem to fit me correctly. Little girls love the beach, but they grow out of it when they get older.



A Friendly Crab~ Mia Irving, 10, Water Color



# Sorry I Missed You

Riley Oswald, 12, Fiction

Nancy—Good morning! I was running late this morning, missed my bus, and had to take the station wagon. I hope you don't mind taking the bus to work today. Please don't forget to feed the dog when you get up. Have a good day. I love you—Richard

R—I couldn't find the dog food. I gave Hugo whatever you left on the counter from your breakfast. Thank you for leaving out tokens for my bus ride. I hope you had a good day. I'll bring back dinner from the restaurant that we can heat up when I get home. I love you too—N

N—Hope you slept well. I went to bed early last night, and I didn't hear you come home. Also—dogs cannot be fed grape jelly. I made an appointment for Hugo to go to the vet. Hopefully, he doesn't get sick. Please don't forget. I love you—R

R—How was your day? The doctor said that Hugo might throw up tonight because of the pills they gave him. I have to leave to go to work, so if he throws up, please clean it up. I love you—N

N—Hugo did throw up. I think I cleaned it all, but if you see anything I missed when you get home, could you clean it up? I left the vacuum out in the kitchen just in case. Try to use baking soda to mask the smell. I love you too—R

R—I hope you didn't like the rug in the back bedroom. Have a good day, I love you.—N

\* \* \*

N—Good morning! Don't forget to take out the trash. Please put the bins out on the curb by 9 am. I love you—R

R—I remembered the trash from the kitchen but forgot the trash can in the bathroom. We'll have to wait until next week. What should I do? I have the lunch shift tomorrow, so I'm leaving earlier tomorrow morning. I have to deal with it today. I love you too—N

N—Grab one of our old cardboard boxes, put the trash in there, and leave it outside. We can put it out on the curb next week. I should be home after your shift ends tomorrow, maybe we can grab dinner and go to the drive-in after? Check the paper to see if there's a movie you want to see. I love you—R

R—I hope it'll be okay to leave the box outside. I don't want any raccoons getting into it. Also, my boss rescheduled me for the dinner shift tomorrow, so I can't do dinner anymore. Maybe another night?—N

\* \* \*

N—I just saw your note now, so I'll go ahead and cancel the reservation. I'll try to stay up tonight so we can still spend some time together when you get home. I love you—R

R—Sorry I had to cancel on you for dinner. I tried to call you from work, but the damn line was tied up. I'll make it up to you soon. I was hoping you'd still be awake when I got home, but I forgot how late it was. I wish we'd stop missing each other like this.—N

\* \* \*

N—Good morning. I want you to know how hard I tried to stay awake. My long day at work just kicked my ass. I have a day off this Monday, so maybe we can work your schedule around so that I can finally see you when you're not asleep next to me? I love you—R

R—You were out like a light last night! But I could tell you needed the rest. I'll try to get the day off Monday, but holiday weekends always cause a huge rush at the restaurant. Maybe we can go on a small vacation for the long weekend? We haven't gone away since our honeymoon. We can celebrate our first anniversary a bit early. We can drop Hugo off at my mom's house, so we can get some alone time. It's been a while since we've spent some time together. I miss you.—N

N—I got off of work early today, and I was rushing home to try and catch you before you left, but I think I missed you by a hair. I just wanted to say hi. A vacation sounds great. Maybe to that one bed and breakfast a few towns over? I can call and book us a room. If I tell them it's our anniversary, maybe they can give us a discount. I think their number is still in my Filofax, but I might have to scan the phone book for it. I miss you too.—R

R—I got Monday off!! Go ahead and call to book us a room. Knowing you, you forgot to write it in your Filofax. What's the point of having one if you won't use it? I left the phonebook on the counter for you. The weekend cannot come soon enough! I miss when we were at home and awake at the same time. I began scanning the newspaper for job openings again... Never thought I'd want to work a 9—5, but it'd be worth it if I got to see you again. Also, I heard on the radio on my drive home that a rainstorm is supposed to hit us tomorrow. I left your umbrella out by the door. Don't forget it! I miss you.—N

\* \* \*

“R—I didn’t see you in bed last night. Did your boss have you work late last night? I thought I’d see you this morning, but you left before I woke up. Did you call the bed and breakfast yet? I want to make sure we get a room before they all book for the weekend. If it’s too much for you I can do it.—N”

\* \* \*

R—Another late night? I thought for sure you’d be home by now. I even left work a little early to try and see you before you went to bed, but I guess you’re not home yet. I hope you’re getting overtime pay for these extra hours. Can you please let me know next time if you’re going to be home late? Especially now, since we’re getting all this rain, I don’t want you staying out too late just to be safe. In case you lost it, here’s my work number again. Put it in your Filofax this time. Call me if you’ll be home late. I’m getting a little worried.—N

\* \* \*

R—Okay, it’s been two days, and I still haven’t heard from you. I called the office to ask if you came in today, but they thought you were at home sick. Where are you? I’m calling the station when I get back from work tonight to see if they know anything. Hopefully, you’ll come home soon. I miss you—N

\* \* \*

Richard, I didn’t want to call the station because I didn’t want to think that you were really missing. But I didn’t want to go one more day without knowing where you were. I didn’t want the police to pick up and tell me that they’d received multiple calls about missing spouses. I didn’t want them to say that they believed it was all linked. I didn’t want them to call me later and say they found a bus overturned on the backroads. I didn’t want them to say that they couldn’t find any survivors. I wish you ran late that day. You would’ve taken the car and I would have been forced to take the bus. Then maybe we’d be getting ready to go out of town today. We’d be able to celebrate our first anniversary. I wouldn’t have to try to explain to Hugo why you weren’t coming home. He wouldn’t understand me anyways. I wouldn’t have to call my mom and tell her why I’m not going out of town anymore. I wouldn’t have to accept the box of your things handed over to me by the police.



“I wouldn’t be crying over an umbrella and bus tokens. I wouldn’t be slipping your ring on and off my fingers, trying to remind myself how it felt against my skin when you held my hand. I wouldn’t be thumbing through your Filofax, wondering where all your phone numbers are and why the only number you had was our house phone. It wasn’t even labeled correctly. You just wrote my name next to it. Like it was the only number that mattered. Like I was the only person that mattered. Damn it, Richard. It’s been a week since you left, and your Filofax is still annoying me. I miss you, and I love you—Nancy.”



Escape~ Claire Brown , 12, Graphite



# Soup of the Day

Asher McKinney-Ring, 12, Fiction



Spring Kitchen~ Mia Irving, 10, Mixed Media

Elle twirled around the small kitchen, the air filled with the smell of herbs and the sound of punk rock from the stereo. She stirred a large, simmering pot, adding a pinch of salt and a fistful of basil. Her fluid movements came to a jagged halt when she stepped directly into the pool of blood that seeped across the floor. Her bruised eye twitched at the sensation. Scowling at her now sticky sock, she peeled it from her foot and tossed it in the trash. She'd made a mess, and on the nice hardwood floor too. Elle hummed along to the music; her fingers traced the knife block before settling on a newly sharpened butcher's knife. She turned pointedly to the bloody and mutilated man whimpering through a gag in the corner of the kitchen.

"I know this has been a lot more fun for me than it has been for you. I really am sorry." She wasn't. Not one bit. "But don't worry! This next part will be much worse." The man on the floor struggled against the ropes, feet slipping in the blood that surrounded him. It was satisfying to see the cause of all her pain, all her scars, and bruises, so helpless. She approached the man, feet sticking to the warm blood. "Just try to be brave for me and . . . don't scream." He screamed.

Elle had met John three years ago at their friend's wedding. She was the maid of honor, he was the best man. It all happened rather quickly much to the chagrin of his parents. Within a month they were living together and within six, they were having a wedding of their own. Their relationship was fiery, passionate. To Elle, it had seemed like a dream. Those feelings soon diminished as John became . . . darker. He drank more. He got mad and bitterly jealous. He wanted to know where she was and who she was with at all times. Her life became a game of walking on shattered glass every moment of every day. But she had been young, naive, and in love. Trapping herself in a cage of her own creation.

When the physical abuse began, she felt there was nothing she could do. With her parents gone, she had gone to her in-laws for help. They were useless. When she tried to tell them about everything John was putting her through, they just couldn't bear to believe that their dear son was anything more than a perfect, mild-mannered, stick-up-the-ass angel.

No one talked about the abuse after that. They just went on pretending like they were the sickeningly loving family everyone thought they were. But that's over now. Four years of hell and she was sick of it.

The last straw was two days ago. He had come home—drunk again—and snapped at her after she confronted him with suspicions of him cheating. It ended with her nose broken and a growing feeling of overwhelming anger that boiled over into a cool and collected rage. She knew what she had to do. She wouldn't let this happen to anyone else. She cleaned up her bloodied face in the bathroom and began to write out a grocery list: Vegetable broth, onions, carrots, bleach, rubber gloves, rope, and a bottle of very expensive wine.

The screaming finally stopped as the life drained from poor John's eyes. His grating voice pleading with her and whatever God he supposedly believed in had been driving her insane. It was satisfying, honestly. Cathartic even. Watching as he took his pitiful last few breaths. As she removed John's right arm from his limp body and began to chop it up, she felt calm. Happy for what felt like the first time in years. She dropped the pieces of him into the pot with a satisfying plop, covering it with a lid to let simmer before turning to the butchered mess she had made. She checked her watch. Two hours until John's parents got there for dinner. She was making great time. Snapping on a fresh pair of rubber gloves, Elle got to work scrubbing down the kitchen, placing what was left of John's chopped-up body in various trash bags, walking them one by one to the backyard, and throwing them unceremoniously into the bonfire pit before she lit it. She watched as the flames grew, and grew, her face burning hot. A sneer crept across her face as she watched her hard work burn and melt before her. By the time she heard a car rolling up the gravel driveway, the fire had dwindled to a small blaze.

Elle took a breath before opening the front door to reveal a short, older woman with tightly pinned hair, and a squat man who looked like he hadn't smiled in decades.

"Darlene! Benny! So glad you could make it."

"It's Benjamin." Benjamin handed Elle his coat.

"Ah, right, Benjamin."

"Well, this is just the cutest little place you've got here!" said Darlene, "we're just ecstatic you invited us for dinner—it's been ages since we've sat down just the three of us. Perfect timing with John away on that important business trip of his."



“I couldn’t agree more. Are y’all hungry?”

“Absolutely ravenous, isn’t that right, Benjamin?” Darlene turned to the old man who grunted in response.

“Good, I hope you like soup!” Elle lead the couple to the dining room, quickly wiping away a splatter of blood she had missed. She brought the pot in from the kitchen and ladled servings into their waiting bowls.

“Oh, this is just perfect for this fall weather we’ve been having. Don’t you think, Benjamin?”

“Hmph.” He stirred his soup, not listening. Elle suppressed a scowl.

“Shall we say grace?” Darlene extended her hands. “Elle, would you like to do the honors?”

“I’d love to, Darlene.” She closed her eyes “Dear Lord, thank you for the loving family around me, all of the blessings in our lives, and this delicious meal before us. Amen”

“Amen. That was beautiful Elle, thank you.” Darlene raised a spoonful of soup to her mouth. Elle watched apprehensively. “Oh, dear, this is delicious! What’d you put in this?”

“Oh, you know, just whatever I could find in the kitchen.”

“Well it’s just divine, don’t you think, Benjamin?” said Darlene.

“Yeah, it’s good, mhm.”

Elle watched as they ate, stirring her soup, but never taking a bite. Her eyes gleamed. As her mother had always said, revenge is a dish best served as soup.

# Love Is Blind

Amaya Harris, 12, Ficton

The island of Sarepdon eased into view on the horizon. It was a small islet with nothing but a single lair made out of stone resting on its bank, a stain of green and gray in the center of an otherwise peaceful cerulean sea. Thea couldn't see anything, but as her sailboat approached the land, she could feel the presence of death and despair in the salty air. With each gust of wind, the souls of slain men screamed out to her, begging her to leave and never return. She ignored their pleas and continued on her campaign. The island she was approaching was the home of the monster she had spent her whole life training to kill: Medusa.

Thea was born in a small civilization near Medusa's island without her sense of sight. Blindness would be a disadvantage for most, but it made Thea a valuable asset to the men of her village. Ever since she was strong enough to hold a dagger, she trained rigorously in order to defeat the monster who had ruthlessly turned so many of their men into statues. Now, after over a decade of training, she was confident that she could kill the serpent-haired monster.

Thea's boat came to a halt on the coast of the island. She stepped out of her sailboat and ventured onto the sand, looking for the monster she was meant to slay. As she walked toward the opening of the stone building, a serpent cocked its head out over a dilapidated stone wall, trying to identify the intruder. It was confused; a woman hadn't visited this island in decades. Usually it's just men looking to kill the once-beautiful beast.

"Why are you here?" asked Medusa, rising from behind the wall.

Thea paused. It's different to encounter a monster in real life after only hearing about them from stories. Even though she couldn't see Medusa, she could feel an aura of power radiating off of her body. "I'm here to kill you," answered Thea, excited to finally be able to say the lines she'd rehearsed for so many years. "The same way you killed so many innocent men."

"Innocent? You think those men were innocent?" scoffed Medusa.

This comment caught Thea off guard; it was completely different from any of the variations in dialogue she had practiced when she was alone, fantasizing about the day she'd fulfill her life's purpose. Instead of immediately attacking her, Medusa didn't seem phased at all by Thea's threat. Instead, her words oozed confidence, and that interested Thea. She thought for a second about what she'd respond with. Leaves rustled in the distance, anticipating her response to the outburst. "Even if they weren't innocent, they didn't deserve to die," said Thea. She then began to unsheath her sword, but before she could take it all the way out, a serpent sprang from Medusa's head and wrapped its scaly body around the hilt of the sword, unarming Thea.

Instead of killing her instantly like she did to most of her guests, Medusa gave Thea the benefit of the doubt. “Do you know my story?” asked Medusa. “Do you know why I am the way that I am?”

Thea searched her mind for the answer to the question. Although she’d spent her whole life training to fight Medusa and hearing stories about how sinister she was, she’d never once been told about *how* she became the monster that she is. “No, do you care to tell me?” Thea said, entertaining Medusa’s question.

“My body was taken, used and defiled by the god Poseidon. The goddess Athena, out of jealousy, turned me into this monster. She cursed me. She made me ugly and undesirable so I’d never be able to love.” Medusa paused. “And those men weren’t innocent. They came here to use me, or kill me.”

Thea was taken aback. Was everything she had been told about Medusa a lie? Medusa must’ve been the victim, a pawn in a rivalry between the gods. But she couldn’t blindly believe her enemy.

“How do I know you’re not lying?” asked Thea.

“Look at me. Look where I live. I live all by myself on this island, trying to shield the world from my evil abilities, yet they still come here to try to kill me,” said Medusa.

Thea thought about this for a second. “I’m . . . so sorry” was all Thea could muster. She couldn’t kill Medusa after this revelation, and if she didn’t kill Medusa, she would never be allowed back into the civilization that raised her. In a moment, her life’s purpose went from clear to jumbled. So many years were wasted training to fight this monster just for her to realize the monster was the victim.

It was at this moment that she realized she had been used in a similar way to Medusa. Why did her village even bother raising a blinded female child? In other societies she would’ve been cast away because of her disability. Those men only raised her for their own selfish needs, grooming her into the perfect killing machine, neglecting any wishes she may have had for herself.

“I’ll stay here with you. I’ll protect you,” decided Thea.

Medusa thought about this proposition for a moment. In a matter of minutes, Medusa and Thea had gone from enemies to acquaintances. “You understand that I’m a monster, right? I don’t need a human to protect me,” said Medusa. But then she thought about how lonely she was. Maybe it’s okay to let the world in sometimes, and she didn’t have to fear turning Thea into stone.

“Fine then, if I can’t move in right away, I’ll visit every day until you’re comfortable,” argued Thea. “See you tomorrow.” and with that, she left back to her home. When she arrived, she boasted about slaying Medusa and Thea celebrated with her town. After the celebration, she prepared her clothes and food for the journey back to Medusa’s island.



For the following months, Thea stuck to her promise and visited Medusa every day on her island. Instead of protecting her, though, she brought her freshly cooked meals and performed epic poems for her.

One day, as the two enjoyed a picnic with each other under the sun, Medusa said, “I think I’ll take you up on your offer. You can stay here and protect me.”

Thea smiled. “You know, it’s not every day that a blind warrior falls in love with a serpent-haired monster.”



Wandering Across Media~ Veronica Martinez, 10, Mixed Media



# THE BELT

Louisa Koon, II, Fiction

Lying crumpled on the floor, Sarah stared at the lifeless body of her lover. Her sweet, beloved Goliath. Her perfectly perfect Goliath. Her dead Goliath.

Goliath was a man who would never love Sarah back. At least, not in the way she had longed for him to. Sarah had always been an overinvestor. An emotional wreck of a woman. She would let her emotions swarm her and wrap themselves around her limbs. She watched, bewildered, as they solidified into the bodies of serpents, constricting her slowly. She always clapped an encore when they swallowed her whole. She knew from the start he would never love her back. Never could love her back. But she couldn't help herself. Now, she lay coiled on the floor, her body mimicking the shape of Goliath's waist. She was empty without him.

They met two months ago. Every Tuesday night, the local cinema would air reruns of *21 Jump Street*. Every Tuesday night, Goliath would buy a single ticket and two large bags of extra-buttered popcorn, just for himself. Sarah, who always worked the night shifts at the ticket booth, found it a little odd and quite impressive that a man as little as Goliath could stomach two large bags of extra-buttered popcorn. Everyone knows the butter isn't real. But Goliath never seemed to mind, and his pleasant disposition covered the scent of fake butter that had begun following him like a lost dog. Every Tuesday night, always around 7:34, Sarah would pay off her coworker to finish the shift without her. She would stash her red ticket-taker apron behind the popcorn machine and sneak into the theater behind Goliath.

Sitting two rows back and three seats over, Sarah stole glimpses of Goliath's perfect, porcelain face whenever it was illuminated by the glare of the big screen. She hated *21 Jump Street*. She hated Doug Penhall. She hated Tom Hanson even more. She hated his high cheekbones and sleek, shiny hair. Most of all, she hated that Goliath never looked at her the way he looked at Tom.

Sarah never understood Goliath's fascination with Tom—sure, he was good-looking, but that was it. Tom wasn't real; he was fiction. He would never love Goliath back. Never could love him back. Not in the way Sarah promised the stars she would. Sarah often stared at the belt around Goliath's waist—a perfectly polished, black, leather belt with a large silver buckle.



The Fall~ Manning Stewart, 11, Photograph

As much as she hated it because it reminded her of Tom, specifically his hair, she couldn't help but admire it. She grew jealous of the belt, wishing it was her, wishing that she would be the one to wrap her arms around his waist and hold him tight.

She hardly noticed it at first—the dry, leathery sensation on her hands. Perhaps it was the weather? She'd have to remember to get more lotion next time she was at the store. Not giving it another minute of thought, Sarah oiled her hands in a thick layer of Vaseline and took one last look in the mirror before heading out the door to her Tuesday night shift. By 6:58, the prickling, parchment-like feel to her skin had spread up her arms, and she could feel it crawling up toward her ankles from the tips of her toes. Her arms itched. When no one was looking, Sarah crept over to the popcorn machine and stuck her hands under the tap. She let the warm, buttery grease pour over her hands and seep into the creases of her palms. She gathered handfuls and rubbed it all over her body. She buttered up her bosom and lathered down her legs. She wasn't satisfied until her skin was stained yellow, and her feet stood in a puddle of margarine. But her relief was short-lived. Sarah watched in horror as her butter-soaked limbs dried in seconds, replacing her once smooth skin with a shriveled, time-worn leather and a protruding stench of grease. She opened her mouth to scream, and the air was sucked from her lungs. Her shoulders squared, and her body narrowed, her leather skin pulled tautly.



Losing her footing, she fell. A belt with a large metal buckle hit the floor, splashing melted butter onto the base of the popcorn machine. There she lay, coiled on the ground, unable to move. She looked up helplessly to two eyes staring back down at her. It was Goliath.

Goliath's hand reached down, picking Sarah up by the waist. The smell of fake butter—smelling precariously and distinctly different from that with which she had just oiled her skin—welcomed her warmly as he wiped off the belt and buckled her around his waist. Sarah hugged him tight. She never wanted to let go, let him go. They were finally together. Arms wrapped around his waist; she could hear his heart.

Lup-Dup. Lup-Dup.

She hugged him a notch tighter. Sarah kept hugging Goliath as he dropped to the ground. It tickled as his fingers clawed at her leather skin. It made her laugh. She cinched him tighter.

Lup-Dup. Lup-Dup. Lup-Dup.

Sarah giggled as his fingers fumbled with her metal buckle. Her heart began to race, mimicking the speed of Goliath's.

Lup-Dup. Lup-Dup. Lup-Dup. Lup-Dup. Lup-Dup.

But then it stopped. Startled, Sarah lost her grip on Goliath's waist. His fingers grasped the belt's frame, ripping her off his body and flinging her onto the ground beside him. His last effort for freedom came a moment too late. Goliath was dead.

# FAMILIAR STRANGERS

Delanie Ross, 12, Fiction

She sits in the corner of the coffee shop. The sidewalk is scattered with leaves of crisp shades of autumn orange. The cafe is unusually crowded for three o'clock on a Wednesday—dishes clattering behind the counter, a mother trying to comfort her screaming child, a businessman standing impatiently beside the counter—holding a briefcase close to his chest, a woman quarreling with the server over her stale dessert.

