

REFLECTIONS





SURMISE ■ ARLO B ■ GRADE 10 ■ *PHOTOGRAPH*

REFLECTIONS

Mission Statement

Reflections, the annual literary and arts magazine of The Berkeley Carroll Upper School, seeks to tap into the vibrant, creative energy circulating in the classrooms and hallways of our school. Berkeley Carroll's mission is to foster an environment of critical, ethical, and global thinking; *Reflections* contributes by making space for artistic conversation and collaboration in our meetings and in this volume.

Reflections

What's in a name? "Reflection" implies both a mirroring and a distortion: something recognizably strange and strangely recognizable. In selecting and arranging the visual and written work in this magazine, we seek to create this experience of broken mirrors: reflections that are just a bit off, refracted and bent to reveal unexpected resemblances. Notice, for example, the sudden swerve away from transcendental bliss toward urban enthusiasm in Amelia L's "Purple Summer": "Left with the sweetest haze / Spring ends all blue clouds / This feeling . . . / Cannot shake city joy!" This dynamic is mirrored in Arlo B's paired picture, "Cornice," in which the rustling buds of spring abut the cornice of a city brownstone. In each of these works the urban and the natural work in tension and in tandem, each revealing or reflecting the beauty and grace in the other. We're also proud of the city love in this pairing, reflecting the authentic Brooklyn vibe of our magazine. We hope you find such beauty and grace captured through these broken reflections of written and visual art.

Editorial Policy and Procedures

The *Reflections* staff is a small, dedicated group of students who meet weekly over Cheez-Its, wasabi peas, and paleo thumbprint cookies to discuss and develop a shared interest in art and literature. In the fall, *Reflections* members establish the magazine's high standards, solicit submissions, and refine their own works in progress. In February, the editors preside over small groups who read and critique anonymous student art and literature submissions. After the preliminary critiques—and with helpful suggestions from the art department—the editors carefully consider feedback from the entire *Reflections* team before choosing and editing the final selections and laying out the magazine, including selecting and designing the spreads. Editors then submit all materials to our fantastic printer, review the proofs, and distribute copies of our beautiful magazine—through our library, as summer reading for our writing courses, at admissions events, and to anyone lucky enough to find the PDF on our school website.

Reflections is a student-run, -led, and -organized coterie; neither the editors nor the staff receive class credit for their work. We are proud members of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association. The striking artwork and writing in this magazine were all crafted by Berkeley Carroll Upper School students, sometimes to fulfill class assignments, but always from the engines of their own creativity.



At *Reflections*, our layout process is old-school. We like to move words and images around on paper until everything looks right.

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AMBA D MAX M

AMELIA L TOBI M

GRAY S

Editor's Statement

As has become tradition, we are excited to include an outstanding collection of personal essays from our Voice & Style writing course as well as our senior Essay class. We are also thrilled to be featuring an abundance of poems from our Poetry for Revolution class. After nearly two full years of isolation, we have experienced with new gratitude the buzz of beautiful writing and artwork created in real, in-person classrooms.

This year's *Reflections* would not have been possible without our faculty advisors, Ms. Drezner and Dr. Hughes, whose support was crucial in producing this volume. The publication of this magazine would not be complete without the help of Linda Adams, director of strategic communications at Berkeley Carroll, and talented designer Bob Lane at Studio Lane. We're also grateful for the guidance and support of Dr. Daniel, Mr. Cortes, and Mr. Gavryushenko in the art department. And of course, *Reflections* would be naught without the thoughtful writing and intricate artwork that is shared with us each year.

An especially large thank-you to Dr. Hughes, who has been an indispensable member of the *Reflections* team for seven years and who, we are sad to say, is reaching the end of his time at Berkeley Carroll. Dr. Hughes, we love you and wish you joy in your next endeavors.

The dedication of our staff and faculty advisors to *Reflections* cannot be overstated: long days spent huddled around a table, snacking and PopCorners in lieu of dinner, were more often the rule than the exception in early April. Whether encouraging classmates to submit a beautiful essay overheard in English class, working closely with authors to strengthen their submissions, or making minute decisions about punctuation or layout, we found challenges and rewards in each part of the publication process. Ultimately, we have a beautiful magazine that reflects this hard and meaningful work.

For over fifty years, *Reflections* has represented the creativity, passion, and heart of the Berkeley Carroll community. We could not be prouder to continue in this tradition, and we hope you find the work inside these pages as illuminating and enjoyable as we have.

AVI K

Editor-in-Chief, Spring 2023

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He is Flower, Flower *(after Tammy Nguyen)*

DEVRA G • GRADE 10 • POETRY



n my dream my face

is slipping off and a world
of weeds is growing

go, let the mask
clatter away, revel in
the inexplicable

behind it. there are
four-leafed clovers itching out
from my mouth, dandelions

chaos that has
always been inside of me.
reckless, ruthless joy!

poking through my eye
sockets. i am a garden
of predatory

plants, possible
parasites preying on my
plights and passions. yet

in this one moment
i finally know what it
is to let myself



PROFILE IN BOTANICALS ■ AIDAN P ■ GRADE 12

ACRYLIC, GOLD LEAF, & COLORED PENCIL





The Upsides of Lizzy

AYA L • GRADE 10 • PERSONAL ESSAY



Bottom bunks are the best, especially in Kush, where the top bunk is offset to the side, creating an L shape with the bottom bed. Perfect for forts. The rain is pounding hard against the cheap plastic skylight—it makes the rain sound fake or prerecorded even.

I place my spare blanket under the paper-thin mattress on the bunk above me and let it fall down to create a small nook in my bed. But my one blanket's too small, so I need another one to cover the whole area. I peek out and spy Lizzy's rainbow polka-dot, fuzzy blanket on her bed, the one neat thing in a sea of dirty clothes that "smell like camp" even though fresh from the small-but-mighty Keeseville wash. Lizzy's reading an awful Wattpad-turned-actual-published-book-that-nobody-asked-for, *The Upside of Falling*, in the hammock and is not to be disturbed. Screw it—I run across the cabin and snatch the nicely folded blanket off Lizzy's bed.

NO, AYA, YOU LITTLE HUSSY—GET BACK HERE!
I hear a rustle and a slam as Lizzy practically

throws herself off the hammock onto the floor to stop me. But it's too late; the blanket's mine. I tuck her blanket in, the same way I did mine, and step back to admire my work.

Ugh, fine, you can use it—but only if I can come inside, Lizzy says. I say yes (she knows that's what I wanted the whole time) and show her to the entrance. We snuggle up in the tiny twin-sized camp bed practically on top of each other. Lizzy continues her



WE SNUGGLE UP IN THE TINY

TWIN-SIZED CAMP BED

PRACTICALLY ON TOP OF EACH

OTHER. LIZZY CONTINUES HER BOOK

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JUST THE TWO OF US, SMUSHED

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book but this time aloud for the both of us to enjoy the absolutely terrible storyline. Just the two of us, smushed together in a rainstorm.

Flip-flop-flip-flop. I'm walking back from the showers, pine needles thrown up by my slides, sticking to the back of my wet legs. I hang up my shower caddy as I head into the cabin.

Inside, by the mirror, Lizzy is brushing out her hip-length hair with a travel-sized brush simply because she was too lazy to unpack her normal one (keep in mind we're already four to five weeks into an eight-week summer). I walk up behind her and bite her shoulder, and she tells me to *piss off* lovingly and unbraids the other side of her head. She reaches for the Sun Bum leave-in conditioner on the top of the cubby, which the two of us have simultaneously converted into our makeup vanity. Sun Bum smells like coconuts and pineapples, but more importantly it smells like Lizzy. Technically, Lizzy smells like Sun Bum, but in my world everyone has a smell that belongs to them, and when I smell that smell I am instantly taken

to them. So: in conclusion, Sun Bum, which smells like coconuts and pineapples, smells like Lizzy.

There are many types of wheezing in the world: an old man trying to catch his breath after going up the stairs, me trying to catch my breath after going up the stairs, the sound of old furniture after you sit down in order to recover from the loss of your breath. But my favorite type of wheezing is Lizzy's laugh. Her wheeze, which sounds as if someone has taken her lungs and completely squashed them free of air, is a low wheezing often followed by my personal hyena-shriek laugh, followed by the both of us quite literally crumbling to the floor as a result of the sounds we make. The journey doesn't end there, though: we now can't believe we are on the floor, so to compensate we continue to wheeze and shriek, causing more wheezes and shrieks because we find each other's sounds often more hilarious than the jokes themselves. We laugh and laugh until our stomachs hurt and tears fall down our faces, and just as we think we've recovered, all it takes is the simplest eye contact to activate the wheeze all over again.



A Date with Closetcase

GRAY S • GRADE 12 • PERSONAL ESSAY

The first time I met Closetcase, it was the third grade, and I thought nothing of it. I noticed how he laughed at bathroom jokes, and I bonded with him over the way that our Spanish names rhymed: Gabi and Xavi. We wrote comics together and, even though his energy often outpaced mine, we became best friends. Years passed, and we began to talk about girls with each other, coming up with code names for our crushes, as middle schoolers do. At the end of seventh grade, I realized that maybe I liked boys too. And, early in the next year, the two of us went to a Halloween sleepover. All of our friends were there, and, as the night began to wind down, I found myself on a cot with Closetcase. He told me that he was bisexual. I said, “Me too.” My eyes met his, possibility swirled, and we spent the night with our arms wrapped around one another.

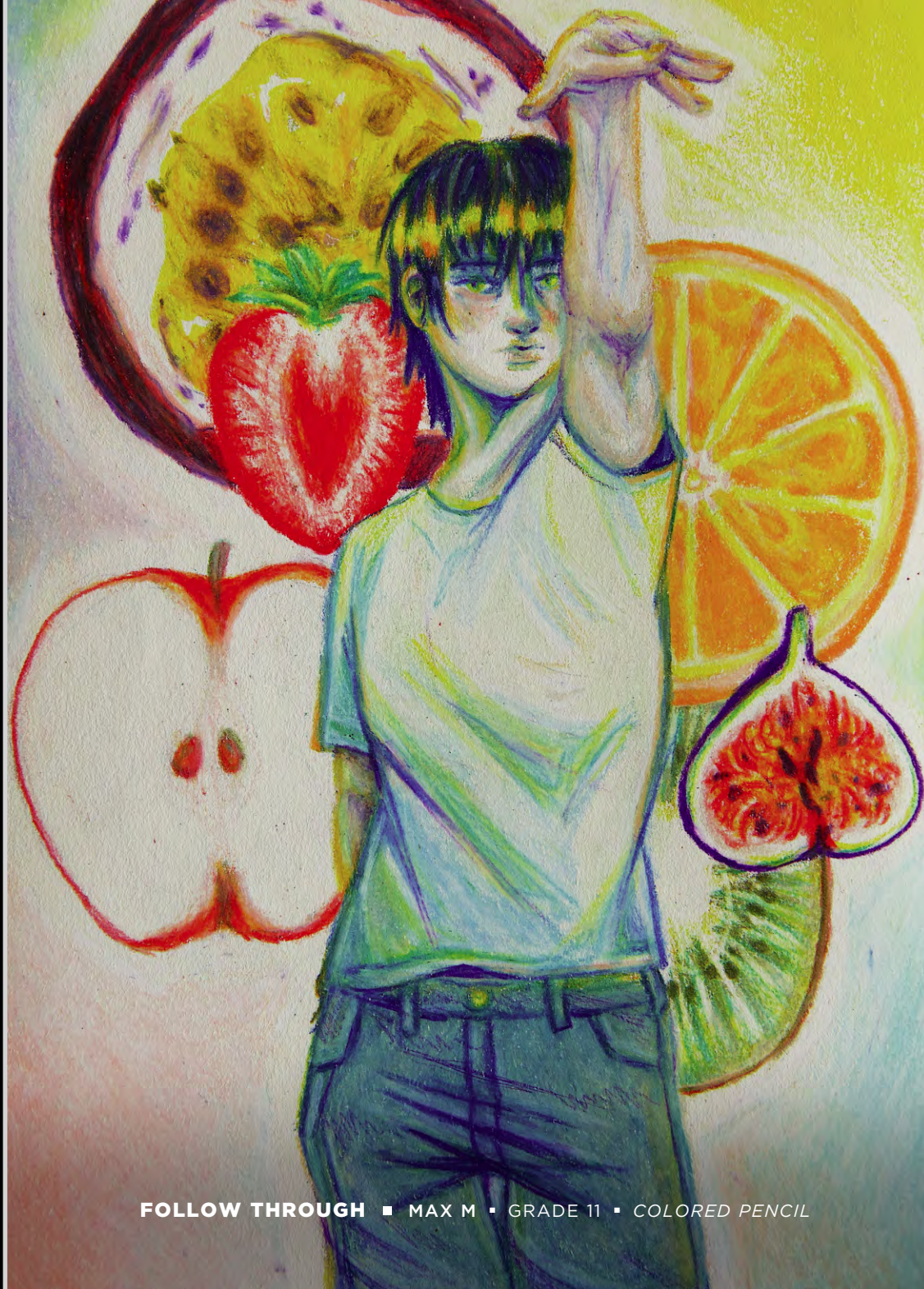
The ensuing months flew by. I wondered if Closetcase still remembered that night; I didn’t forget. He made plans to go to a different high school. He was the only other queer boy I actually knew, and my mind began to wander. Possibility once again flared, and I

asked him if he wanted to try it, “just to experiment.” He said no. But on the last day of eighth grade, both of us went to a rooftop party; we ended up sitting face to face, concealed by a blanket. His face was lit with soft purple, and my words were slurred, and I wrapped my arms around him. He kissed me, and in that moment my entire body disappeared except for those parts that were also his. I could have lost every sense but touch for the rest of my life and



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PULLED AWAY WITH AN
“UGH,” AND A CRACK
FORMED ON MY HEART. ”



still have been perfectly happy; in that moment, touch was everything, magic. But he pulled away with an “Ugh,” and a crack formed on my heart. For the rest of the night, we sat apart from each other, and I stared at the blank expression on his face. My stomach churned, and my brain echoed with *ImessedupImessedupImessedup*. The next morning, I texted him an apology. He didn’t respond.

As the months passed with no response, no response, no response, the crack on my heart grew, and at the end of the summer—when he texted me to say that his brother just ate a snail, as if nothing ever happened—the crack didn’t know what to do. As ninth grade began, he came to hang out with me and my new high school friends. My stomach did flips and my eyes tracked him and I narrated all of it to my closest friends in a hushed voice when he wasn’t looking. As we were walking home, he blurted out, “You know Gray and I made out? It was pretty funny.” My friends uttered half-hearted chuckles, and I found myself silent. Over the next week, my mind ran on whys and maybes, and the following weekend I called him. I told him I liked him, and he acted surprised that I liked boys, and when I asked him, he said that he was straight. His new friends laughed in the background.

The crack froze in time, stopped dead. This was not the last I saw of Closetcase, but it might as well have been.

