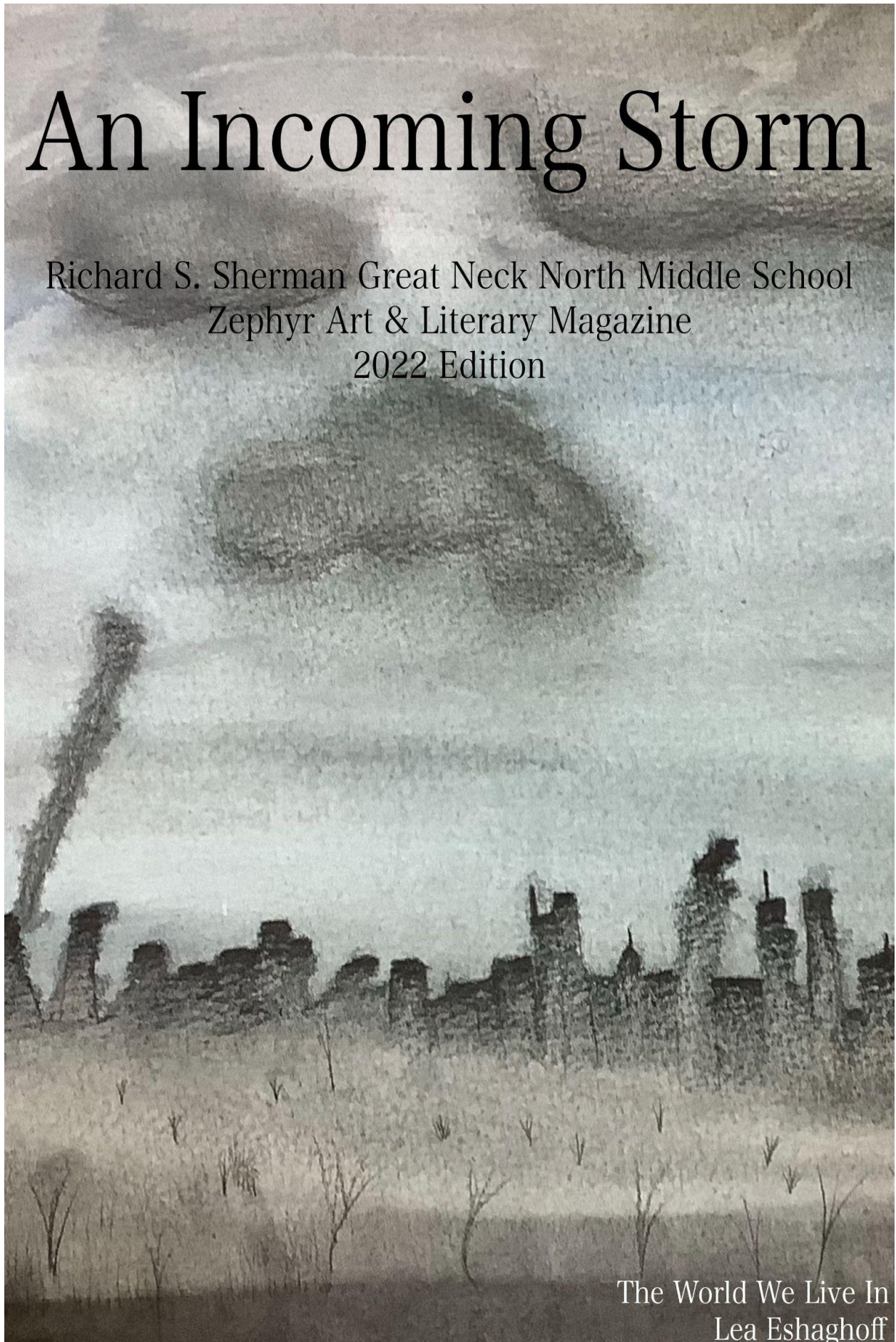


An Incoming Storm

Richard S. Sherman Great Neck North Middle School
Zephyr Art & Literary Magazine
2022 Edition



The World We Live In
Lea Eshaghoff

ZEPHYR LITERARY MAGAZINE

A Magazine of Art and Literature
2021-2022 Edition

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SPECIAL THANKS

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Zephyr's Philosophy

Great Neck North Middle School's literary magazine, *Zephyr*, provides students with the opportunity to share their poems, short stories, and graphic artwork with the school community. *Zephyr* is a unique way for students to express themselves, to demonstrate their talents, and to articulate their feelings through a creative outlet. This school-based publication is a student-run activity where students are encouraged to contribute not only as writers and artists, but as members of the editorial staff.

Explanation of Theme

"An Incoming Storm" was imagined by the students of the *Zephyr* club. Our members wanted to highlight the impending doom that typically presents itself within a piece of writing. The poems and short stories found in this year's magazine incorporate challenges, conflicts, conniving antagonists, and some unexpected inclement weather.

We hope that you enjoy experiencing this incoming storm!

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“Neither Will We”

by Lila Halpert

The storm, our obstacles
They start as a drizzle
But for everyone, they only get stronger
Soon we're standing in a full-on downpour
With nothing to shield us from the rain
The storm won't stop
No matter what we do
The storm won't stop
If we let it continue
The storm won't stop
Unless we look within ourselves
And then, in that moment, we can find something
Perseverance, hope, courage, whatever it may be
Take it — and use it
For those things inside that keep us going
Despite the strongest of winds
And pouring storms
They are our umbrellas
So open them up and hold them tight
Because, if we use our umbrellas to persevere
There is nothing that can stop us
And then we can stop the storm
And yet...
No matter how hard we try
No matter how much we do
No matter how badly we want it to
The storm won't stop
But, with the aid of our umbrellas
Neither will we



“Anthropause”

by Sophia Li

“Over the past few months, many countries around the world went into lockdown to control the spread of COVID-19. Brought about by the most tragic circumstances, this period of unusually reduced human mobility may provide important insights into human–wildlife interactions in the twenty-first century.”

Year 2004

I didn’t quite understand what was happening. All I understood was that the humans were to blame. I clenched my beak in anger as I watched my family in such distress. Father was flying around, gathering all the flock members while mother reassured my younger siblings. I heard her and father talking privately earlier, secretly discussing that they were worried the younger ones wouldn’t make the long journey.

“I know,” father had sighed, “but we cannot keep living in these conditions. We don’t have any other choice.”

I certainly didn’t want to leave my home. This was the city my family had been nesting and living in for three generations. It had everything we needed when my great grandparents settled here- fish from the bay nearby, some scraps from the humans, and a variety of materials perfect for creating nests. The humans also kept the threatening predators away, and not a lot of other animals lived here, eliminating most competitions.

But this is not the reality I have known. What I see is all the fish in the bay either dead from all the pollution or too scared of the ships to come. The humans are increasing exponentially every year, and the noise, chaos, and trash they bring are almost unbearable. We have less and less space to fly every year. But most importantly of all, the air is too smoky, too polluted for us to breathe and live in now. So, my family is flying southwards in hopes of finding a cleaner, quieter place to live with less humans.

It is all unfair to me. *We were here first. We were here before them to this whole planet. Why did humans have to come and steal everything from us? This is their world too- don’t they care about it? Why are they destroying the beautiful trees and air our planet was blessed to have?* I hissed to myself.

“Is everyone ready?” my father called. “It’s time for us to leave! Young ones, stick to your mothers. We must make this perilous journey and lose everything we have worked for years to build in order to gain a more stable life. We might not all make it, but this is a flight we must make for a better life.”

And with that, he jumped off the ledge of the building we called home and flew. The flock quickly followed and so did I. We formed a V formation with my father at the front, rising up, up, up. We kept flying, and I took one last look at the place I called home, now just a small dot in the ground.

Year 2020

I perch triumphantly on a building. Although it is not *my* building that I lived on the roof of years ago, it is the same city I left years ago. I cannot find the building that I used to live in. *This city really has changed a lot in sixteen years. Well, so have I. I left this place as a little hatchling, and returned as the head of my family.* It really is a beautiful sight without all the humans. The city’s noise of beeping and screeching is now just the beautiful chirping of birds. The air has cleared up a little, and streets are cleaner than ever.

A few months ago, word began spreading through the animal community about the sudden disappearance of humans. Everybody has noticed it- the absence of cars on the road, bustling people everywhere, and the absence of destroying our nature. We all thought, *could it be? The humans have stopped doing harm? Why?* It seemed a little too good to be true. So, we waited, hesitantly, cautiously. After a month of still no movement, we decided that something really must have happened to make them stop everything they were doing and lock themselves indoors. I just couldn’t figure out what. Then, I made one of the toughest decisions of my life. Now that I was responsible for a whole flock, this choice could change whether we thrived, or died. Perhaps my decision was a little personal. I still haven't completely come to terms with being kicked out of my home because humans were wrecking it, so maybe that’s what led me to lead my flock back to my old home.

As I stand on top of the highest building in the city, I have no regrets. The beautiful waters, buildings, and trees are all I’ll ever need to help my

family flourish. Without humans, there is nothing holding us back.

I soar around the city giddily, addressing my mate, my children, and my flock mates.

“Today, we arrived at the place that once belonged to me, before it was slowly destroyed by humans. As we can all see now, the humans have retreated for some unknown reason. But no matter! What matters is that we have a home again!” I boomed. “We have no bounds! This city is ours to grow in. Without the humans, we have no boundaries!”

My flock chirps and calls out their agreement, and they all leap off their ledges and spread their wings, soaring alongside me. As I look at them flying freely and happily, I feel on top of the world. I don’t know how long the humans will stay like this.

But while they are gone, we are free.

**“The Wind Blows”
by Leila Ghatani**

The wind blows
I can feel a storm brewing
The tension in the air cracks like lightning
Boom
Boom
I hear a battle cry
Their voices merge with the wind
With each word more chaos erupts
Destruction is all around
In front of and inside me
Crash
Crash
Their words are indistinguishable through the scream of the wind
Swirling out of control
Emotions spiraling
Finally in the eye of the storm
Where all is lost, I am found



Catching Rain
By Talya Bagim

“A Mystery of Magic and Memories”

by Serena Chen

I woke up to the feeling of the sun on my face. I blinked open my eyes to find that I was lying in the middle of a forest. It was quiet and serene, with a small river flowing at my side. It would have been a nice way to wake up, if I knew how I ended up there.

I suddenly realized that my mind was completely blank, and there wasn't a single thing I could remember about my life, not even my name. I panicked as I realized that, and I started desperately trying to remember.

My belongings were no help, since I was wearing a pair of plain brown pants, a plain white shirt, and black shoes. There was nothing that could help me remember, since all I had were my clothes. After several minutes of trying and failing, I almost gave up.

Then, suddenly, a face popped into my mind. It was a boy that had light golden hair, blue eyes, and looked identical to me. I only knew that after I looked at my reflection in the river, when I realized I didn't even know what I looked like. He was saying something, and had a solemn look.

Then, the memory faded. I knew he was important to me, I just didn't know how. Soon, after more failed attempts at remembering anything, I decided to go. Some instinct told me I had to find this boy to regain my memories, and I wouldn't find him by just waiting.

I didn't have a particular destination in mind, so I ended up following a dirt path. After a couple hours of following the path, it ended up leading to a small village. I walked down the path to the center of the village.

There were people selling things, people walking around, and a loud chatter of people talking. However, when I listened closely to some people near me, their talking seemed harsh.

This could be important. I decided to eavesdrop on some conversations.

“...Princess...disappeared...”

“...Rebels... whose loyalties...”

“...Prince Jackson...”

“...whose side?”

After I listened around, it seemed to me that they were all talking about rumors of the royal family. This didn't really help with my memories, so I stopped

eavesdropping. I wanted to ask people if they knew anything about me, but the same instinct told me not to draw attention to myself. I kept my head down, and walked around trying to find something I might recognize.

“Young lady, would you like your fortune read?” an old lady asked me.

She had a small shop that was barely noticeable among all of the loud people selling their goods.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any money,” I explained, turning my pockets inside and out.

“It’s alright. There’s something special about you,” she said mysteriously. *Well, it can’t hurt. Maybe she has some useful information.*

I told her yes, and I sat down on a small stool on the other side of her. She did some magic hand gestures around a crystal ball. She closed her eyes and concentrated for a few seconds, and then suddenly gasped.

“So that’s what happened,” she said to herself, while looking at me with wide eyes.

“I don’t understand,” I told her. “See, I lost all of my memories. Do you have anything that could help?”

“That’s what they did,” the old woman said, while rubbing her eyes. “This is what I know, and I shall tell you.”

She explained how there was a pair of twins, a Prince and a Princess, that were fair rulers. The Princess was always helping someone, which caused the people to love her. The Prince was more distant, but never became jealous. For although he wanted the people to love him, he still loved his sister the most.

One day, someone found out a secret about the Princess, which caused some people to turn against them. They are the rebels and plan on overthrowing them.

“You must hurry if you want to save him,” the old woman explained.

“Wait. Are you saying I’m the Princess?” I asked with disbelief.

That would actually make sense. So the boy from my memories is the Prince and my brother.

“Yes,” she looked at me with urgency, “I believe your brother never did anything wrong. You have to save him from the rebels.”

“The rebels?” I questioned.

“Yes. They are the people who want to take over. They have already tried to kill the Princess...you...a couple days ago. They are planning on taking the throne. However, they are evil, and will destroy this kingdom!” she exclaimed.

I took all of that in and thought about it. It didn't make sense though. If the rebels really tried to kill me, then they failed. That didn't explain my memory loss though, why I woke up in the middle of a forest, or why they didn't kill my brother. However I didn't say any of that, and I just thanked the old lady, who looked at me with a hopeful expression.

I walked out of the village and looked at the road that led to the royal palace. My brother was there, and I had to warn him. Hopefully, he will be able to answer my questions. I started running towards the palace, when I saw a group of people. Were they the rebels? I didn't know, so I went into the forest to spy on them.

"Your plan failed," hissed a man that looked like the leader.

He was talking to another person who was cowering. They were surrounded by a group of people wearing masks. It was kind of funny actually, since the cowering man seemed to be larger and bulkier than the leader.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I did not know that the Prince had the same powers."

The leader punched the man in the face.

"Idiot. Of course you didn't," he muttered something about having the dumbest people.

I realized that the cowering man was the one who had attempted to kill me. I felt a sudden rush of anger, and was about to reveal myself, when I heard something that made me gasp.

"You know the Princess has magic, and you didn't think that he might too?"

The leader kept on talking, but I didn't hear him. *I have powers?* I looked at my hands, and tried concentrating on something, but nothing happened. I didn't really mind that it didn't work, because I had just connected everything.

The day that they tried to kill me, a disguised rebel had brought us a cake. Apparently that cake had some sort of poison that stopped me from using my powers, but my brother was somehow immune to it. The rebel then stabbed me, and I couldn't do anything. However, my brother used his magic to kill the rebel, and then he healed me and sent me away to be safe from the rebels. I wasn't sure about the memory loss, but before I could think of anything else, I got knocked out.

When I woke up sometime later, I was tied up and surrounded by the rebels. *How could I have let them capture me? I should have paid more attention.*

"Well, well, well. We were just talking about you," the leader said, smiling coldly.

I decided to play dumb. “Who were you talking about? I was just in the forest for a walk. I think you might have the wrong person.”

“Nice try,” he ordered a henchman who grabbed my hand.

It suddenly glowed, and then he flew into a tree.

I was shocked, and the leader just smirked.

I didn’t even realize what I did, but the leader said, “You wouldn’t be able to hide your powers if you tried.”

I was confused, but I guessed it appeared automatically for self defense.

“Knock her out,” he suddenly ordered. “We shall take over today! That weak Prince will definitely give the throne up for her.”

I started to struggle against my ties and use another burst of magic, but I blacked out again. When I woke up I was in the royal throne room. I felt like I’ve been here before, and then I saw my brother. He looked exactly like my memory, but seemed angrier and more tired.

“Are you okay?” he asked me, and he looked like he wanted to slowly strangle every single rebel.

“Now, now. Hand over your throne, and I’ll let her go,” the leader said.

It seemed obvious that he was lying, but my brother seems to agree.

“Let her go first,” he said, “and I’ll willingly do it.”

The leader seemed to be impatient to get the throne, and seemed to not care about me anymore, so he agreed. A henchman cut my ties.

The second that he did, my brother leaped forward, grabbed my hands, and whispered, “Elizabeth.”

That was my name, I realized, and all of my memories came rushing back. Then, we both summoned weapons into our hands, and started fighting. The rebels started shouting, and I saw one stab my brother. I suddenly felt a white hot rush of anger, and I concentrated on making all of the rebels disappear. A golden flash filled the throne room, and I fell backwards. The throne room was now empty besides me and my brother.

I felt dizzy from using so much power, but then I remembered my brother. I crawled over to him, and gasped when I saw how pale he was. His wound was gushing out blood, and he smiled at me weakly. I held up my hands to try and save him, but nearly fell over. He gently grabbed my hand to stop me.

“I missed you,” he whispered. “You know you can’t help everyone, but you always try your best.”

He coughed and then he stopped breathing.

I stared at him, not wanting to believe it. Then I started silently crying. I knew what he meant. I always tried to help everyone, but I never used my powers. They were meant to be a secret. The one time I did use them to help someone, some people became suspicious and turned against us. The common people did not want their rulers to have special abilities. I knew I had to never use them again. However, I had to use them two more times.