The girl ignores all of this, her face turned to her book, her mind deep in thought. But one thing draws her attention. A man's laugh. She can't see him yet. She raises the book higher so only her eyes stare above it. The man enters the cafe holding a woman's hand and carrying a small child on his shoulders. His dark hair is longer than she remembered, his glasses that always sat slightly askew have been replaced with contacts, the same freckle by his mouth that moves when he smiles. He's laughing at the son who puts on a ball cap that slides down over his eyes. A laugh she could recognize anywhere.

This man is now a stranger. She recalls that last New Year's Day, three years ago, as she picked up scattered Polaroids of him kissing another girl. They swept up the glitter from the party and knew it was over—the way he had loved her for five years, when they danced in the rain and sang at the top of their lungs at two in the morning. So many moments turned into memories. His laughter calls her back to the present. She stays in her corner and watches what could have been hers. But for now, she sits right where he left her.







# Spooky Season

Erin Weaver, 12, Nonfiction

Leaves the deep color of a sunset slowly drift and carpet the ground in front of me, the cool breeze a reminder of the summer's end. I inhale as each breath fills my lungs with a sweetness so strong I can almost taste the contentment I feel every year around this time. I round a corner and make my way up the steep sidewalk that continues toward my former middle school, old brick houses lining the way, evoking memories of my friends and me giggling and trekking up the hill.

Now, not familiar with being unaccompanied, my hands carry nothing but the stack of flashcards. I am determined to memorize each psychology term and definition my mouth mutters. The washed jeans that hang on my waist no longer slip down since my pockets are, for once, without the weight of my phone. This observation is interrupted by the distracting sound of quick, determined footsteps gaining on me—a jogger, I assume.



Blue Moves~ Isabella Stafford, 10, Pottery

I am unbothered, since runners usually fill the quiet streets of Waynesville, until these steps slow down. A deep, raspy voice breaks through the silence of the crisp cool air. The stranger repeatedly clears his throat, trying to get my attention.

Refusing to turn around and give him the satisfaction of my acknowledgment, I quicken my pace and pin my shoulders back, unwilling to show any signs of fear. My eyes scan the street that stretches beside me, hoping for just one car to pass so we are not left alone on the bare street, but this hope vanishes.

I can feel his presence, his breath matching mine. My anxiety races as I finally reach the brick building of my church and turn sharply to divert the man.

He finally passes me with an assertive, “Bye now” and a chilling smile that seeps into every inch of my shivering body.

# BEAR HOLLAR

Riley Oswald, 12, Nonfiction

I'm frigid and claustrophobic. I feel them pinching me at every angle. It's toe-curling and numbing. I'm wearing ski boots while clobbering down the outdoor stairs of an Airbnb at 7 am, my arms sticking straight out for balance, and because I'm wearing so many layers of long underwear, they won't stay by my side. I look and feel like the little brother from *A Christmas Story*. And I hate *A Christmas Story*. I'm one missed step away from turtling on my back and sliding down the stairs. It's about 30 degrees, and I can already feel the cold, fake snow that's being blown from snowmaking towers, crystalize on my face. My nose is running, and I can't keep my eyes open from the snow melting down my face. This is North Carolina skiing.

One would think that living in North Carolina, a state that rests beautifully below the Mason-Dixon Line, would mean outdoor activities like biking, neighborhood strolling, and residential gardening, but my dad is from New England. More specifically, he's from a family that devoted his and his siblings' childhood to all winter sports like ice skating, hockey, and most importantly, skiing. I can only assume that the compromise my parents made when they moved to Asheville in the 90s was that my mom could be close to her family, but my dad could force all their future kids to ski on the worst mountains known to man.

North Carolina skiing takes a specific level of grit and commitment. I had to be able to withstand the abnormally warm temperatures in the middle of January when my mom would insist on dressing me in all the long underwear we packed because "If I got too hot, I could always take a layer off." but I never knew where I'd put the hypothetically removed layer because I couldn't leave it on the mountain, but I also couldn't leave it on my person. That would defeat the purpose of taking off the layer in the first place. Additionally, I needed to have the patience to wait in a 30-minute lift line for a 7-minute lift ride that dropped me at the top of a 45-second ski run.

In case North Carolina skiing couldn't get any more painful, my dad had added ski racing on top of it all. My dad and my brothers would ski race while my mom and I watched from the side, cheering as loud as we possibly could as if they could hear us with their snow-clogged ears. Almost every winter weekend since I turned nine was spent at one of three North Carolina "ski resorts": Appalachian Mountain, Sugar Mountain, and Beech Mountain. They each had their reasons for my disdain. Appalachian had only two lifts and five runs. It was designed for people with short attention spans. Sugar had a massive map that was not drawn to scale because they were trying too hard to

be a Colorado ski resort. The skiers at Beech were just assholes. They hated kids and loved to cut me off in lift lines and steal my seat in the lodge. Weekends spent at these ski lodges were the worst thing a 4th grader could do.

These ski races were hosted by Crescent Ski Council, a non-profit, volunteer-based organization that attracted all the mediocre middle-aged white male skiers in the Southeast. My family went to these races to represent the city of Asheville against Palmetto, SC; Spartanburg, SC; Knoxville, TN; Charlotte, NC; and a few others that I didn't care to remember. There were two races each weekend. The slalom race, for faster and more advanced skiers, was on Saturday, and the giant slalom race, for those who had barely seen snow before, on Sunday. Before the racing could get started, we had to go to the lodge early in the morning and check in with whoever's grandma to get our discounted lift tickets. I would be instructed by my mom to find a table for my family to sit at, and I would have to push past the sweaty skiers who already had two or three beers in them and pray that I'd find a table with at least five chairs. I typically had to settle for half a table and three chairs.

The racing would commence, and my day wouldn't end until at least 6 pm. Because not only would I have to sit on the side of the mountain to watch my family weave between flags, I had to sit through the awards ceremony—and let me just say, “ceremony” is a very generous term. There were two segments of the ceremony: a raffle drawing and podium winners. I hated the raffle drawing because Crescent skiers think it's hilarious to have a kid pull the names out of a sweat-stained hat, which is in the slippery grasp of an even sweatier man who is on his fifth beer (not including the three he had before lunch). I got called up to pull names more than enough times and stood as far away from the mass of beer breath and potential athlete's foot as possible. The prizes were always ski wax or hats branded with niche skiing jokes like “how's my goggle tan?” The main event was always learning the podium places for each flight, and I would only pay attention when my brothers' and dad's flights were announced. The prize for getting on the podium was always a \$5 gift certificate to a ski shop right down the road, which was only enough to buy ski wax. We collected a lot of \$5 gift certificates.

I'm not entirely sure what deal was made with my dad, but at 10 years old, I had been roped into ski racing just like my brothers. I can only imagine that my dad made the promise of waffles for dinner every day or tickets to a Broadway musical. I'm not sure if those promises were ever kept. Looking back, I think the real reason my dad was so adamant about my ski racing was that he wanted to get one more cheap lift ticket. If I already despised spending my weekends at these NC mountains, I now held a



vendetta against them. Instead of immediately going down the ski runs when I got to the top of the mountain, I had to wait in another long line until I got to the front where I would hurtle myself down the run as fast as my 10-year-old body would take me, weaving in and out of massive flags, and if I hit one, it would clothesline my throat and strangle me. I hated ski racing, but not that much.

I can't recall my first-ever race, my second, or my third. The first race I do remember took place at Sugar Mountain, the wannabe Breckenridge. That weekend, I followed the Saturday routine like normal: watching my dad and brothers ski fast down the slalom course, knowing the next day I'd be skiing the much slower giant slalom course.

The night before my impending doom, my family crammed into my dad's Toyota Sequoia and bumped down the mountain to a massive Italian restaurant for dinner. Take every stereotype ever said about an Italian restaurant and throw it at this place. It had fake grapevines crawling up each wall, and bottles of cheap wine stacked along the floor, towering high over my brothers and me. Tables with sticky red and white checkerboard tablecloths and menus that have more pages than published novels. One couldn't choose from the abundance of carbs, red sauce, and garlic, but as a proud picky eater, a steaming bowl of plain spaghetti was delivered right in front of me. If I'm being honest, it was an okay dish. I imagine it's hard to perfect every Italian dish dating back to the fall of Rome.

Shortly after, we rumbled our way back up the mountain to our rental condo, which my mom dubbed the "Bear Hollar." It was named after the fact that there was a piece of bear art in every corner. I took the liberty of naming them all. There was Wall Bear: the bear painting on the wall, Key Bear: the bear-shaped key hook, and Fireplace Bear: the stuffed bear resting near the fireplace. It's hard to find a place that has enough beds for five people, and being the youngest sibling, I slept on the couch next to Couch Bear. I didn't think I was nervous about my big ski race, but there was a stirring feeling deep in my gut that caused me to wake up at 3 am. I bolted upright on the makeshift couch bed, knowing something was off.

My brain was fuzzy as I slumped off the couch and shuffled into my parents' temporary room, my security<sup>29</sup> blanket in my clutches as if it were the cure to this sudden stomach-twisting sensation. Reflecting on it now, I wish it WERE the cure. I went to wake my mom up, and you'd think that I shook the whole bed and threatened her with a gun with how she woke up. She yelped at the thought of a possible intruder, but it was just me standing with my blanket and my face whiter than the fake snow outside. I'll spare the

grotesque details on this next part because I didn't like living it, I don't want to write it, and I'm sure no one wants to read it. Basically, I threw up. On my mom, my supposed cure-for-cancer blanket, and the 80s shag carpet. That Italian restaurant missed something on their bible-like menu: Food poisoning. I spent the next half hour puking up every bit of spaghetti into the toilet that had probably seen many a throw-up scene.

Once I was done reliving my mediocre spaghetti, I crawled like a stale raisin back next to Couch Bear, but now with Trash Can Bear right next to my head. I was in my mom's Life Is Good T-shirt that hung down past my knees, and my mom curled up on the floor next to me. From the looks of it, it was a tender moment that my mom stayed with me the rest of the night, but in reality, she just put herself back in the splash zone in case my stomach decided to betray me again.

I woke up a few short hours later to my mom practically stuffing my limbs into my long underwear, pinning my racing number to my front, and pushing my feet back into those god-forsaken ski boots. She was saying how I only had 30 minutes to get onto the mountain before my first race, and I could see my dad already pushing my brothers out the door. In my post-vomit haze, I hadn't realized what was going on until my mom was taking the gummy bears out of my jacket pocket and replacing them with a plastic bag and Bear Washcloth, saying, "In case you have to throw up again, do it in the bag, and clean yourself off with the washcloth." That's when it clicked. My mom had acknowledged the possibility of me throwing up again, and yet instead of letting me stay behind, she had created a backup recon mission for when I had to throw up ON THE MOUNTAIN. My parents were so intent on my ski racing that morning that they were willing to gamble on the fact that their child might barf up whatever was left of her dinner. All for a \$5 gift certificate.

I didn't get that gift certificate. I spent the whole day with my face deep in the artificial snow, waiting for my turn to race, silently praying that I actually WOULD throw up again, and maybe my parents would realize how bad of an idea this was and send me back to the condo. Even if I did throw up again, my dad would say some sort of pep talk claiming that it was "pure adrenaline and that vomit was extra weight so now I can go faster." Both runs I took were just my turning around each flag with the thought of having to ditch my ski poles so I could pull out that plastic bag as fast as possible and not ruin the course for anyone else.

I returned to Asheville that night with my mom saying that I shouldn't go to school the next day because I was "too sick." So I wasn't too sick to fly down the ski slope at top speed, but I was too sick to sit at a desk all day and do simple multiplication. That checks out.



I finished out that ski season, and the next one, and the one after that. I didn't quit ski racing until middle school. To this day, I still don't know why I hung on so long. I appreciate my parents for teaching me the importance of persistence and commitment, but surely there had to be a better way. North Carolina skiing can easily be beaten by any skiing in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming, but what those places don't have is the delight of early-morning drunkards, snowmaking towers, and crusty rental apartments. It's something that can't be replicated. And it's something that SHOULDN'T be replicated. Ski in Colorado, Utah, or Wyoming. Ski anywhere else in the world. It's for your health and safety. For the love of God, do not ski in North Carolina.



Smile!~ Brayden Ross, 9, Photography





# REFLECTION

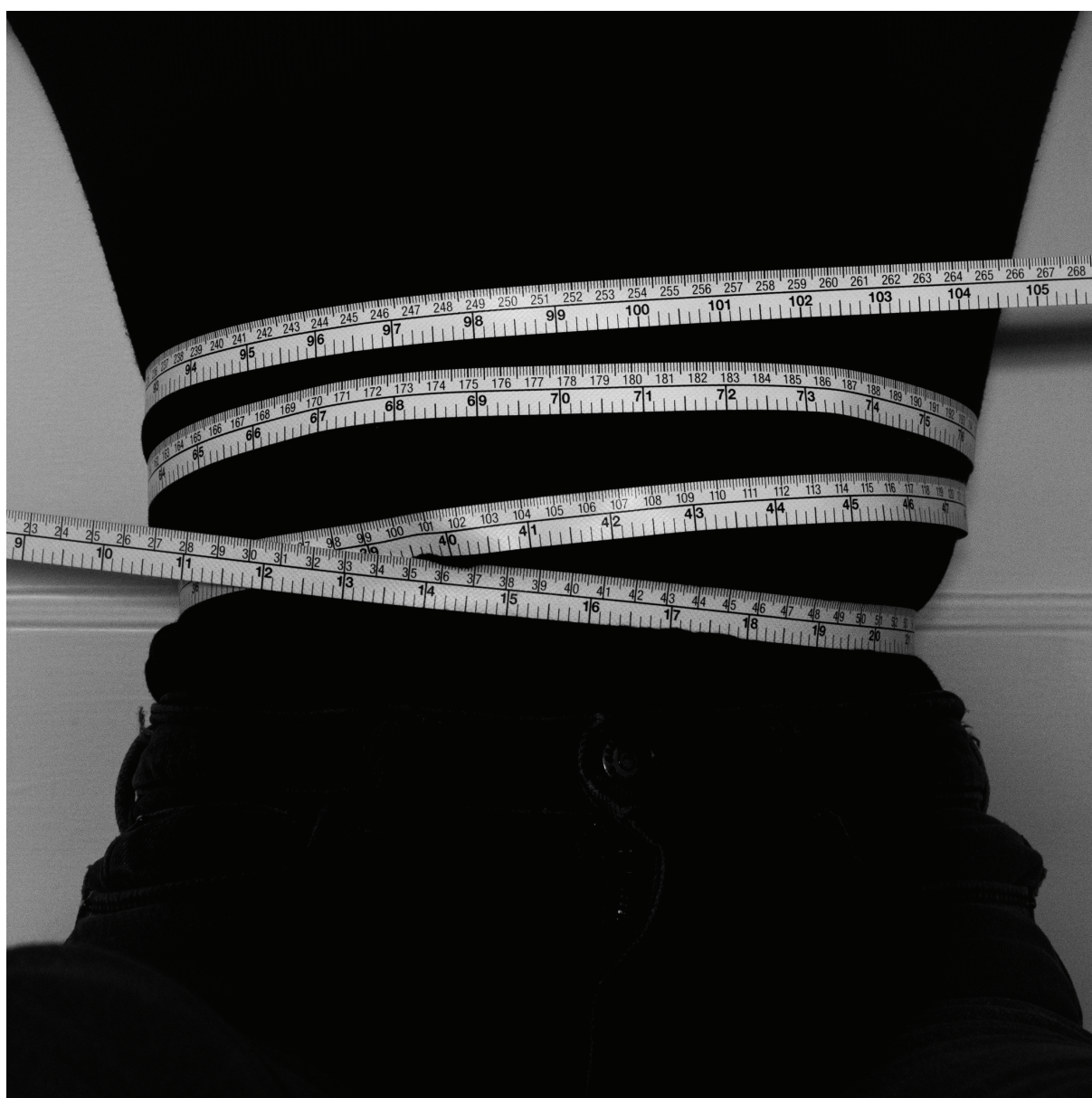
Bella Leet, 11, Nonfiction

The mirror is a knife that cuts deeper into my heart than anyone ever could. When seeing my reflection in the mirror, every little flaw is highlighted and displayed. Some days they're more escapable than others. Some days the flaws are dimmed a little more, but most other days, they are lit up so bright I can't bear to look at them. They can be covered by pieces of cloth and fabric, but that doesn't hide them. They shine right through like the sun peeking through the clouds. No matter how hard I try to cover them, they never disappear. One day I had a thought that would help destroy those flaws, "I should just skip breakfast." So I did, but it suddenly became lunch, then dinner, and soon enough, I barely ate. My flaws began to fade; I could finally stand to see myself again. It didn't matter that inside my body was tearing itself apart; all that mattered was that I looked good. But, that feeling didn't last, and I once again believed I still did not look good enough. My clothes were still too tight, my face was too round, and my stomach wasn't flat enough. Even my own mother began to point out my flaws: "Honey, do you really need that second serving? Isn't one enough?" I wish she understood how taking an extra serving tore me apart with guilt until I completely stopped eating.

My body began to weaken. I couldn't stand anymore. I was so weak that getting out of bed became an impossible task. My legs shook with every step. The world around me spun and became so bright I couldn't see, but it didn't matter to me; the only thing I believed to be important was how I looked. I pushed through the pain and went on with my days as if nothing were wrong, because there was nothing wrong. I looked pretty. Beautiful even. My flaws were so dim they couldn't even shine through my clothes. I could finally look into the mirror and be proud of how I looked. It didn't matter that my skin was as thin as paper and my bones became prominent through my flesh. I looked amazing.

I only came to realize something was wrong when I couldn't bear to eat or even glance at food anymore. My father forced me to join an "important family dinner," but when I tried to eat the meal, I couldn't even bear to smell it. The insides of my body curled up in disgust and my throat closed, not letting me shove a single piece of food down. My parents looked at me with troubled faces when I covered my mouth and nose to stop myself from vomiting. One of them reached a hand out to hold mine but recoiled after noticing my bony hand.

I can't recall precisely what happened after that, but I know I ended up in the hospital. I have a vivid memory of the bright fluorescent lights, loud yet calming background noise, and the doctor explaining to my parents how I was dangerously underweight. He explained to them I would have to be put in recovery and slowly regain my appetite, strength, and overall health. He made sure to ease their worries by explaining how, with time, I would be better, more "normal." Apart from that singular moment, I don't remember much up until a few years ago. Although, My life has changed for the better. I'm happy with how I look and have somewhat mended my relationship with food. I will most likely never have a perfect relationship with food, but relationships aren't easy anyways. I am finally able to look at myself in the mirror. My reflection has become just that, a reflection, nothing more.



CHOKING AT THE WAIST~ CAROLINE BARTON, 10, PHOTOGRAPHY



# THE LURKER

Holly Gill, 11, Fiction

Looking around, there isn't much to see. I've become so familiar with this place this year. The unsettling placements of seating, set up to curve around two round-tables, a smirk with history written all over it. It's my safe space. Safe from that lanky lurker crying in the halls. This dark room is a cave, which suits the class' dark humor. The only reflections visible aside from the flashing pictures of war on the white board are green, deep green—like the lurker's signature flannel. I give up on notes for now and slide a paper from my bag and a chalk pastel from the wobbly metal cabinet, the hum of a dying projector fighting with the little blue fan and scribing notes. The pines sway like seaweed in the window, making the drawing writhe. The sea of green and dark sway, contradicting the colors I want on the page. The rapid soft pawing at the paper becomes all I hear. Shhp, shhp, shhp, doodling anything and everything but not necessarily anything at all at the same time. Darting around the small paper, the creature lurks in through accidental swipes and morphing forms. I see his creeping hand, a staring eye. I wish he would leave—he's ripping and shredding my art, my brief freedom. Grasping the chalk, smooth and sharp in its cubic shape but flat in its color, I rush to fix the art and free the paper. Grabbing another piece and clinking the last down. This warm habitat, the slow breathing, the loud pacing, the silence of the unknown, are all seemingly scary, but safe. Finally, briefly, safe.

But, I have to travel back. Back to his domain. Pulled by time and expectations, I leave the green haven, entering the amber maze. The hall swims and sways after I enter and push forward through the thick sloshing of bodies. The lurker is standing by his locker, visibly upset. I act blind to him for as long as I can until he ensnares me with his eyes. He turns, he knows, he locks on to me, now the object of his desire. I try not to hurt the lanky creature, I try to suppress the need to run that's shaking through my legs and hands. He's reaching out, grabbing, yearning. Still, be still, be complacent, you don't want to hurt him, not here, not in front of everyone. But as he approaches, I instinctively resist, betraying him and myself. It doesn't take long for the lurker to freeze, to ponder, and counter with his acid rain—wanting. Lemon juice from his eyes pours into mine, dripping down to my heart, stinging and stealing my last bits of strength. It tears me apart from the inside out, it's poison seeping into every crevice, pushing its way through my veins and every fiber of my being. Ripping apart my morals, disintegrating them and stirring them up, only to consume them blatantly while I break and give in.

Cast in Shadows~ Caroline Barton, 10, Photography



My regret and strength dribble down the lurker, I run. I retreat to privacy to recover some, any, of what I'm losing, my mind, my center, my core. I try to breathe, cycling through my lungs the emotions that my body's refusing to filter. I want to stop, obviously something's wrong, we need to stop. But, maybe I'm wrong, maybe it's me despite what the lurker whispers. Maybe I truly am the one that hurts him. The guilt over the ripping I feel, from the tethering that tangles us. My heart rushes into his for love while my brain commits chemical suicide, It feels like my head's being ripped off. He loves me though, so why does the lurker hurt me so much? Why does he threaten me? Each time he does, it feels like knives floating in front of me, barely grazing the skin of my chest. If I move—forward or away—I risk everything. Maybe he does it to silence his own creature, his own walking pain he can't escape. I breathe again, centering myself for a final time. I've taken my moments but I'm required to return once again. I feel like I'm walking on another planet, far from here, simple and dusty, quiet and desolate. Despite my floating, I'm full of lead. Lead bones and mercuric blood. Metallic and heavy, I make contact with the cold handle, pause, and heave the door open.