The first time I met Closetcase, it was the sixth grade, and I thought nothing of it. I noticed how he hated to talk trash but loved to gossip, how high his voice was, and how all of his friends were girls. We walked home together every day. We talked about girls together, but only ever in pure hypotheticals. We went through seventh, eighth, ninth grade more or less side by side, trying new things (Juuls and drinks and stylish clothes) and meeting new people (out of

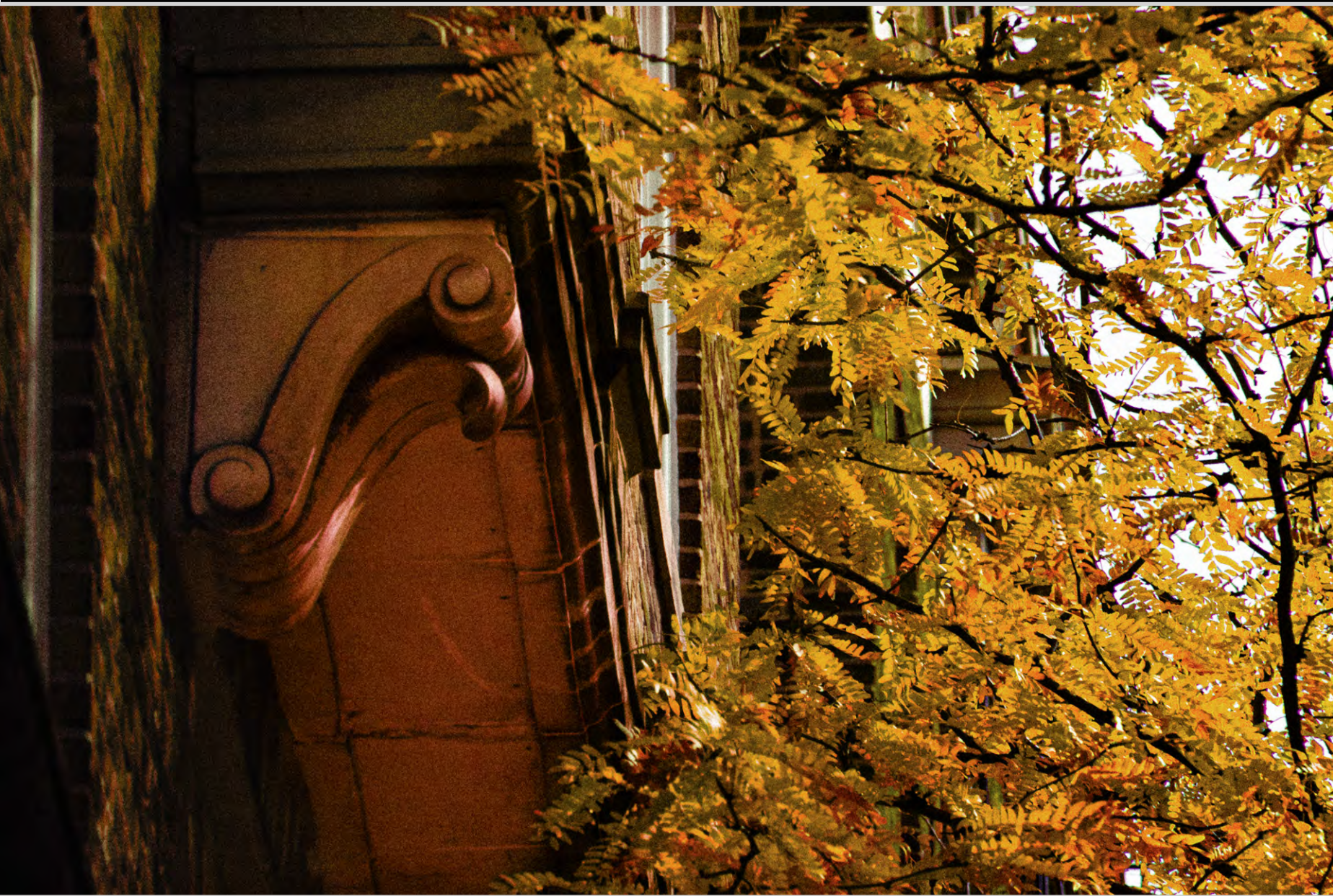


...THEY LAMENTED THEIR
PARTNERS AND WHISPERED IN
MY EAR AND MADE EYE
CONTACT THAT SENT SPARKS
ACROSS ROOMS; THEY JOKED
ABOUT KISSING ME AND
SOMETIMES THEY DID *KISS ME*;
BUT THEY ALWAYS SAID NO. ”

school and in higher grades). In ninth grade, as I began to talk about boys as well as girls, he stopped talking at all. He occasionally made jokes about cute guys and kissing people, still in hypotheticals. When he spoke to me, he would stare at his feet, and a coy smile would creep across his face, and I thought that I knew what he was thinking. I observed his every move, waiting for anything to add to my arsenal of belief. As the little things piled up—the I-want-to-see-your-faces and I-want-to-kiss-hims and the horseplay—I thought I knew more and more, until the night that I was so full up with hope and thinking-knowing that I called him: “Do you like me?” “No, sorry.” The crack thawed and grew anew, and I lashed out for something, anything to grab hold of. I found another Closetcase.

The first time I met Closetcase, in fourth grade, I noticed how quick he was to tears and how loudly he sneezed. The first time I met Closetcase, in ninth grade, he told me he had a girlfriend. The first time I met Closetcase, they appeared like any other, but they hinted and made asides and questioned endlessly, and my insides turned inside out wondering. They touched my thigh and held my hand and hugged me;

they told me how much they wished they could experiment and asked to see me naked; they lamented their partners and whispered in my ear and made eye contact that sent sparks across rooms; they joked about kissing me and sometimes they did *kiss me*; but they always said no. And when they said no, the crack kept growing. It never got so large as to break my heart, because that grew too. With each boy, it swelled with longing and hope, and it couldn’t bear to break. I couldn’t stand the idea that it could’ve been different, and so I shoved them into a name with a shrug of “It wasn’t my fault” and an ember of “Maybe next time.” And the ember flickered, but every time I saw them, it was as if a gust of air came in and fanned it anew, and its flames licked at the walls of my heart, warming and searing it in equal measure. And when the ashes burned, I sought desperately. And I always found a Closetcase.



Purple Summer

AMELIA L ▪ GRADE 11 ▪ *POETRY*



s clear winter blows

Icicles melt away
Dripping water in my lungs
And grass grows

Left with the sweetest haze
Spring ends all blue clouds
This feeling . . .
Cannot shake city joy!

Spring always ends impossibly
To the flowers in my hair
Sun rises with purple summer
Every day I smell heather

Summer haze of softly wet sand
In the days that gently hold my hand

Wistful beaches catch in the breeze
Flowers fall,
All yellow against the green
Not like July could ever care
Mosquitoes fog the hot and heavy air

Margarita

JAZEERA A • GRADE 10 • PERSONAL ESSAY



squinted as I stared at her chopping corn so carelessly. With no cutting board in sight, I expected some hesitation before she started, but the moment I stepped away, I heard the thud of the blade hitting the corn cob. I ran to her and held her hand back: “*Abuela! Te vas a lastimar.*”¹ She sighed, “*Mijita, yo he hecho esto toda mi vida, no se preocupe.*”²

Don’t worry...? How could I not? Don’t get me wrong, I knew she was fully capable of cutting corn, but watching the force she placed on every chop and how close her fingers got to the blade was actual torture. I still watched her from afar, but the feeling of caution swiftly faded away as I saw how perfect the cuts were. The straight, fine lines with which she separated the husk from the corn in two seconds reminded me who she was.

She wasn’t just *abuelita*, the old lady our family worships and gets together with on certain holidays.

She was *Margarita*, the woman who had 10 children and managed to raise them all to be the most resilient people in my life. She was creative, not because she was a natural but because she had to find a way to feed all 12 family members. So believe me when I say, when she found out the recipe of *umitas* she went all out. I’ve had *umitas* my whole life and have loved them ever since I first tried them, but I’ve never made them—never really had the intention to, either. However, as I stood in the doorway of my aunt’s house and stared at the corn in crates on the floor, I figured, why not?

I grabbed the now-cut cobs and carefully peeled off the husks. The husks were incredibly soft with an ombre going from yellow to dark green, and the removal of every husk brought a richer smell from the plant. As much as I wanted to enjoy the satisfaction of peeling, I saw the pile of cut cobs next to me grow by the second, and I frantically peeled off the husks. In doing so, I tore the first four and got a frightening

¹ “Grandma! You’ll hurt yourself.”

² “Honey, I’ve done this all my life. Don’t worry.”

glare from her. She raised her eyebrows and placed her eyes on the husks. I waited, expecting a comment that would bash me for being careless, but instead I heard her suck her teeth. I stared, confused about what it meant: was she mad or saying it was fine? I started peeling again and heard her laugh under her breath, answering all the questions running through my head. The husks are the most important, for they hold the *umitas* together during the cooking process. So I would have understood if she was annoyed by how many I tore, but she wasn't. She liked me by her side, and so did I.

As we finished the process of separating the husks from the cob, I lay back on my cousin's book bag while I watched my mom and aunt take the corn to the kitchen. I then rested my head on Margarita's knee while she placed her hand on my head, and I heard her say, *"Hace años que no tengo compañía mientras cocino, incluso mis hijas, a las que les enseñé a cocinar, ya no están a mi lado."*³ I felt a lump grow in

my throat; she was right about the fact her daughters don't want to cook with her anymore, but it's heartbreaking hearing that she knows. I stayed quiet, nodding my head so she knew I heard her.

I stayed with her as I heard my mom and aunt in the kitchen arguing about which brand of flour was better (they are both off-brand; it doesn't matter). Even with the loud bickering in the background, we talked about how my dad was a troublemaker when he was young. Through laughs, she said she was glad he passed down the good in him. But even when laughing, I'm brought back to my worries. I live two hours away—how long until I see her again? In the spiral of my own worries, I stop. Why would I let myself ruin this moment? Until today, I had never had a grandma moment, a moment where it's just me and her enjoying each other's presence. Now that I have, why diminish it?

³ "It's been years since I've had company while cooking; even my daughters, the ones I taught how to cook, aren't by my side anymore."

The Horrors of Skinny Jeans

SOFIA L • GRADE 10 • HUMOR



kinny jeans suck. And I'm not sorry.
They're awful. Ugly in every way. They're boring. Uninteresting. Stupid looking. I guess they're great for you if you want to make your legs look like sticks and your feet look tiny. That's so fun. Have so much fun.

Fashion is all about balance. All about silhouette. Using a silhouette, you draw attention to different parts of your body. So you want to draw attention to your *whole* body and have interesting and contrasting angles. With skinny jeans, the silhouette you have is essentially a triangle straight down to the feet—seriously, why would you want that? Ew. There are so many different styles, ALL of which are more interesting than a pair of denim leggings (sans stretch): wide-legged, baggy, flare, boot-cut, straight-leg. And to spice it up even more, you can add in some patterns, patches, cutouts!

Completely unrelated to looks, they're uncomfortable. Imagine—it's 7 a.m. on a Monday morning. You're picking out an outfit. A pair of skinny jeans

catches your eye. A great choice. This results in your squeezing into these, having to hop up and down just to get them on. Limbs are flying, you're sweating, WHY, OH WHY OH GOD, must you deal with this. See?

If you're not convinced after all this, let me tell you: YOU COULD DIE FROM WEARING SKINNY JEANS. Okay, that's an exaggeration. BUT wearing them can cause nerve damage. There's a condition called *meralgia paresthetica*, which causes burning, loss of sensation, and/or heightened sensitivity in the outer thigh as a result of irritation to the lateral femoral cutaneous nerve. The condition is commonly caused by repeatedly wearing very tight clothing (SKINNY JEANS). In the event that you develop this condition due to your pants—in which case I will have no sympathy—one of the main remedies is to stop wearing tight clothing! It's not just me: even your body is telling you not to wear these.

You probably shouldn't just start throwing out your skinny jeans—though I have absolutely, definitely

convinced (or maybe scared) you, that's maybe not a great idea. Even though I wish every single pair would just vanish from the face of the earth, that's unfortunately not realistic. And to completely replace your closet at my will is kind of expensive, and probably not great for the environment, either. So it seems like the only thing you can do to maintain the last shred of your dignity after wearing these HORRENDOUS pieces of clothing is to upcycle. And though I am revolted that you EVER owned what is certainly the worst clothing item to ever cross my line of vision, I am not going to shun you for it. In fact, luckily for you, I'm here to help. Put neckties in the sides. WAIT. I know I just lost you. Trust me on this one.

It's so easy. All you have to do is open up the side seam of your disgusting fashion choice, stick in a tie or two, and sew the pants back shut. It's SO simple and makes it so that you can actually walk. Crazy.

Now that I've: 1) explained to you the problem with your dreadful fashion choices and 2) explained to you how to remedy it, I'm finally done. So, in conclu-

sion, be interesting. Make a statement. Don't put yourself in a box. Find joy in what you wear, and let your clothes express who you are. You look stupid in your skinny jeans. And they're gonna kill you.



AND THOUGH I AM REVOLTED

THAT YOU EVER OWNED WHAT IS
CERTAINLY THE WORST CLOTHING
ITEM TO EVER CROSS MY LINE OF
VISION, I AM NOT GOING TO SHUN
YOU FOR IT. IN FACT, LUCKILY FOR
YOU, I'M HERE TO HELP. ”



Emotions

SARAH K • GRADE 11 • POETRY

JOY: I

I wish blueberries were purple.
And that blackberries were mauve.

If the ocean was plum, the waves would be lavender.
If the clouds were thistle, the rain would be lilac.

A bird's underbelly, flecked with violet stars.
The night sky is no longer black but iris.

Wine-colored sand seeps through
Periwinkle-painted toes.

Orchids grow upward to the sky.
Wisteria droops down to touch the ground.

Amethysts line my walls,
And grapevines my ceilings.

If only blueberries were purple—
Petunias would line the walls of my heart.

GRIEF: II

If lemons were not yellow, the sun could not shine.
And if saffron was not golden, the moon would
not glow.

The treetops are not cream, and the fallen leaves
are not butter.

If your smile were not canary, the world would
be dark—
And daffodils would make my heart crumble.

ANGER: III

If hot crimson blood coats your fingers,
And soft cardinal feathers cloud your mind,

Then vermillion powder will trickle down from
your eyes,
And rubies will sprout from your lips.

As scarlet kisses rain down on your beautiful
raspberry-blush face,
Cherry juice is dripping from slits in my heart.





LANE R • GRADE 12 • HUMOR



- ## Safety and Precautions

- touch water. In episode seven, Cleo has her first kiss with her crush, Lewis, on the beach.

- Turn on your iPhone 7 and open Spotify.
- Select *Fearless* by Taylor Swift.
- Scroll until you see a track titled “You Belong with Me.”
- Press play.
 - NOTE: “You Belong with Me” has been your favorite song since you were nine.
- Unzip your suitcase.
 - NOTE: You’ve been on the island for almost two weeks, but haven’t found time to unpack your bags.
- Remove your plastic Glossier makeup bag, the one that comes with every order and looks like pink bubble wrap, from the suitcase.
- Unzip the makeup bag.
- Remove concealer, blush, lip gloss, and mascara from the makeup bag.
- Carefully apply the makeup.
- Trade your jean shorts and white tank top for a slightly-too-small-to-be-practical burgundy bathing suit and lavender sundress.

- a. NOTE: Of course, you're not actually swimming—you're going to the beach to kiss Miles Harris.
 - i. The dating pool is minimal: there are twenty boys between twelve and fourteen ($n1 = 20$), but eight of them are close friends with your brother ($n2 = 12$), and four are already in serious relationships ($n3 = 8$).
 - ii. Of the eight available boys, you are closest to Miles. Miles has been one of your best friends since before *Fearless*. When you met, he was eight, loved *Gravity Falls*, and always had a sunburn; you were seven and loved *Speak Now*.
12. Using a hair tie and brush, pull your hair back into a ponytail.
 13. Apply two layers of lip gloss.
 14. Place the concealer, blush, lip gloss, and mascara back into the makeup bag.
 15. Zip the makeup bag.
 16. Pack a tote bag with the makeup bag, sunglasses, and spearmint gum (just in case).
 17. Leave the house.
- a. NOTE: It's time.

Data Collection

18. Ride your bike five blocks to Main Beach.
19. Smile when you see Larsen and Kelly gossiping outside the ice cream store.
 - a. NOTE: If they don't smile back, lie and tell them their tie-dyed CIT shirts look super-cute.
 - i. CAUTION: Larsen and Kelly are two-thirds of the blonde triplet trio from Connecticut. Their brother, Tristan, is best friends with Miles. They run the island's preteen social scene. Be polite, but don't tell them anything. You don't need this to be anyone else's business.
20. Park your bike on the sidewalk next to the beach's entrance.
21. Wait for Miles by the entrance (approximately two to ten minutes).
 - a. NOTE: Miles babysits every Thursday and Friday until 4:30 p.m., so he might be late. If he doesn't arrive by 5:00 p.m., you should text him to check in.
22. Wave when Miles arrives.
23. Walk down to the beach together.
24. Lay your beach towels next to each other.
 - a. NOTE: Let Miles choose the location. He's very particular about where he sits on the beach.
25. Lie on the beach and listen to Miles vent about his sister and his *Minecraft* scores.

- a. NOTE: *Minecraft* is possibly the least romantic topic you can imagine, but Miles is on a roll so you tolerate it.
26. When he starts talking about how his older cousin wrote a college essay about *Minecraft*, change the subject to Larsen and Kelly's party.
 - a. NOTE: Last weekend, the triplets threw a "Fourth of July in August" party. It was the dumbest thing you've ever attended. But it was the night that Miles touched your arm and complimented your hair color. You've spent a lot of time together over the last few days.
27. Thankfully, he takes the hint. Miles stands up and leads you to the boardwalk.
28. Close your eyes and let him guide you under the boardwalk. You hope that when you open them, he will reveal some romantic surprise—maybe flowers or a candle.
 - a. NOTE: He does not.
29. It's dark and smells like mildew. When two rats run by, Miles screams. You don't.
30. At some point, he takes a step forward, holds your right shoulder, and begins to lean toward you.
 - a. NOTE: A million thoughts will flood your mind, including "Oh my God, it's happening? What if you suck? What if he hates it? What if you hate it?"
31. Close your eyes and tilt your head to the right.
 - a. NOTE: You don't have any detailed steps for this part yet. You've never done this before. You've dreamed about the perfect first kiss for years, and now it's happening.
32. Keep your eyes closed but bring your right hand up to his left cheek.
 - a. NOTE: His breath tastes like mango yogurt—but, like, sour?
33. When you open your eyes, Miles is staring at you. Were his eyes open the entire time? Is this how everybody does it?
34. Nothing about any of it feels normal, but you know you want to do it again. Repeat steps 30–33, leaning in for a second kiss, but this time, initiate it yourself (step 30).
35. When Miles goes in for a third kiss, pull away.
36. Stand in silence for approximately 15 to 25 seconds.
 - a. NOTE: It feels like 10 minutes.
37. Listen carefully when Miles breaks the silence: "Are you going to get mad if I tell anyone? Like, will you be mad if I tell people that we kissed?"
 - a. NOTE: He will not stop talking unless you shut him up.
38. Respond: "No? I mean, I wouldn't be mad. Like, just only tell them that we kissed under the boardwalk and don't give them too many details."

a. CAUTION: When recounting the story to his friends, Miles will exaggerate everything about the afternoon. You actually will be mad at him about it. It won't actually be his fault: when he tells Tristan, Tristan will tell Larsen and Kelly, and then Larsen and Kelly will tell everyone else.