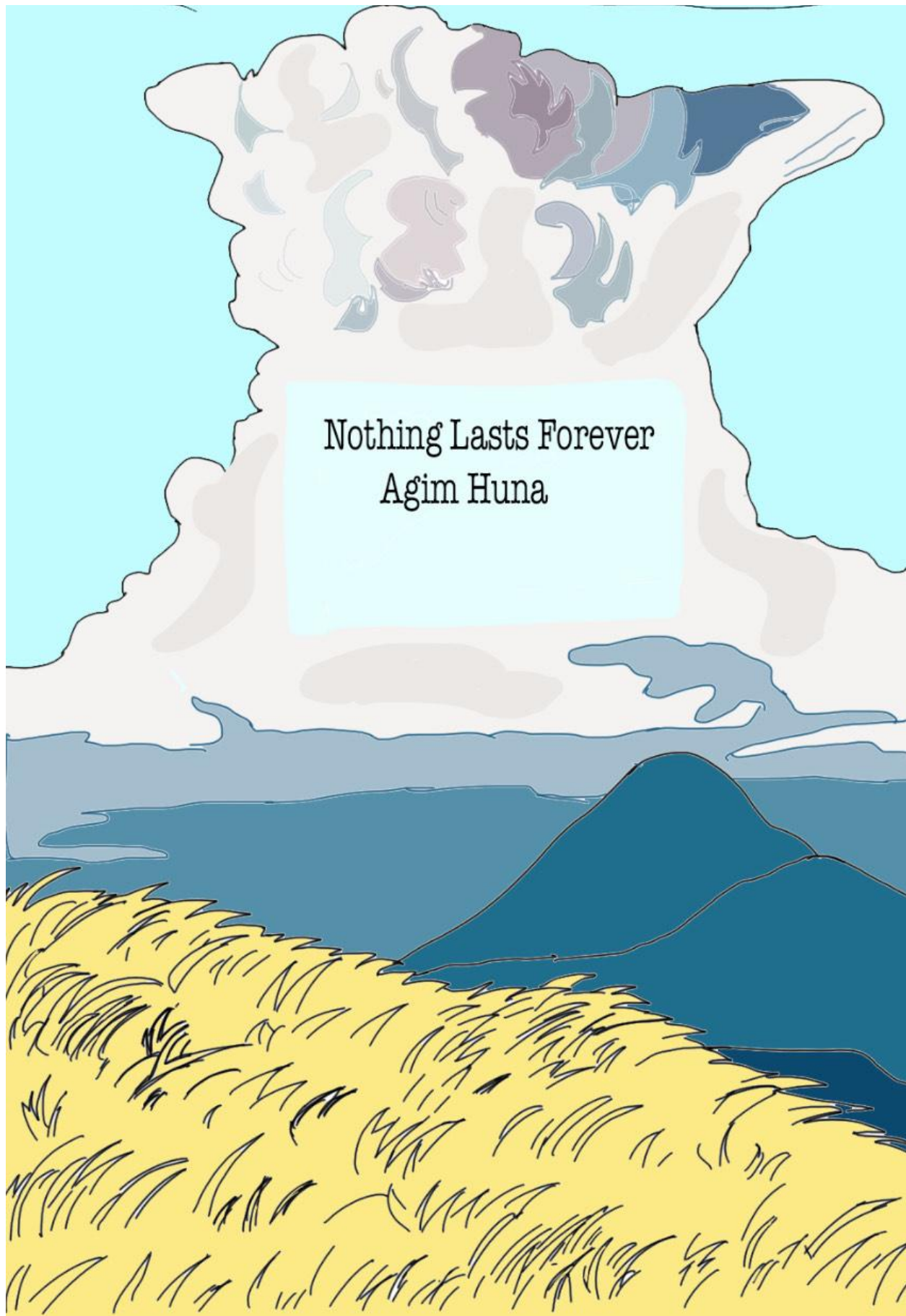
I concentrated, and willed everyone in our...no, my kingdom, to forget about everything that had happened. Then I closed my eyes, and my brother's body disappeared into a cloud of golden dust.

**“A Storm is Coming”
by Benjamin Kraus**

A storm is coming
Everyone is running
Getting the house ready
The rain is holding steady
Getting food from the market
The thunder is roaring
A fierce wind begins to blow
Lightning glows the sky
The leaves begin to fly
I close my eyes
Until the storm goes by

**“The Worst”
by Dylan Hakakian**

The worst comes today
As it begins to rain
We all sit in our homes
While the water pours down
We try to prepare
Getting supplies from the store
Knowing we'll be locked away
For another several days
This day is not the greatest
The worst comes today



“The Mountain”

by Ellen Barbu

I could hear the sound of Mamma making breakfast, so I got up to get ready for the day. I didn't want to be late for work, especially because Mamma and Aulus had only me to count on now. The smell of fresh bread filled up the room, so I knew we were eating the usual cheese on bread. Sometimes, Mamma would give brother Aulus and I some carrot she grew, but those days did not come around often.

We are not rich, so Mamma does her best to keep our family alive and well. But ever since Papa died, things became a lot more difficult for us. He had been the one who sustained our family financially. So when he got sick and bedridden, we all struggled. When he passed, Mamma was heartbroken. She had a constant look of sadness in her eyes, dull as a gray sky, and she almost never smiled anymore. Now, I have found myself a place to work at the bakery, cleaning up, though Il Capo only gives me some scraps and occasionally a coin or two. It wasn't a lot, but it was the best I could get. So I wake up early every morning and I earn what I can.

By the time I get to the bakery, the rising sun bathes us in its warmth, and the cold morning air has disappeared. The birds are already chirping, signaling a new day. The market opens, already crowded. In the distance, I can see the outline of The Mountain, tall and sturdy as it greets me. Every morning it seemed to get more and more impressive. The remains of the morning mist still hanging low around its summit.

“Appius! There y'are, boy! Get in here!” Il Capo was already in a bad mood.

I hurry in, not wanting to anger him more and to come home empty handed. Il Capo was a squat, hairy man. He always seemed to be mad, getting red as a tomato when he did. But if you caught him in a good mood, you might get lucky and end up with a denarii.

Work was the same; dull and repetitive. I always wish I could leave this place for good, and be rid of these responsibilities. But I shouldn't think that way. I have a job to do and a family to take care of. So I carry on. Most times, I would end up day dreaming about where we could be now. I see so many people walk into the bakery, all of different classes, and from many different areas. But the

ones that awed me the most were the ones that had the shining, gold jewelry, which gleamed bright orange like the sun. I want something like that of my own so much, but I know that I will probably never be able to even touch something as beautiful or valuable as jewelry. However, I can still dream.

I am gathering the dust in the shop when I feel the ground start to rumble. My legs are shaking, and I can't stand up straight. I can feel the panic take over as the shop ceiling begins to crumble. Running, I can feel the chunks of clay and dirt fall onto my back as the building collapses, but I don't even look back. I need to get to Aulus. I start to sprint, weaving between screaming people and crying babies as my mind starts racing.

What is this? Why is the world shaking?

Crowds start to form as people are coming outside, but everyone is just as confused. I am dry heaving and coughing by the time I get home, but there isn't enough time for me to catch my breath. The ceiling is already caved in. I hear a deafening explosion behind me, right as I start to pick through the rubble into my house. I look back to see what could have possibly created such a sound, and time slows to a stop. The panicking town goes silent, and only one word shoots into my mind: Run!

The town erupts into screams as people stampede through the square, but I cannot move. I remain, mesmerized by The Mountain. My body is no longer listening to me. I can see streams of red and orange exploding out of it, and ash covering the sky. Suddenly, I can hear the cries of my brother, coming from within the wreckage. I snap back into action, thinking clearly again.

Go get Aulus and Mamma. Now!

I am able to get through what used to be our front door, but what I see sends a chill down my spine. Mamma is lying stomach up on the ground in a pool of her own blood. Chunks of debris cover Mamma from her waist down, but I do not need to see her legs to know what happened. Her gray eyes were now as dark as a storm. Her mouth slightly parted, but a mask of bliss covered her face. There was no more sadness, no more anger, no more anything. There was no more Mamma.

My legs feel like jelly, and I fall to the ground, sobbing. My tears are streaming down my cheeks, and Aulus appears beside me, screaming after Mamma. With my knees weak, I grab Aulus' hand and make a break for the hole I created when I first made my way into the house. Ash and smoke have already started to make their way to us, and inhaling it feels like having sandpaper rub

against my lungs. We run together, hand in hand, through the chaos that has now become our town. Hot, black ash is falling from the sky, making the visibility low, and burning anyone who is not covered. I feel Aulus' tug on my hand as he tires and falls behind.

“Appius!” he screams, and loses grip of me.

I turn to see him fall to the ground, and Cicero, the town beggar, running away from him.

“He elbowed me!” he shouts over the wails of the people around us.

But still, I can barely hear him. The crowd surged towards me, leaving Aulus behind. Panicked people did not stop for me or anyone, and I got caught in the stampede, thrown around like a doll. With my head pounding, I realize I am on the ground now, but the crowd keeps coming. The thing, I realize then, is that we are truly animals. Any drop of empathy these people had was gone, and all they are is moving carcasses.

We stop thinking, and simply start doing whatever it takes to survive, no matter the cost. I could feel my consciousness slipping away, and getting very heavy. Breathing started becoming hard, and my whole body went numb. A gift I suppose, for I no longer could feel anymore of the pain. With the last dregs of my energy, I attempted to get up and look for Aulus, but I could do no more than tilt my head.

As my eyes closed for the final time, I saw the remains of our flag, hanging from a wall, and the words “VIVA POMPEII” below it.

Long live Pompeii.



“A Friendly Foe”

by Daniella Cohen

4:15 PM on a dull Wednesday afternoon. What was Judy doing? Trudging along the way to her dorm room, backpack slung over one shoulder, her thoughts as muddled as the sky. It was finally the last class of the day; or more so the week as she had Thursday and Friday off, and she was filled with a sense of relief. Finally—she could change out of her stiff uniform and actually get some *sleep* this weekend. No exams to study for either. She was starting to see the beginning of freedom. And she was trying so hard not to let anything dampen her mood. Trying. And failing. Despite her seemingly cheery mood, this sense of doubt and worry had started to seep in; this sense of loneliness.

At school, Judy was the *it* girl. Everyone wanted to be her. She had the brains, the looks, and the athletic ability. Even so, she felt she never truly had people who would want to be her friend. Well, at least she had her sister. Arianne was only 8 years old—but that was beside the point. She shook herself out of those thoughts and shut the door on them, determined not to let them ruin her day. It was silent for a while as she continued on her way, until she began to hear the tapping of footsteps trailing behind her. She jumped a little as she turned her head, greeted by a grinning freckled face. Shifting her bag to the other shoulder, she looked in surprise.

“Hey Judy! Sorry for the scare. I was trying to catch up to you. I was wondering if you wanted to meet after school today, around 5:30? My friend Neyra and I were going to the nearby café that everyone’s been gushing about and we were wondering if you would like to come!”

As she spoke, the girl tucked a brown strand of hair behind her ear, and out of the way of her black rimmed glasses.

Noa. She had seen the girl plenty of times before, and people would always compare the two. She was small, but had a strong build, and studied in the similar field of law and justice. There was always some unspoken competition between the two, due to the constant comparison from their peers, and Judy felt awkward around her. But who knows, maybe she’ll end up with a friend after today.

“I’d love to join you. I’m completely free today!”

Which was pretty unusual for her. She always had a ton of clubs and after school activities to get to, and many could never understand how she could

function with such a tightly packed schedule. Sometimes she'd be dubbed, "Hermione Granger" when she had never even read Harry Potter!

"See you soon then, Judy," Noa smiled, and turned the corner.

After some time, upon arriving at her dorm room, she fell to her bed, exhausted. She took out her ponytail, and her long blond hair fell in cascades around her face as she put her head in her hands. Drained of energy, she was once more left to her thoughts. Staring at her dark ceiling from her bed, that same worry crept up on her, and began to chew at Judy's fears. Rubbing her eyes, she pushed herself off of her bed and looked around. She should get ready, she told herself, yawning. There weren't many clothes to choose from thanks to the uniform obligation everyday of the week, but something would have to work. 4:30; exactly one hour to prepare. She pulled open the closet door.

* * *

It was lightly drizzling as Judy made her way out the building and onto the cobblestone sidewalk, already darkening from the rain. Gripping her umbrella handle she continued on her way, her boots splashing in various puddles in the path. The sun had begun to set, showering the sky in a range of beautiful colors; there was a deep orange that faded purplish and pink, and they sort of rippled throughout, intertwining with clouds and illuminating everything on land with a brilliant glow. It was always astonishingly beautiful to see the sunsets around here, and upon leaving she knew she would miss this a lot. Already, as she looked up through her transparent umbrella, she could see a sign reading, "Grimm's Café" in the usual rustic fashion that matched with the theme of the small shop. As she pushed open the door, a gust of wind greeted her, along with the delicious smell of freshly baked goods and pastries and coffee. She sat down at a small wooden table with intricate flower designs carved into it, and picked up the menu. After a quick examination, she glanced up at the clock across from her on the wall, since Noa hadn't arrived yet. She happened to be a few minutes early; no surprise there, so she waited a little longer. As the minutes passed, however, Judy started to wonder if Noa was going to come at all.

"Hello! Are you ready to order?" a waitress said, looking pitifully at her, notepad in hand.

At this point, the waitress had come by twice. How many times could Judy say she “wasn’t ready yet” without further judgment? After all, there are only so many options at a small café.

“Yes, so sorry for the long wait. I’m a little indecisive,” Judy laughed. “I’ll have the *pain au chocolat* please, with a medium black coffee.”

With a nod of her head, the young woman turned to the other direction to take another table’s order. A few moments went by, when her order arrived. Taking the pastry out of the crinkly paper, she slowly chewed, glancing up from time to time at the clock. She’d wasted twenty minutes of her life sitting here, and she wasn’t going to waste more of it. Noa had initiated the meeting for goodness sake! Rubbing her eyes tiredly, she was just about to get out of her seat before Noa showed up at the door.

“I’m so sorry, Judy! Something came up at home, and there was this really long phone call,” she rambled a bit as she rushed in, playing with her necklace.

Starting to feel sorry, Judy reassured her, “Hey, it’s totally ok! I just had to order something ‘cause I was here for a while. To be fair I did come a little early. But I don’t see Neyra anywhere; is she ok?”

“She came down with something; I think it was a stomach bug. I really am so sorry,” Noa repeated.

“It’s completely fine! I’m in no rush. I’m more worried about Neyra. If you see her, tell her I hope she feels better soon. You should order something! The food and coffee here is so good. I completely understand how so many people are obsessed with this place,” I insisted.

Judy felt better knowing it was all a misunderstanding, and a little ashamed she was about to walk right out of there without trying to think about what situation Noa could’ve possibly been in.

“Oh, it’s fine-I just wanted to meet you here to talk a bit, and get to know each other. I keep hearing so many great things about you and I wanted to ask, how are the Law and Justice courses going? I’m sure you’re acing your classes,” Noa gave an odd chuckle, which seemed like the cross of a cough and a laugh.

Was she also sick?

“Oh, um, yeah it’s going pretty well. Thanks by the way, but it’s definitely a huge challenge,” she said warily, glancing over. “Did you want to be a lawyer as well? Or a journalist, was it?”

Noa was playing with the red ribbon necklace she had on, and she smiled through clenched teeth as she specified, “Investigative journalist.”

Her golden flecked green eyes seemed to pierce through her like a blade—then all of a sudden the tension was gone. Breaking free from her thoughts, she pushed the image to the back of her mind. They continued to talk for a while, when Judy noticed it was pitch black outside, apart from some dimly lit street lights.

“Well, I should probably get some sleep; I’m sure you’ve been missing that all week, as well,” Judy laughed.

“Of course; I’ve kept you too long,” her companion agreed, and they each left a tip on the counter before exiting the shop.

* * *

Judy’s umbrella made a sharp noise as she clicked it open, blocking the now pouring rain from drenching her. To her right side, Noa was getting soaked. Why hadn’t she brought an umbrella?

“Hey, do you want to share the umbrella?” she told her classmate.

“No thanks—the umbrella’s yours. I wouldn’t want to be a bother. Besides, I know a good shortcut. Follow me,” Noa declared.

They marched on, boots splashing in the growing rain puddles in the cracks of the pavement. There was a constant sound of the rain hitting Judy’s umbrella. Noa started to look around her constantly, eyes darting back and forth every few seconds. Slowing down, she let Judy pass her.

“Alright, if we turn this corner and go straight, you’ll probably recognize the way from there,” Noa spoke, playing with her necklace.

As she turned the corner in front of Noa, Judy inquired, “Hey, I don’t think this is the right way—”

Her words were cut short when *BAM*, Noa grabbed her by the neck and smashed her head on the brick wall. Her vision quickly fading to black.

* * *

Black spots danced around Judy as her vision started to return. She felt a ringing in her head, accompanied by an enormous aching. She tried to reach her hand up to feel for blood, but she found herself unable to move. She could tell that

she was up against a wall, and looked down to see red ribbon binding her arms and legs. It was surprisingly strong compared to rope; and right then she knew. If she had any doubt who had done this to her before, there was none anymore.

“N-Noa?” Judy pleaded, hoarsely. She found it difficult to speak, as her throat tightened up and tears rolled down her cheeks. “Why are you doing this? Is there something I said—do you want money? I’ll give—”

Her words were cut off by a stinging pain across face, her tears blurring the image of a figure in all black, her hand still up from the blow. Judy went silent. Noa moved towards her, as she looked with wide eyes. The same striking green eyes she’d seen not so long ago now looked deadly; like they belonged to a poisonous snake.

Noa was inches away from her face as she spoke, “I was unsure at first. Did I really want to do this?” She twirled the ribbon on her neck around her finger. “I spent so long just thinking. But then I came. Late, but I still came,” a bubbling of laughter arose from Noa, and Judy looked on in silent horror.

With a crazed grin on her face, she continued, “I mean, I went through all that effort to memorize your schedule. You don’t deserve your popularity, your grades, *your life*. You stole awards that were meant to be mine, and you might think it’s just some stupid school competition, but you know what they say; the way to win is to *eliminate* the competition.”

She came so close to Judy, their noses were practically touching.

“But the truth is, every decision you make is a gamble. And I just happen to be the dealer,” she announced, as she moved back.

From inside her black jacket, Noa pulled out a carving knife, curved at the end, barely visible except for a gleam of silver shining from a dim light in the alley.

“You will be forgotten,” she stepped forward. “First pronounced missing,” she took another step, and the knife entered Judy’s chest. “Then pronounced dead...oops...did I spoil the ending?”

Everything felt cold; frigid. She couldn’t breathe. Then came the searing pain. She tried to inhale as the blade was pushed up through her heart, but it was like she was swimming in the middle of the ocean with 100-pound weights attached to her limbs. A feeling of dizziness overtook Judy, and her senses started to fade.

Noa pulled the blade out. With the last of her consciousness, Judy heard the echoing of Noa’s receding footsteps in the rain puddles.