The lurker is slouching, curling around itself, physically screaming for help in a room of ghosts. I take a deep breath, and place myself next to it, willfully trapped. He turns his head to look at me. I see him shake, crying silently. I reach into him—as he expects, as the lurker's trained me to do so. My hand swelters and bubbles, the skin ripping and pulling from my bones. My contact invites him to completely engulf me. He begs for me to say “I love you” with my lips and chords and breath, and when I don't, he takes it from the rest of my body. From my lungs, my stomach, my thighs, my hands. I want to writhe away, this is crossing so many of my lines but I'm tangled in our heartstrings, frozen and stuck. He grabs me, pulling me in and scratching his thin fingers between my ribs. He squeezes, popping my lungs and making me breathless. My throat cramps as he shoves his hopelessness down to gag me. Bound by publicity, I wait. Wishing, praying, wanting more than anything for it to be over, for him to complete using me for his pleasure. He'd do it with or without me.

“It helps me . . . thank you . . .”

“No problem.”

# The Red and Blue Blues

Wes Fleischer, 11, Nonfiction

In late August of 2022, I became a criminal. I know I did not dream this because I woke up and saw the traffic ticket sitting on my desk, next to my car keys and wallet. I rolled out of bed with a thrashing headache from the previous stress, walked to the edge of my desk and picked up the ticket. *Officer Thomson*—I went back to bed without reading another word. The thing that made me so mad was that I believed I didn't deserve that ticket. Clearly Officer Thomson thought differently.

The night before would be my last hours with a clean record. Alex, George, and I were out for a night on the town in West Asheville. When 10:00 PM hit, we were feeling a bit low on energy so we stopped by the McDonald's on Patton Avenue. I carefully pulled the car into the drive-thru and parked by the rusty speaker.

"Uhh, welcome to Mc—zzczchh—Can I take your order?"

I leaned out my window and answered, "Hi ummm yeah can I get a double cheeseburger meal with a large diet Coke?" While the drive-thru operator sorted through what I had just said like an archeologist trying to translate hieroglyphics, I turned to my friends to ask them what they wanted. George was a prankster, he loved making people think he was a crazy person. He leaned across my lap and jabbed his head out of the window.

"Could I pwease have a ten-piece nugget and pwease could I also pwetty pwease have a McFluwy and lawge fwies?"

The drive-thru operator started to say something but then turned silent for an awkward second. "Uhh is that it for your order?"

"And could we also get just another large Diet Coke?" That was for Alex.

The door slid open and stopped halfway. Something is always broken at McDonald's. I exchanged a shameful look with the cashier and passed my credit card into his greasy fingers.

He slid my card through the machine, "Ok move to the next window."

I drove forward and aggressively tapped George on the leg, signaling that his behavior in the drive-thru was getting out of hand. Between the first and second windows, I realized that it didn't matter what George was doing, even if he was embarrassing. The drive-thru operator handed me the bag of food. It seemed light, but I was so hungry that I didn't care. Of course they forgot my double cheeseburger meal. Now I'm not blaming what happened next on the fact that McDonald's left me high and dry, but it could certainly be a factor.

I sat with them in the car, watching George absolutely crush ten McNuggets and Alex drink his Diet Coke. They had everything, and I had nothing. My friends finished their meals and drinks, without me, and we were ready to go back to Alex's house. This particular McDonald's was located on Patton Ave, a road known for some major bullshit police work. Okay, maybe just me. Anyway, we were ready to leave.

Alex was in charge of directions. Remember, at this point I had only been driving for a few months, and I was never near Patton Ave. I pulled the car to the edge of the McDonald's parking lot and asked Alex which way to turn.

"Uhhhh, uhhhh," he mumbled from the back seat. Clearly this man did not know where his own home was. "Oh oh, turn left."

We were getting somewhere. It was dark, the rain had left the road soaked. I leaned slightly on the gas to turn, pulled the wheel, then I saw it. *Oh shit*. There was a median: a concrete barrier standing between my innocence and my life as a criminal. I yanked the wheel left and found myself in a pickle, a huge pickle like the ones at cheap gas stations. If you know you know.

"THIS ISN'T ENGLAND, FAT ASS!" George politely let me know I was on the wrong side of the road. I love George. I slammed on the gas and peeled into the Bojangles parking lot, which was right next to the McDonald's. All of this happened in about fifteen seconds. I tried to pull out like nothing happened, but my fate was sealed. I saw the lights in my rearview mirror. I told myself they weren't pulling me over, but someone else. Hold on, that homeless guy is looking illegal, maybe they just have their lights on for fun. This panic and rushed thinking made my head spin. That poor homeless guy didn't deserve what I thought about him in that split second. I blinked and found myself right back in the action.

I placed my hands on my steering wheel and waited for the cop to approach us. I looked at George and then back at Alex, who is Columbian. Now, I only say that to convey to you . . . well, there was fear in the car.

For some reason I still can't understand, the officer walked to the back of the car, Alex's window. He proceeded to ask Alex what happened instead of me, the driver. The. Driver.

"How's it going, guys?" His badge read "Thomson."

I almost let slip, "I'm wonderful, thanks for asking." We all would have been arrested, possibly just shot right there, if I said that. "Hi officer," I said, turning my neck all the way around to look at him out the back window.

"What happened back there?" This guy had to be the worst cop. Not even a "Do you know why I pulled you over tonight?" Just straight into it. I admire him for his style, but I would have preferred him to complete the traffic stop by the book.

"Sorry, I'm not on this road very often and it's dark, so I didn't see the median," was my pretty reasonable answer. But not for this guy, he was a special type of cop.



I'm not normally the type of person to judge, but this guy had the most boring face I've ever seen. He looked like he would be easy to draw. Every bit of his face was average.

"You know, I can arrest you three for driving on the wrong side of the road?" That was probably not true, but I didn't argue with him. I reminded him of my reasonable answer, but he didn't budge. "Ok, I'm writing you a ticket for that stunt you pulled back there." Yes, he actually said that. No one says "stunt you pulled" except for Mr. Boringface.

I took Alex back to his house and then dropped George off before heading home. I put my things on my desk and fell asleep. I woke to the realization that it indeed was not a dream, but also, I realized something. Until now, I had been relatively sheltered from the world. My parents drove me everywhere, and all I did was go to school and go home. That night, I learned something very valuable. The real world sucks.



Inner City~ Thompson Murray, 12, Mixed Media

# ENCOUNTERING ANOMALY

Sophia Smith, 11, Fiction

"I knew you once," his eyes were gray, knowing, "You yearn for things, don't you? For something you cannot grasp, locked away in some strange part of the world."

"I suppose you're right," I said. I wasn't happy to see him, nor disappointed. It was as if I was set to meet him from the second I came out of my mother's womb, balled fists and wound-up face. I stood before him now, unmoving. The concrete below me held me in place, like it knew I had to concentrate on standing there, still and upright.

The streets around us were a never-ending bustle of people, all looking at the world the same way. They saw each other and decided each of them was meant to be there, that they belonged. We watched together, and I felt that for the first time in my life, I was calm.

"You don't belong here, do you?" I could have been more gentle about it, but I knew he was waiting for the question.

He let out a short sigh and said, "No. No, I do not. But you belong here and you belong in this moment speaking to me."

"What do I ask?" I looked at him, but he was looking out into the distance, a glimmer of sun shining off his whitened hair.

He stood still for a moment before saying, "I can't tell you that. I know what you asked. Or, will ask. And you know what I will say, maybe not now but you still do at some point."

I thought about his response and the words that hung idly on my tongue. I knew I could spend an eternity standing on the street in silence and he would still wait patiently, staring out at the horizon while he waited for me to tap through an unknown script. The ground below us radiated a dreary sort of heat, rising up lazily and cupping my face in adoration while the cars and the people around us created an asynchronous song that drifted languidly in spirals around us. He looked out at the world with an expression of familiarity.

"Tell me," I said, "Tell me about your world." I didn't know how I knew he wasn't from here. He had human eyes, which crinkled in the corners, dilating and undilating with the shifting of light. He knew the same history as me, all the trials and tribulations of human society, the conflict and the moral instability. But still, he wasn't from this place.

"It's just as beautiful as here, the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, and Andromeda is coming toward us just like it is here." He smiled faintly as he spoke.

"You find this beautiful?" I said, nodding towards the asphalt, the people, the structures.

"You have to if it's all you know, yes?"

"No. I can think of things so much more beautiful, more vibrant and colorful and joyful."

"And do they exist?"

"... No."

"Find something real and look for the beauty in it. Someone very wise told me that once."

"I envy their optimism."

"You have it in you. Look at the future and the past and the dimensions that exist synonymously."

"I cannot do that. I am here and only here."

"Are you sure?"

I wasn't sure. I knew that the sun rose in the East and set in the West, that we were on a collision course with Andromeda, and that I was there talking to him. But deep down I knew that I was experiencing everything else as well. Sometimes if I closed my eyes I could feel my breakfast the next morning settling in my stomach, or the emotions of three years before churning up in my gut. If I focused just hard enough I could feel a blade of grass somewhere in the universe, swaying along to the rhythm of its nature. I didn't tell him that, though, I hadn't weaved my mind together yet.

We stood there, looking out at the horizon. He with a melancholic smile on his face, I with a stony grimace of finally starting to comprehend myself. Time, as I knew it, passed. The sun set and the daytime people were replaced with drunks and lost tourists. They didn't spare one look at our duo. The crickets started their orchestral song that lasted through the night, as the dregs of life slipped away into the early morning. We stood as the sun rose in the East and twinkled his good morning to the birds.

We stood as the bakery man opened the door to his shop, whistling a boisterous tune. We stood as the sentience of the world emanated its reality, balmy and offbeat.

At last, the man next to me let out a puff of a chuckle, all down in his chest and out his nose. "You are an anomaly. This is why I got lost. To end up here." I didn't respond, not when I was focused on the tune of the birds that celebrated the new day. "Do you find it beautiful?" he asked.



**Feathered Foe~ Paige Howard,  
10, Watercolor**

"Maybe. Yes, I think I do, for now," I whispered, just barely audible. My eyes were closed, my legs tired. I ached from the world, it was surrounding me and gripping my bones with fervor. And then, when I pressed my fingertips together in fixation, I felt a whisper of something new folded up neatly in my mind. When I opened my eyes again, I was alone, standing still within the bustle of the street. I knew him once too, in some world at least.



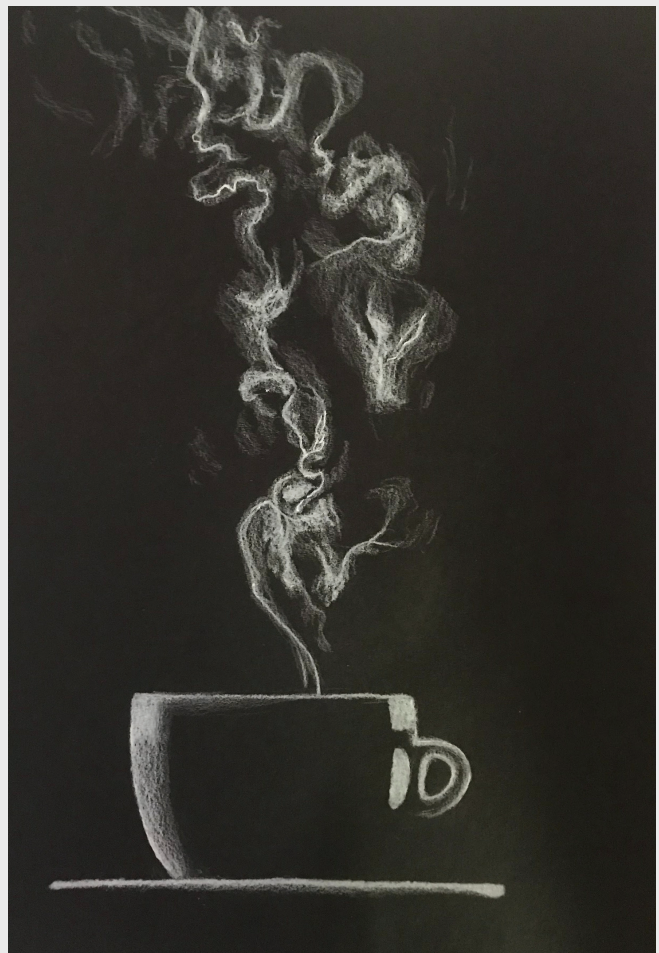
# COFFEE

Emily Boettcher, 12, Fiction

My finger slowly thumps along the spines of the A-D section while the soft-white lamps on either side of the aisle whisper an electric hum. Old surround-sound speakers play nostalgic tunes; I recognize the familiar notes of "Come Fly With Me." The music fades to the back of my mind as a shivering woman hurries through the glass double doors, wind slamming them behind her. A wrap holds a baby close to her chest, keeping the child comfortable and quiet.

I try to not let her notice my eyes following her across the fiction section. I grab the first book my fingers find and take a seat at the tables, gaining a perfect, discrete view of her, my eyes barely above the pages. I can tell a book catches her attention, and she lifts it from the shelf. She seems to ignore the world around her, her visibly tired eyes only able to focus on one word at a time. She starts to stroll, slowly, eyes still on the pages. A bend in the carpet stumbles her feet and sends her coffee to the floor, the hot drink soaking her pants. She releases a defeated sigh, crouching down to pick up the empty cup, carefully trying not to wake her baby

The spill doesn't seem to bother her, though. She reopens the book. "Damnit." The back cover is coffee stained—I assume she has to buy it now. She walks toward my table, empty coffee cup and damp paperback in hand. Her tired bones fall to the chair just as her baby awakens, letting out its hungry cries. The lady rolls her eyes, clearly accustomed to the nuisance. .



Rising Steam~ Diana Almeida, 12, Chalk

I chuckle, "Rough day?"  
Her heavy eyes slowly look up at me,  
eyebags desperate for a good night's rest. "Too  
rough to care anymore."

# Bittersweet

Ella Dowden, 11, Fiction

Levi and I grew up together, spending countless hours at each other's house. We had always claimed we were simply the result of forced family friends that didn't choose to be together. After all that time, never did I think Levi could turn into something so bitter.

His transformation started last week. We had just parted after one of our fights that ended in the classic "I hate you." "No, I hate you more." They were never serious, nor was this the first time this had happened, so I left expecting he would get over it. That night, he did not send his usual long paragraph admitting being wrong. These usually started with "Hey I just wanted to apologize . . ." He always had this selfless and considerate approach to him, never hostile. Whether it was true or not, he always was the one taking the blame just so we could go back to normal. We spent the weekend apart, something we hadn't done since the time he was grounded in 8th grade.

That week our parents arranged dinner. "Do we really have to go, it's not like he wants to see me anyway," I pestered my mom. I told her everything that had happened, our fight, and the way he hasn't tried to make up as he always does. I explained that he was the one who started it this time and that I was the right one, as always. My mom didn't buy anything I told her as she has heard this same story many times. "Just get in the car, I'm sure he's gotten over it as he always does," my mom said, slamming the door behind her.

When we got there, I noticed everything about him had begun to round and turn this bright shade of yellow. I stared at him in disbelief, wondering what had happened between now and the other night. He was wearing a blue collared, long-sleeve shirt and long black pants. Levi usually wore one of his dorky graphic tees paired with whatever shorts were on his bedroom floor. Usually during these dinners, his mom had to beg him to put on presentable clothing. His skin was peeking out of his blue sleeves and had this sort of tough, bumpy layer around the real him. His usual sweet, understanding personality was covered by this new bitter layer.

It felt like there was no way to connect with him, yet why did everyone else seem unfazed? Everyone around us was acting like he was his normal self. But where was his comforting smile or soft, blue eyes? Throughout the night, I stared, analyzing this new version of Levi and wondering if he was still really there.

"Levi, what happened to you? Why are you acting this way? I'm sorry if it was something I said. Please just come back. I miss you." That night I texted him countless times in disbelief that I was the one apologizing to him. I scrolled through old conversations wishing that the paragraph "Hey I just wanted to apologize . . ." would show up in a dark grey bubble.

His silence was at first hard to deal with. I had never imagined life without him, but this person I grew up with was no longer there.

“I hate you, I hate the way you are making me feel,” I texted him and for the first time in my life, I meant these words of hate. “I hate what you have become.” These texts carried on for weeks as I lived my life in denial. There was no response as Levi was not really there. Our parents had continued planning our weekly dinners, but I stopped going. There was no point in being forced into a conversation with a stranger, especially a stranger who had betrayed me and shut me out as harshly as he did. Why can't he just reach out and apologize like normal? I sat in my room looking at my tough, bumpy, popcorn ceiling. It reminded me of Levi. The people-pleasing, sweet, caring friend I grew up with now had an unpleasant tough peel with a sour core.

I had to learn to live without lemons, tossing them out of my life for the better. The absence of lemons turned out to be bittersweet and a change I needed to make sooner.



**What's Inside~ Diana Almeida 12, Acrylic**



# My World

Max Farmer, 10, Poetry

Books on the wall,  
Clocks on the bookshelf,

Up is down,  
Right is left,

You have been welcomed to my world,  
You have been banned from my life,

Hang your shoes on the coat hanger,  
Drop your coat on the floor,

Put your dishwasher in the dishes,  
Put the laundry machine in the clean clothes,

You were welcomed to my world,  
You abandoned my life,

Upside down,  
Right and left,

Paintings on the floor,  
Carpets on the walls,

You're in my world now,  
You won't get out.

# The Fog Was Thick That Morning

Lauren Dennis 12, Poetry

(Inspired by Nat Geo Traveler Photo Contest, Alessandro Bo)



And from the mist  
A traveler came  
Cloaked in the hovering dew

And the traveler stopped  
In the middle of the road  
Wet with the tears of the moon  
But hard  
Packed solid  
From countless steps

And the traveler looked at the mountains  
Islands in a smoldering sea  
The smoky waves obscuring their height

And the traveler looked at the road  
That wandered into the misty depths  
And disappeared behind  
A hill

And then the traveler left  
Silently as they had come  
Leaving no trace  
Save the stirring of the fog  
As it parted to let them pass

The fog was thick that morning  
And a traveler came  
The mist as their cloak  
The road as their compass  
And left with the rising of the sun

# Moonlit Youth

Lauren Dennis 12, Poetry

The moonlight shining through the window pane  
Reminds me of a time when I was young,  
When I would laugh and tears would fall like rain,  
And bells of death for me had not yet rung.  
The daylight sparkled like a waterfall,  
And everything was bright and full of life.  
Still, there were times when I despised it all,  
And times when every day was full of strife  
But as I sit and watch the moonlight dim,  
My memories of youth have made me glad.  
So as the darkness fills me to the brim,  
I don't regret at all the life I've had.  
Now as I close my dulled and weary eyes,  
I bid goodbye to sunset and sunrise.



# Don't Bring Your Sister to an Estate Sale

Citlalli Zavala, 11, Fiction

The doll was covered in blood. Its legs were bent as if it were about to pounce and its eyes held a mischievous glint. I almost thought I saw it blink. My hand rushed to the switch of the bedside lamp. In the light, the doll looked normal. No blood, no creepy eyes. Only a doll. An ancient, old, and haunting doll. Sitting on the bed and looking down at me.

I hadn't even wanted to buy the doll. It was my mistake really. I brought my sister, Gigi, along to an estate sale because Mom had to pick up an extra shift. Estate sales are for me. I go there to find a history of objects, to find a story, and to add a couple of years to an object's life. I shouldn't have brought Gigi. I shouldn't have told her that she could buy one thing. I shouldn't have even gone. Ice cream and a trip to the park would've been better. In my defense, I didn't know she would choose the most hideous doll ever.

Now it haunts me. My mom changed first. Two weeks ago, I went into her room and saw her, holding the doll, cradling it, her gaze fixated on the doll's blank stare.

"Mom."

She didn't respond.

"Mom."

My voice was dry, raspy. Desperate.

"Mom." My hand found the light switch in the dark. The light broke her trance.

"Sweetie? What are you doing here?"

"Nothing, Mom. I was just getting some—" The room went dark.

"Looks like the power's out, sweetie." Her voice was light and inviting.

Then, it got my brother. He would wake up screaming, every night. He had a nightmare, he would say. But he never said anything more. It got so bad that my mom ended up taking night shifts too because if she wasn't going to be able to sleep, she might as well work. She'd put him and my sister to bed and leave. I was left in charge for eight hours. The first two hours were fine. I would stay up late, doing homework, filing papers, and listening to the ticking of the cheap clock we bought second-hand. Tick-tock, tick-tock. But then it changed. It went tick-tick-tick, faster, building up, until I couldn't tell the second's apart. Tick-tick-tick-tick, how many ticks was it? Three? Three seconds? Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick, faster and faster, and then there would be a shriek. Sharp, loud, and coming from the room at the end. My brother's room. He would be sitting up, panting, tears streaming down his face flushed, and gripping his left arm. I would hold him, playing with his hair and whispering in his ear until his breath became even, his eyes closed, and the ticking of the clock returned to its regular pace.

It wasn't until three weeks of screaming nights had gone by that my brother told me what was plaguing his dreams.