39. You don't know what to do next. You had your first kiss, and you think you liked it?

40. Finally, you make up an excuse to leave.

a. NOTE: Something like "My family has an early dinner reservation."

41. Ride your bike home from Main Beach.

Data Analysis

The following section must be completed four years after the kiss.

You sit cross-legged in the front row of the sundeck, wrapped in golden-hour sunlight. You type the letter "Y" into Spotify. "You Belong with Me (Taylor's Version)" pops up instantly. You press play. Everything is perfect.

As the ferry arrives at the dock, you spot Miles on the dock house terrace. He's reading a book, but you can't tell which one.

You're rehearsing a play in the city, so you only get out to the island on weekends. Larsen and Kelly's "Fourth of July in August" party has become an annual tradition—and of course, you missed it. You've missed all the good parties this year.

You used to spend six weeks here every summer; from mid-July to early September this place was home. This summer, you might get six full days on the island.

You climb the steps up to the dock house terrace. Miles blushes and puts his book down when you make eye contact. He still has a sunburn.

Although you two have drifted since the kiss, it doesn't feel particularly awkward. You barely see Miles during the summers: you're busy acting and he spends a lot of time inside with his family.

"When's move-in?" You sit down next to him.

"I leave for Rochester in two days."

"Oh. I missed you this summer." You don't have feelings for Miles anymore, but he is still one of your oldest friends. You don't tell him that this is your family's last summer on the island.

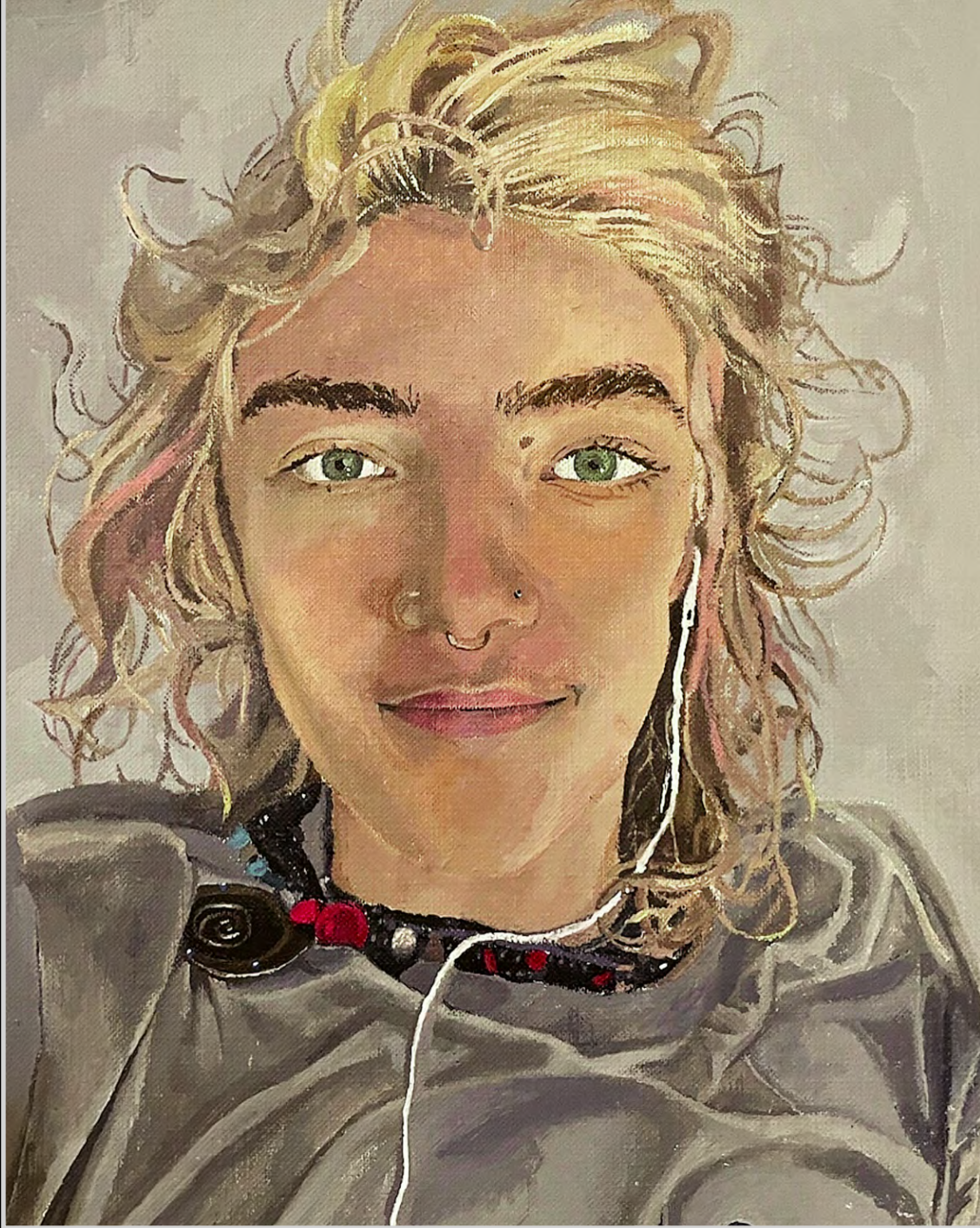
"Yeah, me too."

"I think you're gonna love college."

"I hope so."

"Do you want to go to the bonfire with me?"

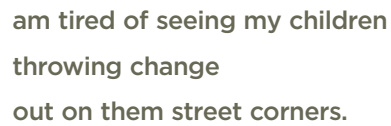
Miles nods and the two of you head to the beach together.



HAIR DYE ■ SEVERAN L ■ GRADE 12 ■ ACRYLIC



(after Sylvia Rivera)



we are getting stronger
for the simple fact that
we have to survive.

Throw it before it blows!

Disaster Averted

ADDISON R • GRADE 10 • PERSONAL ESSAY



ike Bryn's drum solo broke the air as the strobes flashed at every beat. Fog filled the stadium while white, yellow, and orange lights on the platform covered the audience. The rapid drum strokes sounded like gunshots, and the air smelled thick with beer and cigarettes. The rhythm thumped in my stomach, and the rubbery strawberry Twizzler stuck in my teeth.

I was at Madison Square Garden at a Jane's Addiction and Smashing Pumpkins concert. I had been listening to the Smashing Pumpkins's *Siamese Dream* album for years. All the adults I told about the concert got excited for me and told me how epic it would be. But then—disaster!—my friend canceled on me the night before. Four hours before the concert, my mom found a friend she knew to come with me. She told me her name was Jessica. I felt wary about going with someone I didn't know, especially someone who was almost 40 years old, but when I met Jessica outside the Garden, she was wearing a cheetah fur-print coat with a black, long-sleeve shirt, her long, straight black hair blowing in the wind. She told

me that her friend had just texted her from inside saying that the concert had begun 30 minutes ago. We hurried inside.

The moment we walked into the lobby, we could hear the loud beginning of "Irresistible Force." I noticed that I was one of the youngest people in the audience. As we climbed up the switchbacks to the doors, Jessica and I talked about the music we like and found out that we have the same favorite band, Radiohead. She last saw the Smashing Pumpkins and Jane's Addiction 20 years ago, four years before I was born! I bought water with Twizzlers, and she got a beer. We weaved our way to our seats, which had a perfect view of the entire stage. I am most used to being in the pit of the audience at concerts, but these seats let me see the whole set at once. Strippers in red lingerie danced behind the lead singer, Perry, seducing the crowd. When I asked Jessica what was going on, she replied, "That's just Perry's thing. He's a weirdo." She told me that when the band began performing, Perry would go on completely naked, possibly to gain fame, or possibly because he is



unhinged. The only things I could make out of Perry and his bandmates' appearances were their black tank tops and pants.

I looked up a picture of him and noticed how much plastic surgery he'd had. I learned that Jane's Addiction's members met each other in the mid-'80s through their Los Angeles high school marching band but soon began to perform together in underground, alternative club shows. Their name rapidly spread around LA, and soon record-label reps were chasing them for a contract. During their 35 years together—including some breakups—they inspired fights on and off stage, as well as controversies and bans because of their nudity. Since 2008, they have stayed together and are still going strong.

Our row was filled with white men in their forties, mostly brown-haired with tightish jeans, beers in their hands, scruffy facial hair, and a few with vests like dads on the weekend. They had so much beer in their hands, though, that they didn't look responsible enough to be dads. A few rows down, people smoked cigarettes. By the time the Smashing Pumpkins took the stage, people from 30 to 80 were partying, the younger ones singing and moving side to side or

jumping up and down, the oldest people and those with beer bellies sitting in their seats. I got into the mood and began to nod my head to the beat.

I expected Smashing Pumpkins to open with one of their older songs that I knew, but instead they played one of their newer ones. Although the band is 35 years old, they went straight to shredding. The screen behind them changed colors, and different videos flashed with each song.



BY THE TIME THE SMASHING

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TO THE BEAT. ”

I knew only the names of the band members and that there had been a lot of interpersonal drama in the group. After talking about them with Jessica, I researched them more. Wikipedia told me that Billy Corgan met the guitarist, James Iha, at a record store where he was working. The duo began performing at a Polish bar and met bass guitarist Wretzky at the show of another band. They met the drummer, Jimmy Chamberlin, through a friend. However, Wretzky left in 1999, so we were watching Jeff Schroeder on bass instead. The band began opening for bigger bands, including Jane's Addiction. Their breakthrough album, *Siamese Dream*, came out in 1993 and debuted at number 10 on the Billboard 200 chart. They became known for their videos, which they treated as an art form instead of an ordinary MTV rock video.

As one number ended, Jessica elbowed me and shouted, "Addie, you are going to love the next one!"

She was right. The incredible drum fill began, and I knew they were finally playing my favorite song, "Cherub Rock" from *Siamese Dream*. The drum solo sounded like a million beats per second. Then the electric guitar came in, then the drums again; then

another electric guitar joined in a lower octave. Thermal colors burst on the screen, and blue, purple, and white beams pulsed with every beat. When they transitioned into the drum and guitar solos, kaleidoscope patterns splattered across the screen. Light beams staggered around the arena, and the screen pixelated into more neon colors as the tempo surged during the last chorus and guitar riff.

Since they were closing with "Beguiled" from one of their newer albums, Jessica and I left early to beat the crowd to the train. Hearing the music as we headed to the stairs, I was already missing it. As we strode through the wind toward the Q, we agreed "Cherub Rock" outshone the other numbers. Jessica also loved "Tonight, Tonight," when Corgan brought his six-year-old son on stage. As she pulled her MetroCard out of her pocket, she stopped and smelled it, sighing, "Oh, no! Someone next to us spilled their beer on my jacket."

The Healer

AMELIA L • GRADE 11 • POETRY



rapped in red, the birds sit on the bench.

I always wonder how they
continuously stay
behind the safety and darkness
of their bars.

I remember the day that they arrived.

The two girls, their human feet
leaving footprints as they ran
from the hot white sand,
to the cool, wet brown
sand that stuck between their toes.

And I heard their laughs
whispering through the grass
in small giggles, and then
filling the sky as it caught in the wind.
And all my friends
were happy.

Their wet curls tangled with
seaweed as they swam
in the ocean.
Going down under
a wave and coming back up
for sweet summer air.

They continued to run
along the beach, with all their might,
trying to fly over the sand. But every time
they tripped and fell, the ocean caught them
and returned them to the shore.

Then the man in red came;
his eyes were red,
his hair was red,
his lips were red (that cloak bewildered me),
but beneath the red came a cage,
to fit two little birds.

I will never forget the laughter
that faded to nothing as the beautiful girls
grew feathers.
Round cheeks became
pointed beaks, and
sandy feet were claws.

I wonder if, past the wraps of red, they know,
they are still at the beach.



Menu Day #5

MICHAEL M • GRADE 12 • FICTION



ole is nineteen and sitting at the end of the dock on a wood bench, and the bench is dedicated, with a small metal plaque, to his great-grandfather. Next to the dock, submerged, is an old stump; the branches are broken off and pointed hazardingly outward like a sea mine. The dock is supported by a rusted-metal and wood skeleton with razored corners and errant nails that you could also cut yourself on if you tried to climb on the supports to get out of the water, which is normally brown (or blue, depending on if you're standing close [brown] or far [blue], bluer on the scorched-earth, sun-as-an-affliction days, browner on the wet-glove, smooth, flat, low-saturation sky days), but today and for the past two weeks it has been greenish-red, colored by the hazardous algae bloom. It is July 31st.

Hot air comes over the lake and rustles a cornfield, about two football fields wide and one football field deep from the lake, perfectly square besides the edge that meets the water. The field is cut out of the surrounding forest, and the two are separated by a weather-stained, waist-high, white-picket fence. The corn starts fifty feet back from the water, and the in-between is green sod wafting a grassy smell under

the cloudless sky. Viewed from the lake, the dock is on the left side of the cutout, the house set just to the right (the house itself a cutout from the corn, with a small moat of grass), and the field slopes down to the water gradually until the last 50 feet, where there begins a sudden drop-off, a slope of about six inches of vertical drop-off for every horizontal foot.

It's about 1:30 in the afternoon. There are twenty-five or so people at the party, standing and sitting around on the dock, eating barbecued pork ribs and buttered corn on the cob and slaw and boiled green beans. They also eat pork-belly sandwiches and braised short rib over mashed potatoes. They toss the rib bones and the corncobs into the lake absently, where there are also some dead fish (the algae bloom) floating in no particular direction. Cole finishes his ribs and starts nibbling at fried fish, a local catch. (He hooked it this morning, from the lake, in preparation for the party. There is also fish soup.) A film of dust from the corn coats the paper plate he's eating off. The surface of the water splashes a bit from the fish below, gathered to eat the leftovers. There's a thicker carpet of dust on the dock itself, and some of the party guests trace absently with their

feet. A bucket of chum, made from the boney bits of the fish, sits in the middle of the dock.

A car pulls into the driveway, and the crunching noise from wheels on dirt carries over the guests, who turn to it. Cole's father gets out and walks toward the dock. He thanks the guests for coming. They smile and nod back. The men are wearing bright summer suits and the women are wearing long summer dresses. The sun reflects up off the water irregularly (like a strobe timed to music) with the swells, and some of the guests already look pink from burn. Cole's father is wearing a fishing shirt and is carrying a pair of gloves, which he puts on before he dips his hand into the chum bucket and tosses the fishy oats out onto the lake. The guests turn to Cole expectantly as the water experiences a marked uptick in agitation, going from gentle splashes to a churn that makes it look like it's come to a boil. They smile and murmur to each other and encouragements to Cole.

His father turns now and beckons him. "Now's just about time."

Cole sets aside his plate and nods. He gets up and ties his bathing suit the same way he ties his sneakers, with two bunny ears, and peels off his shirt. His father tosses another handful of chum as the water in



AN EEL BREAKS FROM THE WRITHING

SPHERE OF FISH (ONLY THE TOP OF THE SPHERE CAN BE SEEN FROM THE DOCK, THE REST SHIELDED BY THE BROWN WATER) TO EAT A RIB BONE WITH A MASS OF FAT ON THE END OF IT. ”

front of the dock froths and twists just below the surface, almost vortexing.

Small fish wriggle concentrically as they try to get at the oats and avoid the eels, just now arriving for the fish and just visible when they breach as they turn downward for another pass. The guests murmur. The eels look big this year, at least six or seven feet, eighty or a hundred pounds. They stare at Cole as he stares at the lake.

"Time to go, Cole," his father says, standing just behind him now. He smiles. "Don't make me push you." He turns to the guests and they chuckle.