Clearing
By Ying Sun

“Beyond The Meadow”

by Tayla Bagim

This is a world of endless choices
Sings their voices
From somewhere beyond
Beyond this meadow
In which the flowers reside
Beautiful and pure
Waiting for something
Waiting for dawn
I am a flower
Waiting to be chosen
By someone
But that opportunity is gone
The colors blind me, fate defying
I look through the cracks
Of what this world is implying
I am but a flower
Useless
For other's eyes only
Plucked prematurely
While the others stay grounded
I am the only one
Who found it
The reality
In this world of endless choices
I am finding a way to get to their voices
Looking for a way to break through those cracks
Once you find the reality
The truth
There is no turning back
The meadow is empty
Abandoned and dry
I truly have no purpose

No will to live my life
Victim to the wind currents
I give up on my pride
And let it take me elsewhere
Away from the meadow
Until a hand picks me up, eyes wide
This is the moment
Something I have been waiting for the entire time
A glimmer of hope, in this cycle of mine
But I glide downwards as the hand tosses me aside
And picks a different flower
Still grounded
Still beautiful and pure
I am not breaking through the boundary
In this world of endless choices
Their voices sing once again
Taunting me
Reminding me
That I cannot choose my fate
That I am but a useless flower
Only existing to be tossed around by the wind currents
That even though this is a world of endless choices
I can never choose a happy ending
Dawn will never come
And I can never go back to those innocent times
Those times when
I was waiting to be chosen
By someone
I could never be chosen in the first place
Because I am not a part of those seemingly endless choices
Because I am not the unreachable flower at the top of the hill
I am the one reaching
I had never left the meadow
For the wind had only guided me back

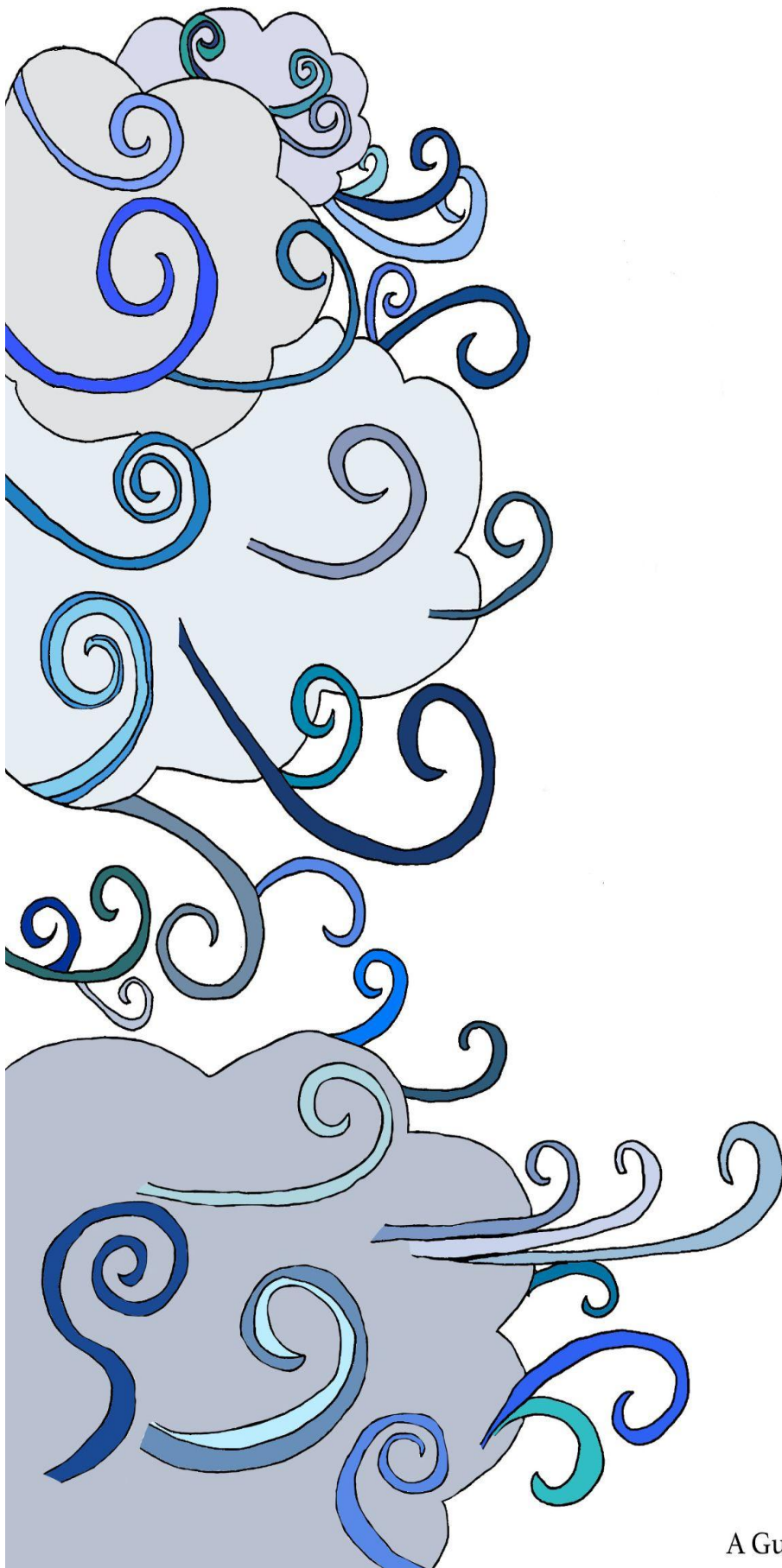
“An Imaginative and Innovative Character”

by Haruka Ishi

(a journal entry about the novel *Monster*, written by Walter Dean Myers)

In the novel *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers, the ways in which Steve Harmon reacts to conflict illustrate his imaginative and innovative character. The central conflict that Steve faces and one that the novel revolves around is his trial. After being accused of having had a key role in the robbery and murder of Mr. Nesbitt, Steve is faced with a long trial and time in jail. As Steve spends more and more time surrounded by other inmates and people in court, he experiences feelings of loneliness and struggles to become conscious of his present state in life. With the uncertainty of what lies ahead of him, Steve deals with this conflict in a way that illustrates the kind of “outside of the box” character he is. Steve takes close notice of his atmosphere, including things such as the insanity of his prison cell, and documents the emotions that evoke inside of him. He introduces the idea of creating a movie out of the experiences he will face, with him being the director of his own movie.

The idea of documenting, as well as becoming the narrator of his movie, is an approach that shows uniqueness in his character. This is because he has chosen to incorporate his passion into a situation of uncomfortness and darkness. He has found an innovative way to create something of value, out of what may seem like a hopeless and dark situation. Steve explains how the movie is not the story of his life, but rather a documentation of one of his experiences in life. Writing a screenplay allows Steve to become conscious of his reality and helps him to understand his life and motives more clearly. Steve also includes flashbacks into his screenplay, such as the one with him and his brother Jerry, which presents a normal brother to brother relationship. He incorporates this flashback in order to show that he is a real person. It proves that he is a good person, and someone more complex than a person on trial for criminal activity. The project allows Steve to dive into his own character and understand himself more deeply. Thus, Steve’s use of a screenplay in order to deal with his conflict shows how he is an innovative and creative character.



A Gust of Wind by Iris Wang

“What the Wind Hears”
by Juliana Dayani

They sound distant here
They sound on top of me there

Sometimes they scream
Sometimes they laugh
Sometimes they are drowned out
By my own furious sounds

There are searchers
Looking for the lost
And then
There is the lost
Running from searchers

There are howls
There are chirps
There are weeps from trees
Who have been ripped from their home
By ax and man

Without knowing I’m there
They seek privacy for their sorrow
They seek to hide from their past
They seek solitude from every being
Yet they are never truly alone
For I am both here and there

“Stone-Faced”

by Elliott Kane

Monday

“Mister?” I ask the man.

He just stands there on the sidewalk, not doing anything. I’m going around town, selling newspapers as I do, and I see this man. He looked pretty rich to me, so I walked up to him. He’s just standing there. Maybe checking the time, but that would only take a few seconds.

He turns around, and I can see that he’s a wealthy, well-dressed middle-aged man, with a perfect mustache and a bowl hat.

That, and his entire body is turning into stone.

“Mister?” I ask, quietly.

No response. I’m not much of an expert on stone, but I don’t think it should be bubbling like hot boiling water on the stovetop or crawling like the creeper vines mentioned in *Into The Jungle*, my favorite book. The gray, rocky substance crawls up his neck and envelops his entire head. He’s frozen in his place, mid-stride.

I’m not one to panic much, but when I do, it’s for good reason. War’s already brewing in Europe, so I have enough to stress about other than how many newspapers I’m going to sell and if I can make enough money to feed Papa and my siblings.

I whip my head around and ask the wealthy-looking lady behind me if she knows anything about the odd phenomenon happening to this poor man. Unfortunately, she is also turned to stone.

I rush home in a daze, hoping that my family is well and safe. I rush into the house and lock the doors. In our small kitchen is Papa, cutting up a loaf of bread for dinner. You can never doubt Papa’s skill with a knife. He fought in the Great War, slicing up German troops left and right with his trusty Bowie knife. I don’t think he’s truly recovered from an experience like that, and I’m sure it’s gotten worse for him since Mama died.

Jill, Molly and Henry, my three younger siblings, are playing on the rug in the living room. I’d hate to cause them fear, so I decide that I will only tell Papa. Just as I am about to tell him about what happened, our radio pops on with a low-quality, staticky transmission.

“People of America, do not fear. We are not at war. Today’s battle is against a different foe. A sickness has been spotted in New York City that is alarmingly causing citizens to become stone-like and immobile. Do not panic. Just be prepared.”

The transmission ends. The siblings are all huddled up around my legs at this point, and Papa looks stunned. I too am scared, but not from a nightmare or a monster underneath my bed. I fear for my family, my friends, and my life. I look up at Papa. His expression can be described as none other than stone-faced.

Tuesday

I’d truly hate to tell Papa what I just did. It fills me with guilt and excess panic. But alas, everyone is in panic. The streets are packed to the brim with men, women, and children. They are rushing back and forth, looking for supplies to load up on, scared that they could be turned to stone at any minute.

I’ve stolen someone’s money. A gentleman had a fifty-dollar bill sticking out of his back pocket, probably stuffed in there in a hurry so as to hastily buy food and supplies. I feel horrible for what I have done, but not a soul will buy newspapers today. I know that for sure.

When I get back home, I am going to tell Papa that I’ve been saving up money for a special occasion. It’ll burn me to see his proud, smiling face, happy that his eldest son is being responsible. But I have to do what must be done.

I am back at home with food and supplies to last for at least two weeks. (I may have done a bit of extra pickpocketing.) Papa and I board up and lock the doors. Jill, the second-oldest, sometimes helps, but she mostly stays with Molly and Henry. All three of them were scared out of their wits in our small basement.

There hasn’t been much more on the radio, but our banged-up television set has shown us reports of this “Stoneface Disease.” Papa has had to calm Molly and Henry down several times by now. They are the youngest and they are twins, both six-and-a-half. Jill is nine, and I am thirteen. As the oldest, I have to take care of all three. But I don’t complain. I do my job.

For the rest of that day, Papa and I board and lock up anything in the house where anything could get in. It’s tough work and I want to quit, but I can tell how frightened Papa is. He needs my help.

Wednesday

God, it feels like so much time has passed since this began. It's only been two days, but it's like time has turned into a thick chicken soup. Something you'd eat when you're sick. I feel sick, but we don't have any chicken soup in the house. It's the slow, droning passage of time and my nervous mind that gives my stomach heavy aching pains.

This feels as if we're awaiting an important weather forecast on the radio. "Incoming storm, hitting New York in a few hours." We'd prepare, hunker down, and wait it out as a family.

Right now, we're waiting for an end to this madness. I haven't dared look out the windows. I don't want to see terrified stone corpses, frozen in a struggle to escape.

Are we waiting for an end? Or is the coming storm going to be a dose of more pain?

I've booby-trapped all the doors and windows. Using some of the wood-carvings I've made in Boy Scouts, I've made it so that if anyone or anything tries to get in, they'll get firmly hit on the head and knocked clean out.

I do not know why I am doing this. If this is a disease, some falling chunks of maple wood would not help.

Thursday

Something feels different about today. I can't pinpoint my feelings, so I focus on eating breakfast and enjoying some good food before my recently-awakened mind clears and I remember what has been happening. My siblings are less scared now, although Henry is still sucking his thumb, a bad habit he dropped years ago. I talk to Papa, and he tells me that maybe, maybe things will be okay in the end. I hope so.

The radio pops on again. There haven't been many transmissions, except for warnings to other cities and states that there have been sightings of Stoneface Disease in their areas.

All I hear is a raging sound of laughter. It sounds like the news host, Frederick Hoyley. When he stops laughing, he explains everything.

Back in spring of 1935, Hoyley Production Industries had suffered a blow. Frederick Hoyley, who, being one of the richest men in America, not only owned a radio channel and several television channels, but an entire company. However,

this company had been going through bad times. Many workers had quit, and less people than ever were buying their products. So Hoyley came up with an idea. Rock-Solid Rick's Miracle Foam. The man had thought that "prank-pulling," "delinquent" kids, who made up most of his customers, would love the idea. A miraculous substance that could make it look like your entire body had turned to stone! It would start as a liquid, creep down your body, and harden! Perfect for causing mischief and madness.

Unfortunately, Hoyley's catastrophic idea took a lot of planning. In the meantime, they focused on other projects. It still confuses me why Hoyley would think of something that peculiar. The idea is beyond me.

By the current year, 1939, the incredibly perfect, scientific miracle, fun and amazing substance was available. However, Hoyley himself was also a bit of a prankster. Using his own product, he hired volunteers to cover themselves with the stuff, making it look like they had become petrified. His own employees even got in on it, resulting in massive "outbreaks" of the "disease."

This whole fiasco backfired for Hoyley, once he was finished explaining his three-day plan. First, he had perpetrated one of the largest radio hoaxes in American history, causing panic and chaos across the country. Due to this, multiple lawsuits were filed against him, and he lost a lot of money and most of the hope that Hoyley Production Industries had left.

Such a big, malevolent idea of ominous dread soon to come. But all fizzled out, perhaps with some temporary effects. Just some man's idiotic dream that ended up being a massive backfire. At least he'll go into the history books.

I forgot to mention, there was one other side effect to the hoax. The foam was effective in allowing air through to breathe, but the people who had participated in the hoax still couldn't break free! Throughout the next few days, we'd see firemen roaming up and down the streets. They were cracking people out of their gray, crusty prisons. That was quite a laugh!



FLYING HIGH BY JESSICA CAO

“The Flying Fiasco”

by Michelle Cheng

Birdie was like any other bird; she had two eyes, a beak, a mouth, two legs...but one thing was different. For as long as she could remember, she's been told to stay in her nest. Only if necessary, she could fly out, to stretch her wings, but she still had to be supervised. You might wonder why. *Why does this bird need to stay in her nest? Aren't birds supposed to be free? Don't they fly everywhere?* Well, to answer your questions, when she was little, Birdie fell out of her nest and damaged her wings. They're all healed now. But while flying, her wings will suddenly cramp and she'll plummet to the ground, which is why she's not allowed to fly.

One day, while her mom Ginny goes to find food, Birdie decides that she wants to be stronger and goes to practice flying. She hops out of the nest, and onto the branch. She inhales and calmly exhales, blowing away all of her nerves.

“3, 2, 1,” she chirps.

She then takes off. For about two seconds, she gracefully flaps her wings and then she starts to fall.

Down, down, down.

Plop!

Birdie lands on her left wing, her body aching from the shooting pain. Grimacing, she hops back onto her legs and tries to take off again. This time, she perches onto a lower branch.

“3, 2, 1,” she determinedly tweets again.

This time, she holds on for a few more seconds before crashing to the ground.

“Again! Again! I can do this,” she peeps.

She does this for about half an hour before returning to her nest. Her mom is returning soon. Five minutes later, Ginny returns with worms in her mouth. She feeds Birdie and leaves again, without noticing the bruises under Birdie's left wing.

The next day, the same thing happens. After Ginny leaves, Birdie practices flying. This time, she hops onto a higher branch and makes a goal. Her aim is to fly to the statue, twenty feet from the branch she's currently perched on. It takes her many tries, but she finally reaches her goal.

She gradually increases the distance of her goal each day.

One day, Birdie loses track of time and practices for an additional fifteen minutes. By the time she hops back into her nest, her mom is already there, staring at her and tapping her claws on the tree. She just stares quietly. One minute, then two, then three tick by. Finally, Ginny speaks.

“Where did you run off to?” she questions.

“Umm. I just wanted a change of scenery,” she stumbles. “Yea, that’s all.”

Ginny narrows her eyes, “Hmm, really? Because I could’ve sworn I saw someone with the same figure as yours, flying by the oak tree over there,” she points.

Birdie is silent.

“Tell me the truth. What were you doing?” she asks, “And why do you have so many bruises on your body? Don’t think I don’t notice everything that’s been going on. Every time I come back, your feathers are messed up, you are a lot more hungry...I could go on and on.”

“Okay, fine. I was trying to fly,” Birdie reluctantly responded.

“Why? Why would you do that? You know that your wing is partially crippled,” she warbles.

“Wait. Hear me out. You know I’ve been up to something this whole month. Well, I’ve been practicing every day, and I’m making a lot of progress. Right now, I can actually fly short distances without falling,” Birdie trills.

Ginny is silent.

She finally chirps, “Fine, you can keep practicing, but you need to do it while I watch you. I don’t want you to push and overwork yourself. And in the case you fall, I want to be there to help. Ok?”

“Ok!” Birdie happily tweets.

As each day passes, Birdie gets stronger and stronger. She can now almost fly fifty feet from a height of ten feet. Despite the amount of progress she’s already made, Birdie is still not satisfied with her skills. She continues to push herself and strives to become better.

“Lachrymose”

by Ofer Adar

Lamentations linger long thereafter
Antiquated solemn feelings break through their plaster
Cannot stop; induces neverending tears
Hampers the ability to think rationally, diluted by fears
Ransacked the body, mind and soul
Yearning for ailments to rejuvenate the empty holes
Mourning an eternal loss or damnation
Obscures reality and produces isolation
Secluded to a tiny cell deep within one's heart
But a glimmer of hope appears, perhaps it is just the start

“Hold on Soldier”

by Daniil Isarevich

Hold onto your hope
Even if it feels far fetched
Hold onto your goals
Even if they feel outmatched
Hold onto dreams
Even if a dream is bad
Hold onto your talents
Even if your talent's yet to show
Hold onto your time
As even when the time feels endless, it will always take its gentle turn



Clouds
By Kayden Li

“The Swordfish”

by Abigail Bernstein

After the feat of Perseus, who froze a sea monster with the head of Medusa, the Gorgon to save Andromeda, the sea grew violent. Not only was Poseidon mad, Ceto, the goddess of sea monsters, was fuming. That “Sea Monster” had been her partner in crime. It was the first thing she ever created when her mother, Gaia, gave her a lump of clay. That sea monster was her first and favorite creation, and has been with her for thousands of years. The best thing she’d ever had in her life, taken like an unprotected jewel. And that fool Poseidon! He had swiped the monster without even asking her consent! She swore on the river Styx that she would get revenge. She decided to consult with Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, to form a plan.