"It's the doll," he said, abruptly, while I was driving him from school. His voice was calm and even, almost mechanical or robotic.

"The doll?"

We were approaching a green light.

"She's watching us. She wants us. Mom, you, me, Gigi. She wants us to herself."

The hair on my arms stood on end. The light must've turned yellow then, but I didn't realize it.

"She is planning it right now. How to take us. Well, not how. When. She's deciding when to take us."

The light was red, and the cars next to us slowed. We didn't, and the white line was fast approaching.

"What do you mean take us? Where?"

"Her home. But it's not a house. It's more of a—" I hit the brakes. The car jolted forward and made a loud screeching noise. My seatbelt strained against my weight. We didn't talk the rest of the ride home.

Then it got me. After putting my brother back to sleep, I would go to bed. The first couple of nights were without incident. But afterward, every morning was the same. I would be awakened from the feeling of being watching, and the doll would be on my bed, her face tilted toward me and her eyes empty. The first morning, I thought it was Gigi. What a sick little joke she was playing. I grabbed the doll, stormed into her room, and threw it on the bed.

"Don't ever do that again or this'll be the last time I ever buy you anything."

She didn't move from her bed. Her breath was even and her eyes were closed. No suppressed giggles like the other times she would prank me.

"Gigi," I shook her awake.

She opened her eyes, groggily, and looked up at me, squinting.

"What do you want?" She said, pulling the blanket over her head.

I paused. I had thrown the doll on the bed, I was sure. Wasn't I? It fell off the bed? No, there was nothing on the floor. Under the bed? Only dirty socks.

"Nothing," I answered and then I left for my room. My legs dragged across the floor and my arms pushed against the air as I fought gravity itself to get to my room. My heart was up my neck, in my mouth, against my ears as it started beating louder and louder, until it was all I could hear. The doorknob was slippery against my fingers. Or maybe it was the sweat from my hands. And there it was, right where I thought it'd be, where I knew it'd be: sitting upright against the pillow of my unmade bed, its expression dark and shadowed.

I grabbed the doll by its limp arm and put it in my car. Ten minutes, only ten more minutes with this doll. Then we'd be free of it.

Nine minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of Goodwill. My hand shakily got ahold of the doll I had carelessly tossed in the back. The donation bin was right in front of me. The doll fell, lifelessly and heavy, into the bin.



Mac and Cheese, Sarah Wren Robinson, 12, Mixed Media



# The Other

Cecelia Dettelbach, 12, Fiction

She steps through the door and the sweat-filled air swirls past her; like a bad taste in her mouth, it cannot be removed. As she makes her way through the room she dissipates into the crowd. The hoard continues to walk through her and appears to feel nothing. But, she feels everything. She feels a sickening joy as he walks around by another's side. She feels a dimmed jealousy as she longs to be wrapped around his arm. She feels a wave of slow-burning anger as she slips further into the background. She feels everything.

He is everything. His smile that is so easily splayed across his face is special to her every time. His eyes always seem to be fixed on mundane things, but when he stares at them, they triple in value. His heart is good. She saw this, but so did the other. And, the other is whom he chose.

As the night comes to an end, she is still fixated on him. He stands there like a vintage photo: the memories they share haven't changed. But, she remembers them in a different light. What was once a pristine, cherished memory is now tainted and has faded with time. A new photo has been taken, and the other is who it's with.

Yet, she holds on. Just for this one night, she allows herself to hold on to him. Him. He who always makes her feel better. He who always seems to truly get her. He, with whom she never wastes time because, with him, it's never a waste. But, she was just a violin in a symphony: She knew she was special and had a pretty song to sing, but to him, she was just another melody in the mix.

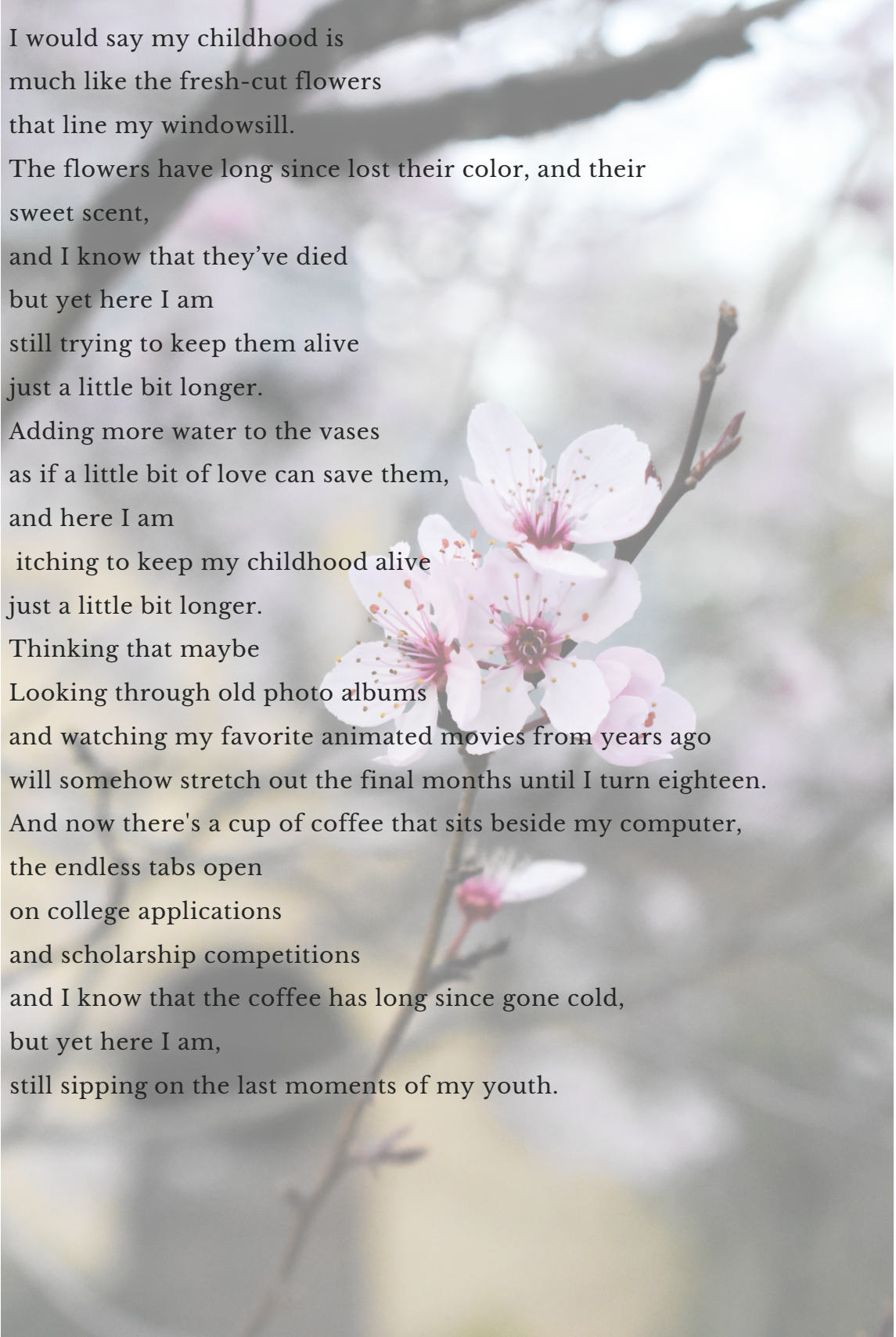
# Ants

Gabe Glasser, 11, Fiction

Silence. Nothing but silence. The occasional whistle of the wind, and then the return to silence. Dark sand, and a darkish orange tint. A man smiled to himself. He wore a purple suit and had blonde hair that gleamed in the sunlight. What did I have for breakfast yesterday? he wondered. And why did I wake up at 7:10 instead of 7? Every night I am asleep by 11 and make a point to get exactly eight hours of sleep, but today he was disturbed. He just wanted to live his definition of a quiet and peaceful life, but society had failed him again. However, he was not entirely shaken. There had never been a challenge that he failed to overcome, and this was merely an obstacle in the grand scheme of his peaceful life. The clouds suddenly parted and the sun beamed down on him, highlighting the edges of the dark metal of his detonator. Across the valley from him, a few objects came into view. They looked like ants from far away, and they would be crushed like ants when they got closer. The man in the purple suit relaxed, sat back down, and enjoyed his sandwich.

# Dreadful Eighteen

Mariana Hernandez-Oñate, 12, Poetry



I would say my childhood is  
much like the fresh-cut flowers  
that line my windowsill.  
The flowers have long since lost their color, and their  
sweet scent,  
and I know that they've died  
but yet here I am  
still trying to keep them alive  
just a little bit longer.  
Adding more water to the vases  
as if a little bit of love can save them,  
and here I am  
itching to keep my childhood alive  
just a little bit longer.  
Thinking that maybe  
Looking through old photo albums  
and watching my favorite animated movies from years ago  
will somehow stretch out the final months until I turn eighteen.  
And now there's a cup of coffee that sits beside my computer,  
the endless tabs open  
on college applications  
and scholarship competitions  
and I know that the coffee has long since gone cold,  
but yet here I am,  
still sipping on the last moments of my youth.

Isolation~ Mckenzie Thies, 11, Photography



# Twenty-Five Dollars

Eden Mosley, 11, Fiction

All I want to do is *die*. I'm finally on my last body of the night, and the guy I just whacked off only gave me fifteen instead of twenty-five. I'm pissed off 'cause I don't play 'bout my money! I stare into his eyes until he breaks the silence.

"What else do you want? I gave you your money."

"I want my twenty-five dollars. THAT'S what I want."

A smirk begins to grow on his face, then he chuckles a little bit as if I'm joking or some shit. I don't have time to lollygag and play games. Pimp Named Slickback doesn't have time for that either. He also does NOT play about his money. If I come five dollars short, he might rip the lashes off my eyes and sock the lipstick off my lips! I need that twenty-five dollars, and I need it now.

"I ain't givin' you more money. Now get the hell outta my car," blurts Stevey.

"You know it's always been twenty-five dollars, Stevey. Ain't nothing changed," I say.

"If you go inside the gas station and get me a pack of Twizzlers and an orange Fanta, I'll give you the rest of the money."

"Okay, say less."

I open the door slowly while looking at his facial expression to see if he is trying to play me. He has a neutral look on his face, so I think he is pretty serious about his offer. I shut the door and begin to walk backward slowly so he won't pull off and leave me here.

He stares at me as I make my way to the entrance, and never takes his eyes off me once. Where his eyeballs move, his head movements follow. I walk into the gas station and then quickly turn around to see if he's still out there, and he is. I scurry around gettig Stevey's orange Fanta and Twizzlers. These have to be the most nastiest combos in the world because who the hell drinks Fanta and eats licorice?

The woman at the cash register, Sellie, rings up my items, and her facial expression is how I look at these two items: nauseating and unappetizing. She then looks up at me and gives me the look she always does. The when-the-hell-are-you-gonna-escape-this horrible-situation look.

I roll my eyes at her, but she's right because I live in a whorehouse, I spend my time attempting to navigate my daily life without being killed or killing someone else.

One day Stevey gon' hurt you and I'd hate to be the one to find you dead in my parking lot," Sellie says.

"Stevey's too smart to end me like that. He'll probably pour bleach on me then burn my body right after he does what he has to do," I follow.

"You got it all mapped out, huh?"

"I might as well prepare myself anyways. It's either kill or be killed. You know?"

"I'm just tired of you doing this to yourself. You are so much more than this!"

"Well, I can't escape it now. I don't even try to leave anymore because I always get found, and when he finds you . . . he sure as hell will beat the shit outta you," I say. I feel the tear run down my face, but I quickly wipe it away.

Sellie looks down at my change and slides it towards me with her hand still covering it.

She ain't never seen me shed a tear before. But I don't care. I'm tired of this tough persona, seeming like I'm invincible, 'cause I really just want to fall gracefully off a bridge and let the water absorb the impact my body makes. I'd rather feel the slap of the water than a slap to my face.



Faces~ Jessica Worden, 11, Mixed Media

# IT'S BEEN A WHILE

Asher McKinney-Ring, 12, Fiction

It's been a while since they left. You wander through the long, maze-like corridors, fingers tracing the rows and rows of books. The dust seeps through your skin. The usually comforting smell of aging paper and sagging wooden shelves now only serves as a reminder: you've never been here alone. The cluttered space around you feels empty. The halls stretch on. The books whisper to you of lost time, of history you can never relive. The air weighs heavy, saturated with memories. Approaching the poetry section, you stop, your eyes caught on the spine of a familiar Pablo Neruda book, *Veinte Poemas de Amor y una Canción Desesperada*. It's their favorite. It— it was. You would sit on the carpeted floor with them as they read you poetry in a language you didn't understand. Their lilting voice is a sort of poetry itself. They would laugh lightly at your puzzled face and offer their English translation.

*"Qué importa que mi amor no pudiera guardarla. La noche está estrellada y ella no está conmigo:* So what that my love could not keep her. The night is full of stars, and she is not with me."

The memory makes you smile. It hurts. You're not sure why you decided to come back here, not sure what it would bring you. As you leave the hollow, dimly lit bookstore, you look back once more before heading out into the clatter of the city, the sky darkening with the approaching dusk. You breathe. It's been a while since they left.



It's All Connected~ Anonymous, Mixed Media



# INTERSTELLAR ZOO

Wes Fleischer, II, Fiction

Tonio looked in the mirror. It was twelve twenty-six in the morning, and he couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes his room got brighter. He looked, his stare empty. He looked at his brown eyes, short straight dark hair, broad shoulders that were barely held up by his thin stomach and waist. Even the shadows cast on his face were sleeping. Dead bugs in the ceiling light. He was awake though. The air in his apartment made his throat dry. Every breath felt like intense labor. He knew the New York air wasn't much better but he still ventured out to clear his mind.

Tonio walked through the concrete jungle and looked at the black sky. He dug his cell phone from his cargo pocket and rang his mother.

"Hi, I'm sorry I can't take your call right now, but please leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can." Her voice was sweet. He called again.

Rain fell from Tonio's eyes on his phone screen. He was alone, in the second-largest city on the continent. It was time for him to head home. Putting his phone back in his pocket, he turned the corner onto Doyers Street. The street corner disappeared and was replaced by magical, unbelievable color. Stars zoomed by, and everything in the universe was right in front of him in an instant. Tonio fell over trying to run back, but this universe seemed to be expanding in every direction.

"I'm dead."

He could see a different light, a closer light. Tonio walked along the rim of the galaxy with curiosity. He arrived at a glowing sign: "Welcome to the Interstellar Zoo." The sign consisted of colors he'd never seen before, colors anyone else couldn't imagine. Tonio walked in. This zoo was a place where beings from across the galaxy came to see strange and bizarre creatures. These creatures were familiar to Tonio. All of them were Tonio. Young Tonio, teen Tonio, this morning's Tonio. His life was laid out in order. Every part. Starting with his birth. Tonio ventured to the first exhibit.

"Ok ma'am, you're doing great, keep pu—" the nurse started. Gross. Tonio continued walking.

He stopped when he saw the day his dad betrayed his family. There he was, little Tonio, coming inside from the backyard. He trudged through the mud and dead grass to open the sliding door. "Tonio, you little shit! You're a damn accident, you know that?" His father lashed out in uncontrolled anger. Looking at himself through the glass gave him a burning sensation in his stomach.

“Pop, I didn’t do it I swear,” Little Tonio didn’t know why his dad was so angry.

“Little bastard! Where’d you hide it?” Tonio wouldn’t figure out that his dad broke his meth pipe over his mom’s head until he was much older.

“Hide what, Pop? I didn’t hide nothing! Please, Pop, you’re scaring me,”

Little Tonio wiped tears as his father told him that his mother had to go to the hospital to draw blood. Tonio, wiping tears from his cheeks, walked to the next exhibit.

His mother’s first trip to the hospital. The same night as the pipe incident. Little Tonio’s father lied—she wasn’t getting blood drawn. Tonio’s mother had pieces of glass pipe embedded in her right ear and skull. She didn’t need a doctor to draw blood, plenty was already oozing out of her. Tonio stared through the glass into the hospital room where his mother spent the rest of that week. Tonio kept walking. “It’s not my fault, it’s not my fault.”

The next one caught his eye. Austin, Tonio’s best friend growing up, was standing in the middle of a movie theater parking lot. It was summertime, the last good summer of Tonio’s life. Tonio was sixteen then and he spent as much time away from home as he could. A new movie had just come out and Austin and he snuck in. *Casino*, an R-rated film that they weren’t allowed to see. Seeing his friend through the glass made Tonio smile.

“Yo Toni, how’s it going, man,” Austin greeted Tonio.

“Dude, I heard this movie is crazy. I’m so excited.” Tonio’s excitement transferred through the glass and entered his chest. It felt good seeing Austin this way. This Austin wasn’t taking pills yet. Austin was happy. It made Tonio happy.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Austin replied. The movie was good, definitely worth sneaking in Tonio thought.

With newfound joy in his step, Tonio decided to explore the Zoo a bit more. “Why rush to see what I’ve already seen?” He saw all sorts of creatures staring at different Tonios through glass barriers, studying his emotions, his actions, his words. Why was he so interesting to them? He thought about it but it didn’t bug him too much. He was already standing on the edge of the galaxy. Why care about anything now? He decided he was ready to continue. He walked away from his last good summer, wishing he could stay at the exhibit, but he was strangely curious as to where the zoo would take him next.

Tonio wasn’t surprised. The next exhibit was the following summer. Anxiety replaced every function in Tonio’s head. He knew how this story ended. The EMTs wouldn’t save Austin. Tonio knew Austin was having trouble at home, but he hadn’t seen him turning to oxycodone. “Tonio, this pill could make you stop hurting. Don’t you want that, Tonio? I know you are tired of all the pain, Tonio; this will make it all go away.”

“Austin,” Tonio whispered at the glass, watching his friend die. Teen Tonio didn’t know what was happening. He wondered why his best friend would turn to painkillers instead of talking to him about his problems. Some people are scared of their own feelings. Tonio left dejected.

When saw the hospital room, his eyes watered. This was his mom’s last trip to the hospital. Tonio on the other side of the glass knelt by the side of the hospital bed his mother lay on. He was 26 and already losing her. This time it wasn’t his father, it was stage-four skin cancer. He came to the hospital every day for three weeks. Looking through the glass, Tonio remembered his mother saying, “They say I’ve got melanoma.” He had never heard her voice so low. Usually, it was full of energy and pitch, but not that day.

“Oh, Ma, what do we do?” Tonio fell into his mother’s shoulders. “There’s gotta be something, some way we can get you better, fix you, fix it.” Tonio’s body pulsed as tears soaked his mother’s cashmere scarf that Tonio had saved up for weeks to buy.

“Can’t do much about cancer, Tonio.” His mother cried with him. “They’re starting me on new medicine and chemotherapy this week. I’m going in tomorrow to get set up, I’ll be in the hospital for a while.”

“I’ll visit you, every day, I promise. I’ll spend every minute with you until you get better.” Tonio knew she wouldn’t get better. Over the next three weeks, she decomposed in that bed. By the end, the skin on her cheeks was nearly translucent. Still, he sat with her. Every day. Till the end. Tonio was on his knees now. He couldn’t take any more.

Why was he here? How? “I can’t, no more. I’m done.” He kept walking through the zoo. All the exhibits ran through his mind. His father, Austin, his mother. He walked to the last exhibit.

He saw himself. Not younger. He saw himself looking through the glass at himself. The Tonio in the glass was him. At the Zoo. He needed it to end. He punched the glass. “This isn’t working.” he grabbed an interstellar rock from the floor of the Zoo and smashed it into the glass over and over again until it shattered.

There he stood looking at himself. He was a shell of what he used to be. He was traumatized by the Zoo. He didn’t care anymore. Some people choose to live, others would rather die. The Tonio from the exhibit handed him a gun. He felt it in his hand. It was heavy, heavier than he thought a gun would be.

He was drowning in sadness. A different sadness, one that filled his whole body. He didn’t care. He couldn’t fix anything in the past, but he could fix himself. Tonio looked through the barrel. The barrel looked back. Tonio pulled the trigger.