Everyone can smell the chum bucket, amplified by the sun, so hot it begins to cook a bit, just whitening. An eel breaks from the writhing sphere of fish (only the top of the sphere can be seen from the dock, the rest shielded by the brown water) to eat a



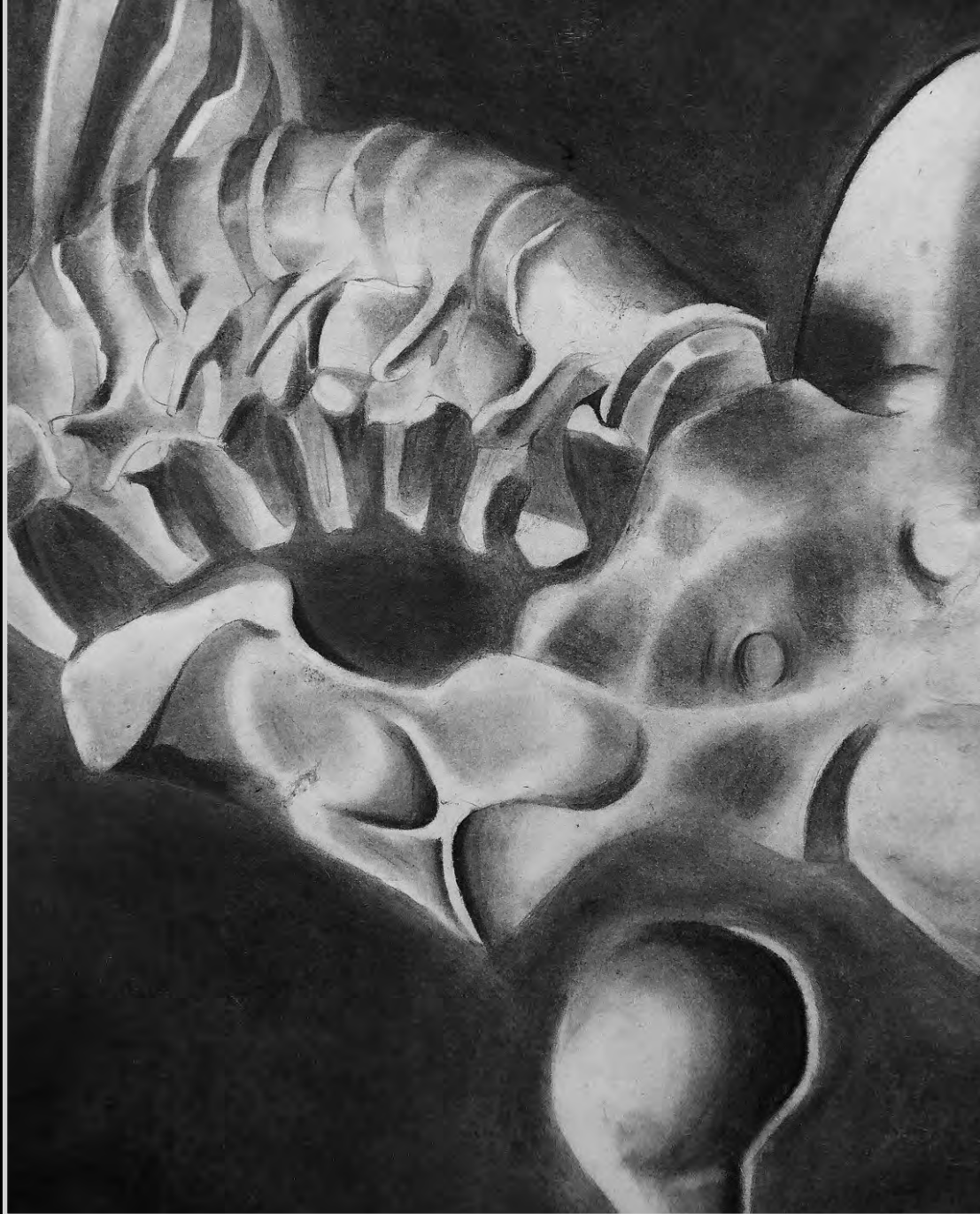
rib bone with a mass of fat on the end of it. The guests watch as Cole takes a deep breath. They quiet down. The only noise—that is, the only noise breaking out from the background of rustling corn—is the furious splashing of the water.

Cole jumps, leaning into a dive, spearing into the top of the sphere, which explodes outwards. The water seems to part; Cole's white feet-soles glow before disappearing into the brown; the fish follow him down, and for a second there is quiet—just the sound of the corn. Then the guests crowd the edge of the dock excitedly, shouting when they catch a glimpse of him through the water and the fish. Air bubbles to the surface.

An eel's thrashing tail breaks out and then slaps the water. *He's got him*, the crowd murmurs. Cole erupts to the surface and the guests cheer. Invisible, underwater, eels circle his treading legs, and one bites his calf and stays lodged. Cole yelps and raises the head of the eel above his own head, holding it by digging his fingers into its side, and brings it down as hard as he can, striking the head of the eel on the side of the dock. It thrashes more violently and escapes Cole's grasp for a second, but he recovers and hits it

against the dock again. It trembles and then dies. The guests cheer and move back as Cole tosses it onto the dock.

He climbs out. His hands are covered in blood, and he has a gash on his side from the tree. His legs are covered in bites, and there is a small eel still hanging off his left calf, but he smiles. Cole's father produces the filleting knife and cuts the eel, tossing the bits into the water. The guests joke and congratulate Cole before beginning to file off the dock. The party is over now. They get into their cars and leave, each with a small paper bag holding a piece of eel. The splashing quiets and the breeze blows again, hot still; the water laps against the dock, and corn dust blows into the forest.



SKELETON ■ NICO G ■ GRADE 11 ■ *CHARCOAL*

Phlegmatic

AVI K • GRADE 11 • *POETRY*



lass cows and pots and pans

and why are you never enough?

And computers.

I fell down the stairs when I was seven.

Shoelaces and I have to be strong but

you had to be strong first when they carried you
down but

I was on my back with grease on my hands and
pots and pans and

hands in the snow.

Where did you
go? And CHAIRS.

I moved yours back while you were gone.



Writer's Block

APRIL 5 • GRADE 12 • PERSONAL ESSAY



It's time for you to start the Wordle.
Please pick one of the following
starting words:

EMPTY

You've just opened an empty document. It's completely blank, except for the taunting black line that blinks in and out of existence. On your screen is endless possibility, but what irks you is that the possibility is hidden from you. Maybe not hidden, but in view and you can't reach it. Everything you type seems to be wrong. No matter what sentences you begin with, they all look like immature writing that you should be over by now. You're suddenly standing in an elementary school classroom filled with your old classmates and their families.

LINED

It is the day of reckoning: your final writing projects are to be posted on the wall for all to see. How polished they all look, with their printed templates neatly filled in with stories and accompanying drawings! Everywhere, you see beaming faces of parents as they

≡ Wordle



congratulate their children. But this isn't a day of joy for you. When your parents come into the room, they look excited and ready to see the work their amazing child has produced. But soon, your parents stand off to the side, with "Why did we come here?" broadcasted by their expressions and posture. You know exactly why they've suddenly changed course. It's because they're staring at the one piece of yellow paper on the wall, the kind that the other kids only used for their drafts. The blue lines against the yellow background make it such a loud declaration of incompetence, of



trees

SOEFI E • GRADE 10 • POETRY



y fingers, in the cold breeze of April air, look like trees. Old, ancient sassafras and redwood, swirls in the center of their stump and cracks and creases in the bark. The leaves pop out at the ends, purple and scuffed, imprinted with the fingerprints of animals and humans who pass by and stroke the leaves with a fondness, ruffle them with a sense of mischief. You can see the work and wear and weathered-ness of the knuckles, the dry, white ash settling deep into each crevice and fold of skin.

In the cold winter light through my window, my hands look gray. Ashen and pale like they have never seen light in their life, like they've been sucked dry of blood and life.

In the warmth, they are soft and delicate and fragile, and one likens them to fingers, unknowing that they are wood, sucked of blood but not of life.

Mirrors

FINNORA S • GRADE 12 • PERSONAL ESSAY



What if what I see in the mirror is completely different from what other people think I look like? My favorite mirror is my bathroom mirror—its lighting best compliments my features. My eyes are dark brown in the center, hazel in the middle, and the outermost ring is deep green under the lights. I have olive skin that gets darker and brighter in the summer. My hair is dark brown in the winter, but lighter in the sun. My lips are almost coral, but there’s no word for their exact shade. My features are pretty average, but my face isn’t at all. I’ve never seen someone who looks like me.

Is it possible to look like two completely different people? Or completely different to two people?

What if I look different to everyone? What if it’s not just my face that people see but the way my eyebrows raise, legs cross, and lips part when staring at my reflection through the glass on subway doors? Do I remind them of someone? Do they think I’m pretty?

Do you ever think about how we might have the same word for a color but be seeing completely different ones? We’ll never know what a “blue sky” or a “yellow taxi” looks like through someone else’s eyes. I think that’s true about faces.

Last night I threw a dinner party. My friends all looked beautiful, which the Polaroid pictures captured. But the photos didn’t capture the way their eyes lit up with smiles, or the unspoken currents of love that passed through hugs, or the slope of negative space in between their figures as they crowded around my daybed.

They’ll never know how beautiful they looked seated around my table, lit by dimmed lights combating the night. They may never know how gorgeous their laughter is. How the shadow of their hair on the wall looks from across the table. How it feels to share a hug that lasts a second longer than it should.





MULAN J ▪ GRADE 11 ▪ POETRY

on November 11, Mary Magdalene cries again, tears of joy. Because I am the stone, left to dust.

Moon, This Time You're in the Spotlight

KAYA C • GRADE 10 • HUMOR



ome 250 million miles away there is a light-emitting satellite. We call it “The Moon.” Now, excuse my indignation, and my stomping on the hearts of poets past, but I think that this Moon character is overplayed.

“Look up! It’s the moon!”

All right. I see it.

It’s bright compared to the dark sky. It’s big, so you say, white, and suspended above us. But then I lower my gaze just a touch and see a city streetlamp. It, too, illuminates the sky with a bright white light, and it, too, is suspended above. It’s smaller, I’ll admit, but from where I’m standing looms larger than this faraway rock.

About that. Have you ever seen those pictures where a person pinches their thumb and pointer together, and it looks like the Moon is trapped between their fingers? How pathetic of the Moon. How demeaning for its entirety to be wedged in there like sushi between chopsticks. I understand it’s perspective and all, but unless you’re an astronaut, that’s the only real-life perspective you’re going to get. And let’s face it: it’s wimpy.

Then there’s the laziness. The laziness may be the most frustrating part of the Moon. We are the ones down here gawking, painting, creating festivals, and building spaceships, while it just hangs out in the sky, assuming it’s our muse. It orbits, and we are thankful, but I do a lot more than spin around on a daily basis.

It doesn’t even manage to do its job all the time. I’m talking about solar eclipses, when the Moon carelessly galivants between us and the sun, stealing all our light and quite literally darkening our day. In times like these, I am thankful, once again, for streetlamps.

Now, at this point you’re probably asking yourself: Kaya, what did the Moon do to you to get you so incredibly fired up? I wish I could tell you. There’s no



**IT ORBITS, AND WE ARE THANKFUL,
BUT I DO A LOT MORE THAN SPIN AROUND
ON A DAILY BASIS.”**

villain origin story to point a finger at, no confrontation to recount, and no silly little anecdote of the Moon ruining my day when I was a tiny little toddler. I have just had enough of this diva. I'm pretty too.

Back to the meaty stuff.

Why is a Full Moon such a novelty? I can't be the only one who doesn't find it cool when the Moon is a perfect circle. Call me crazy, but I maintain the expectation that all my circles be perfect. But no, the Moon is of course the exception, getting various chunks of itself swallowed up by shade most of the time so it appears lumpy and misshapen. I am ashamed not only of the Moon this time but also of you earthly dwellers for going goo-goo-gaw-gaw over the one day a month that the Moon doesn't screw up.

And then there's the other notorious Moon shape. The one where it downright plagiarizes the letter "C." This shape is always colored yellow in bedtime books and man-made movie sets for no apparent reason. You know who I think was behind this historic inaccuracy? The Moon.

Beyond that, the shape is just plain ugly. Thank God for DreamWorks, who came in hot with the boy fishing off this C-shaped Moon in the opening scene of every good movie ever. What a recovery.

The Moon never even said thank you.

When Apollo 11 first landed, I think two thoughts were going off in Neil Armstrong's head. First, "How cool; I'm the first man on the moon." Second, "How many billions did we spend getting up here? This boulder is a wasteland. Yay, America . . . I guess?" There is nothing alive on the Moon, nothing that could ever potentially flourish up there, and a total of zero materials that can benefit us in any way. Trust me, we've been looking.

I'm not here petitioning to cut NASA's funding but rather trying to knock through their big helmet-heads that we can stop caring about the Moon once and for all. It will do its thing. We will do ours.

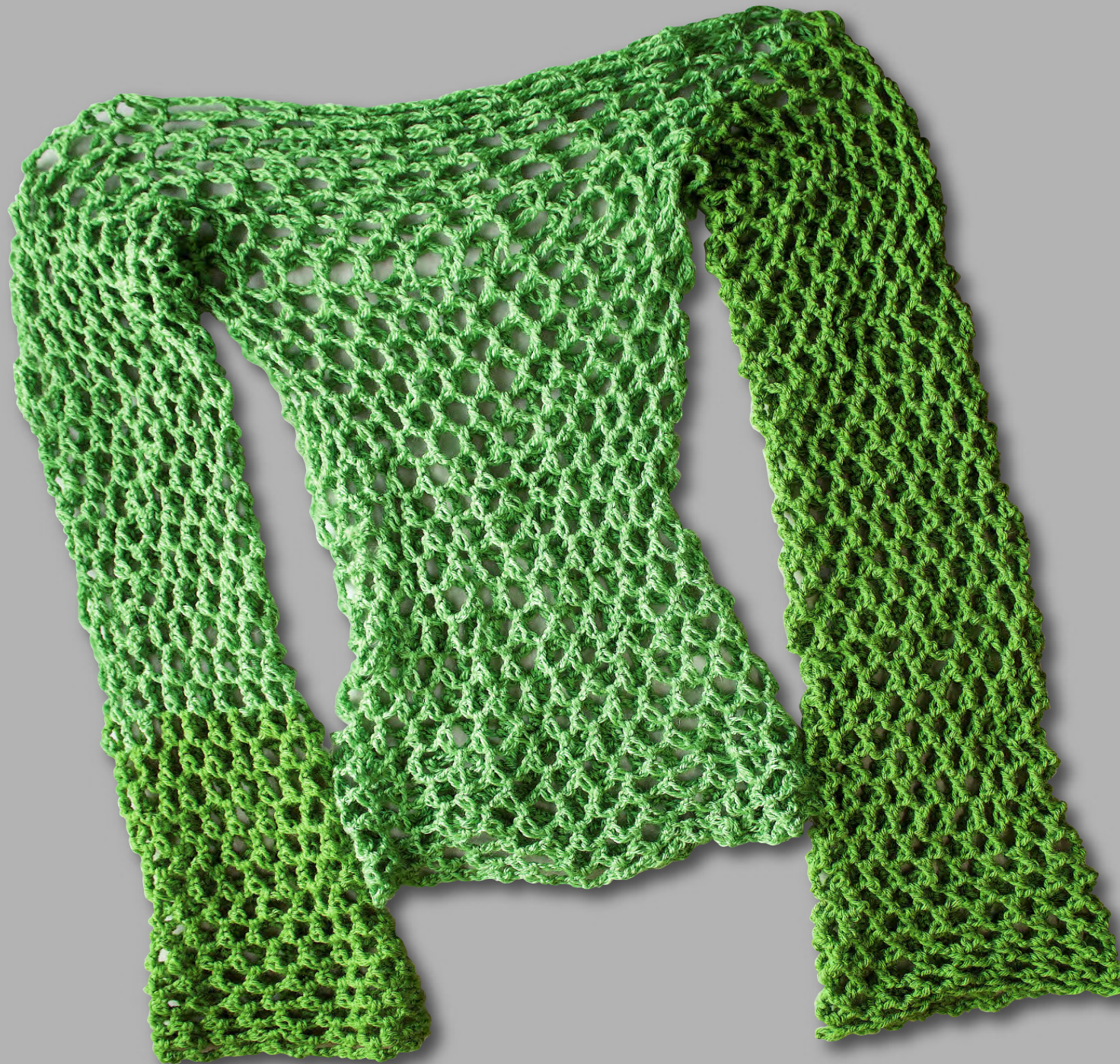
Go watch Uranus.



SELF-PORTRAIT: ILLUMINATED ■ MAX M ■ GRADE 11 ■ *SPRAY PAINT ON PAPER*







MESH SWEATER ■ ULA K ■ GRADE 10 ■ ACRYLIC YARN





Navigating: A Crossword

ELIZA S • GRADE 12 • PERSONAL ESSAY

ACROSS:

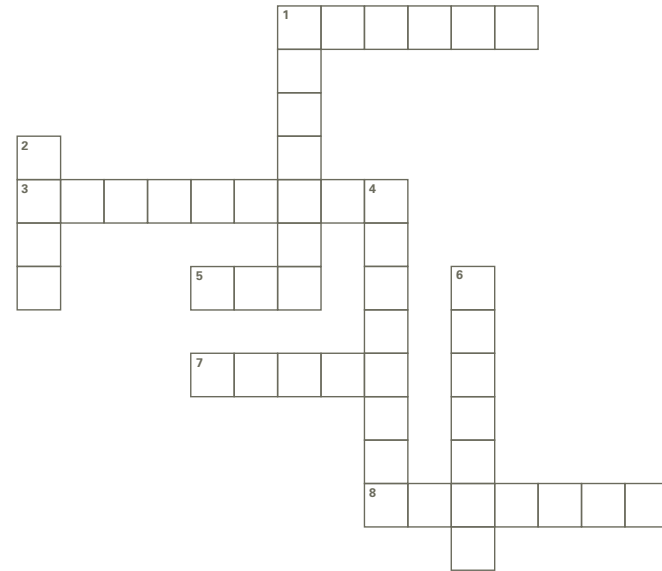
1. An underground system of transportation.
3. Bladed boots used on a cold surface.
5. A four-wheeled structure you steer.
7. To move on all fours, body close to ground.
8. The action of moving faster than a walk.

DOWN:

1. A two-wheeled structure you stand on.
2. A two-wheeled structure you sit on.
4. A wheeled seat with a spot for one standing child and one sitting.
6. Regular-paced movement using legs.