Perseus was returning from a mission with the Argonauts, and would soon be home again. With the help of all the winds, a huge storm suddenly hit the Argo and threw only Perseus overboard. The headwind from the storm hit the Argo’s sails and sped them through the waves, so they were incapable of going back and looking for him. Perseus swam hastily towards the nearest island. However, the nearest island happened to be the island of Circe, the sorceress and follower of Hecate. Perseus recognized the island instantly, because of all the stories from his friends and family. There was one ship left on the island, which Perseus took without hesitation.

Ceto was smoldering, simmering; she was boiling! She had a lust for blood, Perseus’s blood. It was time to take matters into her own hands. She went down to her lair, at the bottom of the sea, and took a lump of clay. First, she quickly sculpted a long rapier, sharper than a knife. Then, she sculpted a body of a fish, with razor sharp fins that could cut through stone. Her twisted smile had shown her success. She swiftly made twenty more, and quickly shoved them all into an underwater volcano, to make them as firm as possible.

The lair reeked of madness, Ceto wouldn’t stop until the job was done. Her maniacal laughter ringing off the sides of the sea cliffs! She was so close! She could feel the power of Nemesis working with her! She felt stronger, more powerful! She felt as though she could overtake Zeus himself! Zeus begged her to stop, however she couldn’t hear him over the sounds of madness, ringing in her ears. *Whoosh!* The sound of twenty one swordfish zooming through the air!

Every single swordfish landed on the deck of Perseus's ship. Perseus's heart was racing, his breath unsteady, a cold sweat dripping down the back of his neck. He took out his sword and prepared to fight. He swung at the nearest one, but to Ceto's surprise, he hit it with the butt of his sword. The swordfish, without any limbs to grasp onto the side of the ship, fell with a huge splash!

It was then Ceto realized her one mistake. She forgot to give them a way back onto the ship. With every swordfish pushed off the ship, a thundering from a distance sounded closer and closer! The thundering became so loud that no one could hear anything but it!

Perseus had pushed every single swordfish off the deck. However, the fish had adopted a new technique. They were ramming their pointy rapiers into the bottom of the ship, too quick for Perseus to even catch them! Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning and a blast of thunder. Perseus's ship seemed to glow! It was the aid of Zeus, the god of thunder and lightning, and the father of Perseus. Zeus had made Perseus's ship indestructible, so the swordfish were incapable of making holes, and made Perseus's journey home much safer. Thus, Perseus lived on, Ceto carried on being angry, and the swordfish remained in the Mediterranean Sea.

“Fire”

by Ellen Barbu

A fire, hot with orange tongues
A fire, bright with yellow tones
A fire, oh so warm and nice
A fire, lashing back and forth
A fire, growing big and bigger
A fire, not so sweet but filled with vigor
A fire, blazing no more
A fire, but a flicker in the dust
A fire, gone with just one gust

“Oblivious Oak”

by Shira Khoda

Sometimes it's better to be prepared
If you knew what would happen you wouldn't have dared
Be cautious
But come on, let's not get nauseous
You say, it's in your head
So you ignore it instead.
Go on with your day
Lock the lock, the key to throw away
Your leaves sway
Don't get your branches in such a fuss
After all, the one who worries
Bites the dust.
Eyes closed
Go on, keep yourself composed
Don't let doubt
Sprout
A gray cloud
For crying out loud
See the local crow
He says, "Storm's coming, you know,"
Then, "Nice talking, gotta go,"
"Find a safe place,"
"Sheltered space."
He leaves, you scoff
This isn't worth getting put off.
Hear the locals inside talking,
And the young girl squawking,
"Forecast says a hurricane!"
She's staring out the window pane.
Assure yourself, you've seen this before
Don't get caught up in this fake lore

Your roots go down so far,
You're setting the bar
A little bit of wind, a few flurries
Brush off all your worries
It'll be done before you know
Stay put, lie low
A big gust comes close
It's a bit of a high dose...
And then
Then
The next events are a blur
What really happened, you can't be sure
It strikes a weak limb
Your face is still grim
You don't even comprehend
The branch is starting to bend.
Shock pulses through your trunk.
On the ground a big chunk
Of bark and wood.
It hit you; you finally understood.

The storm's gone, it left a big mess
The residents are now in distress
And gone is your branch; a piece of you!
But the neighbors' protection really came through
No other damage to nature was done.
But then the regret came for some.
Ignorance is bliss, they say!
Not so much for you that day.

“The Final Moment”

by Ava Salehani

(a poem inspired by “Sign of the Times,” by Harry Styles)

Just stop your crying, it'll be alright
The clock is ticking, but don't you fright
You'll be okay, just live your life
Things won't always end up right

It feels like we're always stuck
Why are we always dodging bullets with no luck
We always end in the same place struck
We never seem to learn

We have been here before
It's not the same anymore
But please stop your crying
It's a Sign of the Times

Explanation: “Sign of the Times” is told from the perspective of a mother who dies shortly after childbirth. The song is exactly five minutes and forty seconds long. In this short time, the mother talks to her child knowing she only has minutes left.

“Love”

by Daniil Isarevich

Love
Is a mighty dragon
Burning you with blasts of fire
Rising your heart's biggest desire
Melting ice, and calling off the darkening clouds
Worth more than a pile of gold
As even gold can't help
When you are alone and cold



Something Behind You
By Talya Bagim

“Powerless”

by Juliana Dayani

Alice’s first secret was small, soft, and given the name Blue. Unfortunately, as much as she loved her new companion, Alice barely had time to even *look* at Blue, since she was too busy sneaking him throughout the castle. Her first secret lasted just under ten minutes when he clawed through her dress and ran away, only leaving a trail of muddy footprints and screams from those he passed.

The next thing Alice knew, her parents—with their pristinely elegant clothes now ruined by claw marks—were towering over her with identical looks that made Alice want to run and hide in the farthest corners of the earth and never come out.

With that thought, Alice turned around and sprinted towards her room.

Hiding under her bed, Alice watched her door with such rapt attention that her tutors would be proud.

“Please don’t open the door, please don’t open the door,” she whispered it like a mantra, while crossing her fingers.

Her parents had always been cold shadows in her life, especially compared to her tutors and maids who showered her with love, gifts, and praise. So when—after what could have been hours or minutes in Alice’s eyes—she heard a click coming from behind her door and familiar retreating footsteps, she knew it was one of her maids locking the door to protect her from her parents’ wrath.

Up until then, she had never experienced her parents' ferocity. So—for an eight year old who was as familiar with punishments as she was with strangers—a missed dinner seemed to be the worst there was. And it would have been, if not for her parents unparalleled pride and cruelty.

The next day, when she assumed her parents had calmed down and her maids would come bustling in any second to dress her, Alice sat on her bed in anticipation of breakfast. They seemed to take longer than usual, but Alice just chalked that up to her hunger making her impatient. She was determined not to slip up again and miss another meal. And then, just when Alice’s hunger had reached its peak and her manners were giving way to annoyance, a plate slid under the small crack of her door.

There was barely any food on the dish, but it was that very fact that introduced her to her long and perilous journey with punishment.

With this newfound discipline, Alice found herself trying not to laugh. Her parents might have been in charge, but did they really think she had nobody by her side to help her? Her maids loved her, her tutors praised her, and even her parents' friends had always adored her at fancy gatherings. All she had to do was wait to be rescued. Though waiting for someone to save her with an elaborate escape plan might have been boring, that was all she could do for the first day. And the second day. And the third. And fourth. It was not until the seventh day that the slow realization that she had nobody to save her finally sunk in and Alice cried well into the night.

She was angry, for the eighth day. And ninth, tenth, and eleventh. She was livid at her parents, who had locked her in there in the first place.

Who gives them the right? She thought naively.

She was furious at her tutors and maids who pretended to love and take care of her, but did absolutely nothing when it truly mattered.

She was mad, and wanted the whole world to know the pure fury that coursed through her veins in a never-ending manner. So she screamed and screamed and screamed. She shouted at the top of her lungs and jumped up and down as hard as she could. She banged on the doors and trashed her room, all for the sliver of hope that someone, *anyone* would come in and tell her she wasn't alone. That her anger was for nothing and her loneliness was non-existent. But that didn't happen.

No matter how many times she shouted, "Open the door! Open the door!" while manically jumping up and down, nobody came.

On the thirteenth day, when her anger no longer knew how to be heard and her loneliness seemed as permanent as her maids' lack of help, she stood in her room full of broken glass and ripped paper, missing her parents. She missed the balls they would force her to, and the tutors they assigned, and the maids they directed to care for her. She missed being naive enough to think that, although they were never around, her parents would always be there to protect her.

Most of all, she missed the way her parents influence, *their* power on those around her, caused *her* to believe she was powerful. Unfortunately, Alice knew she would never be that naive again.

Alice didn't scream, for the rest of her forced friendship with punishment. Never again, Alice vowed, would she feel so powerless, *act* so vulnerable with her futile cries for help.

The days began to blur together, as Alice was soon left with nothing to do but lay on her bed and think. She thought about how she was already being prepared to be married off when she turned seventeen. She was horrified at the thought of spending nine more years under her parents' watch only to be controlled by another person once she was free of them. It was with those realizations that Alice no longer let her mind wander and began to plan. The only way to escape her parents' shadow was for her voice to be heard and trusted more than theirs. She needed to make a connection with those who hated her parents and form alliances. She needed to *work* for the power they had and take it for herself.

. . .

Alice sat atop the charred throne that was once her father's, watching the last of her parents' troops fall to their knees. She watched in satisfaction as the last man fell and all of the power she craved at eight years old became a reality on her eighteenth birthday.

“Bill Gates”

by Ofer Adar

If I were in charge of the world
I'd seize all private property
Inject everyone with microchips
Connected to the Metaverse
If I were in charge in the world
There'd be living pods for the masses
Enjoying life in virtual reality
Consuming climate-friendly cicadas
You wouldn't be able to spread misinformation
You wouldn't leave your designated living quarters
Or you'd be sent to re-education bungalows
If I were in charge of the world

“Oops, That's Awkward: Part 1”

by Sophia Li

Another day. Wake up to the chattering of people pointing and ogling at you. Endure for half of the day. Eat your enriched tasteless pellets. Go to sleep, repeat. Sometimes, we don't get to sleep so the researchers can do their research. I think this all to myself, preening my once white feathers sadly. Perhaps it is the Probing Day that is affecting my thoughts, as today is also the day the researchers would be taking me out of my tube to do their “research.” I remember the last time they did their research, about two weeks ago. At least, I think it was two weeks ago. Time is hard to keep track of when every day is the same.

I wonder what they'll do today. I hope it's one of those easy sessions, where they just see how long it takes for me to solve a puzzle. Sometimes, the bad sessions last over a week with worsened conditions: less food, less water, less space, whatever the government could come up with. My belief is that they do these experiments to see what they can minimize, since they always want the bare minimum. I am startled out of my thoughts by a loud banging on my tube. I sigh. *Maybe if I act boring, the visitors will just walk away.*

I don't respond to the banging except to slowly lift my head up to peer at the noise maker. It is a little girl, just like I suspected. She has black pigtails and is smiling at me, showing off her crooked teeth and braces. I know why she's here. She is obviously entranced by my dangerously good looks. I like to play a guessing game, where I guess what Vicinity they're from. This girl, I'd say is probably from Vicinity 1: the richest Vicinity. Normally most people are from 1 or 2, since those are the richest Vicinities. Other Vicinities are probably too busy trying to afford food in their plates to pay overinflated prices to look at the animals that still exist in the Preserves. I stare unblinkingly at the little girl, whose enthusiasm slowly fades.

She whines, “Mommy, this bird is boring! Make it do something!”

“Jessica, come on, let's move on. Let's go to the elephant. It looks more interesting than this bird,” her mom says, as she practically drags Jessica off by her pigtails, who huffs and stomps angrily.

I watch them walk to the elephant and continue preening my gray feathers. Many more people come and go. Most of them are from Vicinity 1 or 2. I can tell by the way their yellow clothes are spotless and their shoes shining. I nibble

around with my pellets that are carefully rationed to never fill me up. The sky slowly turns a pinkish hue, signaling for me to be ready for the researchers. I spread my wings out to my widest wingspan, so that the tips of my wings touched the walls of my tube. I felt drowsy, but I liked to be prepared for when the researchers came, so I stayed awake. I watched squads of people enter the Preserves, their white suits gleaming under the moonlight. Three of them break off from the others and approach my tube in the darkness.

“Serena, go grab the bird and put it into research room eight,” the shortest researcher said, with a bossy attitude that didn’t match her height.

I remember her from my previous session. I think her name was Madylyn or Mackenzie or Michelle or something of that sort. My tube is opened from the top using some sort of rectangular device, and I am grabbed from the top with rough hands. My eyes are covered and I can’t do much but listen to the footsteps of Serena and the third researcher walk. Struggling is useless. I’ve seen a small calf struggling before, and they killed it. Wasn’t important enough, I guess.

Before long, I am dropped into a big room. Actually, I doubt the room is actually big, since they probably have much bigger rooms for the bigger animals like horses. But compared to my minuscule tube where I barely have enough room to spread my wings, this is huge. However, it is incredibly tall. No matter what animal you were, it would be tall. Even a giraffe would probably think this room was tall, too. I crouch defensively, alert, ready for whatever they have prepared for me. I look around at my surroundings: I see nothing too unusual, a few blocks and weird gadgets here and there, until I look up. At the very top of the room is a full platter, bigger than my whole body length, full of foods that filled the room with a delicious smell that is completely unfamiliar to the bland diet I am on now. *This can’t be too bad if the challenge is just getting all of this delicious food.*

I wait for the researchers who are currently setting up cameras to leave so I can see what this experiment is all about. A small part of my brain warns me not to get my hopes up. The government would never be so nice to just give me free food. Still, I am excited that at least the food is a part of it.

“Hurry up, Lia,” Serena snaps.

The third researcher, who is apparently Lia, is glancing wistfully at the food, and I can’t judge her, because so am I.

“I don’t even get to eat oatmeal. Why does this filthy *bird* get to eat it?” she grumbled.

I heard Michelle explaining that at least they weren't used by the government as they trudged out. As soon as they left and locked me in, I focused on the food. I don't see a clear path leading to the food, which I guess is the catch. *Well, I have wings for a reason.* I spread my wings and crouched, ready to take off. Then I stumbled a little uncertainly before I realized it has been a long time since I have actually flown. I leap into the air, putting a whole lot more faith in myself than a rational bird would, and flap about a third of the way up before fluttering off balanced back to the ground. I am ready to try again, when Lia enters the room again. In her hand, she clutches a bird that is slightly bigger than me. It is brown, except for the head which is gleaming white. I wonder how the bird maintained such a clean coat, but this bird had clearly seen the food too and looked like it meant business.

I was confused. Why was there another bird here? This had never happened before. Species were always kept separate for research. I didn't like this. Now I had to figure out how to fly to the top with a competitor that also evidently wanted the food as much as I did. I squawked loudly to show my unhappiness. The bird didn't flinch or blink in return. I'll guess this bird is a male and named him Michael.

Lia left the room, seemingly unbothered by my anger.

"You know who else was a subject of this experiment," she smirked, "your mom."

I feel mildly surprised by this random piece of information that just came out of her mouth, and didn't know what to do with it. After all, I had never met my mother. They only needed one of every species. So when a newer, fitter one was born, their parents were disposed of in the Preserves and retired to live in the labs for experiments forever. That's just how it is and always has been.

Michael took off without a moment's hesitation, but evidently hadn't flown either as he lost his balance and came crashing down into me. I beat him off with my wings, and he clawed at my eyes before getting off of me and retreating to the corner of the room to glare at me. All I knew was that this tough guy was not going to steal all of that food from me. I took a flying leap and flapped as aggressively as I could. Michael saw what I was doing, and quickly took off to do the same. I was so close to the food, but I felt my wings getting tired. I hovered without moving for a short pause, and that was enough for Michael to fly ahead of

me. He then stomped mercilessly on top of me, sapping my remaining energy. I tumbled down even further before barely catching myself.

I saw him perch on the platter triumphantly, and I felt the rage build up in me. I let out my best war cry and felt my body burn with the effort, and let out a loud screech while hurling myself upwards. I landed beside him, breathless, but nonetheless triumphant.

“Chirp!” I yelled happily.

I breathed in the scent of the wide assortment of food, ready to take a big bite. I open my beak-- and then all of a sudden I’m pitched towards the ground. The floor is coming towards me too fast for me to react. I have just enough time to think, *you jerk*, before hitting the ground at an awkward angle on my foot.

I almost black out from the pain, but force myself to stay conscious. I feel dizzy and my foot is bent weirdly. Michael hardly pays me any attention and continues digging into his feast happily. I lower my head and feel a sadness. I can’t remember the last time I felt this feeling so strongly. It isn’t every day that I’m offered an opportunity to get out of my cage to actually do something fun. *At least, I got to stretch my wings, and smell some good food, even if I didn’t get to eat it.* I get up and then stumble, reminding me that I have an injured foot.

The researchers re-enter the room, Michelle first.

“Well, what’d I tell you Serena? I told you Skyler would pass! Now you have to go on poop duty and only eat D Snuts for a week!” she laughed, while pressing buttons that removed the food from the platter.

His name is Skyler? Guess I can’t call him Michael anymore.

Michael, I mean Skyler, glares at the researchers and comes fluttering down to the ground, sulking about his unfinished meal. I stand up straighter, laughing at him internally that I’m not the only one thinking about the food I didn’t get to eat.

Serena glares at me, like it’s my fault that Michael was bigger, stronger, and meaner. I hop and ruffle my feathers a little. *I did that on purpose. Now you’re on poop duty. Haha, that was my plan all along. Suck that!* I think I am partially reassuring myself. *Don’t worry, you’re still a big baddie. You’re tough and handsome and get all the girls.*

“Yeah whatever. Just make the report on your droidling and exterminate Albert already,” Serena snaps.

Woah! What’d this big lady just say? Exterminate me? Nuh uh. Not happening. Way too handsome to be exterminated.

Lia comes over to grab me, and my survival instincts kick in again. I think of all the Bird Kwan Do lessons I've given myself and open my wings. Lia doesn't seem to be intimidated though, so I turn to Plan B, which is to run away. I skert away as fast as I can, before stepping weirdly on my hurt foot and promptly toppling over.

"Stupid bird," Lia grumbles.

She stomps towards me, and I cower in fear. I don't like this. I doubt I look very heroic or handsome.

"Put it under the kipping drug," Michelle suggests.

Serena hands Lia a big needle, and I don't know what a kipping drug is but all I know is that I ain't going near a needle that thick.

I yell again, "Caw!" but it's useless.