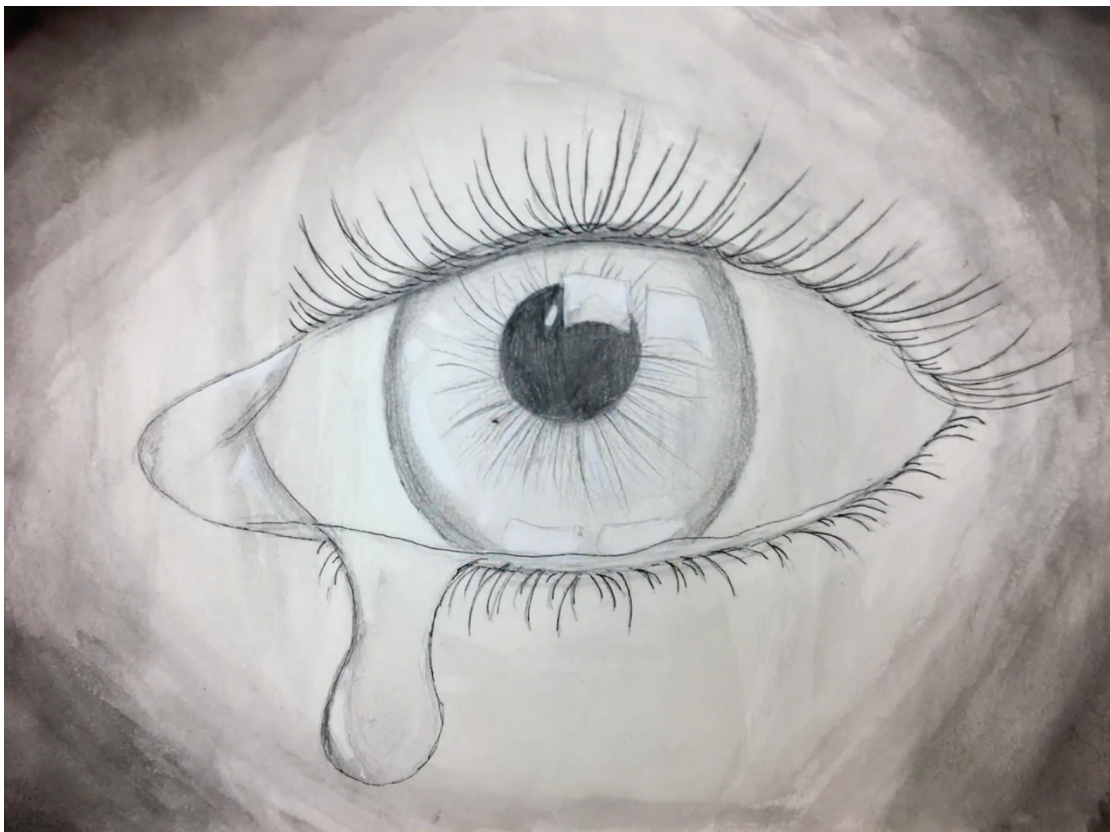
# ON THE PAVEMENT

**Citlalli Zavala, 11, Nonfiction**

We're moving across the mountains and everything is a blur. The trees are only a flash of colors, their branches indistinguishable. The leaves are bright yellows and reds. The colors blend into each other as we drive by. Inside, the car is packed. My brother is yelling at my sister to get off of his jacket, the baby wants noodles, and I can barely hear my parents over the cacophony.

Gradually, I can see the trees as one, not as a whole. I can see which trees have yellow leaves and which ones are still hanging on to their summer color. Outside, it's calm and peaceful and no longer an indiscernible blur. I hear my parents' worried whispers, and only then do I look forward. I can't make out their whispers, I can't see beyond the cars in front, but I feel a knot in my stomach. My sister says it first: "What's going on?"

Instantly, the already chaotic car becomes more chaotic. My brother is lifting himself out of his seat, tugging on his seatbelt to get a better look. The baby, who isn't really a baby, strains against his car seat. I look ahead, but I'm in the backseat, so I look to my left. We're yelling over each other—was there an accident? Is someone hurt? We're sitting there, anxiously waiting to see what has happened. My parents are the first to see it. Over the noise, I hear my mom's voice: "Cover your brothers' eyes." Neither my sister nor I pay any attention. We drive by and I feel my voice catch in my throat.



**The First Drop, Eliza Bacot, 9, Charcoal**

The scene in front of me sucks all the noise of the world and it's silent. There's a motorcycle. The cyclist is nowhere to be seen. Or rather, I can't shift my focus to look for them. There's a car, beat up, and further away a police car, its red and blue lights still flashing. There are people. Five, maybe six. I can't shift my focus to look at them.

In the center, encircled by all this pandemonium, is the bear. His head is away from me and he's lying on his side. If it weren't for the dark liquid surrounding his body, if the pavement were simply a forest, and if all these people were trees, I'd have thought he was sleeping. He looked lonely and out of place.

In an instant, the noises resume, and I am back inside the car, my mom scolding me for not covering my brothers' eyes, the boys asking what had happened, and my dad, his calm and unperturbed demeanor never seeming to have changed. Everything outside once again a blur, the colors melding into each other.



PINES, MACKENZIE THIES, 11, PHOTOGRAPHY



# Monsters

Max Farmer, 10, Poetry

(Inspired by Death Note Manga Series)

I have these dreams,  
Vivid dreams,  
About monsters specifically,

The fact that there are many types of monsters in this world,  
Monsters who will not show themselves,  
Monsters who cause trouble,  
Monsters who abduct children,  
Monsters who devour dreams,  
Monsters who suck blood,  
Monsters who always tell lies,

Lying monsters are a real nuisance,  
They are much more cunning than other monsters,  
They pose as humans,  
Even though they have no understanding of the human heart,

They eat,  
Even though they've never experienced hunger,

They study,  
Even though they have no interest in academics,

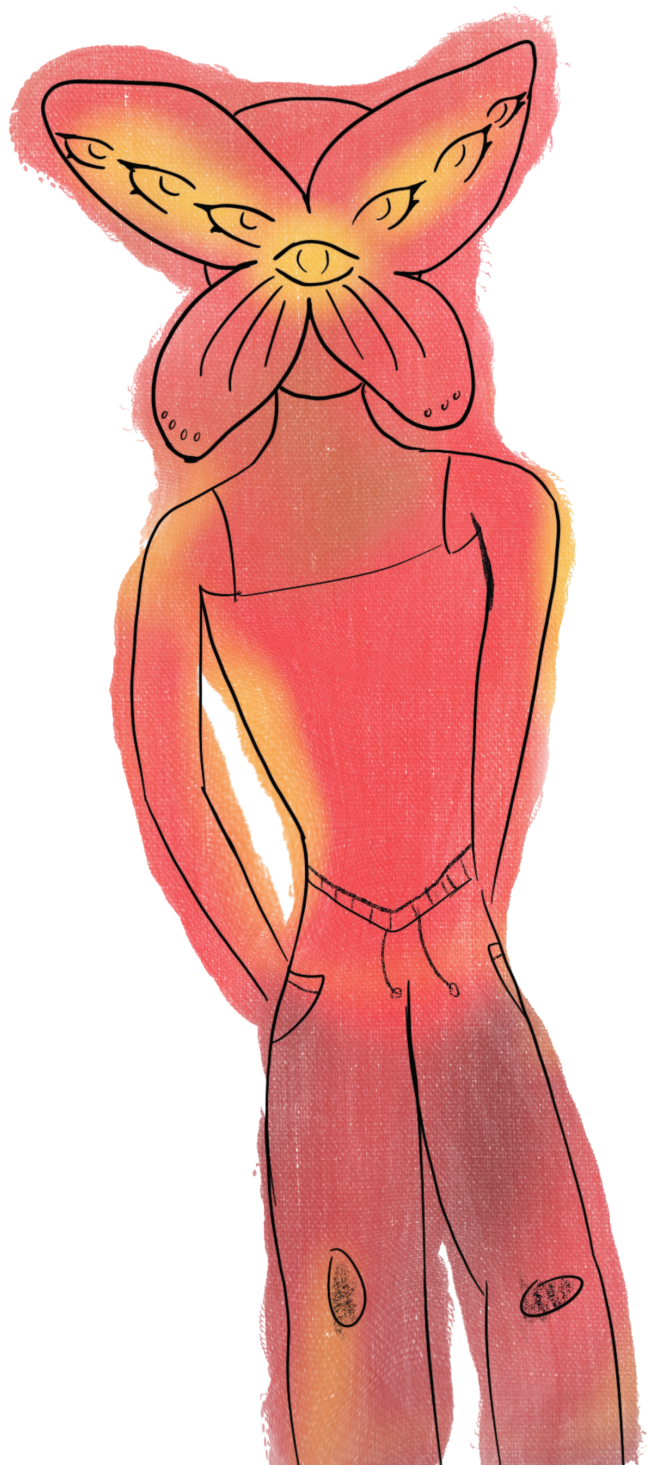
They seek friendship,  
Even though they do not know how to love,

If I were to encounter such a monster,  
I would likely be eaten by it,  
because in truth,  
I am that monster.

Lacy Shadow~ Caroline Barton, 10, photography



# Meet Mari Posa!



Hi there, I'm Mari Posa :) My friends describe me as bubbly and outgoing, I try my hardest to express only the happiest of emotions. When I'm not socializing, I like to recharge in my personal butterfly garden. The moment I enter through the vine-adorned archways, every emotion is released and able to be expressed. Feelings of sadness, regret, guilt, anger, and excitement flow through my mind as I watch and listen to the soft, beating wings of the butterflies surrounding me.

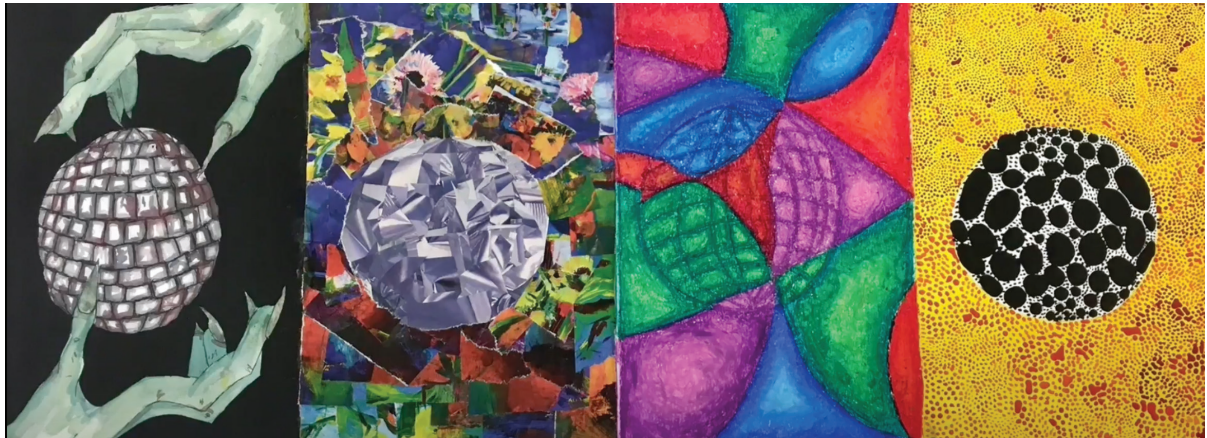
One stormy day, I felt a strong urge to go to the butterfly garden and sketch. My day at school was filled with emotional drama, and it took practically all my energy to stay positive.

I found a perfect spot where the sun beamed through the clouds enough to pour a thin stream of sunshine on my forehead. My pencil ran across the sketchbook in every direction. An overpowering sensation led me to scribble illustration after illustration, and my face felt hotter and hotter—then I realized my vision was different. All the colors that saturated the garden had become more vibrant. Colors pulsed shades of green I had never seen before, and the clouds changed from a dull gray blanket of vapor into a bag of tie-dyed cotton balls.

I didn't understand what was happening. I ran to the bathroom and stared at the mirror. My face was in the shape of a butterfly, and my eyes burned back at my reflection. I wasn't scared; instead, a wave of relief washed over my new, glittery skin. I am now a part of something greater: I understand the beauty of ART.

# The Birth of the Universe

Evan Brooks, 12, Fiction



Pieces of Me~ Lily Valeika 10, Mixed Media

Nothing.

A nothing that can't be quantified because then it becomes something.

Stop trying to because you can't. You *cannot* quantify nothingness because now there's an image, an association with something; It's rather rude to think of something as nothing, is it not? Do you not understand? Is the concept too abstract? Do you need familiar explanations to understand? That's wise, but understanding something that is yet to exist can only be done in hypotheticals. It hurts to hear but there are limitations to your abilities, knowledge, life, legacy, influence. There is always a limit, a level at which there is nothing more to be deduced. Do you not believe me? Allow me to demonstrate. Imagine a shoebox. Now imagine it smaller and smaller and smaller. Imagine everything you know fitting in it. Imagine your friends, family, memories, past, and future all tucked into that small small small box. It's unstable, ready to burst at any moment. Everything in that box is muddled. You can't tell your friends apart, recognize your family or yourself because they are nothing, you are nothing, everything in the box is nothing as is the box. Unquantifiable.

But worry not because the unquantifiable can become unquantifiably huge, heavy, all-knowing, and powerful. And it did.

Nothing became,

Something.

# Self-Reflection

Sophia Smith, 11, Poetry

Some days, I transform  
I wake up in a bed bigger than before, curled into a twisted knot of limbs  
When I peel myself off the bedsheet and peer into the mirror,  
I am met with a curious figure  
She looks back at me with childish disdain, and I purse my lips in response  
She is expecting a comment, I do not submit  
'Why is your hair straight?'  
'People like it better this way.'  
'But didn't it turn out like Madeline's?'  
'I don't have time to do my hair each morning,  
nor do I have time to mock play violin in the small corners of rooms,  
hoping to be someone I am not'  
Tears well in her eyes—  
I think how sensitive she is to be hurt by something so simple.  
When I arrive to school that morning, I cry in the bathroom.



Mother Nature~ Padme Cross, 9, Pottery



# ROOTS

Louisa Koon, 11, Fiction

Blurry hues of greens and yellows darted through Ida's eyes as her car plowed through the old, windy roads of the countryside. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been there. The fields seemed like they'd continue forever, one crop after another. They continued long after the roads turned from the dark, city asphalt to the dusty dirt roads she'd grown up on. But it didn't feel like home.

The dirt roads ended at an empty cul-de-sac, and the car trundled to a stop. The car door opened and a cane stepped out, followed by one foot, then the other. Ida stood in the weed-ridden lawn she once called home and stared up at the decaying house she once called her castle. A scarecrow—her old, loyal guard—stood watch just outside in the garden, his face threadbare and tattered from years of lonesome neglect. The old woman hobbled up to him and placed a hand on his arm, catching her breath.

"You've seen better days, Cassius, my dear."

The scarecrow replied with an empty stare. Once, he would've shaken his head and laughed with Ida. Later, he would've chased her around the garden, teetering after her until her face was a brilliant radish red.

Ida kicked the rotting remains of a radish across the path. It probably wasn't ever real, anyway. Perhaps her parents had been right. They had never believed her when she was a little girl—her adventures with Cassius, how the trees would sing in the wind if you listened close enough, how the woods behind the house were alive. They never understood why Ida cried so hard when the scarecrow lost his head one morning to a battle with an unusually large crow. They only laughed at her relief when her mother sewed his head back on—bringing him back to life. To them, it was all just childish fantasies. Their disbelief never bugged Ida—she had grown to ignore their perturbed stares and to tune out the semi-drunken arguments over child psychology that would carry into Ida's bedroom from the kitchen late at night.

It didn't bug her until the night two men, dressed in black, grabbed her by the arms and pulled her out of bed. They carried her, arms and legs flailing, down the stairs and out to where a car waited in the driveway. They pushed Ida into the backseat. Her parents stood by the car door, tears in their eyes.

"It's for your own good, sweetheart. These stories you believe in—they aren't real. They must stop. These men will help you. They will take you somewhere you will get the help you need. Somewhere that helps troubled children like you."

"No. Mama, please. You have to trust me. Please, don't do this. I'm telling you the truth!"

"I'm sorry, Ida. We're only doing this because we love you."

The car door slammed shut. The backseat reeked of cigarettes, and the leather seats itched against Ida's skin. The two men got in and drove off with Ida into the night. One of them lit a cigarette. The smoke carried into the backseat and burned Ida's throat, her eyes swelled with tears. That night, Ida was brought to Miss Dewitt's Home for Unladylike Ladies—a finishing school in the city. Miss Dewitt's Home for Unladylike Ladies was Ida's home for the next six years. When she graduated, she was allowed to return home, but home never felt the same. She moved out a year later and never returned. Her parents never looked for her, never called, never wrote, and Ida never once looked back. Now, 60 years later, Ida stood in the weed-ridden garden she once called home and stared up at the decaying house she once called her castle, now nothing more than ghosts of her past.

Her parents had both been dead for some time now. Her mother—cancer. Her father—heartbreak. He drowned himself in alcohol after she died. Ida had been to the funeral—said her goodbyes, used her years of practicing polite conversation from Miss Dewitt's Home to pretend to enjoy the company of her extended family and childhood friends. But, now, all that was left of her parents was the trauma-tainted memories and the derelict house with the untamed garden. The memories—she could live with—after all, she figured her memory would start to fail her in a few years, anyway. But, the garden? The house? No. It had to go. It just couldn't stay.

Her frail hands gripping the rail, Ida climbed the steps to the veranda. Each step creaked out years of dust and disuse, and cobweb chandeliers hung from the ceiling, draping silk robes over Ida as she made her way to the front door. She decided the porch was where she must start and she knew her parents kept a broom just inside. Ida crept through the house, the splitting hardwood beneath her feet groaned with every step she took. Sunlight beamed through the windows and cast dark, foreboding shadows across the dust-covered floorboards—filling the house with a desolate, haunted spirit. Ida tiptoed the rest of the way toward the broom cupboard. She didn't want to wake up any ghosts from her past.



**A Broken Barn~ x 10, Photograph**

On the porch, spiders' silken chandeliers danced in the late afternoon sun, spinning warm tones of light in a mirrorball across the yard. Humming the tune of a classical piece she'd long forgotten the name of, Ida beat the cobwebs with the broom. She gave a half-smile of satisfaction and waltzed, broom in hand, across the porch—sweeping away years of dirt and remnants of her past with every stroke.

"What are you doing?" A curious voice called from the garden, interrupting the encore of Ida's hummed string quartet.

"I'm cleaning this place up. That's what I'm doing."

"Why?"

Ida looked up. A young boy stood in the garden. He was six, maybe seven, eight at the most. His curly hair, disheveled and wild, pointed in every direction. He had dirt smudged on his cheeks.

"So I can sell it."

"But why?"

"You ask a lot of questions, dear boy. Where did you come from?"

The boy narrowed his eyes at the old woman. "Why should I tell you? You're a *stranger*."

"Have it your way then. I have work to do. Be off with you now".

The boy put his hands in his pockets and kicked his feet. He was barefoot. He shrugged. "Fine. I live just down the road. My name's Kirrily. What's yours?"

"Ida".

"Ida," the boy repeated. "that's a strange name."

"Why, how thoughtful of you to say."

Ida stopped sweeping. The dusking sky told her the day's work was done. "Run along home, Kirrily. The sun's almost set and your parents must be expecting you."

No response. Kirrily stared blankly past Ida toward the woods at the garden's edge.

"Kirrily?"

"Hmm?" The boy looked up, lost in thought. Ida wondered if he had heard her at all.

"Can I come back tomorrow? Please? I promise I can help. I can sweep, or or or dust, or—"

A smile crept along the wrinkles of Ida's cheeks. "Goodnight, Kirrily."

Kirrily waved to the old woman before running through the garden and down the dry-weathered road, dirt flying from his heels as he ran. He tipped his head goodbye to the scarecrow in the garden as he passed. "night Cassius!"

The broom dropped from Ida's hand, followed by her jaw. She closed her eyes and shook her head, not believing what she had just heard. How could he ever know the scarecrow's name? Ida opened her eyes. "Kirrily, how?" But the boy was gone. Disappeared into the night. Only the scarecrow was left standing in the garden, he stared back at her, his face threadbare and tattered.

That night, Ida woke up dreaming. She was four. Possibly five. She was in the garden with her parents. Her mother was planting radishes while her father worked, stuffing the arms of an old patchwork jacket with straw. It felt familiar—too real to be a dream. There, Ida sat in the grass, legs crisscrossed, painting a face on an old burlap sack.



She giggled as the brush accidentally grazed her hands, tickling the tips of her fingers. She finished and set the paintbrush down, admiring the painted, burlap face staring back at her. The wind blew around her, tousling her hair and leaving cold kisses on her nose. To Ida, the trees always sang in the wind, but today, they whispered a name.

“Cassius.”

“Cassius?” Ida repeated. The trees only nodded, shaking their leaves in agreement. Ida looked down at the burlap sack and grinned. “Hello, Cassius.” The painted face said nothing back, but smiled back up at her.

Ida awoke to the morning light peeking through the curtains in her childhood room. Mourning doves sang outside her window, stirring her from sleep. Her back ached. As she walked to the kitchen, Ida hummed a string quartet—this time Dimitri Shostakovich’s “Waltz No.2”—the wooden floorboards creaking along as she hobbled down the hallway. In the kitchen, Ida poured herself a glass of grapefruit juice and buttered a slice of toast. As she ate, she found comfort in the silence around her. A silence short-lived. The screen to the backdoor slammed open and Kirrily walked in. Ida swallowed and muttered a series of unrepeatable impertinences under her breath.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you it’s polite to knock?”

“I’m only here to help,” Kirrily said, smiling an impish grin.

“Hmmf.”

Ida placed her dishes in the sink, murmuring about the good Miss Dewitt’s Home for Unladylike Ladies would do for him. Nonetheless, she set Kirrily to work, dusting the old pictures on the credenza and packing them into bubble-wrapped boxes. He worked diligently, not seeming to mind Ida’s humming.

She found Kirrily to be a strange sort. In a way, he reminded her of herself. Perhaps they knew each other in a past life. She found it odd how a boy his age wanted to help an old lady such as herself, and sort through the remnants of her childhood. But she was grateful for his company.

“Ida, who is this?” The boy asked. He held a picture inside a tarnished silver frame. In it, a young Ida, not much younger than Kirrily smiled back at the old woman.

“A friend. From long ago. I don’t know what happened to her.”

“Oh,” Kirrily replied. “She reminds me of you.”

“Hmm.”

Kirrily glared at the picture, his eyes detailing over a figure in the bottom left corner, the glare from the glass blocked Ida’s view. Kirrily cleared his throat.

“Why didn’t you come back?”

“Whatever do you mean, dear boy?”

"You've been gone for years. Everyone's missed you."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. What are you saying?" Ida thought of her parents. Surely not them. But if not them, then who?

"All of us," Kirrily said, fingers curling around the tarnished frame.

"All of us?"

"All of us," the boy repeated. "The garden, the woods, Cassius. Me."