7 Across: To move on all fours, body close to ground.

Your first memory, probably age two or less. You look up from your crib at graceful Princess Belle and Cinderella hanging just out of your reach. You wonder where Mom and Dad went. Reaching up to the rail, you pull yourself out. You hear a rattle of the metal doorknob, and the slight creak of the hinges. Looking straight up, you see Mom's shocked face peering down at yours. *Well, how did you make it here, little miss?*



4 Down: A wheeled seat with a spot for one standing child and one sitting.

You sit under the plastic cover, raindrops pooling on the clear sheet in front of you. Oh, how you yearn to be your brother: getting to stand, having freedom of boots and a raincoat, splashing in puddles, and not trapped under this plastic. He tells you he doesn't need an umbrella; you want to be like him. When you ask to stand: *But you don't want to get your pretty dress wet!* When you cry: *Crybaby.*

1 Down: A two-wheeled structure you stand on.

Pink Razor, the best gift yet. *Watch this!* Jump and glide, jump and glide, jump and *bam*. You wince and prepare yourself to peek. Red . . . more red . . . a lot of red . . . white? Bone. You scream. She sighs, walks over, and tells you to calm down. *Those are fat cells, not bone. You're fine.* You don't feel fine, but you can't run the risk of tears, so you agree. *Okay, I'm fine.*

2 Down: A two-wheeled structure you sit on.

Purple and white tassels, with a white wicker basket and fuchsia plastic peonies. At first, you are lost behind the rest. You watch your family get smaller in the distance and feel your chest getting increasingly heavier. With time, you grow into the decked-out frame; you gain speed. You learn how to stand without tipping over, to get up the hill without placing your butt down on the cushiony seat—not even once. You're proud of yourself the day you beat your brother home. Your thighs burn as proof of your accomplishment. When you skin the tops of your toes and see white, you know the drill. It was your fault for not wearing shoes anyways, so you hobble home, and dig through the cabinet for Band-Aids and Neosporin.

3 Across: Bladed boots used on a cold surface.

Your first pair is white, just like the true professional girls whom you watch on TV. You yearn to be as graceful as the girls in the middle of the rink, the ones with the tight, baby-blue quarter-zips; the matching,

pleated spandex skirts; pastel pink tights; and cozy white leg warmers. You catch your own wobbling reflection, bundled up in a heap of mismatched winter items: your brother's bulky hand-me-down green coat, your dad's red "Dr. Dog" hat (at this point, indie-rock was still "embarrassing dad music" and hadn't yet become "cool kid" music), Nana's classic patchwork scarf she knitted you, and your wiggling ankles wearing your pristine white Christmas gift. When you return to the rink with your fourth grade class a few years later, you pretentiously do a 180°, begin moving backward, then a 540°, and slowly lift your leg up into the air, landing right in the middle of the rink where the graceful girls in the pretty outfits used to stand. You wonder if anyone saw.

8 Across: The action of moving faster than a walk.

When you're placed into soccer by your mom, you find out the morning of your first practice. *But I don't know how to.* Thus begin the years of it. You make the travel team in third grade; you're the youngest on the team. You sit in a circle, surrounded by girls who spend the weekends with their moms shopping at Pink for sports bras. Girls who think about boys, and girls who plead with their parents to get their ears pierced. Girls who will start to roll up their shorts three times instead of two, and not because they're too baggy or it's an extra-hot day. You sit around these girls and guzzle your Gatorade because today is an extra-hot day. You swallow and they ask you if you want children when you're older. You say of

course. You want two girls and two boys, so they can each have a friend. You feel your face flush as you watch their noses scrunch and whispers start. *Ewww! She wants to do it!* When you get home, you ask your mom how babies are made. You regret your question moments later. You go to bed that night with a new addition to your bookshelf: *It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health*.

1 Across: An underground system of transportation.

In seventh grade, you start taking it alone. You suddenly notice the eyes meandering and fixating on you. You try not to dwell and instead blame your anxiety. When you forget your sweatpants one day after volleyball, you are pulled aside by a nice-looking, 40-something-year-old man. You instinctively unplug your headphones and prepare to give directions. *You have beautiful legs*. When you step onto the platform: *Hey there, gorgeous*. Note to self: remember your sweatpants tomorrow, please.

6 Down: Regular-paced movement using legs.

When you are locked inside for one year because of a worldwide pandemic, you turn to this to keep you sane. While putting in your headphones to tune out the rest of the noise, you make your regular loops around the parallel blocks. *One, two, three, four, five . . . five hundred . . . one thousand*. You go up Maple, then down Midwood, then back up the other side of Maple, return to Lefferts, say hi to the neighbor whom

you always forget to catch the name of. One thousand and one, one thousand and two. When sanity turns into obsession, you stop.

5 Across: A four-wheeled structure you steer.

You seem to have run out of options, so you turn to the last one. *Why do you need to? You live in New York*. The first time you're behind the wheel, you feel like you are in the early stages of moving once again. *Well, how did you make it here, little miss?* You feel your back straighten and shoulders relax as you watch the grip on the passenger-side door loosen. You feel the breeze of the freeway hit your face. Freeway: way to freedom? You turn up the song: *"You live your life, you go in shadows. . . . Fade into you"* and let the wind guide your hand doing airplanes out the window.

Answers:	
Across:	Down:
1. Subway	1. Scooter
3. Iceskates	2. Bike
5. Car	4. Stroller
7. Crawl	6. Walking
8. Running	



a dead lighter

SOEFI E • GRADE 10 • POETRY



shut off the burning light of the LED,
the room finally at rest as I light candles.

Like everything else in this room, the candles
are worn and low, the wick curled up in black ash,
waiting to be finished by a final breath.

I stare at the candles every night, finding
something to distract myself with when I should
be working. But the candles sway and flicker,
taunting and inviting me to come look, to come
talk and share secrets.

They whisper to me, kindly, gently, as if they're
scared they're going to perish, and tell me all their
secrets, all their problems. I listen dopily, because
their stories sound an awful lot like mine. And so I
wonder how small the world could be, if three
candles like us could all have the same story.

But along the lines of the deep night, when the
branches of the trees outside have begun to

swing and shine more violently, a name hits
my ear, and I wonder if it really is their story
that they're telling.

I take a leap of faith, and ask a candle, "Whose
story is this?"

It laughs, bending over, curling more—it'll be of
no use soon enough. "Who else?" it wonders.
"Who else have we been watching, perched on
the shelf, cold and frigid except for the nights?"

"You are a funny kid," the second one says, "it is
your story that you listen to so happily, and yet
you mope."

I'm taken aback—how many other children has
my story been told to? But I calm once more—
it's only me, only them, only the LED light. So I
blow them out, as they feared, and crawl into
the maroon blanket.



Stainless

AVI K • GRADE 11 • PERSONAL ESSAY



“OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE STRONGER THAN THEY APPEAR,” reads a sign on the mirror in the locker room. I huff, stomach swimming, and pick a locker in the corner, setting my backpack inside. I take off my shoes, shrug off my coat, and strip off my pants to reveal a pair of shorter pants and place all of those in my locker too.

I make desperate eye contact with myself in the mirror, encouraging sign be damned. *Can I do this?*

Possibly, a little voice answers.

Gee, thanks.

Taking a deep breath, I close my locker, grab my mat, and head next door to class.

The room is washed in a gentle pink light. Surprisingly, it smells less like sweaty people and more like disinfectant and a hint of perfume. I immediately notice two things. One: six of the seven poles are already occupied. Two: the only unoccupied pole is at the front and center of the room. Because of course it is. I try not to look too lost as I glance around the room, hoping a free pole will pop up.

It doesn't.

I gulp, spread my mat next to the available pole, and sit down, praying that it's not secretly the teacher's pole or something.

Use of poles for various athletic activities stretches back hundreds of years—even back to the twelfth century through the Indian sport *Mallakhamb*, which includes a shorter, wider pole of wood, and Chinese Pole, which includes two taller poles. Pole dancing as we know it, though, may have originated during the early twentieth century, when performers in traveling sideshows began to utilize the central pole in their tents for their pre-existing styles of sexy dance. Pole dancing has since become associated with stripping and so-called exotic dancing.

In 1994, however, a dancer named Fawnia Monney created the first official pole dancing class for nonprofessional folks. Since then, pole dancing has gained more recognition as a sport and a fitness activity, and classes have become much more mainstream.

Which is, I guess, how I've found myself in a pink-lit room staring at a stainless-steel pole on this fine Friday afternoon. I signed up for this intro-level class two days ago on a whim.

As I resign myself to ill fate in the form of a front-and-center pole, I notice that the instructor is going around to speak to each student individually—asking their names, how they're feeling today, if they've ever

pole-danced before. He's wearing a loose gray T-shirt and black booty shorts with a white trim. I glance around—most people, in fact, are wearing sports bras and shorts. The girl sitting to my right, who looks very cool and confident, is rocking some fishnet tights. Another person is wearing black bell-bottom pants with a light blue V-neck, bell-sleeved shirt. It strikes me how bizarrely normal everyone looks. Like, no crazy sex aliens from outer space here.

When my instructor gets to me, I tell him my name, that I'm doing well, and that this is my first time pole dancing. He congratulates me, and then moves on to the next person.

Eventually, the instructor—whose name, I've learned, is Armando—comes to the front of the room and announces that we'll be doing a brief warm-up and some floor work before learning a few tricks on the pole. He then fiddles with his phone, and an upbeat pop song—which I will later identify as “BAM BAM” by Merk & Kremont—fills the space.

“All right!” he calls, bopping to the front of the room. “Warm-up! Head up and down! Let's go! Woohoo!!”

“So, that's the walk-around, yeah?” Armando asks, gripping his pole (which is, in fact, the front and center one—I've been relegated to a different pole). “Just”—he demonstrates on his own pole as he speaks—“walk, walk, walk, walk, booty turn, walk,

walk, walk, walk, booty turn. And so on.” He looks at us through the mirror at the front of the room. “Any questions?”

The room is silent.

“So now, you get a minute or two to practice individually.” Armando is walking over to the wall, where a massive speaker sits. I look at my pole and then at myself in the mirror and then at Armando, who presses something on his phone—

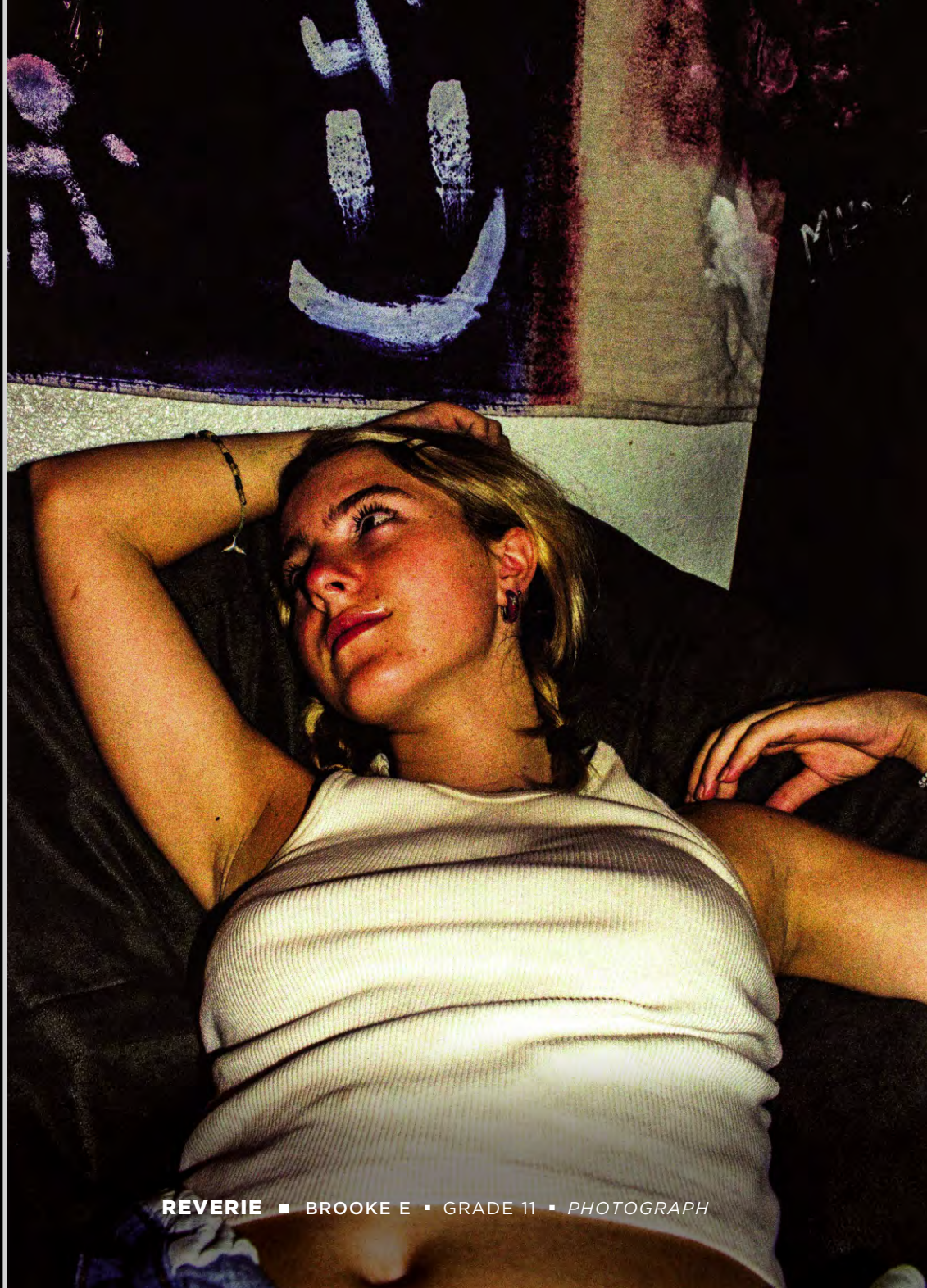
And in an instant, the room transforms: the lights have been turned off, plunging the room into darkness. The spotlights have gone from pink to a deep blue, illuminating each of the seven individual poles. The blue galaxy lights thrown across the back wall glitter in the darkness. Music blasts through the speaker.

Of course they're playing WAP, I think, and that's my last coherent thought before I walk forward, give the pole a once-over with my sanitized washcloth (yay COVID precautions!), grab the pole, and start to dance.

My body twirls through the air. I step to the beat, becoming one with the music. On a whim, I turn my back to the pole and do a dip. I feel otherworldly. It's like a dream.

I catch a glance of myself in the mirror—the deep blue light is reflecting off my body.

Maybe that sign in the dressing room was right, after all.



REVERIE ■ BROOKE E ■ GRADE 11 ■ PHOTOGRAPH



Docket of Thought

EVA V • GRADE 12 • PERSONAL ESSAY



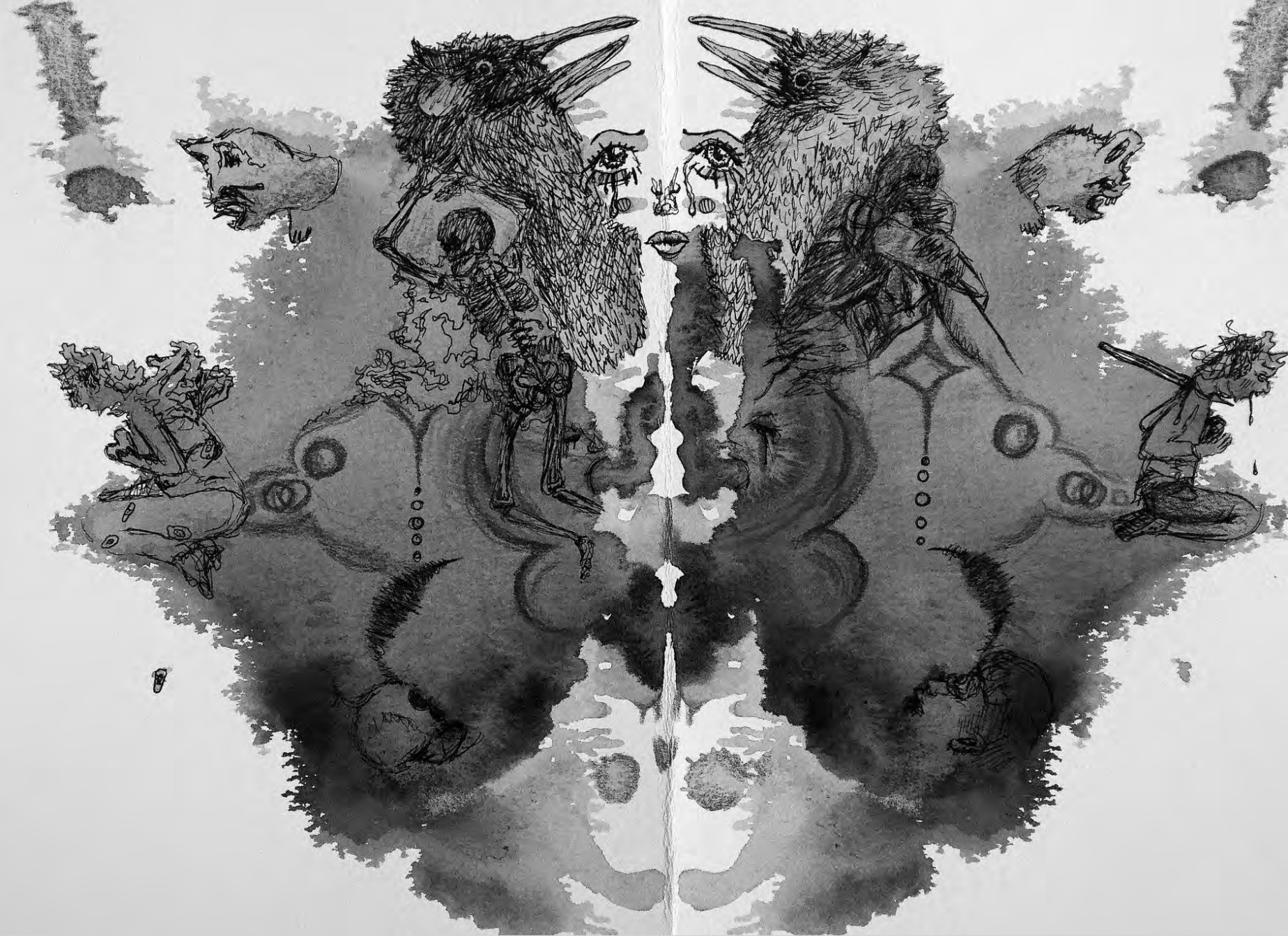
MONDAY

You wake up at 6:24 a.m.; your alarm goes off at 6:45. There's your heartbeat. You fell asleep last night trying to take your mind off the paragraph of history homework you procrastinated on and how you had tripped in front of a freshman girl. Somehow, your eyes are heavier than they were before you slept. After changing, you go downstairs into the kitchen and pull a stainless-steel pot from the cupboard that's hanging loosely on a broken hinge. You push and turn the white knob on the stove to ignite the flame with three fast clicks and a surge of heat. Pulling open the top drawer of the dirty dishwasher, you crane your neck to find your favorite small spoon that you must eat your oatmeal with; otherwise, it'll feel wrong. You go through the motions of cooking your oats as usual (wait for the milk to bubble around the edges, then stir the oats until a lumpy, yet soupy enough, texture has been achieved) and head upstairs with the bowl. This is the one time every day where you watch Netflix in bed, oats on your lap, checking the

time every two minutes. At 8.05 a.m., out the door, down the street, headphones in; you're at school.