Nobody even reacts. I slowly resign and accept my fate. *I am going to die.*

All of a sudden there is a soft plopping noise. Everyone's head swivels slowly towards Skyler, who innocently stares at us. Under his behind is a round, large, white, egg. Nobody makes a sound.

Then, I am struck with the realization. *Male birds can't lay eggs. Is Skylar a female?*

"She laid an egg?" Serena says, despite it being quite obvious.

"Ughh!" Michelle groans, seeming more annoyed than confused.

Serena smiles, "Well, Skyler's now a mother to a baby bald eagle, and we can only have one of them. I guess Skyler's the one getting exterminated and we'll be using Albert!"

Lia grumbles her assent. I feel incredibly confused. Wasn't I just going to die a few seconds ago? And how could they talk about Skyler's death so easily? And how did Skyler just...lay an egg? And what did they mean by using me? I didn't like the sound of that at all. I was panicking. I felt happy I wasn't going to die anymore, but then I felt guilty that Skyler was going to die instead of me. She sacrificed herself for me! And to think I was fighting with her over some food! What was happening? I had felt more emotion this past hour than I did my whole life.

Lia turned towards Skyler and held the needle up. I saw Skyler look at me, and I didn't exactly look loving, but at least she didn't look like she hated me. Then, her lively and sharp eyes went dull and lifeless. Lia extracted the needle, and turned triumphantly.

Skyler just died for me. Oops, that's awkward.

Michelle then lifted me up, grabbing my hurt foot in the process. I screamed and she shifted me onto my head. The researchers walked with me and a lifeless Skyler out of the room, until Lia tripped over a table.

“Oh no! Our table! It’s broken!” Serena yelled angrily.

I took this opportunity to try to escape and fly away from whatever these psychos were trying to do to me.

“The bird!” Michelle screeched.

“Caw!” I screeched, biting every finger in my sight.

I thought I was winning for a hot second until I felt Lia come from behind me and stab me with the needle forcefully. I let out a weak chirp, before falling into a dark slumber.

When I woke up, I was in an unfamiliar place, a big room...

TO BE CONTINUED...

“Keyhole”

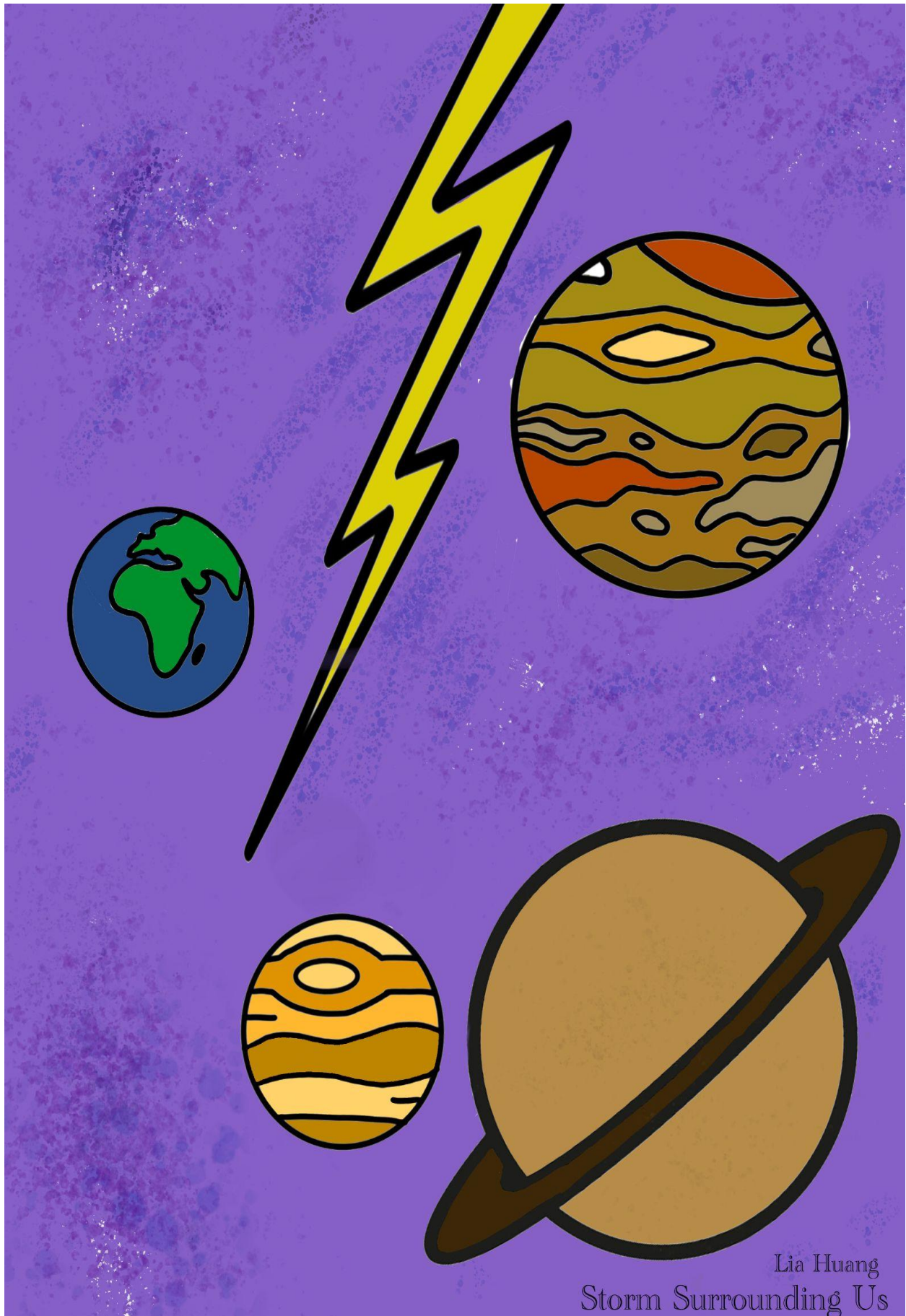
by Ellen Barbu

To know and to do are two very different things, separate by quite a lot
To know is to look through the keyhole, to run when you could be caught
To do is to grab the key, and to unlock that which is locked

“Universe”

by Ellen Barbu

The moon, a lone sailor of the sky
The sun, quick on its tail ablaze
The stars, small fish and shrimp and crab
The clouds, like foam on the beach
And the asteroids, quick dolphins swimming
The sky, a mirror of the ocean beneath



“The Real Reward”

by Amit Chanoch

Lance bolted upright, sweat dripping off his face. He stood up and left his creaky cabin and glanced to his right, where the pilgrims were playing cards while slamming their beers on the deck. As Lance walked down the wooden hallway towards his friends, the ship started moving unusually. He held onto a ledge for stability. The ceiling was ripped off.

“Abort the ship, incoming wave,” Perose shouted, while running towards the anchors.

The stormy weather did not help with the ship's uncontrollable shaking. Perose snapped his head at Lance and nodded. He was then flung into the ocean along with the rest of the pilgrims. Lance started feeling dizzy, and fell onto the ship's floor. Everything turned to black.

Perose woke up with a sandy taste in his mouth. He looked down on his body and saw a crab eating his shoes. The substantial humidity made it hard to breathe or focus on one thing at a time. He got up and looked around with his torn shoes. To his disbelief, the sky was radiant and there was a forest which stretched on for miles. Perose was stuck on an island all alone.

He looked down and saw the footprints of the crab. They lead into the forest and into a cave underneath a cliff. Perose had a gut feeling he should follow the crab. *I could end up running towards my demise, but I should still give it a try.* As the cave gets closer, Perose smells something rancid. The cave structure changes into a crab-like shape and all of the trees disappear. He enters the structure and sees the pilgrims unconscious on the floor. He rushes toward them.

“Omni, Ethil, Attacus, wake up!” he shouts, while shaking them.

“It would be unwise to do that, mortal,” something declares.

Perose looks up to see a witch brewing potions in a large cauldron.

“Who are you? What do you want?” he pants.

“I can answer your second question, Perose. I know this all seems very sudden and frightening. But, I need you to do something for me,” she whispers.

“What?” he shouts.

“You will travel where I cannot and retrieve the treasure I yearn for, for the fate of your friends’ lives depend upon it. If you mention this to them during your voyage, I will kill them,” she says in a monotone voice.

“Why me? Why them?” he questions.

The witch removes her face cloth to reveal a pale white face. Perose can’t quite discern her age. She has long, black hair with hazel eyes that look empty.

“You were chosen. None of this is random. Now do what I tell you to do or else you will go on to lead a very lonely life,” she proclaims.

“Fine, but under one condition. You leave me and my friends alone,” he grunts.

“Deal,” she states.

The pilgrims start waking up.

“I will escort you as close as I can to your destination,” she announces.

The cave rumbles as everything around them turns white. Perose feels a falling sensation and he lands on dirt unscathed. The pilgrims wake up to birds chirping.

“Ay, where are we supposed to be?” Atticus mutters.

A streak of light appears in the sky, pointing towards a stone path. They follow the path to a steel ladder.

“We gotta go up this ladder, it’s our only choice,” Omni says.

“Whatever you say,” Ethil sighs.

They climb up to reach a vault painted with crabs. The sky turns black and the crabs start glowing. As the vault opens, mist slowly creeps out to reveal a map.

“I know what this is, it’s a Truvian map. They lead to one of two things, treasure or death. According to this witch we met, we need to take it,” Omni says.

Perose walks up to the stand on which the map is laid out and sees the X is marked in the middle of the ocean. There are also fingerprints on the map.

“I think people have already used this map before to get to the same treasure or death,” Perose slowly mutters.

He picks up the map to discover a bag of gold coins.

“Hey fellas, get over here,” Perose shouts.

“That bag is for me,” Ethil grunts, while trying to pick up the bag.

He can’t pick it up. The bag slowly budes and is lifted off the ground. But, now it’s lighter than feathers.

“Weird. What’s on that map?” he asks.

“You don’t want to know,” Perose answers, with both fear and excitement on his face.

The rest of the pilgrims all take a peek at the old map.

“Perose, this map is useless. We’re not sailing across the ocean to some stupid treasure. We’ve got what we need here,” Ethil asserts, while shaking the bag.

Omni nods in agreement, whereas Perose and Atticus look at each other with disappointed faces.

“Well then, you lads go your own separate ways. All I’m saying is, you’re sailing towards your own demise,” Ethil states.

They part ways. Atticus and Perose walk towards the ocean where a boat suddenly appears, and Omni and Ethil walk the other way inland.

20 Days Later

“We should be arriving in about a day,” Atticus shouts in the midst of a storm.

“Come on, let’s take a break,” Perose bawls.

They walk into the torch-lit ship room. The polished white marble table consumes the room.

“I take it you’ve given up on Lance,” Atticus sighs.

Perose sat down with tiredness.

“Tell me Atticus, why’d you come with me?” Perose questions.

“I’ll always come with you. We’re brothers. You don’t turn your back on your brother or leader,” Atticus replies.

“That’s a bloody good answer. Good night. May the gods bless with fortune and valor,” Perose yawns.

As the night melts away Atticus looks at Perose with inspiration. He was just a wee little kid when he met him and he’s been with him ever since. The duo arrives at the destination to see a small island patch with pieces of shipwreck.

“Looks like others have made it here, just not in one piece,” Atticus says.

The sun smothers the sand, making everything hard to look at except for one thing, a tall skinny bloke with jagged teeth and numerous tattoos. They walk up to him after docking their ship.

“Hello, Gentleman. We both know what you came here for, but everything has a price,” he shouts, with pleasure in his voice. “Duel me until I yield. If you win, I will give you what you seek,” he announces with a mischievous grin.

Atticus and Perose look at each other and nod. They charge toward the man with swords in hand. Perose is flung back after the bloke slaps him with his abnormally large hand. Atticus cuts him on his stomach and right knee until he's hit with what feels like a hammer.

"We need a different gameplan. Find out a way to bait him and I'll attack from behind. You got that Atticus?" Perose whispers into Atticus' ringing ears.

He heard enough of it to understand the task. Atticus gets up next to Perose and shouts, "Hey ugly, you're done for!"

The man leaps toward Atticus and hits him with all of his power. He dodges and parries. As the man is about to end Atticus, he feels a hot feeling in his chest and looks down to see a sword in his chest. The plan worked. Perose stabbed the bloke from behind. The monster of a man turns into sand and reveals a goblet.

"One of you must drink this for the treasure. But I warn you, choose carefully," he announces, while disappearing into ashes.

As the goblet is gently placed on the sand, Atticus dives for it and immediately drinks its content. Right next to them, a large closet appears.

"This must be the treasure," Atticus sighs.

Perose opens it and sees three things. An immense amount of gold, a silver vial, and a man who looks malnourished. Atticus starts groaning with pain and looks at Perose.

"I'm sorry, it was me. I had to do it. I have nothing to lose except for you. You have Lance," Atticus moans.

The malnourished man is revealed to be Lance. He falls into Perose's arms.

"Little brother, I thought you were...gone," Perose cries.

"I had faith in you, big brother," Lance stammers.

They hug and reminisce. The three sit down and look out into the sunset.

"I guess our fate is really up to ourselves. I had to drink it, or else you would have. You have an actual brother, Sir. Treasure your time with him. Don't take him for granted. You are lucky. I guess God really does choose when death comes upon us," Atticus says, with his last breath.

Perose and Lance are transported to the witch, who thanks them for the vial.

"I don't know what you went through, but I thank you. You will be remembered," she admits.

The brothers nod in agreement and walk towards the boat to sail towards the sunset into a new chapter of their lives.

“Stress”

by Jordan Pourtavoosi

Stress.

It's like a soda being shaken until it pops.

It's like holding a glass of water for a very long time.

It's like you want to scream your guts out at everyone and everything.

However,

Some people don't understand stress.

They may take away things that have nothing to do with it.

It's like you want to run away from all of it.

However,

You can't.

More things will be taken away and life will become harder.

Over time, they become nice and say “sorry.”

The next day, they act extremely horribly and forget that “sorry.”

They say they're doing it for your “own good.”

However,

They're just adding more Mentos to the soda.

If they would only understand.

Stress.

“Sadness”

by Ellen Barbu

A bleak, dark morning

A single singing bird

The rain's non stop drumming on the roof

Cars passing through puddles of water

The cold air seeping through crevices

The calm sadness of the world as it wakes



Dancing With No Care In The World
By Chanel Alexander

“An Incoming Storm”

by Julang (Jerry) Wang

Boom!

Lightning flew across the sky.

“It's gonna rain,” I yelled to my friend Jimmy.

When we saw the lightning and heard the thunder, Jimmy and I were still in the middle of a cliff on our hike.

“Well, we might have a little bit of trouble, Jimmy,” I had to yell at him because of the wind.

We were faced with the decision to keep climbing to the top and quickly build a tent so we could hide from the rain, or climb back down the cliff. But climbing back down was going to be slow and we would definitely be fully washed by the rain when we got to the bottom.

“What do you think Jimmy?” I still had to scream to him.

“Gotta think fast, my boy!” Jimmy yelled back, which left the decision up to me.

I decided that we would continue climbing, since there were only around ten meters left to climb. It seemed like there was a big rock which could stop some of the wind for us. That could prevent the tent from collapsing. Seventeen minutes later, we got to the top where it was already raining a little.

After we finished setting up the tent, we were soaked from head to toe by the rain. This was different from my plan. We started a fire, and when we were about to sleep, I heard weird noises coming from the other side of the cliff. They were getting louder and louder.

I left the tent to check out what it was and I was shocked.

“It's a tornado!” I screamed.

I knew that there was no chance that we would survive this, because it was coming right towards us.

The tornado grew closer, the sound of the wind swirling and the sound of trees cracking and smashing.

It finally arrived and I got eaten by the tornado, flying towards the sky. Yelling and screaming, I waved my arms, trying to grab something that could stop me from falling back down to the ground. I was getting closer and closer to the ground, as the seconds passed.

Just when I was about to hit the ground, I woke up. It was all just a dream and it was still a beautiful Saturday morning. Then I heard my mom yell to me.
“Honey, Jimmy is here for your hike!”

“A Weak Character”

by Selena Feng

(a journal entry about the novel *Monster*, written by Walter Dean Myers)

In the novel *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers, Steve is impacted by the setting, a prison. The setting takes place in a jail cell where Steve is surrounded by adult criminals and is treated like one. From the state, Steve wants nothing more than to escape from the prison. Everyday, inmates are beaten and violated by each other, using violence to suppress their emotions. Steve is affected by this environment, because he develops a terrified character trait and unlocks paranoid emotions. Steve has no friends or anyone to really talk to, leaving him feeling “alone when you are really not alone.” He copes with this feeling by using his notebook, which symbolizes an escape route where he can pour out his emotions.

Next, Steve becomes afraid as he is constantly feeling threatened while in prison. In one case, an inmate wanted to tattoo “monster” across his forehead. As Steve is being mentally and physically tortured, he is reminded of his failures and weaknesses as a character. It does not make him feel any better when he comes to the realization that he might have to stay there forever if they lose the trial. This makes Steve paranoid. He even daydreams about the death sentence. This shows how the jail setting evokes Steve’s paranoid emotions, as he would do anything to get out of there. Lastly, Steve is aware that he is the youngest looking and most vulnerable inmate there, making him feel scared of what the violent criminals may do to him. Along with that, not even his inmates believe his innocence. While he is wearing the orange jumpsuit, he realizes that he looks just like them. In conclusion, the setting of the prison takes a toll on Steve’s emotions and reminds him of his failures and weaknesses as a character.

“The Dumb Cheerleader”

by Lindsay Engelstein

“Blossom,” Caitlin says excitedly, “are you ready to start filming your video on why people should vote for you?”

“Of course,” I say.

I sit down in the very fancy fluffy, white chair in my bedroom and smooth out my dress.

“Ok,” I say to Caitlin, “start filming!”

Caitlin holds up her fingers to indicate the countdown before everything I say is recorded. When she signals the start, I begin.

“Hello, Coral Springs Academy! My name is Blossom Hoyt, and I’m running for Student Council President. You might recognize me from the cheer team and debate club. I am very dedicated to making this school a better place. As you know, I am helpful, kind, and full of school spirit. If you vote for me, I’ll make this an amazing year for everyone! Thank you, and remember, vote for Blossom.”

“And cut,” said Caitlin. “That was amazing! You are so going to beat Tanya Dawson.”

“Thanks, Caitlin,” I say. “Let’s start making the posters to hang around school, and the cookies we’re giving out.”

Caitlin and I spend the next several hours decorating posters and making campaign cookies. Although it takes a long time to finish, the product of all our hard work is amazing. So amazing that I can barely fall asleep that night, due to being excited for school the next day.