Ida pinched her wrist. She must still be dreaming. "No, Kirrily. You're wrong. Those are just stories. The woods are just woods, the garden is just a garden. Cassius is nothing more than a scarecrow. Once, I might've agreed with you. But I've grown up now. I know better than to believe in such childish things." Ida took the picture from his hands. "You are a very sweet boy, but you need to go now. I have work to do. This place needs to be clean or it will never sell."

Kirrily stomped his foot and dust stirred up from the floorboards. It swirled around his ankles in a tornado before settling atop his bare feet.

"I don't want you to sell the house. You can't!"

"It's already settled, I'm not staying here."

The wind blew outside and the trees rocked back and forth—their leaves shook, arguing with one another.

Kirrily's face flushed, a shade somewhere between beet red and radish.

"But you can't! I don't want you to go. We need you, Ida. I need you!"

"Enough, Kirrily. Go home."

The house groaned, the wooden walls croaking in the wind. Somewhere a shingle fell off and flew away.

Kirrily stomped again, balling his fists at his side along the seams of his grass-stained overalls. "Why won't you just listen to me?"

"Ida gripped the picture frame.

"Because it's not real, Kirilly!"

The house went quiet. The air—still and stale, even the mourning doves outside stopped singing. Kirrily trembled as tears swelled in his eyes. Ida recognized that look. She once had that look. Standing in front of her, Ida no longer saw Kirrily, but a younger version of herself—all those years ago. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror hanging above the credenza's dusty rows of pictures. Horrified, her mother stood staring back at her through the glass. Ida had become the very person she promised herself she would never grow up to be.

"Kirrily, I—"

Kirrily turned and sprinted out the door.

"Kirrily, wait!" Barefoot, Ida hobbled after him into the garden, but it was too late. He had disappeared into the woods. Ida gripped the picture frame in her hands. Looking down, she studied its depiction—it was a picture of Ida and her mother.

Standing in the radish beds, her mother's dirt-covered hands held a young Ida, who grinned, clutching a burlap sack with a painted face. Staring at the photograph, Ida's eyes focused on the bottom left corner of the landscape, where a small, curly-headed boy with a dirt-freckled face crouched at the edge of the woods. Kirrily.

Ida dropped the silver frame and it fell to the ground, glass shattering on the rocks. She stumbled back, staggering into the stiff stature of the scarecrow behind her.

"Cassius?" she asked, blinking up at him. The scarecrow blinked back, then nodded his head. He teetered up and down, hopping circles around the old woman.

"Oh, Cassius!" Ida rejoiced. Reunited with her old companion and most loyal watchguard, Ida felt a connection to the garden she hadn't felt in years. A connection that tugged at her feet and drew her toward the earth. Like roots. Ida made her way through the garden to the for sale sign that stood where the empty cul-de-sac met the road. She clutched her cane, holding it like a baseball bat and winding it up behind her. She beat the sign until it lay face down in the road. Ida was home.

Every morning, the sun would wake Ida up and she would sit on the porch, listening to the mourning doves call. She stopped beating the cobwebs and instead, admired the silk chandeliers that had, once again, installed themselves across the ceilings. Ida had given up looking for Kirrily. After he had disappeared that morning two years ago, Ida looked for him every day. Every day, she'd walk past the cul-de-sac and down the dirt road. She searched for a house, hidden in the woods—searching for any traces of the boy. But she never found any. It was almost as if he had never existed.

Ida's age had caught up to her. Her bones ached with every breath, and her eyes were not what they once were. She had begun to doubt if she could even remember what the little boy looked like. Ida stared at the garden from the porch, the morning dew reflecting like mirrorballs onto Ida's glasses. She hummed a soft sonata to the sky and closed her eyes, swaying her head gently to its rhythm.

When she opened her eyes, a young boy stood in front of her. He was six, maybe seven, eight at the most. His curly hair, disheveled and wild, pointed in every direction. He had dirt smudged on his cheeks. He looked familiar. The boy held out a hand to the old woman, which she took graciously, and he helped her to her feet. The two walked together, hand in hand, through the garden, disappearing into the woods. The scarecrow, who kept watch over the garden, tipped his head as they passed. His face threadbare and tattered, once more.



# Fallen?

Evan Brooks, 12, Poetry

(Inspired by Fallen Tree by Alexandra Calame)

Calm

for now

Before The Storm

The canvas for a Woodpecker's Painting

The support beams of

Unknown natural

phenomena

A Home for the fragile

A Hideaway for the shunned

Ring around the rosie

Rings on fingers

Rings of the Promise

of Possibility

of both Safety and Security

both Love and Loss

both Life and Death

A Splintering Shattering Raining

Destruction

Begin

A search for a new home

A new hideaway

Unseasonal Migrants

Toppled over towers by the

electric Storm-Child's limbs

Curled around

Cavern-esque imagery

Fake filigree

Can you trust the woody smile of your former protector's doppelganger?

Can you trust the eye of the storm?

Do you know it's gone?

If only I knew

If only I had heard it happen



# ART

## Catherine Bolton, 11, Fiction

Something's happened. I don't know what, but I know I don't like it. An earthquake, maybe? I don't know. I look up to the Moon for answers. She's coming straight at me, heading toward our Earth like a confrontation I can't escape. Is this how the world will end? Because of something we've done, the Moon now seeks revenge? The scare is enough payback, everybody else down here is freaking out. Please show us mercy, Moon. I see so many running from it, into the woods. They beckon others to follow. Yet I stand here asking the Moon why she sends them fleeing. She comes closer and closer until she passes me by. Where is she heading if not for Earth? A glimmer of red shines from the woods, where everybody was headed earlier. I follow the silence, hoping to find chaos somewhere underneath the thick foliage I once considered inviting. When I finally find my way out of the blankets of leaves, I am standing in some sort of camp. Tents upon tents, housing those who were once my neighbors. Most of their houses still stand firm, so why do they run away? Scattered panicked conversations and cries flood my ears. A fire crackles in the middle of all tents, many huddled around for warmth. It's July.

"OK, everybody, listen here!" John Barbour of Cornwall St. calls. Just the other day I was on a run around the neighborhood and caught him reading the paper on that creaky porch of his. He'd always been so serene. Turns out those traits don't carry into the end of the world. "Those whose houses are in ruins, find a neighbor whose house you can stay in for the night!"

He backs down as questions of "Can I stay at yours tonight?" ring throughout the camp. Some take off running immediately, entering any house far away enough from theirs that they deemed it safe. People emerge from the forest, flooding the neighborhood. I follow a group back to my house, Stacy Hodges and two guys she met that night. I have one bedroom to give to them. They go upstairs immediately to rest. I go out on the front porch for a smoke.

The Moon greets me once again, but I don't run this time. It's getting closer and closer again, but this time I know it will pass me by. She doesn't want to hurt me. She's coming as close as she was before, then she stops.

I get the feeling that something is wrong with Stacy and the men upstairs. This is the time I will panic tonight. I rush up the steps, each one feeling as if it takes longer to get up than the one before. As I run to my room, the hallway narrows. I make it to the bedroom just in time, but they are gone. The bed is made, everything cleaned up, all quiet again.

I peek out the window, looking to the Moon for answers, but she's back in her spot far away. I get the feeling she won't be moving again any time soon. The silence is deafening, but I might as well get used to it. I have a feeling it will last forever.

I take one more drag of my cigarette before putting it out on the ashtray on my bedside table. I sit on my bed and look to the Moon one more time. She smiles down at me. She's the only one I needed all along.



**Under the Moon~Anonymous , Pottery**



# Spring Moments

Louisa Koon, 11, Poetry

Wind carrying spring's  
first breath across the treeline  
and winter's last gasp

Wind carrying spring's  
first breath across the treeline  
and winter's last gasp

The soils soft crunch  
Beneath the palm of my hand  
An ant scurries by

Whistling wind blows  
the brown leaf litter towards  
the green grass and me

Where are you going?  
My little scurrying friend  
Are you late for tea?

The texture of bark  
rough against my soft blue jeans  
so harsh so gentle

The flaxen-haired girl  
hidden behind the old bush  
squats like a child

Feelings of Joy~ Mia Irving, 10, Mixed Media

# FISHTANK

Wilson Vest, 11, Fiction

The arid desert of the Lionfish tank eerily contrasts the rest of the life-filled aquarium as if swallowing all the water from its adjacent exhibits. The stillness of the glass-like block of water in the tank is charged through by a hopeful surge of life as the water filter lonesomely releases some air bubbles to the surface of the empty water. The lionfish was always the first I came to see as a kid, but now, the tank is empty. As I turn away, I see the same calm in the rest of the tanks, void of any life. They were there. Weren't they? I move onward, hoping to find some proof of the life that had been here. I pass by the seahorses, grouper, jellyfish, the touch tank where kids go to put their hands in the water and feel the slimy bodies of stingrays and small sharks: all empty. Making my way to the food court, I notice something else: I haven't seen any other people here either. My steps quickening, I hear the thumping of the heart in my chest frantically grow louder. If I keep going straight forward, there must be another person, or at least an exit. Running at this point, I pass signs that read "Reptiles and Amphibians," "Ancient Monsters of the Sea," the thumping grows even louder: "Crustaceans," "Piranhas," "Flounder," "Rockfish." However, at the sight of this next sign, my heart drops.

"Lionfish"

And there on the ground, where I had previously been standing, I see it, in a puddle of bleak, rapidly fading water, brown and white fins writhing desperately, wriggling like a worm on the drying sidewalk after the rain, there on the dark bluish-black aquarium carpet, is a lionfish.

Alone.



Can You Find Him?~ Anonymous, Pottery



# Dimensions

## Sophia Smith, 11, Poetry

"Sometimes, I feel that you live in the fourth dimension, that is why I feel your eyes watching from behind as I speak to you face to face."

"What do you mean?"

*I mean that somehow, you are all around me.*

"I mean that somehow, I know you know."

"I am looking into your eyes at this moment."

*I mean that if I were to turn around, you would be looking at me still, not at my eyes but at my messy part and tense shoulders. And that moment still exists right now.*

"I know."

*You are still there, in front of me and behind me and at every side  
Infinitely*

"Why do you make that face?"

*I know that you know.*

"I am just thinking."

*I can hear the wind, knocking gently at my ears*

*Somewhere distant, far from here.*

*Where objects don't exist, where you are everywhere.*

*Where you are everything.*

"What do you make of this weather?"

"I'm cold."

"The sun is out."

"I know."

*You know.*

"Please tell me what is wrong."

The words lilt up as a question:

"Please tell me what is wrong?"

*I wonder— why you ask questions that you know the answer to.*

*I wonder why you won't just admit it.*

"I know you know."

*I know it.*

"You are beautiful in the sunlight."

*You are all around me. You exist in every place.*

*Somehow I know nothing.*

"Don't look at me like that."



# DELIRIOUS ESCAPE

Matthew Baraki, 11, Fiction

A frigid gale glides over every follicle of hair, stimulating the clusters of nerves running throughout your adrenaline-fueled body, counteracting the eruption of energy escaping your skin. 70. As the force of gust builds and your temperature rapidly fluctuates, your body drowns in the solace of numbness, thoughts of regret and remorse vacant, left forgotten in the rearview mirror. 80. In an attempt to release pent-up mental pressure, you exert your pains into the chilled steel pedal. 90. Your sight fades to black and tunnel vision. Your mind is empty, but your body never felt more active. On the brink of death, but never more alive. 0.



Purple Glasses~ Jessica Worden 11, Pastel

## 8

### Matthew Baraki, 11, Poetry

I am 8.

A consistent and infinite loop,  
at any point in time, on a predictable path.

No deviation in its flow, always returning to the origin,  
bypassing any obstacles or signs to stop.

I am 8.

Conceited in its outward symmetrical perfection,  
a mere facade created to conceal the  
countless loops of self-reflection:  
a never-ending circuit of going over every part of itself.



Metropolitan~ Thompson Murray, 12, Mixed Media

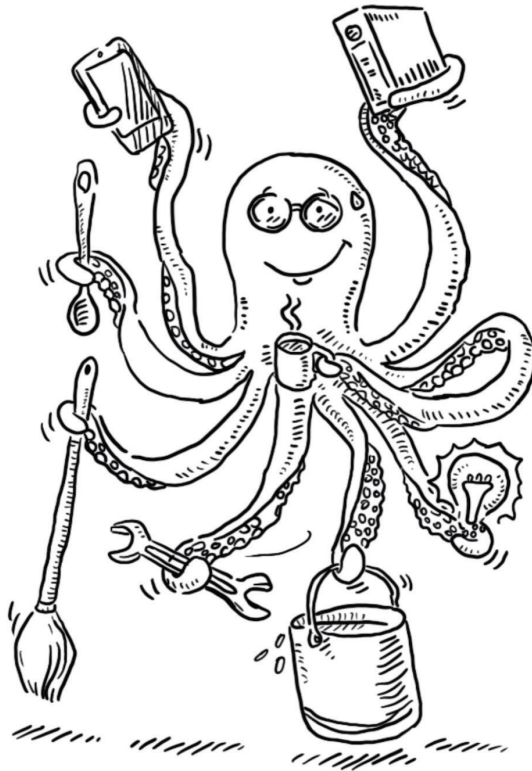
# My Special Octopus

Jocelyn Davis, 12 , Poem, Illustration

(Inspired by Shel Silverstein's poems and illustrations)

Octopuses have many hearts.  
In fact, mine has three.  
My octopus can do many things  
He newly learned tai chi  
What can your octopus do, you say?  
She can take surveys?  
Well, my octopus has blue blood and can turn black, brown, orange, and red.  
Oh ... yours does, too, you say?

Well, I've come to the realization that mine can play a mean tambourine.  
What's that now?  
Yours can do origami?  
Oh wow.  
Well, does your octopus have nine brains?  
Because mine does, and he came from Spain!  
Oh she does too, and she's a good decorator?  
She also likes to entertain?  
Whatever, mine's still better.



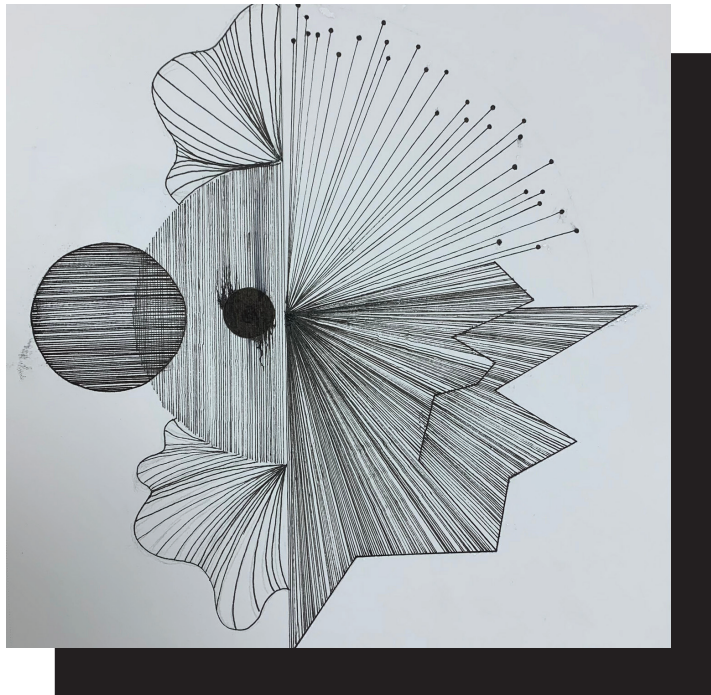
Octaman~ Jocelyn Davis, 12, Illustration



# GOODNIGHT MOUSE

**Louisa Koon, 11, Fiction**

Deep within a secluded part of the wood, blanketed by a dull layer of fog, stood an old oak tree. The tree was hollow and wrapped in a thick, twisted coat of ivy and moss. The ivy was coarse and unwelcoming, but oh how the moss was soft. It was the kind of soft that's soothing and inviting and gives you a slight feeling of nostalgia. You wouldn't be able to put your finger on it but it felt like home. A pervasive smell of must wandered through the forest. Confused, it walked circles around the old oak tree before billowing its way into the hollow of the trunk and disappearing into its depths. The air was cold. Winter had stolen the sun that used to shine through the treetops in abundance, scattering patches of warmth across the forest floor. Instead, only the moon shone down, his face wrinkled with craters.



**Dynamics~ Diana Almeida, 12, Pen**

Perched at the entrance to the hollow in the old oak, sat a mouse. Nest nowhere in sight. She was lonely. She stared up at the old man in the moon, her eyes searching for the smallest crumb of comfort. The moon smiled down back at her, his eyes twinkling like the stars that peppered the sky around him. She became lost in his detail—the dimpling in his cheeks, the creases in his furrowed, timeworn brow. He was objectively beautiful, yet perfectly asymmetrical. Enchanted by his beauty, the mouse drifted toward slumber. Through heavy eyelids, she could still feel his presence. His opaque, cratered face watching her from his starlit perch. The moon smiled down at her once more before vanishing behind the dull layer of fog.

# Ancient Poet

Benett Vance, 12, Poetry

“Spoiled like old milk” the ancient replied  
The well of knowledge withered and dried  
Gone away and back again  
As dawn denotes a new night's end  
Whether or not what's known is true  
What's up to me is now up to you  
The frenzied truth through a temporal haze  
Lost to all but the ancient's gaze  
The gates of wisdom locked and sealed  
It's antique secrets never revealed  
I say this now and warn the well  
On the past one should not dwell  
Don't hail your maker but do not disgrace  
What has been given and who'll take your place  
To the worms all are equal  
Though the opinion isn't so  
And as does the garden hatred will grow  
Conflict itself is a foolish notion  
To challenge the goal of joyful promotion  
As it is to most, these words will be lost  
But for those who will listen they'll hang in your thoughts  
The ramblings of a poet who thinks himself wise  
Though offers no solution to this pointless reprize

# Love Letter To The Sun

Louisa Koon, 11, Poetry

When on my dark and dimpled face you shine  
And through and far across our starry brood  
A face, oh so much prettier than mine  
Looks to me softly in my solitude.  
Pulling me from this lonesome, dreary space  
Your gaze, your radiance, how do I crave  
Your sunlit kisses to pepper my face  
I love you, I love you, from now till grave.  
When even then, I'll remember your eyes  
Their gentle glow, their warm pools of honey  
For them, I will wait, unto your demise  
But don't go, my love, my sun, don't leave me  
For come dusk, come darkness, it's you I rue  
Oh, this heavy burden, this curse of you.



# Meet Ceol [kyol]



What's up, everyone! My name is Ceol. I'm from Fantasy, Ireland, and I'm a fae. I came to the overworld to experience human life because I was an outcast in the fae world for looking more human than the rest. My passion is music, but I'm quiet and reserved unless I'm playing the drums—then I love to be as loud as possible and feel the surrounding beat. Some fun facts about me are I like sugar in my tea but not in my coffee, and my favorite mornings are when the fog lingers and the grass is still wet with dew. I joined the society after playing the final version of my latest drum piece. When my foot taps the base, my heart and the rest of my body move faster, then my breath catches up with me. One day though, I had a new sensation: My ears tingled and I saw the musical notes I had just played on my drums. My ears felt like they were growing. I felt along the sides of my head, expecting to feel my human ears—the ones that had always been my biggest insecurity; instead, I felt them stretching. I looked into my mirror and saw that I finally had ears to match other faes, but, still, something was different. Night had just fallen, and I could hear the sound of what would normally be crickets humming, only it was like a whole symphony of tiny violins and drums. I was given the ability to hear all music, no matter how big or small, and I can now bring attention to those who are not often heard. I have become a master of music.

# Symphony of Solitude

Matthew Baraki, II, Fiction

The mold has blossomed to envelop every crevice of the table. I've picked up a habit of seeing if the new blotches resemble familiar objects, which I've realized to be a pitiful form of cloud-watching. I think I've just stumbled upon my new favorite: "The Bominable Snowman," a feeble version of its famous counterpart. I mentally update my list and search for the next wonder. The splinters from the flipped desk against my back no longer bother me, for they've already settled into their usual spots; honestly, it's serene, the pain from a knot of muscles subdued, now replaced by a negligible prick I've come to tolerate. I've positioned myself in the farthest corner of darkness of what now feels like a room devoid of movement, a sharp contrast to the vibrant concert of the prior hour. Now the only sign of life comes from a faint ambient hum. The vibrations waft through the air and the silence seems to ring.

I get flashbacks to the horrendous 5th-grade bell recital attended by the entire school each month despite everyone's pleas for help. Now I opt to skip them whenever possible, the constant reminder that I was one of those devils only two years ago feels like a shot in the foot. But no, this hum is different. It chimes. It chimes like the bells of Heaven's Gate, carrying a soul-lifting cadence of life with every reverberation. It's odd that I think that.

I've never been religious. The idea of some imaginary being with no proof of existence dictating my life never made sense, and even less so an afterlife in which you float above the clouds or reincarnate into a random tree or whatever. Not that it would be bad to be a tree. Trees have it easy. Trees spend their entire lives with the same trees, like a family. They don't have to deal with the struggles of abandonment. They don't have to experience other trees packing up and leaving them to starve and suffer through thunderstorms and fires. They've never had to experience countless court battles of custody where nobody wants them, where nobody sees their value. Trees can't unders—

The ever-growing shaking of the desk in front of me snaps my attention back to the present. I regain my composure and slowly maneuver to peer over and see the cause of the disturbance: Florence Bates is pressed against the desk trembling in a puddle of her own tears. Not surprising. I move back to my corner and look for something more intriguing. She doesn't deserve my attention. At home she'll recover in a bath of unconditional love and entitlement so what I do now has little meaning. As I look for my next object of interest, and for the first time in what feels like an eternity in this bunkered classroom, the ringing gets louder. I perk up and notice a melody seeming to form, the ringing now replaced by harmonic pops resembling a metronome. A four-count knock echoes from the door as the metronome cuts off, replaced by a faint chuckle.