TUESDAY

You're at school. Right around 10 minutes into class, you begin pondering what you want for lunch. The outside-of-school options are overwhelming so you stick with the cafeteria food; that way, if you don't enjoy it, at least it won't have been a waste of money. Morning break ends and you're ravenous—those oats didn't last as long as they usually do—but you don't get a snack because what if you'll still be full at lunch? You're probably just hungry because you've been thinking about food for the past three hours. No, you decide to wait. In class, your eyes wander, landing on your hands as you contemplate college. *What if I don't get in? What if I get in and it turns out I'm not smart enough? Why am I so behind?* Zoning back in, you look up, trying to figure out where the equations on the white board came from. *Everyone's following their own timeline.* You have to remind yourself or you'll lose focus again. 12:35 p.m. hits; it's lunch time.



WEDNESDAY

It's lunchtime. You walk past the line of students who are waiting for the hot food, looking through their shoulders and over their heads, assessing the options. You make your rounds at the salad bar and the sandwich station before returning to the hot food to pick up some chicken. Your plate looks beige so you construct a salad and add a spoonful of hummus before heading upstairs and into the courtyard. Joining your friends on the concrete benches, you angle your body toward them, legs on either side of the bench. You've decided not to talk about school, or college, or homework, ending up asking instead about their weekend plans. At some point you stop hearing the conversation because you've noticed your jeans; you notice the waistband riding up into your ribs, you notice your skin folding over the top of it, you notice the tightness where your legs meet your torso. All you see now are the bodies around you. You notice how your jeans fit snugly and how those of the person walking out the main entrance don't. You notice someone's collarbones and reach for your own only to feel that they're hidden. Your eyes wander over to someone else's plate and then back to yours. *Stop. Get over yourself.* You realize you never made plans for Friday, and lunch is over.



AT SOME POINT YOU STOP

HEARING THE CONVERSATION
BECAUSE YOU'VE NOTICED YOUR
JEANS; YOU NOTICE THE WAISTBAND
RIDING UP INTO YOUR RIBS, YOU
NOTICE YOUR SKIN FOLDING OVER
THE TOP OF IT, YOU NOTICE THE
TIGHTNESS WHERE YOUR LEGS
MEET YOUR TORSO.”

THURSDAY

Lunch is over, and before you have a chance to sit down and breathe, the end of the day has arrived. You lug yourself over to practice, where you spend the whole time wishing for it to end while also dreading the moment you will have to confront your mountain of work. You get home at 6:45, hang up your keys, and hastily throw your shoes under the church pew that functions as a bench. You've been thinking about dinner for the past five hours and know exactly what you want (the leftover pasta from two nights ago with the squashed tomatoes and mozzarella). On the way upstairs, you tell Dad you had a good day

and he tells you that dinner is in the oven. *No, no, no. This wasn't the plan.* There's your heartbeat. You hold your tongue and go upstairs because you can't be weird about food or he'll worry—it's been almost a year now, but they still worry. Swallowing your words, and sitting down at your desk, you pull out your computer and only go as far as opening Google Classroom before you give up on work. You've been breathing short and fast, and now your hearing is muffled and your vision is spotted. You lean your head in your hands, trying to catch your breath. You watch the clock meticulously. 6:55 . . . 7:00 . . . 7:02 . . . You get the text; it's dinnertime. At the table, you sit to the left of your mum and opposite your brother, who sits next to your dad. Your brother is talking about his history class, making you remember when music suddenly played out of your phone during history on Monday three weeks ago. Your cheeks redden and your chewing quickens. Dinner's over; back to your room.

FRIDAY

Back to your room. You contemplate texting the group chat to ask when and where you're meeting up. You need to know the plan but don't want to be annoying so you distract yourself on your phone.

Finally someone sends a text suggesting a late-night park hangout. You're in the park, sitting on a brown paper bag to keep your new jeans from getting muddy, with the glow of the streetlamp overhead lighting up your friends' faces.

This is nice.

It's the end of the week and the one day you don't do work. Your shoulders finally relax away from your ears, and the knot in your stomach begins to ease.

Your phone that you placed on the grass next to you lights up with a photo memory from 10 months ago. Back when your jeans slipped under your hip bones and your skin was dull. When your hair was thin and frizzy, and your smile couldn't make it to your eyes. You notice your jeans and the way the seams strain against the bloating of your stomach. You're reminded of everything you ate today: oatmeal, bagel, granola bar, Chipotle. You feel your friend looking at you; her face bears a soft smile as her eyes search for yours. You reflect her expression, take a breath, and shake your head. You know you can't just have bad days anymore; not without having to pick apart your brain, dismantle your thoughts, and put everything back together—so you keep it

surface-level. Your mum doesn't want you in the park so you go home.

SATURDAY

You go home, go into the bathroom, and wash off whatever is left of your makeup. Staring at your reflection, you analyze the fullness of your face and run your fingers along the indent your bra strap left on your back. You pinch the fat on your hips and pull at the skin on your stomach. You glare at yourself, making sure nothing has changed since you last checked your reflection in the living room mirror two minutes ago. Unsatisfied, you turn off the light and get into bed. The second your head falls into the pillow, you plug your phone in and begin scrolling. You were tired before but now you're not. *11:03*. You put your phone away, turn onto your left side, and pick up your book. *I'll finish this chapter, then go to sleep*. Page one, there's your heartbeat. You turn over, onto your right side, so the chaotic pounding of your heart won't be as distracting. You reach the end of page two and have to start over again because you were

thinking about breakfast and can't remember how the main character ended up in a nursing home, surrounded by pots of orchids. By the time you reach page four, your vision is spinning, making the letters on the page droopy, so you put the book on a pillow next to you and turn off the light.

SUNDAY

You turn off the light and roll back onto your left side, tightly wrapping your duvet under your chin. Your breath is short and fast, and your heart is pounding. With your attention on your body, you feel your thighs touching and the fold of skin above your hip—everything is soft. You can't keep your eyes from darting around behind your eyelids as you remember bumping into someone in the cafeteria, causing both of you to spill your food on the ground. You remember the look someone gave you as you asked a stupid question during math. You think about breakfast; maybe you'll try something different tomorrow. There's a weight constricting your breathing, as if your ribs are shrinking, but you're used to that.



CONSIDERATION ■ AIDAN P ■ GRADE 12 ■ *CHARCOAL*





Rage Cage

HESHEL R • GRADE 10 • PERSONAL ESSAY

The printer shattered as my dad and I pounded it with our bats. A shard of glass flew into the crease of my glove, nicking my wrist, but I didn't care: I was in flow. My dad and I had developed a pattern. I rammed my bat milliseconds after he pulled his up. There was a music to our madness. The sound of our bats making contact with the printer had a cadence—a rhythmic BAM BAM, then silence, almost parallel to the faint sound of a heartbeat. The printer didn't stand a chance. It was a shell of its old self; its mechanical guts were scattered across the room. I was thirsty for more.

A week earlier, I had been mulling over a school assignment I had just received: have an experience and write an essay about it. I was thinking too hard and had all these grandiose ideas like skydiving and bungee jumping. However, I was in a time crunch and needed to stop being indecisive, so I turned to my parents for aid. As my parents were generating ideas, I realized there was a slight problem. I wanted to be a thrill-seeker and do something outlandish while they were being realistic and suggesting I do something like go to MOMA.



WE BOUGHT WATERMELONS

FROM THE SUPERMARKET AND GOT DOWN TO BUSINESS, CRUSHING MELON AFTER MELON UNTIL OUR WHOLE BACKYARD WAS PAINTED RED. FOR ME, CRUSHING FRUIT HELPED ME IN A TIME WHEN MY WORLD WAS FLIPPED UPSIDE DOWN.”

Booooringggg. I was ready to give up on them before my dad proposed a rage room.

“It would be a nice stress reliever,” he said. “These midterm elections are driving me crazy!”

This piqued my interest. I had seen videos on TikTok of the Rage Cage NYC. It had always looked fun, but I had never really gotten around to actually looking into it. Every time I saw it, I was reminded of the early stages of the pandemic in Ohio, when my brother received a sledgehammer from our uncle for his birthday. The sledgehammer was an immediate smash (no pun intended). We bought

watermelons from the supermarket and got down to business, crushing melon after melon until our whole backyard was painted red. For me, crushing fruit helped me in a time when my world was flipped upside down. I felt like my dad's suggestion was a sign. I was ready to see if smashing stuff could alleviate my stress. We booked a two-person special for 7:20 the next Friday night and waited.

On Friday, then, we drove to Williamsburg and stepped into the misty fog that shrouded Brooklyn, continuing our discussion about Rutgers' newest recruit to their basketball team, Cam Spencer.

"He's averaging 17 points on 48 percent shooting! Man's a beast!"

Three blocks later, our rave was cut short as Google Maps dinged.

I stepped into the first warehouse and was immediately greeted by the scent of a musty storage locker. The sound of loud thuds and gleeful screams periodically filled the air. Looking around, I saw rows of smaller rooms, each with a shining neon sign that read "RAGE CAGE" with a picture above of a bat engulfed in flames. Crates of printers, landline telephones, microwaves, and 2000-era computers rested against a security shutter. There



WE SIGNED LIABILITY WAIVERS

ON IPADS PLASTERED AGAINST THE WHITE BRICK WALL AND PUT ON WHITE HAZMAT SUITS, HARD HATS EQUIPPED WITH EARMUFFS AND VISORS, AND LATEX AND GLOVES. WITH MY WHITE PUFFY SUIT AND MY BRIGHT ORANGE HARD HAT ON, I LOOKED UNCANNILY SIMILAR TO A BURNING MARSHMALLOW."

were mountains of boxes filled with plates stacked almost impossibly high toward the rusting ceiling. AC ventilators and lights were suspended from the roof, producing a deafening whirring noise and an intense glaring light. I sat down on one of the benches placed randomly in the middle of the room as my dad checked us in at the table. A woman and a man probably in their late twenties sat behind a flimsy screen barrier, their faces glued to their computers. Sanitizer, pens, a drill, and miscellaneous wires cluttered their shared desk. The woman

looked up at my dad and addressed him with her staticy mic: "How can we help you today, sir?"

We signed liability waivers on iPads plastered against the white brick wall and put on white hazmat suits, hard hats equipped with earmuffs and visors, and latex and heat-insulated gloves. With my white puffy suit and my bright orange hard hat on, I looked uncannily similar to a burning marshmallow.

She led us to a room and told us to enjoy ourselves. Chunks of chewed-up fiberboard plating lined the half-painted walls. Plastic and metal shards left over from other duos were scattered across the floor. Two tables made of mounted car tires with wood planks atop, eroding from all the hits they had endured, occupied the middle of the room. Resting on the wood planks were a cardboard box of plates, two printers, two keyboards, and a landline phone. I walked over to the corner with my dad and grabbed a bat leaning against the wall.

For the next 30 minutes, I focused all my energy on inanimate objects. I destroyed plate after plate, chucking them at a spray-painted bull's-eye and hitting the center on the first try (we don't talk about the other attempts), and pitching them to my dad like they were baseballs. I focused my attention on the

big electronics next. My dad and I bludgeoned the objects into extinction, spreading their scraps around the floor. By the end of our session, there was barely anything left. The skeleton of a computer and an archaic phone were all that remained among a pile of destruction.

Drenched in sweat and out of breath, I turned to my dad and asked him, “You still worrying about the midterms?”

“NO. No no no no no,” he said in rapid succession.
“My mind is clear!”

Unfurl

ALEXIS S • GRADE 10 • *POETRY*



can physically feel the top of my head
unscrewing and floating away from me, as if
being lifted by a string, tied to my scalp and
getting pulled, spiraling my burdened
consciousness into a collection of paper & air,
becoming truly nothing and finally finding
bliss in my absence.



Foul Beasts

NOELLE A • GRADE 11 • HUMOR

If there's one thing that absolutely disgusts me, absolutely repulses me, it's messy eaters. Greasy-handed, loudly chewing people whom I absolutely loathe. As annoying as it sounds, I can't help but bug my friends about proper hand cleaning, and proper table manners when we're out for food.

First, let's talk about the chop-smackers, those endlessly loud chewers who can't stop chomping like a cow grazing long grasses on a farm. The rhythmic chewing of the mouth, lips, and teeth grinding together should not be audible, but with these people, the loud saliva-filled smack of the lips is unavoidable. And if you dare to take a glance, you can see the food sloshing about in the person's mouth like the clothes in a washing machine.

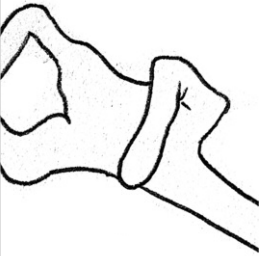
Then there are the people who truly can never stop talking, even when their mouths are full of food. And my sister is definitely guilty of this. During one dinner she turns to me, midway through one of her exciting stories from school,





FIRST, LET'S TALK ABOUT THE

CHOP-SMACKERS, THOSE
ENDLESSLY LOUD CHEWERS WHO
CAN'T STOP CHOMPING LIKE A COW
GRAZING LONG GRASSES ON A
FARM. THE RHYTHMIC CHEWING OF
THE MOUTH, LIPS, AND TEETH GRINDING
TOGETHER SHOULD NOT BE AUDIBLE, BUT
WITH THESE PEOPLE, THE LOUD SALIVA-
FILLED SMACK OF THE LIPS IS
UNAVOIDABLE.”



when a big chunk of food just drops out of
her mouth.