The next morning, I wake up, ready to get to school and start giving out the cookies. I put on black leggings, my cheerleader shirt, and new white sneakers.

When I get to school, I have exactly 45 minutes to set up and make sure people vote for me before school starts. I get my table set up and wait for Caitlin to come. When she arrives, she has a suspiciously shaped bag with her. The bag is shaped like a poster, but I brought the posters we made for my campaign, so I’m not sure what’s in her bag. However, I don’t pry.

“Ok,” I say, “are you ready to help me win?” I ask Caitlin.

“Of course,” she says. “Let’s make sure Tanya loses!”

Just as she says that, Tanya starts setting up a table not too far away from us with lollipops and sparkly pencils with the words “Vote for Tanya” printed on them.

“The nerve of her,” I say. “Why couldn’t she set up further away?”

Caitlin just shrugs and says, “Come get cookies! And remember, vote for Blossom.”

I start doing the same thing. Around 15 minutes in, I realize that Caitlin was talking a little too long to people and that her strange bag was getting smaller and smaller.

“Caitlin,” I say, “is something wrong? What are you saying to everyone?”

“Blossom,” she says innocently, “I’m just trying to get people to vote for you. Why are you asking? I’ve done nothing but help and support you in this. Just trust me.”

“Ok,” I say, still unsure. However, Caitlin is my best friend, so I let it slide.

“How are you doing over here?” says Tanya. “You idiots don’t have what it takes to become Student Council President.”

“Don’t forget,” I tell Tanya. “I’m still the cheer captain and can get you kicked off the team for being rude. So watch it. I know that we don’t like each other, but I’m not going to be mean, and neither should you.”

Everyone starts applauding.

“That’s the kind of student I want running my school!” someone shouted.

Everyone else joins in and I am smiling from ear to ear.

“Whatever,” scoffed Tanya. “You’ll never be as good as me.”

Caitlin and I go back to giving out cookies. When the bell rings to signal the start of school, we clean up. In between classes, I keep hanging posters up.

Tanya and I have several more encounters throughout the day before cheer practice. We have several arguments during cheer as well, which our coach quickly puts an end to.

The next day at school, everyone had the student council assembly to look forward to. Principal Potatohead walks over to the stage.

“Good morning, Coral Springs Academy!” she says. “It’s time to vote for your Student Council President. There are ballots outside for you to put a name on. Make sure you choose someone you know will make a difference for the school!”

Everyone starts walking out to vote. As soon as someone votes, they go right back into the auditorium so that everyone can finish. About an hour later, Principal Potatohead comes back on stage with an envelope in her hand.

“Ok,” she says, “votes are in.”

“You ready to lose, Blossom?” says Tanya.

“As if!” I say. “I’m ready for you to lose.”

“Well,” says Principal Potatohead. “It was a close one. However, our Student Council President for this year is Caitlin Asher! Congratulations Caitlin.”

“What?” Tanya and I both scream in unison.

“I thought you were my friend,” I say to Caitlin.

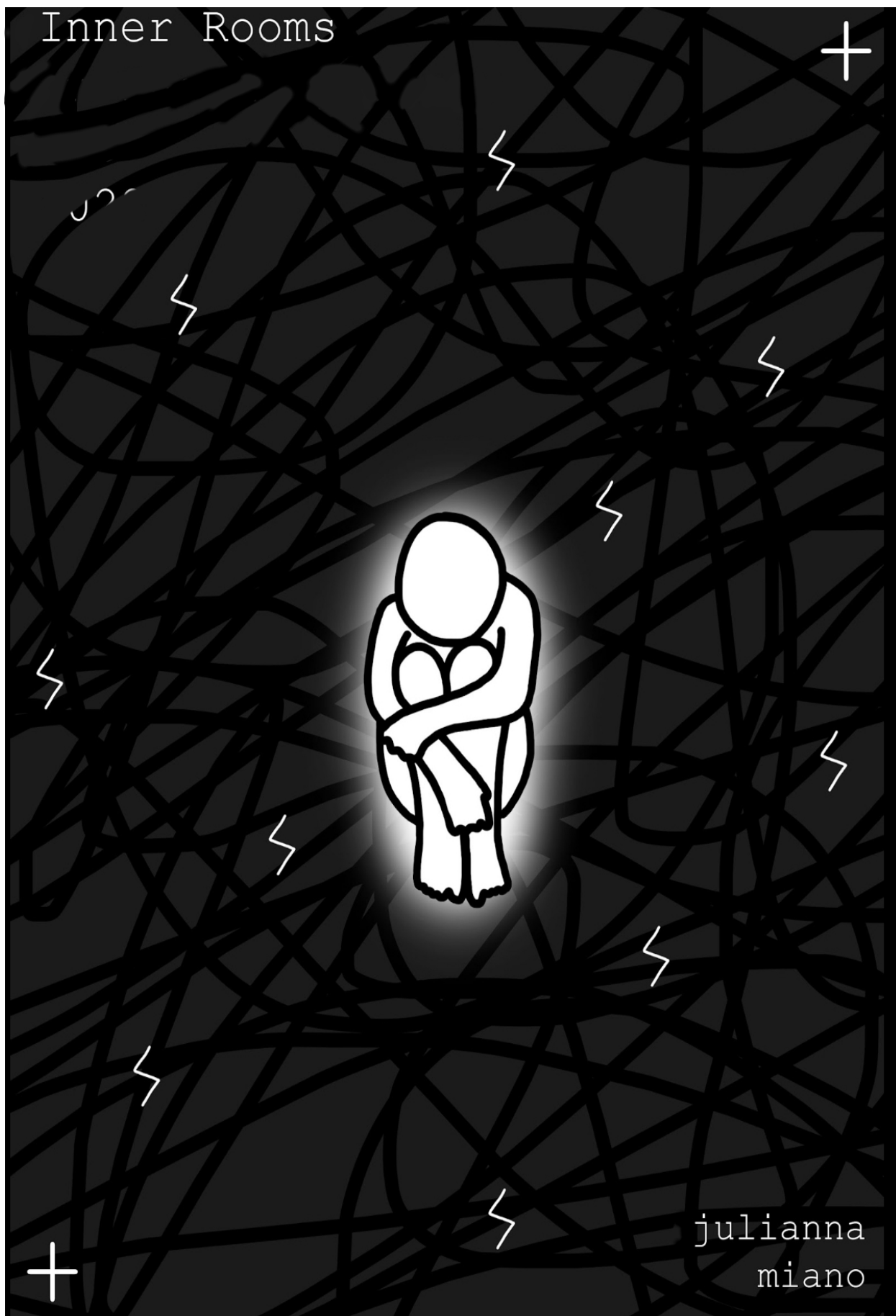
“Well, we were, but then I saw an opportunity to use you for my own benefit. Anyway, see you losers around,” Caitlin snickers.

With that, Tanya and I became the best of friends. As for Caitlin...well, she got expelled for using school fundraiser money to buy herself a new pair of shoes. After that, Tanya and I became Co-School Council Presidents, which worked out perfectly!

“Wisdom” by Ofer Adar

A never-ending futile journey
Searching through a nebulous maze of consciousness
Scouring the universe for vestiges of an elixir
A never-ending futile journey
Omnipresent yet vacant from one’s grasp
Almighty, but always to be far flung
A never-ending futile journey
Searching through a nebulous maze of consciousness

Inner Rooms



julianna
miano

“Silver and Snow”

by Megan McGirr

Background Information:

Elemental Pegasus: a pegasus that has power over one element.

Queen Pegasus: a female white pegasus that comes from Moon Herd.

King Pegasus: a black male pegasus that normally has green eyes. King Pegasus lead and have more powers than a regular pegasus. Regular pegasus normally use dark magic.

Ivy: an elemental pegasus who received earth and nature powers from Moonstar. Ivy is the most powerful pegasus when it comes to earth magic, much like other elemental pegasus are with their powers.

Night Shadow: an elemental pegasus that has one type of elemental power, plus an extra power. Night Shadow uses dark magic and his special power is shapeshifting.

East Herd: a herd in the east. This herd is very small, but is well known like the West Herd.

Forgotten Herd: a herd that was invaded and destroyed, but rebuilt years later.

Power leak: when an elemental pegasus gets a small amount of another elemental pegasus' powers.

Show pony: a tame pegasus.

Regular: a regular pegasus that has only water and nature powers.

Foal: a baby horse/pegasus.

Fillie: a young female horse/pegasus.

Colt: a young boy horse/pegasus.

Winter

The morning breeze woke me up. I yawned and stretched out my long, white wings. I looked at the sunrise, the colors mixing in the sky like a rainbow. I then looked down the hill and saw my friends. I smiled. For once things may go right. I galloped down and greeted my friends. They greeted me with soft neighs. Swan came forward, her eyes shallow. I knew something was wrong. Swan stepped back and a silver pegasus was behind her. It was well groomed and smelled like wizards. I took a cautious step back.

“This is Silver. She’s uh...my friend's friend. Silver is a show pony but wants to join a herd,” Swan said this like it pained her.

“Oh,” was all I could manage to utter.

“I can’t stay with her and you live in your herd. Maybe you could show her around,” Swan said.

“S-sure,” I replied, hesitantly.

I am going crazy! She is a show pony!

I left with Silver. Silver kept stopping and shivering. I looked back. Silver put her head high. I already knew that this was going to be a long day.

I huffed and climbed up the mountain and began to go across the snowy terrain. The tops of my hooves began to freeze. Like always, I moved on and kept going. Before I was even able to ask how Silver was, I heard a screech. I spun around and I heard another screech. I rushed over to the nearest tree and looked. Silver was not there. I lifted my head and sniffed. *Winged wolves*. I prayed to Pegasus that Silver had not gotten herself hurt, or worse...killed. I looked around the forest once again. The trees were yellow, green, and red, like normal trees. The only difference was that it was not winter or fall. I began to dart around.

“Silver! Run down the mountain!” I shouted.

A soft whimper replied, “Wolves. Winged wolves.”

I heard the voice and located it. I discovered ten giant winged wolves snarling at Silver. Silver stood there in shock. I yelped. I reared up and opened my wings, making a big whoosh noise. Two wolves backed away, leaving eight. I ran at them and kicked two, sending them into the bushes. The other wolves pounced on me, digging their sharp claws into me. My hooves began to sink into the snow underneath me. The trees around me began to become smaller as I was pulled down deeper. The wolves noticed this, so they flew out and advanced on Silver. I leaped up and spread my wings once again. I flapped them hard and yelped from the strain. The snow pulled me in, but reluctantly I got out. I looked back and saw the hole my small body had made. I reared fire which surrounded me, making the snow melt. The winged wolves watched my wings as flames began to grow on them. I ran at them; I burned four and sent the rest flying.

I shook myself and then walked away. Silver followed silently.

“Do the winged wolves attack a lot?” Silver asked quietly.

“We live near the portals for the other realms, so yeah,” I replied.

My back still stung from the winged wolves. Luckily, being a Queen Pegasus, I healed quickly.

Finally, I got off the mountain and was near the hill. Normally my herd grazed there. I opened my wings drowsily and pointed at a herd of grazing pegasus. Silver looked down from the hill. She gasped and spun around, her bronze eyes blazing like fire.

“What is this? I thought you said it would be fine, and that there was shelter and blankets and grain. Don’t even tell me that you don’t have grain!” Silver demand.

“What do you mean? I promised you nothing!” I said.

I fought the urge to fight Silver. Instead, I leaped off the cliff and glided down. Silver followed, more clumsily though. Silver ruffled her feathers and muttered. Once again, I was tempted to kick Silver. Sadly, I could not, at least not for Swan’s sake. I looked at Silver. She huffed. *I was wrong again. My day will never go right.*

I looked up and the sun was at its highest point. It felt odd, like it had just been dawn. I looked back five more hours and Silver would be gone. *Why not show her the waterfall? All the pegasus are going.*

I stopped walking towards the moving herd and turned to face Silver.

“We’re going to the waterfall. This time of day is perfect, unless you want to go in a river or lake,” I suggested.

“Whatever,” Silver replied sourly.

I galloped to my herd. Forgetting that Silver was a regular and could not run as fast as me.

I looked back as I trotted with my galloping herd. I saw Silver was panting as she tried to catch up. I broke the formation and ran towards the lead. Surprisingly, Ivy was leading the herd this time. I neighed to Ivy. Ivy looked over. She waved a wing. I got closer.

“Could you slow down? My companion is falling behind,” I asked Ivy.

Ivy nodded and slowed down; the herd did the same. I turned around and galloped over to Silver. Silver was still out of breath. Saying nothing, I ran with Silver; this time at her pace.

We caught up to the herd. Night Shadow was leading the back. I thought that it was odd that Ivy and Night Shadow were working together. I was behind a brown stallion and Silver was behind a bronze mare. *Alice!*

“Alice is that you?” I asked. The mare turned around and looked at me.

“Winter?” the mare asked.

I nodded.

“It’s great to see you. The Forgotten Herd has not been the same without you!” Alice said joyfully.

“Yeah, I really missed everyone. East Herd was boring compared to this,” Winter said.

Silver moaned. She kept galloping and groaning every time I mentioned something new. For the rest of the trip, Alice and I talked and laughed while Silver groaned.

Finally, when we got to the waterfall, even Silver was shocked. Around us were rivers and streams, and lakes were being filled by the rushing water. The herd broke up into groups; the foals played in small streams where the moms watched them. The other mares went through the waterfall and talked by the lake where all of the colts and fillies were playing. I trotted over to the waterfall and squealed with happiness. Crystal was back!

“Winter, it’s great to see you! This is my friend Snow,” Crystal said.

Snow waved her wings.

“She is tame and wild; she visits sometimes,” Crystal added.

I nodded and looked back at Silver, who was staring at Snow like they might have something in common. *Maybe Snow can make Silver nice.*

“Why don’t Snow and Silver go talk to each other? They have a lot in common. Then Crystal and I can talk about other things,” I suggested.

Silver

I shrugged and left with Snow. I felt like a foal. I looked at Snow. *Snow smells like a wizard. Maybe we could get along.*

“Nice to meet you,” Snow said softly. She preened her feathers while she waited for me to respond.

“Nice to meet you, too! Do you have an owner? Also, how do the other pegasus like you? They don’t like me at all,” I admitted.

“Oh, uh, I do have an owner...and, uh, I just try to fit in and try to be kind and likable. Also being yourself helps,” Snow responded.

I looked around, searching for something to do. I wanted her to bond with someone like me, instead of being alone and hated. I looked at the waterfall.

Winter and Crystal were there. The lake was noisy and filled with colts and fillies. The river had some foals that were practicing swimming, and the other foals hogged the small streams. *A flight maybe?*

“Let’s go fly. It’ll be fun,” I said.

Snow nodded. I leaped up and spread my silver wings. Snow did the same as we flew up. Snow zipped over to the mountain. I followed. We landed at the edge of the huge mountain. I looked down and backed away. Snow snickered.

“It’s fine. Trust me, I was also scared at first; but all you have to remember is that you can fly. So it’s safe,” Snow said softly.

I sighed as I walked to the cliff and looked down. Some pegasus gathered and laughed, while other pegasus were fighting. *It’s beautiful!* Two pegasus flew past me.

“Sorry!” they yelled, as I looked at them.

“Snow? Could I ask you something?” Silver asked.

“Yeah sure,” Snow answered.

“How are you so nice, and why does everyone like you?” I asked.

“Well, like I said before, I try to fit in; but I also just act like myself. Anyway, why do you ask if you’re very nice?” Snow replied.

“I have to go! I’ll be back. I really have to tell Winter that I’ve been a horrible pegasus!” I said quickly.

I jumped off the cliff and looked around. I saw Winter with a King Pegasus. I dived. *I’ve been a jerk! Why did I do that?*

Finally, my hooves reached the ground. I pulled in my wings and landed.

Winter

I groaned when I saw Silver.

“Winter, I am so sorry. Please forgive me! I’ve been a jerk and really bossy. I never wanted to come here. My friend talked me into it, but now I want to stay....if you will forgive me,” Silver begged.

I gasped in shock. *Some pegasus can change, I guess.*

I sighed. “I haven’t been the greatest either; and I do forgive you,” I replied.

Silver hugged me; our wings interlocked.

Maybe I was wrong. Today did go right.

“Bells, Bonnie, and Boxball”

by Lila Halpert

Bonnie entered her brand new school. It was a sunny day in the middle of April. Despite the month, it was her first day at T.W. Ace Middle School. She'd just moved to a new school after she had been expelled from her last one a month prior. Bonnie grinned as she remembered the day her mom had gotten the news.

“Bonnie!” she had screeched. “I thought you would stop doing this!”

Bonnie had cackled. She couldn't help who she was.

“It's fun, Mom. Spinning up trouble. Getting expelled was a necessary cost!” she confessed.

Her mom had not been amused, but Bonnie didn't care. This was her seventh time being expelled in six years. She had been causing mischief since she could count to five.

Now, there was a whole new school to conquer. As she walked to the main office to collect her schedule, Bonnie could practically *see* the sparkles on perfect, kind, shiny Ace Middle. She smirked. All that would change as soon as she got her hands on this place.

* * *

Ring! Ring! Ring! The recess rang for lunch. Halie flew out of her seat to the cafeteria. Which, after being the first one in line to get her lunch, she promptly exited. Halie ran down the hallway and out the door to the recess area. Once outside, she gobbled up her lunch in about two seconds flat. Recess was Halie's favorite subject because she could be outside in the fresh air. Whereas, for the rest of the day, she had to sit inside a stuffy classroom. Moments later, her friend Katherine also walked outside into the warm April weather. Katherine had transferred to Ace Middle a few months ago. She'd never told Halie exactly why she'd transferred, but Halie didn't care why in the first place.

Since they were the only ones outside at the moment, they could do anything they wanted.

“So, what should we do first?” Katherine asked Halie. “Basketball, soccer, or tag?”

Halie pondered this for a moment before responding, “Let’s play soccer, because once everyone else finishes their lunch, they’re going to come out in the thousands. It’ll be really busy on the field then. So we should play now, when there’s no one else out here.”

“Good plan,” Katherine agreed.

Together, they ran off to the soccer field, happy as could be. Halie never suspected that by the end of this short recess period, instead of Katherine being her best friend, she’d be her worst enemy.

But before we get into that, we have more people to discuss.

* * *

When Peter got his lunch, he instinctively went to his favorite spot in the cafeteria: right by the window, two seats down from the vending machines. Throughout many trials and studies, he’d determined that this was the best spot for some lunchtime studying. Once at this desk, Peter set down his tray with a slightly squashed plastic-wrapped bagel on it and propped up his iPad. He was just about to open Google Classroom to see his assignments when someone behind him shouted, “Boo!”