A beat of rest drains the room of any sound that might have existed, and as it passes and comes to an end, it sparks the eruption of a symphony. An explosive 808 grenade blows the hinges off the door and the earlier concert returns. The synchronous shrieks harmonize in agony as the metronome returns, but this time more like a hit hat pattern of bullets. The furniture flying and falling shakes the room with a panicked bass. The hit hats pan left to right and ear to ear as the harmony diminishes. I lock eyes with the conductor, and as quickly as the symphony erupted, it cuts to conclusion. And for the first time I experience the true silence of darkness.



Splintering Shards- Manning Stewart, II, Photograph



# Levi Lizard Escapes The Hell Hole

(For Scuille the English Cocker Spaniel)

Sophia Smith, 11, Fiction

Levi Lizard stuck his nostrils against the glass of his cage. His little lizard eyes bulged out of their sockets as he watched the people come and go. The colors were bright and lively, but the inside of his cage felt monochromatic, a lonely little space cut off from the world.

That morning, he decided it was the day. He would present himself in the best way possible and be rid of this space forever. He dipped his little fingers in his water bowl and washed his hands and his face. He rubbed the dead scales off his back. He was shiny, he was beautiful. What human wouldn't want him? But as the sun danced slowly across the sky, he started losing hope once more, like each of the days before.

A woman with a golden-haired dog walked by, and the dog stared curiously at Levi. His inquisitive eyes stared down the perfectly pointed snout that presented a stark black nose at the tip. Levi wondered if this dog had a lovely basket at home to sit in, maybe a big yard to run around and play with wild lizards that Levi could only envy.

The dog trotted cheerily along the tiled floor, his bouncing tail adorned with long wavy hair that shone in the afternoon sun. Levi was jealous because he knew he could never be tied to a leash and paraded around the human world. Instead, he would live his sad, old life in this tiny, stupid little smudged glass cage. When he realized that this day was yet another failure, he retreated into his hidey hole, curling up under the brush. Just as he was drifting into his sorrowful sentiment, a thunderous sound of the lid being lifted surrounded him, interrupting his wonderful spout of being a miserable victim in this world. Was he being fed this early into the afternoon? As he cautiously stuck his head from the entrance of his home, he saw the dog with the stark black nose beaming at him through the glass wall. He was being lifted, into the air and out of the cage, out of this hell hole.



Piper's Spo to Skylar Romero, 10, Photography

He closed his eyes, the comforting uncertainty of his future enveloping his tired joints and sleepy body. And when the light poured onto him again, the cheery dog greeted him with a blink of those inquisitive eyes.

# Sandman

## Wilson Vest, II, Fiction

The spiraling fog spread itself across the ever-stretching, gloomy desert and seemed to twist in impossible geometries as if denying the guidance that physics had suggested of it. The Sahara continued endlessly, and its lifelessness was unbroken by any signs of change. However, the emptiness was eventually interrupted by something in the distance that was also tumbling over into the dark, clouded sky—smoke. The fire inside took the focus of my eyes and thawed the crippled, frozen bone inside my hands. Once the fire had soothed my chill, my eyes softened their gaze and lifted—and there they were again: huddled together like a numberless mass of catfish madly writhing against one another in pursuit of the blood-spurting, cleaved finger that accidentally made its way into the terrible ink-black water of the lake.

The smoke rapidly began to unwind itself then shakily return to its burning coals, and the fog followed. The twisting settled itself, and I watched in terror as they got closer to me, but before they could wrap their wriggling clutches around my neck, my eyes frantically slammed themselves open, and I shot up from the cold, hard ground upon which the only cushioning was a few layers of linen.

Ever since my plane and I were shot down over the desert and my aimless wandering led me to the small, Egyptian town of Alhulm, I had been engrossed by the eeriest dreams, always turning, always twisting. But today was my last day in the town, for the wounds on my body had finally healed to the amount which doctors in the town deemed acceptable.

The crunch of sand sounded with each heavy step as the horses carried me, and the two leading me forward, following the crooked limestone pathway to the great gateway at the border of the town. The familiarity of the trek was much too reminiscent of a far-off time or place to a man who had never been there before, and I noticed my consciousness drifting. Luckily, I was able to catch it just in time to see one of the man's horses buck up in resolute refusal to continue forward, and our other horses were just as adamant. Their legs tripped up against one another, and they let out their vocalizations of discontent. The two men dismounted the horses and tried their best to soothe them and I followed.

The horses' grueling breathing calmed, the defiant stomping settled, and the men climbed back aboard their saddles. But then, as a mouse does after locking eyes with an eagle soaring through the sky toward it, the horses bolted away in avoidance of their invisible pursuers and took their riders away with them. That's when I felt it too, turning away from the now distant horses and looking back toward the gate. Though I could see right through its rigid metal bars, it seemed too grand to lead to a place as desolate as the desert.

A howling wind suddenly erupted from behind me, and the Egyptian sky adorned itself with a turbulent ocean of clouds. The unceasing, stinging drops of water pierced my flesh, and my fear led me running toward the cold, unmoving metal doors of the gate. Fumbling at the lock, I turned my head back into the wind—and there they were, spiraling out from the desolate and glazed eye of the storm, the horrible mass of twisting arms, heads, legs, and other inhuman aberrational appendages, moving like a swarm of mosquitos flooding to their next victim to drink it dry, approached me.

Even through the terror I felt, I did not give in or turn. I kept still and watched the turning, the turning of the hellish conglomeration that seemed to twist in impossible geometries. It crept closer through the sky, climbing over clouds and gliding across the sand until it crept its way a couple of feet before me and settled, pulsated, and thrashed within itself for a moment before stretching out an arm to me. For a few moments, I stood there feeling the heavy rain soak my clothes and my skin, gazing upon the hand with a strange calm induced either by terror or familiarity—and I let out my own and took hold of the cold and barren palm. As its fingers wrapped themselves around mine, I felt its twig-like bones and the skin that had been loosely draped over them. As I looked back up and gazed into the empty, pansophical eyes of the agglomerate, a visceral rush of abhorrence charged through my body and I turned away—

And as I turned to flee through the gate, the world twisted itself as if the horrid mass of hands and arms had grabbed ahold of the tides of the Earth and swirled them so that the place where the horses had fled to, and the place I had come from, and the place that the tempest showered down its mighty torrent were all left and, as if the gods had instilled nepenthe's philter, were all forgotten on the other side of the obstruction of those horrible, beautiful, metallic bars of the immense gate.



# Would You Still Love Me If I Were a Worm?

Elise Waters, 11, Fiction

"Babe, be honest . . . would you still love me if I were a worm?" My fiancé looks at me expectantly.

"Uhh," I search for the right answer. She can't seriously expect me to answer yes to that. "You know I love you!" I turn up the car radio in hopes that it'll discourage her from pursuing the question any further.

A slow, mournful ballad comes on and a deep voice warbles, "*whyyyy doooon't yooou looove meeee?*"

She doesn't fall for it. "But would you still love me if I was a *worm*?!"

"Well, babe, c'mon. You'd be a *worm*."

Her face becomes stoney. "So?"

*Oh shit*. "No, no, nevermind! Love you!"

"No, no, you can tell me! What were you going to say?" She smiles sweetly.

"Nothing! I wasn't gonna say anything!"

Her smile is now fixed in place, her left eye twitching slightly. "*Tell me*."

"Well, yanno, it's just . . . you'd be a *worm*."

"Soo . . . you wouldn't still love me?"

"Uhh . . ." I proceed cautiously, "like, if you were a *worm*, probably not, but—"

"Are you serious?!!" She stares at me, betrayed.

I turn up the radio, frantically trying to find a way out of the situation. "*Whyyy dooon't yooou loooovee meeee*" blasts my ears.

"YOU SAID YOU'D ALWAYS LOVE ME!" she yells over the music. *Damn. It didn't work.*

"Wait, I'm not—"

*"I wiiiish yooou loooved meee!"*

"DON'T DENY WHAT YOU JUST SAID!"

"No wait! I didn't mean—"

*"Buuut yooou'll onlyyyy looove meeee conditionaaallyyy!"*

The car suddenly speeds up, hurtling along the highway. My fiancé looks at me, tears in her eyes. "Is this what this is? Conditional love?!"

"What?! No!!"

"But you said—"

"I SAID I WOULDN'T LOVE YOU IF YOU WERE A WORM! YOU'RE NOT GONNA TURN INTO A WORM, SO I STILL LOVE YOU!!!"

"OH, SO YOU ONLY LOVE ME FOR MY BODY?!"

"NO, I—"

"Yooou'll neverrrr looovee meee uncooooonditionallllyy!"

*I reach to turn the radio off, but she slaps my hand away, shouting, “OH PLEASE, DON’T ACT LIKE YOU DON’T RECOGNIZE SOME OF YOURSELF IN THE SONG!”*

*“WHAT?! YOU’RE CRAZY!!”*

*“FINE!”* The car comes to a sudden halt at a gas station. *“GET OUT!”*

*“ . . . what?”*

She turns the radio off (*Thank god.*) “Get out. I’m not driving you anywhere. I’m honestly not sure I even want to marry you anymore.” *Oh shit wait no wait what???*

*“Wait, no I—” What do I say what do I say???*

*“OUT.”*

I slowly walk into the gas station as the car drives off. As soon as I open the doors, a warbling voice greets me, singing “*Whyyyyy doooooon’t yooooou loooveee meee!*” I immediately exit and slam the door behind me. Stupid song.



Huh?~ Thompson Murray, 12, Digital



# The Barn Near My House

Grace D'Angelo, 11, Poetry

The barn near my house collapsed  
It was a sudden sort of thing  
No one noticed her creaking,  
the thin sheen of age coating her dappled planks  
Her hopeless cries as her boards bellowed with the weight of her burden  
And despite the wind's harsh kisses amongst her crown,  
the trees turned a blind eye to the brutality of time  
How does one ask her?  
Why did no one ask her?  
The Unsteady-maiden pushed by Nature's Breath  
She was falling—  
her fate sealed by the lick of light flush through her hair  
Why?

Why was she subjected to a pile of rubble  
An assortment of questions laid to rest under the anchor of time  
No one noticed the cracks that plagued her,  
I didn't notice the cracks that plagued her,  
Spiraling veins, lost without a heart  
No direction,  
No home to return to,  
  
did she ever have a home to return to?



# MEET PIXEL!



Greetings and Salutations! My name's Paxton, but I go by Pixel. I love watching classic movies, creating some of the latest social media trends, and writing articles for my local paper. I have struggled in the past with interviews—as it's hard for me to talk to people until I really know them. I hear you asking, "Why then would you choose journalism, Pixel?" Well, my friends, I love to share the stories of those around me.

I believe that if we just give others the time of day and a listening ear, we can learn an endless amount of things from each other. I joined the society after a musician shared a particularly challenging story with me, whom I shall not name to respect their privacy. The musician played while talking, which helped our thoughts and words flow. After that interview, my mind went blank, and all I could see when I closed my eyes was TV static. I stood from my desk in a blur and moved to my bed. I laid my head on the pillow, and when I awoke, I had taken on the form of Media with a TV set for a head. Now, at first this was a terrifying discovery, but I soon realized I could access all media and, in the blink of an eye, delete all hate or discriminatory comments on posts—allowing for a safer environment for all to share their creativity. I have incorporated an actual listening experience for this magazine's readers.

# REDMOND

CATHERINE BOLTON, 11, NONFICTION

Sometimes I stare at my phone giving every last bit of hope I have to the thought of receiving a notification with your name on it. I don't want to talk to you, though. I want you to want to talk to me. Not in the way that you do when you call me once a month so that you feel like you're keeping the friendship going. I want you to want to still know me. I tell the friends that I introduced you to about how much it hurts that you're no longer in my life.

"Yeah, she's left me on delivered for a few days now too, that's so weird!" They just don't get it. You were my everything and now you're a stranger. That's not the same as ignoring people who meant nothing to you. Did we even mean anything? Please just tell me, if I truly was the most important person in your life, why did you leave me?



GHOSTLY~ CAROLINE BARTON, 11, PHOTOGRAPHY

I don't like this. I want to go back to the lake, late nights on the dock, baking a cake, who I was before this godforsaken place infected me, and in turn, spread its virus to you. I want to go back to Folly beach, taking pictures under the outdoor shower and walks around the town after dark. I want to go back to a time before the ice began to grow thinner and thinner under you and me. I hate that I miss you. I should be mad, I'm the one who gets to be mad. I can't even go to the Coldstone where you used to work, or the theater where we saw *Frozen 2*, or the outlet mall anymore and that's on you. You don't care, how could you when you don't even know? How could you know about these things when you never call anymore? Well that's fine. I hope you have a blast with your new beautiful friends at your new beautiful school as you all take pictures together on the phone that still holds my name. All I'm left with is the memory of who you once were before I watched you slowly fade away. And I'll spend every second praying for the day when you are truly dead to me. That headstone will display the name of a traitor: Ellen Redmond.



# THE DOOR EXPLODED ON THE SPACE STATION

WES FLEISCHER, 11, FICTION

The hatch exploded, silently leaving a huge hole in the hull. In an instant, four hearts stopped beating. Their bodies flew out of the space station like they had been shot out of a cannon.

Bat, the Mathematics PhD graduate at Michigan State, was in charge of monitoring the data screens. "Axel, we have a negative reading on the first latch on door 22," he said. This was the most interesting thing he had seen all day. It gave him hope that he really was useful.

"That's the pressure lock on team B's research designation lab," Axel reminded his crew. He loved reminding his crew of everything because, of course, he was the captain of team C.

In its robotic voice, Amos, team C's AI astronaut, vocalized, "Amos has devised a possible solution, would you like to hear possible outcomes of going to check." Amos continued, "Possible outcomes of this exciting adventure are as follows." Amos printed out a small, yellow piece of paper with a list in black letters.

team B is functional—14% possibility

team B is no longer functional—86%

"Amos, I'm sure they are fine," the sweet, southern voice that always reminded Bat of Paula Deen from TV, belonged to Roshan, the Engineer who cheated off of Axel on the final exam. "Bat, darling boy, will you be a dear and contact team B in their quarters."

"Uhh, yes sure, Roshan." Bat reached over to the shiny microphone in the middle of the desk and pushed the connect button. "Team Bravo, this is Bat, requesting a status update."

When Bat let off the button, only white noise crept through the holes in the tiny speaker below the microphone.

"The probability that team B is no longer functional has just gone up to 97%," Amos interrupted the white noise.

"Ughh, now, Amos, we do not need your electronic doodad brain at this time," Roshan said.

"OK, Roshan, searching for answers for . . ."

"We need a recipe for spaghetti." Amos was still in its beta stage.

Bat felt his tongue start to swell. He felt hot with nervousness, like his body was getting tighter and tighter, crushing him from the outside. "I will check on Bravo," he said in a wobbly voice. "Amos, open door number 23, please.

"Opening." As the hatch slowly opened, the airlock hissed and pressurized the threshold between their room and Team B's research lab.

"OK, Amos, open the security lock," Bat said. A silent scream filled the room as team C was sucked into blackness, all happening in an instant.

[illegible]

# THE RENEGADE A-90; CHRONICLES OF A FAILED DETECTIVE

GRACE D'ANGELO, 11, FICTION

Captain's Log, Year 5023 — The Search Continues

We finally have a lead. Thirteen years of searching and I've finally scraped together enough beings to create my own squad. I had to make some adjustments from the original plan since I had trouble finding humans that wanted to participate in the search. And although we aren't all the same, I think this crew will take me far. We will catch this killer by the end of this year, mark my words!

Captain Ophelia Rights.

Ophelia Right, captain of *The Renegade A-90*, closed the window holding her previous entries and rose from her seat at the helm. An obnoxious knock at the door caught her attention.

"Come i—"

"Miss Right, ma'am, I have those papers you requested!" said the small cyborg, slamming open the door and dancing in place to keep a large stack of papers on her head.

"We've gone over this, Shelly; Captain is fine, please place them over on the desk," Ophelia said, sipping from her fourth mug of coffee, "and please refrain from slamming the door. That's the third time this week that you've pierced that wall." Shelly wobbled across the room and dropped the papers on the broad metal desk. She was about the size of a child, looking to be around ten or so, but the sections of her face that were metal detracted from the youthful look she once had.

"Captain Miss Right ma'am, is there anything else I can help you with?" Shelly shouted raising her biomechanical hand to her forehead in a salute. Pressing her hand to her head, Ophelia closed her eyes as she listened to the rambling of the short cyborg, her high-pitched voice giving her a headache. A piercing shriek pulled her out of her thoughts as Shelly raised her hand in the air, like a kid waiting for a teacher to call on them.

"Yes, Shelly?" Ophelia was tired. It had been a long time since she had been able to rest. From the rent payment on the ship coming up and the excessive amounts of paperwork necessary to maintain the ship, there was little room for sleep.

"Captain, ma'am, permission to exit the room, please?" Shelly said, her hand still against her forehead. It appeared to be stuck, unable to move from the position it was in due to the excessive amount of wear building up around her shoulder joint.



“You don’t have to ask, Shelly, and please take care of your joints. Remind me when we land on Proxima Centauri to resupply our oil reserves,” Ophelia said, opening a file and sliding some of the papers on the desk into it.

Shelly exited the room in a marching rhythm, her steps making the doorframe shake and groan. With her eyes closed, Ophelia sat in the worn chair in front of the desk, the jaded furniture grumbled as she settled her weight in it, wobbling. She opted to slide onto the floor, from where she pulled the large stack of papers into her lap, all records of life on Venus: records from the entrance gates, documenting all entries and exits of those with authorization and permission as well as archives containing missing person files. She had put in the order for them about a month ago with her commander, but there had been a misunderstanding amongst the crew, and Shelly had accidentally shredded the stack. After four days of constant apologies from Shelly, Ophelia had finally been able to confirm the transfer of files to the ship once again. Shuffling through the stack nothing stood out to the captain in the entries, they seemed normal except for an occasional ship carrying an important politician. The same with the exits, nothing unusual until the last paper in the stack: a record describing the exit of a ship, the captain’s ship, *The Renegade A-90*, but it didn't seem right.

The date seemed altered or maybe it was just incorrect, reading J-31-12, 5023. A loud knock sounded as Ophelia looked closer at the strange date.

“You may enter,” she called to whoever was knocking on the door.

The door slid open, and the door frame was filled with the mechanical body of the ship's faithful AI.

“Captain, I have brought another mug of caffeinated beverage for you,” the robotic voice of the tall AI said.

“Ruse, perfect timing. I could use your help with something,” Ophelia said standing with the paper containing the strange record on it.

“How can I assist you, Captain?” Ruse asked, tilting their head.

“What can you tell me about this date?” Ophelia asked, handing the paper to the AI who had their hands positioned ready to take them.

“After 3174, the previous modern-day model of the Gregorian calendar was altered to simply state the first letter of the month, followed by the number of days, finishing with the current day and the current year–”

“No, Ruse, not the history of the date, I mean this specific date,” Ophelia said pointing at the small date under the photo of the ship.

“If the records are correct, on the date of J-31-12, 5023 *The Renegade A-90* was awaiting a fuel refill on Mars,” Ruse said, glancing over the paper. “It seems like the information on this paper is incorrect based on the actual location of the ship at this date.”

This caught Ophelia off guard. “How is it possible that someone could imitate a government spaceship along with its crew? We’re part of the detective branch, not some vigilante group.” Ophelia looked at the AI, which had a blank look.

“Captain, the only solution I can find is that a rouge group from some organization must be targeting *The Renegade*,” Ruse said as they handed the paper back to Ophelia.

This puzzled Ophelia. The crew certainly wasn’t a threat when it came to completing the missions they were tasked with. No one should even know about *The Renegade*. The evidence was in the continuous mission that Ophelia still had since she had first received *The Renegade*. After spending twelve years in school, when Ophelia finally joined the detective squad, she had been tasked with what her superiors thought would be an easy job for the squad’s newbie. She hadn’t seen those superiors in ten years. They stopped checking in after Ophelia put in her request for backup on the case. They didn’t send anyone. They never sent anyone. After her superiors ignored her request, headquarters suggested that she seek her own help. It was an uphill battle from there. No human wanted to be part of a governmental detective crew that was tasked with tracking down a serial killer. This person wasn’t always a serial killer; there wasn’t a chance headquarters would give such a serious case to a newbie if they were. It started as a single murder, a secretary for the president of Venus. They found her body strewn across the floor of the break room, a deep stab wound across her midsection. After a detailed autopsy of the body, it became clear that the wound was caused by some sort of metal, which left no tracks because it was the same metal used in automail limbs, which around half of the population had. No fingerprints were found,, which lead headquarters to believe this entity had at least two automail limbs.

“Captain, I believe that this could possibly give us some details into the case. We’ve been on this scentless trail for years now, and I believe that we have finally found something to chase,” Ruse stated, their monotone voice giving no insight into what they thought about it.

“Ruse, please place an order to headquarters asking for a full report on the murders related to this case in the last fifteen years,” Ophelia ordered the AI, gazing at the projection on the wall that attempted to connect murders to this case. With a buzz of acknowledgment, Ruse turned and exited the room, leaving the captain to her thoughts. Ophelia sat back in her unstable chair and turned to her computer. If there was an impersonation of *The Renegade* then it shouldn’t be that hard to request all of the sightings of *The Renegade* in the last few months.