LITERALLY DROPS. It falls and lands
nicely on her lap: like a whole combined
chunk of nicely chewed-down meat and rice
we're eating for dinner. *Gross.*

And let me tell you, that has happened
multiple times, with her never giving the fallen



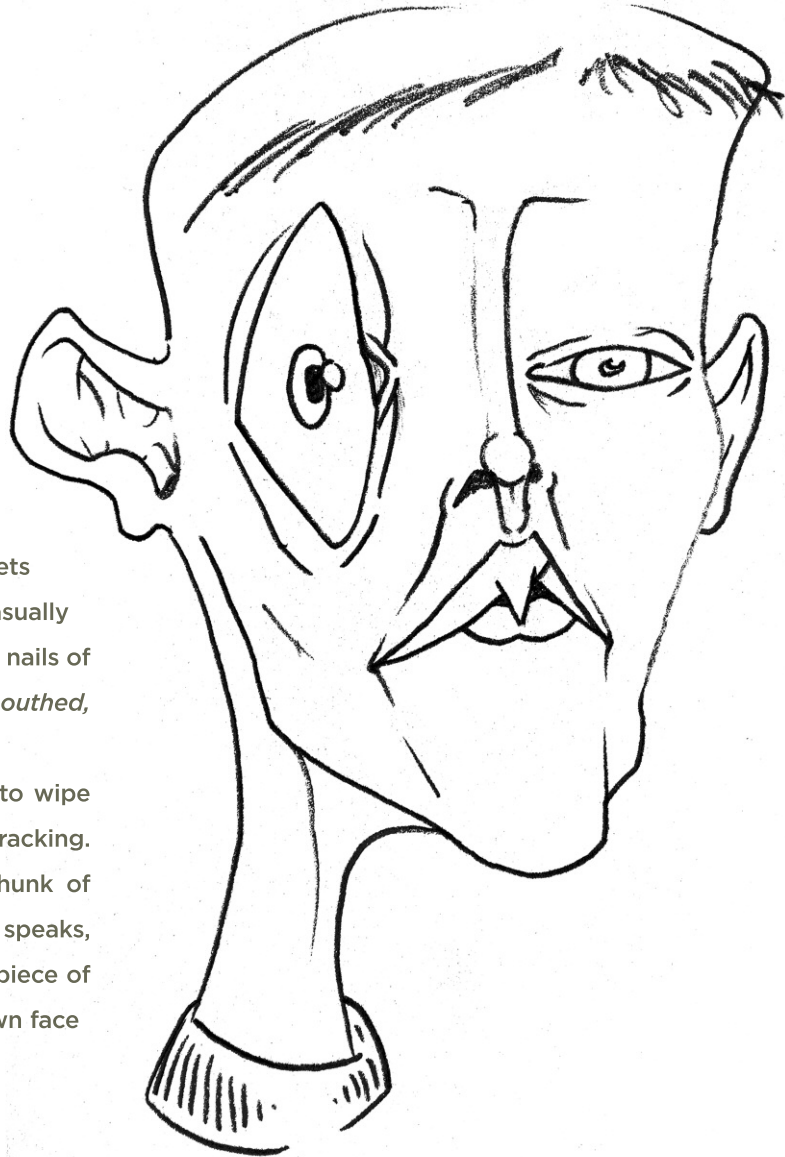


IT'S THE MOMENT WHEN THOSE

GREASY FINGERS TOUCH THE
PRISTINE BLACK OF THEIR PHONE
SCREEN THAT MAKES ME CRINGE.
THE OILY SWIPE OF THE FINGERS
ACROSS THE CLEAN GLASS MAKES
MY SKIN CRAWL AND MY HAIR
STAND ON END.”

food a second glance, adamant about continuing her story. And when she finally gets enough of my disgusted looks, she just casually glances down and picks it up with those long nails of hers, laughing it off—laughing it off *open-mouthed*, the food *still* in her mouth.

My mother's ghastly habit of forgetting to wipe her mouth after she eats is especially nerve-racking. Often I'll see a stray crumb of bread or chunk of tomato sauce stuck on her mouth, and as she speaks, my eyes can't help but just follow the awful piece of food moving. I discreetly point toward my own face



while staring at her, trying to indicate that she should clean her mouth. It's truly awful.

Next, we have what I like to call the “food pickers.” These foul-fingered beasts have never heard of a good hand wash. Constantly, food grease coats their hands. I mean, have you ever heard of soap and water? Maybe hand sanitizer? The worst part about these “food pickers” is that they can't stop touching anything and *everything*. However, it's the moment when those greasy fingers touch the pristine black of their phone screen that makes me cringe. The oily swipe of the fingers across the clean glass makes my skin crawl and my hair stand on end. They check their phone after a bite of greasy fried chicken or french fries and then casually swipe their hands across their pant legs to “remove” the grease.

I can't forget what happened at our most recent family dinner with my cousins. On the table before us lay a wonderful platter of shrimp. Peeled (except for the tail), the shrimp were neatly placed in rows for everyone to eat. My little cousin reaches for a piece—completely disregarding the fork lying RIGHT NEXT TO HER—and grabs it with her bare hands. Now this

cousin is already in fourth grade, well-learned in the ways of using a fork and knife, so my utter horror in this moment was unimaginable. Completely oblivious, she continues to hold the shrimp in her fist, ripping off small chunks to eat. Slivers of shrimp get stuck in her nails, her hands filthy with the strong smell of fish. Then, to top it off, she goes and grabs her favorite stuffed duck, her hands still unwashed, fishy, and gross.

In conclusion: never chew with your mouth open, and always remember to CLEAN YOUR HANDS.

Thank you.

In the Eye

GRAY S • GRADE 12 • PERSONAL ESSAY

It's been three years since my grandmother died, and I've only just begun to cry. A foot in front of me, Oliver is whispering dirty jokes to Aidan; 20 or 30 feet past them, a rabbi reads a list of names; even further, Zach is standing, freshly bar-mitzvahed and relieved; I am sitting, and a silent river of tears streams down my face. The names are those of dead people, people who were once a part of the congregation and never will be again.

I've lived blocks away from Beth Elohim my entire life, but have never attended an actual service inside before today. I've sat in its pews for Thanksgiving speeches and walked past it every single day; I've noted the special services held on the Jewish holidays that I've never celebrated; I even went to preschool in the building itself. But now I know none of the names. Have I been missing something?

The rabbi reads, and I cry. I stare at the stained-glass tableaux and the domed ceiling, absorbed in its grid pattern. The names of people I've never known wash over me, and I begin to think of my grandmoth-

er. The night that she died, I was watching YouTube past my bedtime when I began to hear my mom sob. Her grief was not like mine. Where I sat, quietly wiping my tears away, she wailed, shrieks and groans and words of shaking incoherence, a pain so loud and sudden that it swelled through her entire body and burst out of every inch, a violent last stand from the part of her that couldn't, wouldn't believe it. I had no idea what it could've been. I'd never heard crying like that before, and I couldn't imagine how anything on



I'D NEVER HEARD CRYING LIKE
THAT BEFORE, AND I COULDN'T
IMAGINE HOW ANYTHING ON THE
PLANET COULD EVOKE SUCH A
REACTION. AND WHEN, THE NEXT
MORNING, SHE CAME INTO MY ROOM
TO TELL ME THAT MY GRANDMOTHER
HAD DIED, IT DIDN'T. ”



the planet could evoke such a reaction. And when, the next morning, she came into my room to tell me that my grandmother had died, it didn't. I didn't cry, nor did my eyes well up, nor did my voice grow shaky with confusion. I just wondered if my mom had noticed that I'd been watching YouTube (against the rules) when she walked in.

I sit, cry, and listen, and am drawn to the circular skylight at the top of the dome. It appears as though I were on the inside of an eyeball; the hole in the ceiling is only a few feet in diameter, a narrow pupil peering toward the heavens, shrunk by the brightness of the sky above it. I remember the time that she gave my sister a framed bible verse, and my cousin a copy of *Siddhartha*, and me a book of sheet music. Or the time she came over for our seder and stayed to watch me practice piano, a mask covering her face so all the cat fur wouldn't irritate her. She would watch me play through the allergic reactions, never correcting my mistakes or critiquing my technique; just watching.

The last time she saw any of my cousins, aunts, or uncles was when she brought me and my mom to see the New York Philharmonic. It was a night in early



I'M SITTING AND CRYING,
AND I DON'T PLAY PIANO, AND I
LISTEN TO RAP AND I'M A BAD
JEW AND A BAD GRANDSON
AND I THINK I HAVE A CRUSH
ON THE BAR MITZVAH—AND
FOR THE FIRST TIME IN
MY LIFE, I PRAY. ”

November, brisk enough to keep you at attention, but not so cold that the indoors represented a sudden relief. I'd had an espresso at dinner to keep myself awake—I was 10 and it was almost my bedtime. It was just us three, but it was really us two: again, I was 10, and so Mom was a given, but for my grandmother and me, classical music was our thing. She played and listened and loved, and when she saw me at the piano or heard that I would take up viola, she would smile and launch into tales of her own musical education. On that night, my mom and I dropped her off at Columbus Circle with long, warm hugs, and as our taxi drove away, I thought toward Thanksgiving, only 10 days away, and how this memory would last



Sisters

DEVRA G • GRADE 10 • PERSONAL ESSAY



y little sister is constantly in motion:

pacing as she speaks, twirling her hair, twisting rubber bands around and around and around her arm. When she is excited about something, I can see her light up, talking and talking and talking about her dolls or her hair or *The Baby-Sitters Club*. My mom and I can tune out but she'll still be talking, on and on.

When I get home from school, she's sitting on the couch reading and eating chunks of apple from a glass bowl she'll inevitably leave there to be sat on. *How was school?* I ask. She mumbles a *mmf* nonanswer and goes back to reading; I know from experience that later she will want to tell me all about it.

Later comes, inevitably, when I'm reading my own book. *Devi, wanna hang out?* No, but I know I'll want to have wanted to, so I say yes, and she's telling me all about school: the trouble her grade is in, her affinity group meeting, her friends' secret crushes. I feign interest even when it comes slowly; no matter the mood I'm in, hearing my sister's end-

less chatting will eventually send me back into a state of calm. I sit on her bed and she paces around the room, eternally restless.

My sister has 15 dolls, outfitted in 15 different colors of the rainbow, whose 15 names she can recite in one breath: *RubyPoppyJadeBellaStellaAveryKrystal-HollyLaurelDariaGeorgiaDelilahLilaJulesShanelle*. They are often lined up in the middle of our bedroom floor, displayed in various orders: rainbow, release date, order-she-got-them-in, favorites-to-least-



MY SISTER HAS 15 DOLLS,

OUTFITTED IN 15 DIFFERENT COLORS

OF THE RAINBOW, WHOSE 15 NAMES

SHE CAN RECITE IN ONE BREATH:

RUBYPOPPYJADEBELLASTELLA-

AVERYKRISTALHOLLYLAURELDARIA-

GEORGIADELILAH LILAJULESSHANELLE. ”

favorites. The rest of the time, they live in our old Grandma-gifted dollhouse, where my sister arranges them into homemade scenes, with dolls falling down the stairs and gossiping in the kitchen and (on scandalizing occasions) kissing on the balcony. If she's in or near the house, no matter what she's doing—breakfast, calling Grandma, playing in the snow—she probably has a doll along with her to keep company. She uses them as friends and fidgets, giving them situation-responsive dialogue and curling her fingers through their hair.

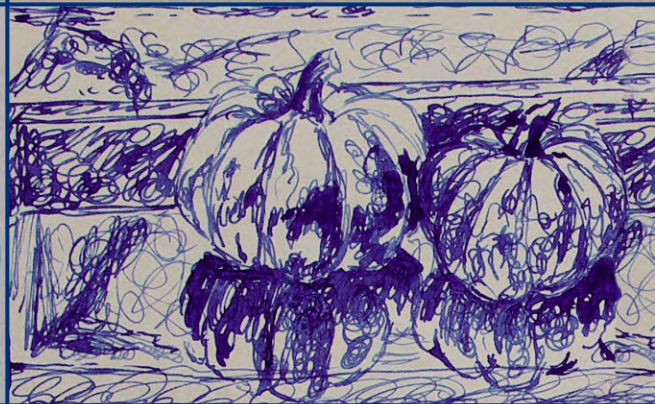
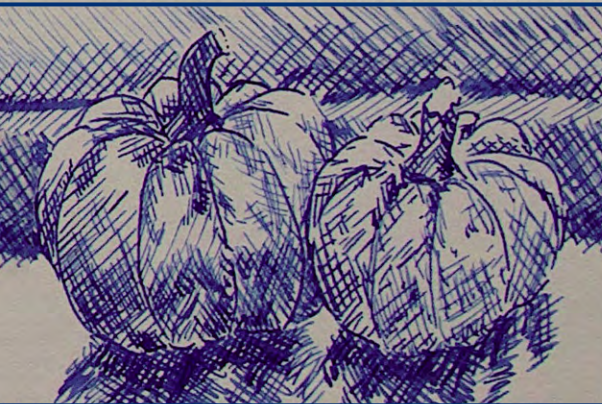
She gives them stories too: all 15 have been selected by their elite art academy to go on a coveted exchange program in New York City, staying with a host family that's none other than ours. Hijinks ensue, and I hear about them constantly. My sister loves to talk about the dolls, and although no one else really cares as much as she thinks they will, I like hearing about them too. It makes me happy to see Mira happy. And so I ask her, again, to recite their names.

It's nighttime, but my sister refuses to fall asleep. She has too much on her mind: upcoming projects, nagging anxieties. Late at night, her insecurities come out. (I tuck them in, kiss them on the cheek, and say our father's goodnight blessing: *May you make the world anew.*) We are lying parallel in our beds, her by the wall, me by the window whose shutters never quite close, leaving the streetlamp's light to flood in at inconvenient times.

Devi, she says, voice quiet in the dark. *Is it normal to be sad sometimes?* Yes, I say. We let it sit for a moment.

Devi? she says. Late at night, our thoughts and voices meld together, an indecipherable mess. *Mmmf. I want to sleep. Whaaaaaat? I love you.*

I love you too.



My Secret Silhouette

TOBI M • GRADE 9 • FICTION

FEBRUARY 12, 1993

I think I'm a monster.

Sorry, that's kind of direct—and, we just met, didn't we? Okay. I'll be honest. I've never really done this kind of thing before. I mean, I guess it *kind of feels* like therapy, but I don't even know who I'm talking to. Who is listening to this—if anyone. I think I'm being too casual. Okay, yeah, let me start over.

Is it on? Okay. Hi, I'm, um . . . Well, I'm not really sure who I am. Oh my God, this is horrible. I got this tape recorder from my therapist, but I'm atrocious with technology. I think this is just, like, I don't know, a diary, but with my voice instead of my writing?

Damn it. I'm overthinking again. Deep breaths.

For the longest time, every night, I've had this dream, where I'm at this, like, masquerade party. I'm dancing with someone. We dance all night, laughing and naturally following the rhythm of the music echoing across the ballroom. There are so many other masked people, all talking, and drinking, and laughing, and kissing, but this mysterious silhouette and I just dance, the whole night. Each time I have

this dream, it feels like a new night at the party—like the person I dance with also knows that we've met again and again, if that makes sense—but each night, the same events happen. They wait for me at the ballroom door, and they ask if they may have this dance. I say yes, and then they take my hand and whisk me away to the center of the room. From there, everything is just . . . perfect.

Normally, in dreams, you lose the ability to touch, but I can literally feel myself holding the mysterious person's hand. It fits perfectly in mine, and it's soft—like a feather. And with each move, they're so gentle with me. Never once do they step on my foot, or grip my shoulder, or even curse under their breath when I mess up a move. I, personally, am horrible at dancing, and my looks are plenty average, so I'm always curious as to why they choose *me* every night. I mean, there are so many other seemingly beautiful girls there. I know we're all in masks, but still.

I guess the freaky thing is how *real* it feels. I didn't



even have any interest in dancing before I started having these dreams, but now each night I look forward to dancing with my secret silhouette. I forget all the troubles I have in the arms of my dancer. It's magical. They hold me close and softly caress my cheek as we sway. After I pirouette, they swiftly take my shoulder and twirl me around. Every night. The feeling of their sweet, warm breath on my neck while music plays is more surreal and exciting than anything.

At the end of each night, we make our way to the ballroom terrace and watch the sunrise together, while other guests start to clean up and leave.

I think I've fallen in love with my dancer. I'm not even joking. It's funny, though, right? Never even seen their face before. Never even talked to them. I don't know anything about them. Well, I mean, except that they're incredible at dancing. They really are.

Oh, and there's something I forgot. It kind of creeps me out, which is ironic because, I mean, it's at the end of the night and we just had this sensational time together.

They whisper in my ear, "I'll see you tomorrow night." And with that, the dream ends, and I wake up to my alarm screaming at me.

I know, it doesn't seem weird, but it is, because



I THINK I'VE FALLEN IN LOVE

WITH MY DANCER. I'M NOT

EVEN JOKING. IT'S FUNNY,

THOUGH, RIGHT? NEVER EVEN

SEEN THEIR FACE BEFORE.

NEVER EVEN TALKED TO THEM.

I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING

ABOUT THEM. ”

each night they never mention the other nights before. It's always the same. They always act like they don't know me. But I know they do. I feel it. I feel it in their steps. In their breath. It bothers me, but I also pretend like I've never met them either, so I guess we're even. I also never remember their voice. I remember every detail about everything else—the ceiling of the ballroom, the slick, perfectly white suit that my dancer wears, the glimmering golden drinks the waiters hand out throughout the night, but . . . not their voice.

Last night's dream was different. When I entered the ballroom, someone I had never seen before was there. That night, while my silhouette and I were dancing, she came up to us and attempted to hand

me something. But, before I could take it, my dancer quickly took my hand and steered us to a different area of the ballroom. I could still see her in the corner of my eye as we resumed dancing as if nothing happened. She stood there, visibly angry. Concerned, I attempted to walk over and apologize, but as I was releasing my dancer to walk back over, they shook their head and carefully squeezed my hand. They stopped dancing and wrapped their arms around my shoulder. They turned their back to the girl. Then, they said—

“Don’t move.”

A gunshot cracked in the air. I heard a scream. Everyone gasped, and the music stopped. Everything happened so fast. My dancer’s grip released, and I felt them slump to the ground. I looked up to see the girl pointing a gun directly at where my dancer’s back had just been. I pieced together what had happened and looked down below me. My dancer was on the ground below me, unconscious and covered in blood. Their once-white suit now was soaked in red. Their hand was still outstretched to meet mine.

I screamed.

My dancer was gone.