Peter screamed, looking behind him. It was his best friend, Felix. Though they shared some similarities, Peter and Felix were also very different. For example, whenever Felix had something to say, he always tried to see how much he could spook you before telling you.

“Got you!” Felix said playfully.

Peter grumbled, “What is it this time?”

“Oh,” Felix said, suddenly joyless, “you know that new kid, Bonnie, who just came to Ace Middle today?”

“Um . . . no,” Peter told his friend.

Felix knew everything about everyone. His parents loved to stay on top of things. So anytime something happened at school, their son was always the first to know about it. His sister, Nora (who was in their grade despite being a few months younger than Felix) knew everything about all of their classmates, as well. So between his parents and his sister, Felix was one big well of information.

“Well,” Felix said, answering Peter, “it turns out that the reason she’s

coming in the middle of April is because she got expelled from her last school! And the one before that! And the one before that, and the —”

“So?” Peter grunted, still upset about being interrupted from his potential study session.

“So, school just got ten times more interesting,” Felix answered.

Just then, Peter noticed a girl he’d never seen before walking towards them.

“Oh, and that’s her now,” Felix said matter-of-factly. “And I do not want to interact with an expellee. See you later, Peter!” Felix shouted, and then he ran away as fast as his legs would carry him.

Peter cracked his knuckles as the new girl — Bonnie, apparently — drew closer. He would just have to deal with the expelled student himself.

* * *

At first, Bonnie was pretty hopeless in her mission to find ways to make mischief. No one at Ace Middle had any opportunities for that kind of trouble. But then, as Bonnie was trying to find a seat to eat her lunch, she saw them: two friends. And where there are friends, there’s a chance for enemies. These particular friends — she thought that their names were Peter and Felix — seemed to also really trust each other. This meant that if Bonnie got involved, it would make things even more chaotic.

Here was the plan. Step One: Tell Peter that Felix said something mean about him. Step Two: Tell Felix that Peter said something mean about him. That was it. But from Bonnie’s past experiences, it only took two people to plunge a school into absolute chaos. And besides, Bonnie already had her ally.

(Oh, you haven’t figured out who it is yet? Well, I won’t tell you. It’ll make this story more interesting.)

Bonnie’s ally had gone to every school with her to stir up some trouble. They always left a few months earlier than her, though, when it was getting good, to avert suspicion. And right this instant, Bonnie’s ally was inside Ace Middle, actively causing trouble. In fact, they had been the one to come up with the idea of starting chaos with friends, long ago, when they were just starting to work together.

(Anyway, let’s get back to the cafeteria.)

Bonnie walked over to Peter, who was standing as still as a statue, petrified with fear.

“Peter,” she said, putting on a serious tone, “earlier today, I heard Felix say that he doesn’t want to be friends with you anymore. Something about how you’re always studying on your iPad and getting scared too easily.”

Bonnie was basing this off of the fact that Google Classroom was open on his iPad, and she’d seen him jump a mile high when Felix surprised him.

“Felix?” Peter asked, unfreezing. “He would never say that. He’s never even talked to you. Has he?”

“When I was walking to my second period class, I heard him tell his sister in the hallway.”

She had no idea if Felix had a sister. She was really pressing her luck here.

“Felix told Nora that he doesn’t want to be friends?” Peter drooped down into his chair. “This...makes me sad.”

Bonnie smirked, “Well, I just thought you should know. Bye.”

She then walked away to find Felix and tell him that Peter thought he was too scary and didn’t appreciate studying.

* * *

Just as Halie had predicted earlier, the entire student body of Ace Middle poured out of the double doors leading from the cafeteria.

“Here they all come,” she told Katherine, stopping the soccer ball with the side of her foot, and leaving it on the field’s grass for whomever decided to play next. “Let’s head over to the blacktop.”

At recess, Halie and Katherine always played boxball with two of their classmates, Peter and Felix. The girls walked off the soccer field to their usual court, and soon their friends turned up. But today, something was off. Normally, Peter and Felix were the best of friends, but now they had their arms crossed and were avoiding looking at each other.

“Are you okay?” Halie asked.

In unison, both boys yelled, “No!”

“Why?” Halie said, taken aback by their outburst.

Peter went first. “Because Felix told Nora that I study too much, and he doesn’t want to be my friend anymore.”

“What?” Felix shouted. “You’re the one who said that I’m too scary.”

“Huh?” Peter asked. “Who told you that?”

“I did,” came a voice from off to the side.

The three kids turned to look at who it was. To Halie’s extreme bewilderment, it was...Katherine.

“All right, very funny,” Peter said sarcastically. “But it wasn’t you. It was that expelled girl, Bonnie.”

“I was also expelled,” Katherine informed everyone. “I’ve been working with Bonnie all along, to spread mischief.”

“What? Katherine?” Halie asked, disbelief in her voice. “Is that true?”

“Absolutely,” Katherine said, grinning evilly. “I’m Bonnie’s secret ally.”

(Do you understand now, reader?)

“And ‘Katherine’ isn’t even my real name. It’s actually Gertrude.”

“Gertrude?” the three kids echoed.

“Gertrude!” called Bonnie’s voice.

Seeming to notice Halie, Peter, and Felix as she walked over to Katherine/Gertrude, she immediately changed to Nice Bonnie. Her voice got higher and sounded fake, and she was all smiles.

“I mean, Katherine! Heh heh. That is your name, right? ‘Cause we’ve obviously never met before. Heh,” Bonnie chuckled.

“Um, yes,” Katherine/Gertrude said slowly, in a very unconvincing voice. “I’ve never seen you ever.”

The three good kids sighed. Bonnie and Gertrude were extremely terrible actresses.

“Sorry for getting upset,” Felix said, turning to Peter. “I guess it was a little strange that a new kid told us about...well, us. I can’t believe I fell for it. You’re a great friend. I should never have listened to Bonnie.”

“Yeah, I overreacted, too. I’ll never ditch you again for something some random person says,” Peter replied.

He and Felix high-fived and fist-bumped, smiling. Halie was happy her classmates had made up, but had her own problem to deal with.

“Bonnie,” she growled. “Gertrude. You are nothing but troublemakers.”

The expellees tried to sneak away when Peter and Felix were apologizing to each other, but turned back when they heard their names.

“And Ace Middle does not accept troublemakers,” Halie continued.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” Bonnie asked, smiling smugly, sure she would get away scot-free.

“This,” Halie answered.

She clasped one hand around Bonnie’s arm and another around Gertrude’s. She dragged them back into the school cafeteria, where she found the principal of the school. Halie explained the situation in great detail. Bonnie and Gertrude gulped, because, as everyone knows, you don’t mess with the principal.

* * *

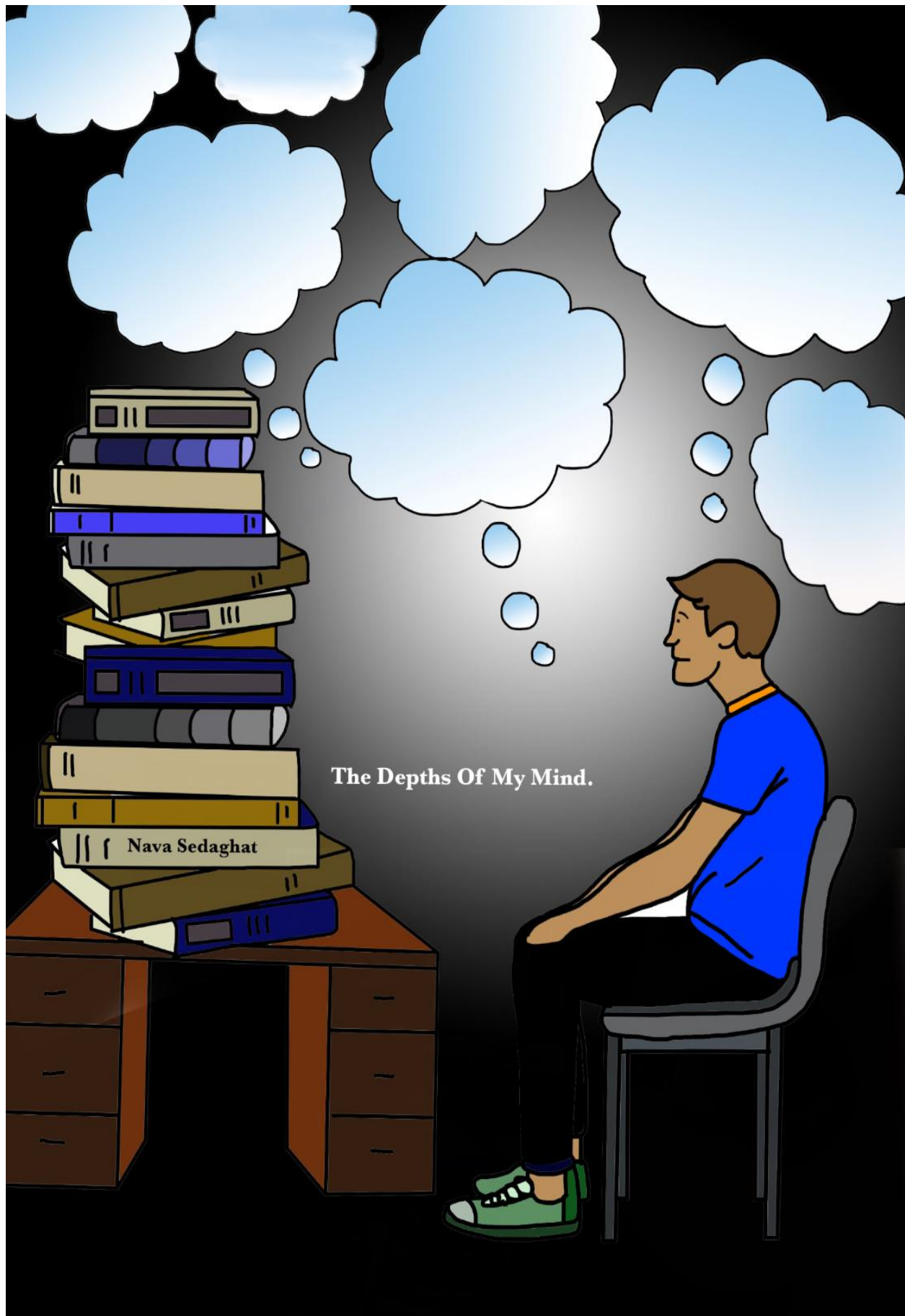
One week later, Bonnie and Gertrude were expelled, yet again. Ace Middle returned to some state of normalness. After all, the most exciting thing that happened there now was Peter, Felix, and Halie, who were all even better friends now, losing the ball during one particularly heated match of recess boxball.

Bonnie and Gertrude’s rein of terror had finally come to an end.

“The Blow of the Wind”

by Daniil Isarevich

Born, made to last, in the oceans, or in the plain’s land past
Gaining strength, and shaking everything around
Traveling the word, while barely making a sound
From one place to another, out it goes
But falls eventually, taking a different form
Like a foul beast, goes back to where it belongs



“Adventures of Annabelle the Hero”

by Talya Bagim

“Yes!” I shout excitedly. “I got picked to be a hero!”

“That’s great Anabelle,” my mother exclaimed with a smile, as she slicked back her golden hair that was the same color as mine. “The message says here that you’ll depart tomorrow though,” she added as she looked at me sadly for a moment, but then returned to her normal smile.

It looked a little forced, as I could see her hands trembling ever so slightly.

“Don’t worry mom, I promise I’ll defeat the monsters so our kingdom can be at peace,” I announce with some reluctance.

Certain people are selected to be heroes by the kingdom. They possess extraordinary abilities that can defeat monsters. The royal advisor apparently chooses them. I’m scared, but I need to make sure to defeat all of the monsters. Especially the ruler of monsters, who creates the strange creatures.

“Yes, I have to do it, for everyone’s safety,” I mumble to myself.

“Make sure to bring your sword,” my sister mentions, worriedly.

“Thanks!” I say with a grin, as I hoist the sheathed sword onto my right shoulder and walk to my room.

* * *

I wake up, opening my eyes wide. *It’s time.*

Quickly tying the piece of green fabric on my arm that I use for good luck and slamming the front door open out of pure excitement, I forget to tell my family goodbye.

“Whatever. I’ll speak to them once I finish my journey,” I pronounce with a grin, as I trudge along the long grass and open land.

My cottage is isolated from the rest of the kingdom. Our family likes to be around nature.

With no hesitation, I take out the bag I packed the day prior and rummage through it to find my map.

“I’m sure the King is expecting me to start my journey,” I mention as I follow the map to the first location; the Nest of Goblins.

These monsters are supposed to be easy to defeat and are apparently good to practice beating before a big fight.

“Here we go,” I mutter as I drag my large silver sword with the kingdom’s crest on it along the brown dirt.

Sure enough, these monsters look easy enough to beat. They have wooden clubs and tiger skin robes, along with pale blue skin. The fact that they have no face is unsettling, but I try to bear with it as I swing my sword. They are more skilled than expected though, maybe it’s because I’m inexperienced. As I’m lost in thought though, I hear a disgusting noise similar to a tomato splatter. The color was the same, too. My eyes widen as I slowly look downwards to see a similar piece of flesh on the ground. The green fabric was ripped and lay still at the ground along with the detached arm, now tinted with a mix of beige and dark purple at the edges where the veins were visible in a rotten gray color. There are crusty red splotches at the part which was brutally detached by what should’ve been something easy to defeat.

While I stay in trance with my eyes widened and body still, another ogre bashes my leg brutally as I let out a blood curdling scream. I could hear my bones cracking when the world around me went into a blur and I reflected upon myself.

Was it my impulsiveness? I question while the blood flows down my forehead. Was it because I forgot to say goodbye? I ask within my mind, now occupied with millions of thoughts. They all stop abruptly though, as I get one last glimpse of the faceless monster. No, it’s not a monster; it’s a *demon*. That was my final thought as I faded into darkness.

“Dang it, I died on the first stage again,” announced a girl with dark brown hair and pitch black eyes, as she slammed her video game controller onto the couch. “Maybe I should just buy a new game,” she said in an annoyed tone, as she turned the console off and glared at the television screen.

You died to the faceless ogres. Please try again.

“If You Give a Boy a Genie”

by Noah Nerayoff

One day, in a land far away, a boy named William found a lamp in an old antique store.

“Mom said we needed fancier things. This seems cool,” William said, as he bought the lamp. Little did he know when he went home and rubbed it to get some dust off, a genie would appear! William was very surprised, and so was the genie.

“Thanks for letting me out of there. It got boring and cold,” the genie said.

William was shocked but already ready with wishes. William wished that he could always surf whenever he wanted! The genie was shocked and confused.

“How would I do tha...”

William interrupted him, saying, “I don’t care, just do it. I’m bored!”

The genie accepted the wish, as he had no choice to do otherwise. It was winter, but when William went outside he saw massive waves from the once frozen pond charging at him. It was a tsunami!

“Woah! It’s heading right towards us. Stop it, magic genie!” William screamed, as the waves grew closer.

“I can’t. You must wish it away,” said the genie.

“But, I haven’t gotten a million dollars, or never having to do homework again,” William announced.

“Well then, this city will drown,” announced the genie. “You must choose if you want to save your town, or have your personal wishes granted.”

As the genie said that, a wave nearly hit the house, and William said, “I wish this storm to be stopped!”

The wave vanished before his eyes. His mother walked in and William was forced to explain the scene.

William said, “Now it’s my time to wish for a million dollars!”

“No you won’t!” said his mother, as she grabbed his ear. “You’re gonna wish this genie out of his magic bottle and say sorry for all of this ruckus!” his mother said, pinching his ear tighter.

“Ow, ow, ow! Ugh, fine. I’m sorry, and I wish you out of your lamp,” the boy said, as the genie became human.

“Finally, I’m free of this lamp,” the genie said, as he hugged William.

And they all lived happily ever after.



“Oops, That's Awkward: Part 2”

by Sophia Li

When I woke up, I was in an unfamiliar place, a big room...

I slowly lifted my head, grumbling to myself. I felt a sore pain in my butt. As I slowly got my bearings, I heard voices having a muffled conversation. *Wait, what am I doing here? The last thing I remember is the little girl with pigtails.* I was disoriented. Slowly, the memories come rushing back. I remember the research room, Skylar, and her being killed. A flood of emotions resurface as I remember that Skylar was the whole reason that I was even alive now, even though I now probably have a death sentence. *I have to escape this place. They're crazy. I wanna live.*

I listened harder, intently listening to the voices that were arguing rapidly.

“...don't know why we can't just use Skylar. She's obviously healthier...” I heard one voice say.

She sounded familiar. I think her name was Selena? *Oh! Serena!*

“You know that's against the rules. She needs to be exterminated. If my associates hear I've kept a mother alive even just for a few hours, I'll be fired. They'll think I'm defying the government. And we can't use her baby either. She won't hatch for another three weeks. Use the other one. What's his name, Albert?” an unfamiliar voice says.

“Yes, boss. But I still don't see why it matters if we use the one with the most aptitude,” Serena replies.

Another familiar voice, I think Lia, chimes in, “It's not like we get to use them. The high aptitude ones always get made for the government.”

I feel mildly insulted that I'm basically hearing that I don't have enough aptitude and that I was just a backup plan. I tune out their conversation to preserve my ego, and look around the room. It's large, and very intimidating. It reminds me of a doctor's office, except those don't exist anymore either. Nobody gets sick anymore. The lights are so bright that they make me squint, and I see a heap of green. *Wait a minute. It's moving. Is it alive?* I squint harder and make out wings. *I think it's a bird just like me! Hey! Maybe we can escape this place together!*

I feel a sense of hopefulness and take a running start towards my new sidekick. I see them look up at me, and I lift my wing to wave all while gaining

speed. *BAM!* I hit a glass barrier loudly. I topple over and feel my old foot injury start hurting again. *How did that wall get there? Was it always there?*

I groan internally. My incident was loud enough to ruin my chances of escape. And sure enough, I hear the conversation stop and the sound of footsteps get closer. Four people enter the room, three familiar, and one new.

“Look at him. Just woken up and already hurting himself. He really is hopeless,” Lia says in a bored voice.

“Honestly, as long as they’re healthy, I think they’ll work as the enrichments for food.”

At first I thought that my head was still recovering from the bang on the glass wall. *Is that their plan? To use me for food? Huh? Well, now more than ever I must escape!*

The women turn their attention to the green bird and so do I.

“What’s this one doing? It doesn’t look healthy enough to serve as an enrichment. Why’s it in the food labs?” Serena asks.