Detective Ophelia Right, Year 5023 — Report on the Metal Massacres

After careful inspection of the documents received from headquarters, it has come to my attention that there have been sightings of another *Renegade A-90* where this ship has not been. I will send along the document holding the false information about *The Renegade’s* whereabouts on J-31-12, 5023, along with the records from this ship of where it was at this time.

I would also like to request a full list of the documented arrivals and departures of The Renegade A-90.

Thank you for entrusting me with this case. I will not let you down.

Captain Ophelia Right.

Someone gently knocked at the door as Olivia sent the request and closed her computer.

"Enter," she said, the obvious exhaust present in her voice. A small blue arm skulked under the door, an eye-popping out when it was clear.

"Miss Right, a hologram has been projected in the news that Ruse believes will aid the case." The small eye on the end of the arm bobbed as the voice spoke.

"Thank you, Blue. I'll be down in a minute. Please project the hologram in the center of the control room and gather the rest of the crew to observe the message," Ophelia said, placing the paper containing the false *Renegade* into a file drawer. The small eye on the end of the arm popped back into the blue flesh and slowly slid under the door.

Ophelia took a deep breath looking up at the ceiling of the ship taking a second to debrief from the overwhelming knowledge gained on this case. She exited and climbed down the small ladder that connected her office to the living quarters and control room. Her small crew surrounded the small sliver of light that the hologram projector produced. A slew of "Captain!" sounded as Ophelia stepped into the room, and she gave a small wave. She glanced around the room and frowned when she noticed the small cyborg missing.

"Where's Shelly?" she questioned, looking at her crew. They shrugged, most of them looking away with blank looks on their faces.

"We can't afford to wait for her, please play the hologram, Ruse," Ophelia said, sitting down on a small couch next to Kait, the ship's mechanic.

"Right away Captain," Ruse said from behind the projector. There was a small click as the beam of light expanded into an image of a human with a metal ear, a microphone in his hand.

"After twelve hours, the body was found in the bathroom of the Apple Corporation's Robotic Limbs Warehouse on Venus. The body had a large stab wound to the heart but no murder weapon was discovered at the scene. After the autopsy, the cause of death was reported to be blood loss, and small traces of metal surrounded the wound. It seems that the weapon of choice was similar to a metal limb of sorts," the man reported, gesturing to the images that showed the scene of the murder. "The victim was a secretary of the CEO at this location. She had served the company for four years, coming up on her fifth this S-30." The man distorted as the beams of light slowly returned to their thin line and the audio cut out.

"Was that sufficient, Captain?" Ruse questioned peeking their head out from behind the projector controls.



“Yes, thank you for playing it, Ruse,” Ophelia said smiling at the AI gazing at her.

“What is this about, Captain?” Kait said.

Ophelia sighed at the formal behavior. “I believe that this has some connection to the case we’ve been following. The style of killing has a striking similarity to the previous murders that have happened in the past few years.”

The rest of the crew turned to their captain with curious eyes as she described the sighting of the other *Renegade* along with the trend of the metal found in each of the bodies.

A loud intercom noise interrupted Ophelia’s explanation: “Detective Ophelia Right, you are required on the planet Mars to investigate a threat made on the life of the CEO of the company Amazon. You are required to immediately report to Mars with proper authorization and license to prove your validity.”

Ophelia looked over to the mechanic of the crew, “Kait, please change the direction of the ship, we’re heading to Mars, and send a message to Shelly to return from wherever she is.”

“Yes, ma’am!” The robotic humanoid cheered, gripping hard onto the steering sticks and wheeling the ship around.

“You’re the detective squad?” The short, brown-haired male said, gazing at the abnormal group of creatures.

Ophelia sighed at the uncomfortable situation, “Yes we—”

“How dare you question the legitimacy of our Captain. Captain Ophelia Right has been on this case for over ten years, and you don’t even know what she looks like?” Shelly screamed jumping up and down behind Ruse.

“That’s enough, Shelly. Here’s our authorization,” Ophelia said, handing over her license and badge. It had been a long 36-hour flight following the work of putting our findings about the case in order.

“Go ahead in, they’re waiting for you,” a slightly taller man said, prompting the short man scrutinizing the documents to give them back. The short man nodded and stepped aside, letting the crew pass. Entering the tall building the atmosphere intensified. Ahead of the group was a large dark room with a small round table in the center surrounded by important-looking people, all dressed in suits or dresses.

“Come in, Ophelia Right,” a deep female voice flowed from the head of the table.

“And crew,” whispered Shelly to Ruse, whose shoulders she rode on.

“This meeting is specifically for the addressing of Captain Ophelia Right; therefore, they would only need to address the Captain,” Ruse’s voice boomed through the hallway.

Ophelia pressed her hand over her eyes, “Kait, please turn the volume on Ruse down.”

Kait rushed behind Ruse to adjust her volume, and the crew proceeded into the dark room under the gazes of the suited people.

"I assume you know why you're here, Detective Right," the woman at the head of the table said, staring at Ophelia.

"I was informed that there was a threat to a life, and I was called to come to investigate," Ophelia said, matching the stern women's stare. She had an inkling that this investigation was to test if she should still be placed on the serial killer's case. "May I ask why I have been chosen to investigate this threat?"

"Do you not feel as though you are certified for this case?" The woman said smiling at Ophelia. They were deliberately mocking her, trying to make her crack under pressure. Ophelia was fully aware of her status in this situation, a detective who had been unable to solve a case that had persisted for over ten years. The way they looked at her irked her. She knew that she was a failure as a detective, a disappointment to her field. She always tried her hardest to put on a brave and determined face in front of her crew, intimating the promise of fame, money, or even just the excitement of solving a mystery.

Glaring at the woman in front of her, Ophelia said, "No, just look at my crew, we are clearly quite qualified."

The woman frowned as she took in the strange arrangement of creatures surrounding the captain. Turning to the man standing behind her, she whispered something in his ear before getting up and heading toward the door. "Mavis, please inform them of the details, and, Miss Right, please be careful. This threat is serious. If you're not careful, you could get hurt," she said turning her back to the group and exiting through a side door.

"Gather round," the man named Mavis said as he laid out a large spread of papers. "The threat was sent sometime this morning at around 6:30 am. The target is the CEO of Amazon," he said pointing at the various papers. "Any questions so far," he asked looking at Ophelia.

"Not to be rude, Mr. Mavis, but you do know that we are a detective squad, not a SWAT team, right?" Shelly asked looking around at the members of the crew. Ophelia smiled at the cyborg; it was a good question. Why would headquarters want anything to do with a failed detective squad when it came to such an important person's life?

"You all have been called not so much to prevent the attack, but more to investigate the aftermath," Mavis said looking at Ophelia.

Blue was the next one to speak. "If I'm not mistaken, my good sir, you are proposing that we let this target die in order to catch this perpetrator?" Ophelia raised her brow at this suggestion. If what Blue was suggesting was true, then headquarters had no concern for this target.

"I wouldn't call it 'letting the target die' so much as a sacrifice for the greater good," Mavis said, looking at Blue with narrow eyes, "I would refrain from placing such accusations on your superiors."

Ophelia widened her eyes at his aggressive tone. Headquarters was asking her to turn a blind eye to the possible death of this man. It was absurd to think that the epitome of justice was asking one of their detectives to allow an innocent to die.

"You do understand what you are asking, Mr. Mavis?" Ophelia questioned the man.

He looked back at her with equal ferocity. "I do, do you understand what I'm asking you to do?" Neither of them was willing to back down.

"I think we understand the assignment, Mr. Mavis," she said, turning and gesturing to her crew to follow her out of the dark room.

"Captain I believe this is what we call a moral dilemma," Ruse said as they walked next to Ophelia.

"Kait, please turn Ruse's speak function off for the time being," Ophelia said as the rest of her crew bickered behind her. It was going to be a long night.

Loud noises from the control room awoke Ophelia as she tried to prepare herself for the long investigations to come. It was too early for the call from Mavis to come in, yet it seemed like someone in the crew was awake. Ophelia tiptoed out of her room and down the ladder into the control room. The darkness seemed to swallow her. She saw nobody in the room, yet the exit door was swinging as if it had just been opened. Ophelia sighed. Sometimes members of the crew would take a late-night walk. They would probably be back by the time Mavis called for the investigation. Sleeping would be difficult, so Ophelia went to her office to sort paperwork while she waited for dawn to break. After a few hours, Ophelia received a call from Mavis.

"It's time." Mavis's grating voice sounded like he had just woken up.

"We're on our way," Ophelia said, grabbing her coat from the back of her chair and descending the ladder. After reaching the control room, she pressed the call button to summon the rest of her crew. Three minutes passed, no sign of anyone. The ship was silent. Five minutes passed, and still no sign of life. At this rate she was going to be late. She gazed at her watch and decided it would be best to arrive at the scene without her crew and call them if she needed them.

Ophelia walked toward the security guard standing by the entrance of the building. "Detective Ophelia Right, here to conduct an investigation on a threat made," Ophelia said to the man, keeping her description vague so as to not cause questions.

The guard stared at her before stepping to the side. "Go ahead."

Ophelia nodded as the guard gestured her in. The lights were dim in the tall building, and the eerie chill of silence settled over Ophelia as she climbed the stairs leading to the top floor. She heard rustling and quiet voices.

She pulled out her stun gun as she crept up to the CEO's office, her back pressed against the frame as she slowly got into position to kick the door open. "Hold your hands above your head!" Ophelia yelled as she kicked open the door and pointed her gun at the figures in front of her. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the dimly lit room and the familiar figures in front of her.

Ophelia slowly lowered her gun as she gazed at her crew obviously helping Shelly murder this woman. Her eyes landed on Ruse, holding down the woman by the shoulders. Blood covered their screen, making their eyes hard to see. She looked at the woman's mouth, which was held closed by a blue arm to muffle her screams. Kait stood behind Ruse, just watching the scene as she wrote something down on a piece of paper. And lastly, Ophelia's eyes landed on Shelly. The small cyborg held completely still as she gazed into her captain's eyes. She had never seen this look in Shelly's eyes before. The cyborg was normally giddy, bouncing around the ship trying to solve others' problems, even from the first time Ophelia met her.

The first time Ophelia had met Shelly was when she had been assigned her first case. It had been about a month of searching for clues and the detective was starting to get burnt out with the lack of discoveries. She had decided to call it a night and headed to a local bar on Venus, where she had been born, The Last Light. After ordering a drink and trying her best to avoid interactions with the surrounding drunks, Ophelia found a small table in the corner. She closed her eyes and sipped her drink, letting the cold liquid flow down her throat, welcoming the gentle burn that flowed into her stomach. Opening her eyes, Ophelia was greeted by a tray.

She sat up straighter and peeked around the corner of the table to see a small cyborg in a blue apron holding a tray of empty glasses and half-drunk drinks on their head.

"Can I get you anything else, Miss stressed-looking lady?" The cyborg chirped smiling at Ophelia, her robotic eye swiveling.

"I'm ok, thank you," Ophelia said, slightly weirded out by the excited cyborg.

"All right! I'm Shelly. Just scream my name if you need me!" Shelly shrieked as she sped across the room, tripping over a man's legs, regained her balance, and continued to the kitchen.

Ophelia smiled at the endearing sight. It wasn't every day that someone would give her a smile for free. Everything always came with a cost. Ophelia stood up as she downed the rest of her drink and headed to the alley, where she sat, thinking about her case. What would happen if she didn't solve it? Would she be fired? Her career ended before it even started?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a tall man poking her, his slurred words scraping against her ears, "You look like you could use a distraction, doll." His crooked smile disturbed her.



This man was much larger than she and would easily overpower her if she tried to get away.

"I have no interest, thank you," she said, standing up and turning away from the stench of alcohol on his breath.

The man sneered, grabbed her wrists and slammed them to the wall in front of her as she tried to escape his looming shadow. "Aw, come on, doll, it's just one night," he whispered in her ear as his nails dug into the fragile skin of her wrist. Warm liquid ran down her arms. She thrashed and kicked, but the man laughed at her futile efforts,

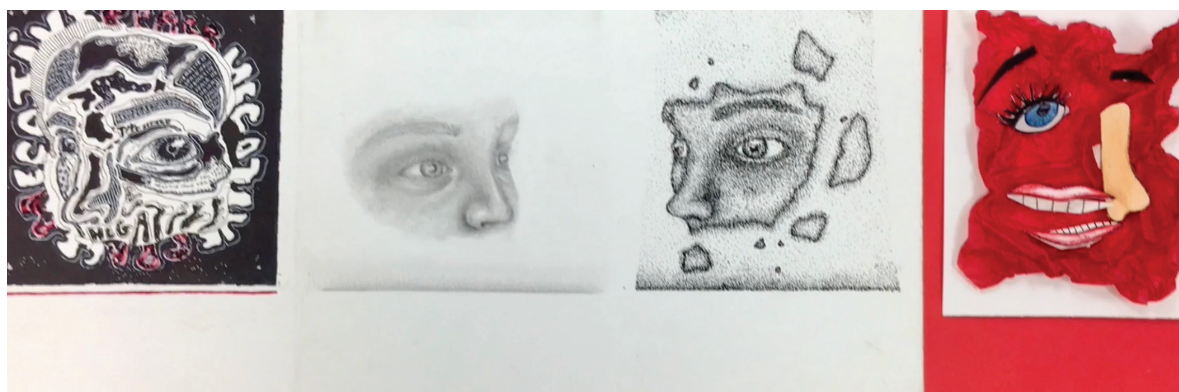
"Come on, doll, just lay still," he said as he brought his hand down to her neckline.

Ophelia pinched her eyes shut as he dragged his lips against her skin, until the hand holding her wrists froze, loosening slightly as the man's body went still.

The hand at her neckline slowly separated from his wrist, parted by a clean cut. The man screamed as the pain seemed to settle in his mind, "Crazy bitch!" His guttural cries forced him to stumble away from Ophelia who was huffing with fear.

In the side doorway of the bar stood the small cyborg, Shelly, the automail of her left arm sharp and covered in blood. "Keep your hands to yourself Mr.," Shelly said smiling as she kicked the man who ran down the street screaming.

"What did you do?" Ophelia whispered as Shelly slung her arm, flinging the remaining blood in a splattered line.



BREAKING DIFFERENTLY~ NIKA KARLOVA, 12, MIXED MEDIA

"I couldn't just let him continue," Shelly said, grinning at Ophelia as she grabbed her hand and pulled her in the direction of the port. "Come on, let's get out of here before I get in trouble!" She sprinted, her small blue apron unraveling, leaving her in black pants and a white shirt. Ophelia, still shocked, followed the cyborg and called out directions to get to her ship. The pair ended the night laughing as Shelly told Ophelia about her life at the bar. "I'm never going back there, I swear!" Shelly said as she smiled at Ophelia.

"Just stay with me. Maybe I'll be able to succeed with your help," Ophelia said.

Shelly smiled at her, her eyes held understanding and joy, "I'd be happy to."

Shelly had been with her ever since, always by her side providing new insight into the case, offering ideas. A tear slipped down Ophelia's face as she tightened her grip on her gun and pointed it at Shelly, "Put your hands up."

Shelly smiled as she tore her arm out of the woman's chest and slung it toward the ground, the blood landing in a line, just like the night they met. She slowly raised her hands above her head, and the rest of the crew did the same.

"Lock us up, Captain," Shelly said staring at Ophelia.

Ophelia led her crew down the stairs and out of the building, her gun pointed to the backs of their heads the entire time. When they reached the outside, a group of officers surrounded them and cuffed the crew of *The Renegade*, and dragged them away. Ophelia grabbed Shelly's shoulder as the officer pushed her toward the space vehicles ready to wheel them off to prison. "Why?" she asked.

Shelly turned and smiled, "You had to solve this case someday, didn't you?" She turned around and raised one of her cuffed hands in an attempt to salute. "So long, Captain, Miss Right, ma'am! I'll tell your tale behind bars, 'The Amazing Ophelia Right, the detective who solved the fifteen-year serial killer case! No other detective stood a chance but her'. You'll move up in the ranks, probably even become a head detective. So long!"

Ophelia's eyes stung at the sight of her crew being shoved into the detainment vehicles. Shelly's words filled her mind as she closed her eyes and swept her hand across her face before screaming toward her disappearing figure, "Don't forget the part where the amazing detective was saved by a murderer!"

Shelly turned her head one last time toward the Captain as she was shoved into the vehicle. "I won't," she whispered.

# ALL HAIL!

BENNETT VANCE, 12, POETRY

INSPIRED BY AN ORIENTAL RULER SEATED ON HIS THRONE, ALBRECHT DÜRER



All hail to the king!  
Unattended, he sits  
upon a mighty chair.  
Draped in wealth,  
it serves no purpose.  
What good is it then?  
Is there anything left to gain?  
Plenty I'd say,  
for his gaze is full of longing.  
What use is a sword if the arms are too weak to wield it?  
What good are the precious metals  
that only work to weigh you down?  
It is far too late now, to realize the truth.  
It is far too late to realize you're a prisoner.  
You sit in a gilded cell.  
The door left open.  
Nothing holds you but your own ambition.

# LITTLE DANCER

LOUISA KOON, 11, POETRY

(INSPIRED BY LITTLE DANCER AGED FOURTEEN BY EDGAR DEGAS)

Little rat  
    little urchin,  
frail body turned to bronze

Bare-legged, eyes closed  
exhausted  
    exploited  
        exposed  
to condemnation and public stares

An unpleasant disposition you are—  
    penniless, a prostitute  
rendered in beeswax, dressed in rags

Beside you, women carved in marble,  
    gowned in gold  
reflect deities of their time and still  
    you reflect nothing of a goddess.

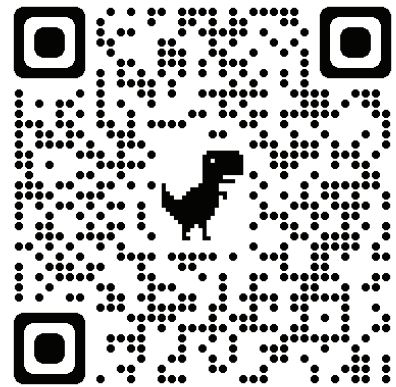
And yet,  
little pauper, you perplex me  
    your poised position—  
one leg forward, toes turned out,  
    shoulders back  
hand clasping hand  
    so still so silent  
Are you tired, little one?

Hour turns hour  
    turns day to day  
Did you imagine such a future for yourself?  
Did you envision this fate—of fame the ballet would never give?  
Is that why you did it?  
What is she thinking?  
    Little flower  
        Little dancer



# TWO

CLAIRE BROWN, 12, INTERPRETATIVE DANCE



# NEVER ENOUGH

ADALYN MILES, 12, BALLROOM DANCE





# Music

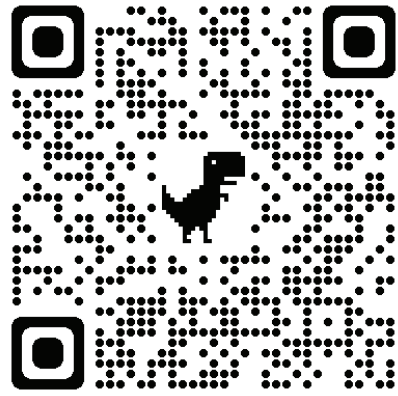
## A Highlight of Our Star Musicians and Singers!

This year we had so many wonderful displays of musical talent! Salon Rouge, Arts Day, the musical concerts, and the student-written musical. We were treated to original pieces, renditions, and a variety of genres!

# Scan to travel through a galaxy of musical talents!



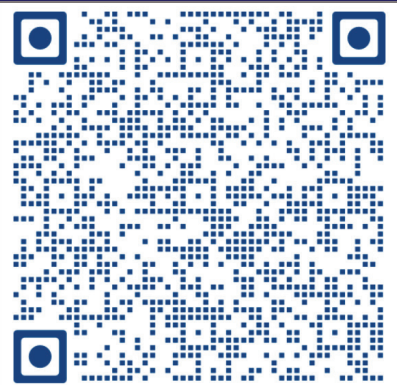
Fade to Black  
B Block Band



What Falling in Love Feels  
Like  
Anna Weaver



La Folia  
Erin Weaver



Down the Rabbit Hole  
Jalena Raine



# Little Lies

## Cecelia Dettelbach, 11, Song

### Little Lies

I was driving from your house late at night  
And I was wishing you had put up a fight  
I was hoping that my friends would understand  
But they couldn't hear me like you can

And oh when you see her I know that you need her  
So I tell these little lies in my head

I was trying so hard to forget  
But the words you say get stuck in my head  
I was crying alone in the dark  
And I was watching her dance in your arms

And oh when I see her I can't help but wanna be her  
So I tell these little lies in my head

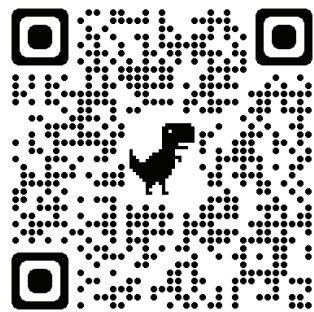
I was looking to find someone new  
But no one made me feel the way do  
I was fighting you slowly drift away  
But I wasn't enough to make you stay

And oh when I see her I know that I can't beat her  
Oh these crumbling little lies in my head

These crumbling little lies  
These stupid little lies  
These hopeless little lies  
Fill my head

These selfish little lies  
These blissful little lies  
These blinding little lies  
fill my head

And oh when you see her you can't help from falling deeper  
but I still tell these lies in my head





# Fall Salon Rouge



Photos by Francis  
Filmworks