I scooped my lover’s body into my arms, sobbing into their chest.

And that’s when their mask fell off.

Soft, plump lips, round eyes, small nose . . .

She was a woman.

“Finally, I managed to find her,” the girl taunted, walking toward the body. I didn’t say anything. I was too shocked. I couldn’t process anything that had just happened. She kept slowly walking to me.

“For so long now, I searched for her, and I finally found her.”

I stayed silent.

“That woman. She’s been spreading this . . . illness. *Lesbianism*. She’d trick other women by dressing up as a man—to satisfy her own disgusting lesbian fantasies.”

That’s when I finally remembered my dancer’s voice.

A light, airy voice, as gentle as a feather. A feminine voice. How had I not realized? The person I was in love with . . . was . . . *a girl*?

The killer paused, waiting for me to react. I didn’t.

“I just saved you. Aren’t you happy?”

Silence.

The girl stood above me, then shouted, “She’s one of them!”

The screams got louder and louder, until it was all I could hear. I heard her shout again, moving away, “She’s a lesbian—over there! Get her! Don’t let her spread the disease!” I heard another gunshot.

... And I woke up.

Yeah, a pretty gruesome dream, but that’s not the scary part.

The scary part was that I didn’t care that my secret dancer was a girl.

All these nights, I yearned to see what they would look like but, now that I have, it doesn’t change the way I feel about them. But, I mean, it’s 1993. Right now isn’t exactly the time to just walk out and tell the world, “Hey, man, I’m in love with a girl in my dream!” You know?

But I think I’m a monster. For, you know, liking a women and all. I don’t even know what a “lesbo” is—the thing that girl was calling us. I think it’s, like, a shorter term for “lesbian”? I didn’t think lesbians actually existed. I mean, I exist, but I don’t know if I’m specifically a lesbian. I just love that nonexistent girl. I thought lesbians were really just some rumor to try to scare women out of dressing more masculine-like. But now we’re here.

So why does any of this matter?

Well, I was on my way to the bus stop. We have this stupid English test today, and I have to get to school early, or whatever.

And she was there.

My dancer.

My dancer.

Alive.

Sitting on the bench, reading a book.

I ran over to her and sat next to her on the bench.

I didn’t even know what to say, so I just sat there.

She looked up at me.

“It’s ... You.”

She recognized me. I don’t know how—I’d never taken off my mask before.

But I nodded.

She sank into her seat.

“You think I’m insane, now, don’t you? That ... I lied to you the whole time ... ?”

But I shook my head. I didn’t care that she had lied. Technically, she hadn’t: she’d never told me that she was specifically a guy.

She smiled, then asked:

“May I have this dance?”

THE VEIL IS LIFTED

USHERING IN THE
UNION OF A CARNIVORE
& A GROTESQUE
SPECTRE OF BEAUTY





106 

The Silly Dumb Boy at the Funeral

MADDY D • GRADE 11 • POETRY



rief, I have never truly felt.

I've never been to a funeral—

I'm lying. I attended one when I was four,
but who counts that?

All I remember from that funeral
was the silly dumb boy:
we were at the kids' table
(I know,
why is there a kids' table?
We can't be left unattended).

This silly dumb boy told the table,
"I can rip this Coke can in half just by
being strong."

He began twisting, making a constipated face,
until all of a sudden he burst into a scream.

The silly dumb boy cut his hand
on the metal.
Oh my God—
what did he think was going to happen?
This is why you don't leave kids unattended.

Of course,
the parents
rushed over.
My mom grabbed me
and said,
"This is a good time to go see her casket."
We walked over and looked at a wooden box,
stood silently,
and then we walked away.

EVA V • GRADE 12 • POETRY

F YOU KNEW IT FAIRLY WELL, WHAT WOULD YOU NOTICE WHEN YOU LOOK AT IT?"



of the pale pink patch
that makes up her
belly don't quite align at the

bottom, making the oval
incomplete. I would
notice how her head

fits perfectly in the nook
underneath my chin as I
pull my duvet over my shoulders.

"IT'S SABOTAGE."

—Peter Elbow

Homesickness

Homesick for the vegetable
garden, for the hours you
spent pulling at weeds and

cleaning carrots with your
dad. The smell of your
monkey that you will never wash

because Homesickness tells you not
to. He comes around when you're
alone, when you have nothing

else to do so you hang out
with Homesickness. You'll be walking
down the hallway behind

your advisor on the first day
when Homesickness floods
your eyes with tears that you swipe

away, careful not to let on that
he's there. Homesickness hates
your parents.

*They are the reason
you're here, the reason
your only friend is me.*

You will sit bundled under
your duvet when your parents come
in, and Homesickness will make you cry

in front of them. He will make
them feel bad and will make
them question their decision.

Your relationship isn't healthy, but
you can't imagine a day
without him. He's been gone

for a while; you drifted.
Made other friends. But,
he comes

bearing gifts every
Christmas, and Easter, and
New Year. He comes.

**"IF IT WERE A PERSON,
WHO WOULD IT BE?"**

—Peter Elbow

Piano

My piano would be my therapist. She
feels my frustration through
the power behind each key

I press. She knows I'm thinking
about my grandma when my music
becomes lyrical, when I've

stopped thinking and my
torso sways with each bar. She can
sense when I'm absent,

when I trip up on a song I've
known for three years. She can tell
I'm preoccupied when her lid

stays shut and her keys gather
dust. She reminds me
to pay attention to

my feet, my fingers, and
my back. She makes the whole world
silent. And gives me space to

speak. She's strong, she's
reliable, and sometimes
she makes me cry.

Spotted in a Supernova

DEVRA G • GRADE 10 • DRAMATIC SCRIPT



n the distance: a loud explosion.

Bright lights flash, for just a moment.

Stage darkens.

Dust settles.

A Person appears. At first, you hardly see them—their head peeks out from behind the curtains or within a wing, glances both ways, retreats back inside wherever they are for just a moment—and then they step out onto the stage, cautious but determined. They walk gingerly, as if determined not to crush something. Nothing changes. No lights go on above them. Long beat.

PERSON: Hello?

Nothing.

PERSON *(slowly, as though afraid to ask the words):* Is—is there anyone left?

Person's words are met again with silence. For a moment. Then the words begin to echo back at them, first softly and then growing louder: Is there anyone left is there anyone left anyone left is there is there anyone anyone left left left

IS THERE ANYONE LEFT? It cuts off abruptly. A great shock of silence.

Lights flash on above the Person. The stage appears empty.

OTHER *(a voice from backstage):*
I am always here.

The Other walks on stage, coming from whichever direction Person is opposite. They might be dressed very simply, wearing all black. Their shoes click against the floor. There is something to differentiate them, a golden headband or scarf or earrings or tiara. They might be any number of creatures depending on who is imagining them. In some way, they look different. Or separate.

They walk until they're standing next to Person but facing opposite: back to back. This positioning continues throughout the play; every time Person turns to look or say something, Other turns in sync away from them, and vice versa. They might walk closer or farther away from each other, but they always stay facing away. The intention is that throughout the whole play, with one exception, the two never look at each other.



THERE WOULDN'T BE ANY

STARS EXPLODING, OR
GALAXIES IMPLoding, OR—
I WOULD BE—EVERYTHING IN
MY LIFE—IT WOULD—IT
WOULD BE OKAY.”

PERSON: Who are you?

OTHER: I was the one who should have
prevented this.

Long beat.

OTHER: I was maybe the first star.

*Another beat. Person considers this. Takes a step
forward. Other retreats in their shadow.*

PERSON: I have been looking for you a long time,
you know. Before any worlds had to die. I always
wanted to know what was up here.

OTHER: Yeah?

PERSON: It's kind of ... empty.

*Person leans down to observe the ground, which has
nothing on it. Other stands behind them, a blank shell.*

OTHER: It didn't used to be like this.

PERSON (*not hearing, still vaguely observing
the ground*): I never thought it would ...
get ... to this point. I thought there would be
something left, even after my world ended. Am I
even—do you hear me?

OTHER: Yes.

PERSON (*caught off-guard*): O-oh. Well ... this is a
little embarrassing, but a part of me just thought if
I found you, or someone up there, in the sky or
whatever—everything would be ... okay. There
wouldn't be any stars exploding, or galaxies
imploding, or—I would be—everything in my life—
it would—it would be *okay*.

Beat. Other considers this.

PERSON (*quietly, in this position of vulnerability*):
Do you think that's stupid?

OTHER: No.

*Some remaining tension in Person deflates. They
get to their feet, and both begin to walk toward
their opposite corners of the stage, pausing once
they're far apart.*

PERSON: This feels like an echo chamber.
I don't know what to do. I don't know where to

look. I don't understand why I'm here and where is everyone else and is this a dream or something more and how am I the only one who got to stay?

OTHER: I was supposed to save the worlds.

PERSON: Where even am I? What even is this?

Once they've paused, and as their dialogue gets more heated, the two subconsciously turn toward each other. In a moment, they will see each other for the only time in the play.

OTHER: I did not try hard enough or work hard enough. I was too fallible and too human. I should have noticed sooner. I should have leapt toward the supernova and wrapped my arms around it and forced it to change. I am the only one here to stop change. Why am I always here?

PERSON: THERE AREN'T EVEN STARS!

This jolts both figures out of their spirals. They both kind of click to attention, now finally facing each other for just a moment before turning back around to their predetermined positions and walking once again to stand in the center, back to back. Person's head tilts toward the sky. A moment passes.

PERSON (*softly*): Hey.

OTHER: Yeah?

PERSON: I was wrong. If you look up, and you squint—you can see them. Tiny little pinpricks of light. In the distance. In the future, maybe.

OTHER: Stars.

Above them, a few lights blink on. They relax against each other, one's head resting on the other's shoulder, and look up at the stars.

PERSON: You did everything you could.

OTHER: I know.

PERSON: What happens next?

OTHER: I don't know.

PERSON: That's okay, I think.

OTHER: Yeah.

PERSON: Yeah.

Lights fade. Somewhere, in some way, the world keeps going. It will be okay.

End.



Did You Know?

MULAN J ▪ GRADE 11 ▪ POETRY



was supposed to hate

you. And with that came warnings of the mornings I'd spend. Tousling tufts of tears. Mine and what was soon to be ours.

Little did I know, you cried
too. Each time I'd refuse you.
Silent tears, falling down the
line of my taught hatred.
Lies, bitter, twisted.
Or so I've been told.

I made a lot of excuses for the
wasted time. Each inhalation
a mockery of the life you give me.
You were, for me, like the sun
that rises each morning. Pulling
me over. I won't apologize,
but can't you tell?

I love you.



Playlist

FINNORA S • GRADE 12 • PERSONAL ESSAY

1. Sparks Fly
2. Everything Has Changed
3. Fearless
4. Delicate
5. Out of the Woods
6. Dear John
7. I Knew You Were Trouble
8. Should've Said No
9. You're Not Sorry
10. White Horse
11. Clean

1. *Sparks Fly* is about butterflies that zing in your stomach when he walks past you after the scoreboard buzzes at the basketball game on the Upper East Side. The tickle in your heart when he nods, head tilted up, eyebrows raised, locs shading his eyes.

2. *Everything Has Changed* is about a relationship shifting from imagination to reality. The possibility. You walk through Prospect Park, on a chilly but sun-warmed day, talking about the Bahamas, his lacrosse team, and his future. He surprises you at your per-

formance, which you mentioned that morning, saying it wasn't a big deal. You feel shy—the nice kind.

3. *Fearless* is about being brave. It's the *glow on the pavement* after it rains. It's trying not to get caught up, but feeling your heartbeat quicken when he asks to kiss you.

4. *Delicate* is about the secrecy of a new relationship. When two people might have something but don't know how to tell, who to tell, what to tell. When he first hugs you tightly in the Atrium hallway, your friends look up, eyes smiling, questions left unanswered. He covers you with the picnic blanket as rain starts pouring down on the New York City rooftop.

5. *Out of the Woods* is about a relationship getting blurrier until feelings are no longer clear. It's getting lost in a thick forest without a compass. He skips your dance performance, even when he promised to go. He won't meet your parents. You want to scream out the lyrics. Are the *monsters* really *just trees*?

6. *Dear John* is about an older guy who messes with a younger girl—an optimist, a dreamer. She keeps

hoping that things will change. He *changes the rules every day*. You notice his *tired, lifeless eyes* turn to the television when you move his hand. You don't like him enough.

7. *I Knew You Were Trouble* is about having fallen for the thrill, after knowing someone was trouble from the start. It's when a roller coaster gets stuck before the drop. *Joke's on you*. After you spend weeks choosing the perfect prom dress, practicing walking in three-inch heels, and promising to take a hundred photos, it's the look on your best friend's face when you tell her he got suspended from prom. "Maybe my friend could take you," he said.

8. *Should've Said No* is about a girl whose boyfriend cheats with someone who *wasn't worth it*. As lights brighten after the Ailey concert, your heart drops to your stomach. You see someone else's mark on his neck. Did he think? Did he care? You're trapped, surrounded at a gala table under deep purple lights, with his father's boss and associates, quiet and humiliated, pretending it's a shadow.

9. *You're Not Sorry* is about not getting hurt twice. *It is the last straw, don't want to hurt anymore*. You're silent in the car home, as he unbuckles and slides next to you, fingers in your hair. Familiar cobblestones rattle beneath you. When he tries to kiss you, you push his chest away. Step out of the car. Walk up three flights of steps, and collapse outside your apartment door. You don't cry, but you turn on the faucet and watch water stream out.

10. *White Horse* is about the aftermath of believing in a person not worth believing in. It's leaving him *in the rearview mirror, disappearing now*. When he texts you, "hey wanna talk" a week later, you flip the phone over, roll your eyes, and stretch.

11. *Clean* is about realizing *you can finally breathe*. Two weeks later, on a windy day at the beach, I stood up and walked away from him into the sea, swimming until the only burning I felt in my heart was from swimming against the current of hurricane waves.



Luminescent

MICHAEL M • GRADE 12 • POETRY



Maybe I saw a glint in the water. The long-and-short-of-it is

I peeled my shirt off and walked and then jogged and then ran and
then swam into the bay. It felt all of a sudden then like some

impossibly big room, like the barrier island, visible, a dark
ridge just on top of the water, could be swum over to and
grabbed. Maybe I just wanted to get away. To get away from myself.

It doesn't matter, because just then I entered some sort of altered
mind state where I thought I could feel every molecule, where
I extended my arms and found handholds in the water and grabbed

them and rocketed forward, and I took stroke after stroke after
stroke toward the middle of the bay, pressing my chest down and
angling myself perpendicular to the gentle lapping waves so it felt

like somehow I was warping those centimeter swells like some sort
of speed demon, creating a meniscus eight inches deep cratering at my hip
and slicing a wake that white-capped at my knees, my feet vortexing

the water so that it pushed me forward and my whole body moving like
a liquid form, my rhythm some cross between metronomic
and wavelike, some kind of swimming enrapture, baptism of saltwater.

I must've taken a hundred strokes before I realized I was about two hundred yards from shore, but I kept going, and I must've taken another hundred strokes before I started feeling oddly dense patches

of water when I kicked my foot deep or reached my right arm far enough to practically pop it from its socket. It made me stand up, which is when I heard someone (it must've been my mother) holler

at me to come in, and I did, putting my hand in to take a first stroke, which is when I hit one of those syrupy patches again and it lit up.

Really perplexed now, hoping it was the moon bouncing off the surface (just like the way pool lights form little shimmering circles indoors when it's dim enough), I went to try to scoop up the glowing water,

trying to prove there was nothing physical there, that I was not dizzy and that I was not about to pass out in the middle of a bay. The thing is, there *was* something there, and it slipped out of my hands about 20

times before I managed to scoop it out of the water, a translucent gelatin form illuminated with turquoise bioluminescent veins, a jellyfish, thousands of squiggly neon streaks defining its loose, oblong form.

Here I could've just about wept, thinking back to wooden churches and bagpipes and fluttering birch trees and incense and organs and choirs, to a first sacrament, uncles and aunts and grandaunts looking on from pews,

could've started chanting in tongues like some sort of Pentecostal, could've levitated and started walking on the water, so enveloped was I in the religiosity of that moment, but instead I sort of croak-yelled,

Tha'ra'rejellyfish. And then I laughed uncontrollably, keeled over and stomach aching, tears. I saw that I had dropped the jellyfish, but it didn't matter then—I had already grasped it. I looked back at the house.

The kitchen's bay window cast a soft glow onto the back of Mom, and Dad now too, both standing on the beach looking out at me. I tried to find another jellyfish to pick up and throw to show them. I found one and threw

it and they did not seem to understand. They did not seem to move at all. I looked at the barrier island. I threw another jellyfish. They seemed to see now. I started swimming to the island then. I didn't stop. I think it was the first time

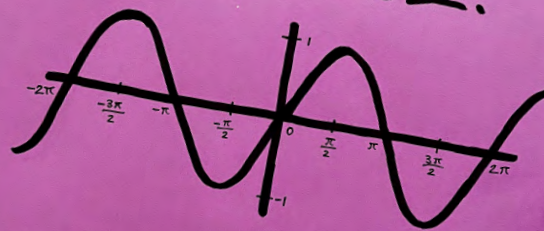
I really finished a mile.



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