The lady I think is the boss says, “That’s Ginny. She tried to escape but we caught her. We didn’t have anywhere to put her on such short notice, so we just stuffed her here since they both need to be exterminated anyway.”

At this, I panic. I still don’t completely understand what’s going on, but I know that I’m going to get exterminated. And slowly, I realize that I’ve never wondered how we got enriched food. The Preserves don’t teach you much about history, but even I know that we used to have to scavenge for our own wild food. People got sick and weak and died in other ways besides old age.

Oh my God, are they going to kill me and cut me up and boil me to eat? Oh my gosh, they’re probably going to stuff me like a turkey and season me with Sriracha Sauce and then they’re going to serve me on a silver platter with a side of cornbread. Oh, that sounds good...except that it’s me getting eaten!

Slowly, the rational bird in me calms me down. *They don’t eat birds. You’d see if people ate birds. They eat normal food, like soup and noodles and peppers and fruits and veggies. I eat pellets. I’m not eating animals either. I mean, people ate animals back then, but that’s why we have so few of them now. So we don’t do that anymore. Right?*

My wondering comes to a stop as the glass wall surrounding me slowly lowers. I’m thrilled by this development, as now I’ll for sure be able to escape! However, this hopefulness slowly dies as the researchers approach me. Roughly,

the unfamiliar researcher grabs me. She takes a rough hold on my neck, and Michelle and Lia approach me. They pluck feathers from my chest area, and I yowl in pain.

Serena instructs from somewhere distant, “Take the ones on the lower belly. They provide the most preventives.”

Lia grumbles, “It’s my first time doing this. Whaddya want?”

“I’m not criticizing you. I’m just explaining. It’s a complicated process making these feathers edible and it’s even harder to make sure they properly prevent disease and such. I think you’d rather be scolded by me than lose your privileges for doing it wrong. You have an important job, and you should treat it like such.”

Lia rolls her eyes but doesn’t argue. I screech in pain as I feel a strong tugging sensation on my lower belly. I look down at it and feel my eyes get watery as I see a pink, bald spot where there were once beautiful white feathers. *At the very least, I’d rather be bald than be dead and eaten. However, I’d prefer to be free and feathered rather than bald.*

Apparently, Lia had taken enough feathers as I was dropped carelessly and the researchers all moved together to start operating machines that looked like they belonged in a cheesecake factory. I watched open-beaked as the feathers got crushed, then moved along into a device that hums. I am so entranced that I forget what I’m supposed to be doing: escaping! I slowly creep towards the exit, until I realize that I can’t quite open a door yet- and even if I did, I would probably get lost as I did not know my way around the “food labs.”

I scan around the room, searching for a possible escape route. I spot an air vent that looks like I could possibly squeeze through it. The only problem: It’s halfway across the room and there are four scary looking researchers who could probably stomp on me with ease. Not to mention the terrifying weapons they have like that sharp needle the other bird Ginny was a victim of. Just in time, Ginny starts stirring and becoming fully conscious. She promptly topples over and hits the floor with a dull thud. Serena, Lia, and Michelle all glance over unconcerned, and continue operating the food lab mechanisms. The “boss” walks over to Ginny and inspects her. I know that they’ll return their attention to me shortly, but this may be the best opportunity I’ll ever get. I creep towards the edge of the table I’m on, and take off. As I do, I know there’s no way I can escape in secrecy. My

wings flap furiously, making a loud sound. Still, I manage to get pretty close to the air vent before I am discovered.

“Hey!” Lia furiously screams.

She seizes the thing closest to her, which I see out of my peripheral vision whilst flapping for my life. It is a bag of chocolates.

“No! My chocolates!” Michelle yells, and then-

Michelle is leaping for her chocolates-

And Lia is pulling Michelle back-

Then the boss has dropped Ginny again-

And then Lia, wait no, Serena is grabbing me-

And there’s a mess of hands and I’m just screaming and trying to fly towards the air vent-

A hand grabs my head, but I furiously twist around and bite it. I fly higher, towards the air vent, sensing my victory. The researchers sense my victory too, as Lia flings the thing closest to her, which happens to be Michelle. Michelle squeals in surprise and so do I as I’m getting weaker, and trying to fly through the air vent, but Michelle is flying at me too fast. All of a sudden, I feel all the air leave me as a heavy mass slams into me. Michelle is flailing and trying to grab me, but her smash into me gave me the momentum I needed and I got thrust into the air vent. I’m going far too fast to control myself, and I get my head bonked. Then my wings are scraped, and it’s all dark. Suddenly, the air vent spits me out onto a barren field with nothing but dead grass.

I lie in a heap, my chest heaving from all that excitement. I think about Ginny and Skylar sadly. I can still hear the inside of the food labs, hearing Michelle groaning and cursing at Lia, and Serena frantically thinking of a way to get me.

“There has to be a shortcut out. The closest entrance is on the opposite side of the air vent. The stupid bird will be far gone before that! Well, at least we got the feathers. We’ve got the enrichments. If we make some excuse why the government can’t see the bird, or we can say he died... Yes, let’s say he died.”

I feel offended, but I can already picture in my head how good this would be for the storyline of a movie. I’m thinking of the headline, “Handsome Bird Pronounced Dead, but Makes Heroic Return.” I slowly get up, stepping tentatively. Nobody comes running at me or tries to kill me, which is the first time in a while. I hear the boss explaining how they can’t just let me escape, because I

could be seen by the government and she'd be fired. *Is everything she does just so she doesn't get fired?* I resist the urge to roll my eyes. *Either way, I've gotta keep moving. There doesn't seem to be any food or water for miles around. If I wanna survive, I've gotta find a permanent place to live.* I feel a sudden wave of despair and feel lost. *Did I really make the right decision? What if I die out here? I barely know how to fly, much less find food for myself.* I ruffle my feathers, shaking the bad thoughts out of my head. *Now I have the chance for an adventure, something to be excited about. Any life is better than the life I lived in a small tube all day. I've already had so many adventures! I've managed to escape all by myself out of that hellhole!* I pause for a moment. *Well, technically, Ginny helped me.*

And then the despair comes back all over again. I let Skylar sacrifice herself for me, and now Ginny. What type of person, I mean bird, does this make me? I set my jaw determined- my beak, I mean. *I won't let another innocent life go!* And before I can chicken out, or maybe bird out- I hurl myself through the air vent again. This time, it's harder to get through since it's an uphill climb and I don't have my momentum. I frantically run my little claws against the slippery surface of the air vent, before sliding down again and falling to the ground with a thump. Who knows if Ginny is still alive, or even still in that room!

I look around, trying to think of a solution. I see the next building and slowly formulate a plan. *Maybe, if I fly from that building, I'll build up enough momentum to make it through the vent.* I soar towards the building, not really thinking my plan through. I landed on the ledge of the building, not too far from the lab where I was. It's about twelve wingspans away, perfect for me to build up some momentum. I fly towards it as fast as I can, and see the white wall with the vent on it getting closer and closer. I dip downwards at the last moment, soaring upwards headfirst. I smack my head on the top of the vent, then tumble out and land on a heap of green feathers.

Ow! It seems like all I'm doing is getting myself hurt these days. Thank goodness my fall was cushioned by- wait... I look down dreadfully. I'm right on top of Ginny! I scramble off of her and stare, wide-eyed. She isn't moving! I desperately wave my wings and dance around her, as if that would wake her up.

"Come on, Ginny! I'm here to rescue you!" I yell in her face.

She doesn't respond. I hear footsteps in the distance, and now I'm getting kind of hysterical. I look around frantically and spot the spilled chocolates on the

ground. I know for sure that these would wake me up if I was out, and I'm desperate enough to try it. I grab one with my foot, and wave it near her face. I'm practically drooling from the smell myself. *How is she not awake yet?* I open up her beak, stuffing the chocolate into her mouth. Her chest heaves a few times, and I start getting excited. It worked! Then, she opens her eyes.

"Hey! I'm here to rescue you! Let's go!" I chirp excitedly.

She tries to make something out, but her eyes start bulging. She starts gasping and making sputtering noises, and I immediately notice something has gone wrong.

I realize that she is choking on the chocolate! I frantically try to roll her over and open her beak, but her eyes are bulging more and then she becomes still and all life leaves her eyes.

I gasp softly.

Oops, that's awkward.

"Winter"

by Ellen Barbu

A nearby squirrel chirps its greetings, almost as if having a conversation
The wind wafts the scent of pine through the air
Fallen leaves have long dried up and shriveled
The air turned cold, but soon it will be even colder
Lights are on and decorations are set
There is hope for the first snowfall
Winter is here



cloud by Talia Davaran

“A Tale of Two Planes”

by Michelle Cheng

For as long as she could remember, Sophia has loved to watch pilots on tv. She’s seen how majestic the planes are, how the helicopters seemingly float, and how the jets soar through the sky. She’s also seen how the pilots somehow effortlessly control these big chunks of metal like it’s their second nature. Ever since her eyes laid on that first cartoon about planes, she knew that she’d one day become a pilot. She always imagined flying high in the sky, feeling free.

At three years old, she’d play pretend and imagine sitting in the cockpit of an aircraft. *Vrrrooommm!* The engine goes. The rush of adrenaline, the loud rumbling of the engine. It felt exhilarating. She’d have a headset and a radio, and sometimes, only sometimes, would she call, “Mayday! Mayday!” But, it rarely happened, since you know, she was a great pilot.

At the age of four, Sophia received her very own toy plane. It was her first one, and she took great care of it, considering the fact that she took it everywhere. You’d always find it with her, whether it was in the bathroom, at the dining table, in bed at night, etc. It just seemed like it was glued to her hand. The plane even had a name. Sophia named it Lia. One day, Sophia’s older sister, Lindsay, started to play with the plane.

“Mommy! Mommy! Lindsay stole Lia!” Sophia bawled.

“It’s fine Soph,” Serena, her mother, consoled her. “You can share Lia for a little bit.

“No!” Sophia screeched, “Lia is mine!”

“I wanna play with it,” Lindsay argues.

“NO! SHE’S MINE!” Sophia repeats.

With this, Sophia tries to snatch Lia out of Lindsay’s hands, but Lindsay just has too strong of a grip. After some more tugging, Lia flies out of Lindsay’s hands and crashes onto the marble tiled floor. *THUD!* The plane crashes into bits, pieces scattering everywhere.

“MOMMY! LIA BROKE!” she sniffles.

“It’s fine Sophia. Shh...shh...it’s okay. We can get you another one. Shush, it’s okay, baby,” Serena solaces.

Sophia quiets down, “But mommy, I don’t want another Lia. I only want her. She’s my best friend. We’ve been on so many adventures together.”

“Well sometimes in life, we have to make new friends,” responds Serena.

Sophia just waddles away, with a sad expression, saying nothing. Fast forward six years, Sophia receives a huge present for her 10th birthday, on June 20th. Her parents were letting her go to a sleepaway aviation camp that lasted the whole summer! At the camp, she’d really be able to learn about planes, how the engine works, etc. She might even be able to sit in the cockpit and help another pilot fly a helicopter and/or plane.

When she heard the news, she could barely contain her excitement! She immediately hugged and thanked both her parents and went off to pack her suitcases. July 1st was the first day of camp. Sophia was impatient; she eagerly counted and crossed off the days. Finally, the ever so-awaited July 1st rolled along. Sophia couldn’t wait! On the car ride there, she kept smiling to herself. *This is it! Once I get there, I’ll be one step closer to becoming a pilot! I can’t wait!*

As her car rolls on the sandy floor with a halt, Sophia opens her door and practically bounces out. She quickly says goodbye to her family and lugs out her bags. She looks around and then spots it. The plane. *Oh my God! That’s a real plane! Oh my God! Oh my God! I’m freaking out right now!*

Now obviously stunned, Sophia tries to come back to reality and walks towards the group of people.

“Hi, I’m Sophia! This is the Aviator Camp right?”

“Yup! You’re in the right place. Let me just look through my list of names to see which bunk you’re in,” the woman pauses. “Ah, there. You’re Sophia W. right? Bunk #3. I’m your counselor, Amy!”

“Thanks, and it’s nice to meet you Amy!”

Sophia trots off towards the cabin and unpacks all of her items. After about an hour, everyone is situated and a loud bell rings.

Amy yells, “Everyone by the shed!”

All of the campers head to the shed, which is apparently a massive warehouse for planes.

“Listen up,” Ben, another counselor announces, “we are now starting our first activity. Pick a plane and stand by it. No more than ten people on a plane. We have eight planes, so there’s more than enough!”

Sophia ponders her choice. All of the planes look really cool. As she walks by them, she sees one that really strikes her eye. It’s a small, sleek, red plane. It

looks just like Lia, the toy she used to have. She immediately walks over to that one.

“Now that all of you have chosen a plane, you are going to work with the people in your group and figure out what each button in the control center does. Don’t worry, there’s no fuel in these, so nothing will happen! Use this time to learn. But most importantly, get to know each other and have fun!”

For the next few days, Sophia participated in activities just like this one, where she’d learn and bond with the other campers. After the first week, she was finally going to get to sit in one and help fly it. She was so excited. She even got to wear her very own pair of noise-canceling headphones. She would be flying with Joanne, an instructor at the camp.

“Ready?” Joanne asks.

Sophia eagerly nods.

“Alright. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, and we’re off!”

Sophia looks out the window, amazed for a few seconds. She keeps going higher, and higher, and higher. Then suddenly, she gets a major headache and starts to feel nauseous. Her head spins and she doesn’t feel too good.

“I don’t feel so good,” she moans to Joanne.

“Okay. Let’s get you back down to the nurse, yeah?”

“Yes, please,” Sophia anxiously nods.

As they land, Sophia’s stomach starts to feel queasy. She feels like her lunch from thirty minutes ago is trying to worm its way up and out of her throat. Finally, Sophia makes it back to solid ground and stumbles to the nurse.

“What happened, Sweetie?” asks Nurse Sally.

“I was just on the plane and I don’t feel too good,” Sophia responds.

“Why don’t you just lay down for a few minutes? Maybe you’ll feel better.”

“Okay.”

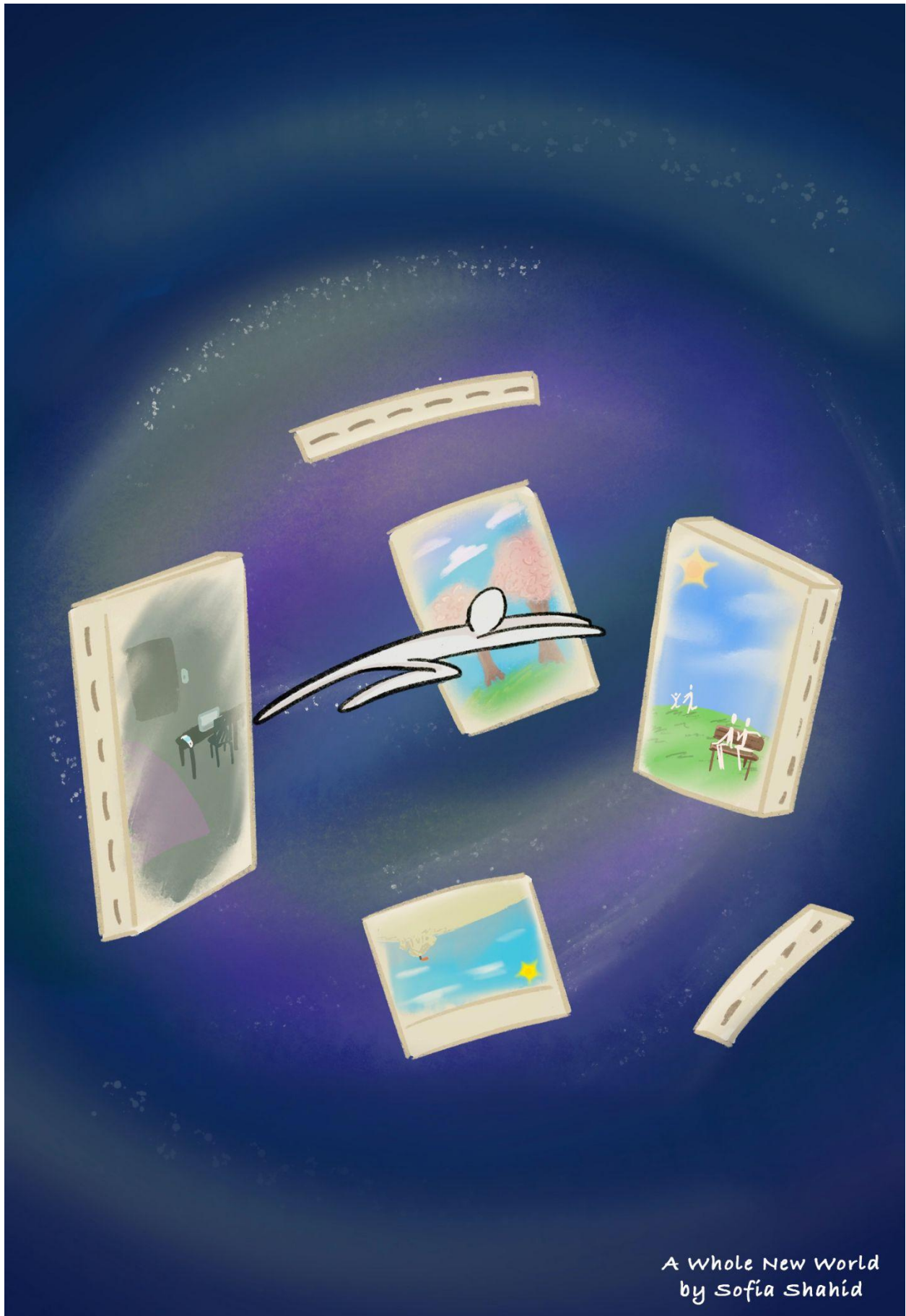
Why do I feel like this? Is it because my stomach wasn’t rested and my food isn’t digested yet? Tomorrow, I’ll make sure to rest for at least an hour before flying.

The very next day, the same thing happens. The following day, it happens again. The nurse finally offers her opinion.

“Maybe you have airsickness. Most other people with the same symptoms usually have airsickness.”

No, no, no, no, no, no. This can't be happening right now. Seriously? What's wrong with me? If I keep getting sick, does it mean that I can't become a pilot? Sophia sighs, desperately, head in her hands, thinking that this couldn't be true. Then how can I be a pilot? What happens now?

For the rest of the week, Sophia is miserable. When she goes home, she is officially diagnosed with airsickness. Although she is crushed, she is now considering becoming an aviation engineer. In the end, Sophia won't let this ruin her love for planes.



A Whole New World
by Sofia Shahid



A STORMY NIGHT
BY ANGELIKA JIANG