

*Ladies and Gentlemen...
It's Showtime!*

*Richard S. Sherman
Great Neck North Middle School*

*Zephyr Art and Literary
Magazine 2023 Edition*

*Embracing the Night
Kendall Aufenanger*

ZEPHYR LITERARY MAGAZINE

A Magazine of Art and Literature
2022-2023 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

"Ladies and Gentlemen...It's Showtime!" was imagined by the students of the *Zephyr* club. Our members wanted to highlight the performance-like aspect that most well-written stories embody. The poems and short stories found in this year's magazine incorporate productions, performances, competition, conflict, and lots of drama.

We hope that you enjoy reading our written performances!

Table of Contents

Title of Piece:	Author/Artist:	Page Number:
Embracing the Night	Kendall Aufenanger	Front Cover
Through the Eyes of the Actor	Lily Kase	Poem, 7
Grand Opening	Elena Zhuang	Illustration, 8
The Bookkeeper	Abigail Bernstein	Short Story, 9
The Troubles of Age	Zahara Bendelstein	Poem, 13
It's All in the Cards	Marisa Levine	Illustration, 14
Thumbtacks and Other Assorted Items	Deuay (NiuNiu) Kong	Short Story, 15
Performance	Lila Halpert	Poem, 19
Out of This World	Sophia Sontag	Illustration, 20
Human Error	Regina Cho	Short Story, 21
Alarm	Sheldon Tang	Short Story, 25
Please Listen Up	Chloe Nazar	Illustration, 28
Words Are Powerful.	Letizia Kaya	Short Story, 29
Excitation From Afar	Zahara Bendelstein	Poem, 35
See the Show	Samantha Baybabayev	Illustration, 36
The Irish Reviser	Kendall Aufenanger	Short Story, 37

Table of Contents

Title of Piece:	Author/Artist:	Page Number:
Mere Happiness	Zahara Bendelstein	Poem, 43
A New Leaf	Adrian Cheah	Illustration, 44
Blooming Flowers	Elena Zhuang	Poem, 45
Acrobats	Shira Crispin	Illustration, 46
Watching Eyes	Eliana Amaya	Short Story, 47
Animal Circus	Mia Li	Illustration, 48
The Fox and the Bear: A Fable	Nathan Zhong	Fable, 49
The Secret Behind Halloween	Zahara Bendelstein	Poem, 51
Outshine	Erin He	Illustration, 52
A Dark Night	Megan McGirr	Short Story, 53
All for Nothing	Phoebe Hoffman	Short Story, 56
Stage Fright	Lily Kase	Poem, 57
Just Like Magic	Deuay (NiuNiu) Kong	Illustration, 58
No Celestial	Elena Zhuang	Short Story, 59
The Hidden Gem	Helen Su	Illustration, 70
Just One Line	Phoebe Hoffman	Short Story, 71
The Best Show in Town!	Chloe Kamali	Illustration, 72

Table of Contents

Title of Piece:	Author/Artist:	Page Number:
Just Mercy	Ethan Yu	Journal Entry, 73
Drumroll Please	Elissa Becker	Illustration, 74
Dawn of Doom	Braydon Chen, Brandon Cohen, Jayden Leung, Kevin Livian, & Sheldon Tang	Short Story, 75
The Show Has Begun	Daniel Goldberg	Illustration, 82
Break a Leg, but Not Really!	Phoebe Hoffman	Short Story, 83
Surf Show	Juhie Yoon	Illustration, 84
The Four Symbols	Elena Zhuang	Creation Myth, 85
One of Us	Phoebe Hoffman	Short Story, 87
Lights, Camera, Action	Yael Lyakhov	Illustration, 88
Revision	Chen (Monica) Chen	Short Story, 89
Magician	Ravid Nafisi	Illustration, 92
Presentations	Zahara Bendelstein	Poem, 93
Throw Your Caps	Megan McCarthy	Illustration, 94
Goodbye, Junior High	Zahara Bendelstein	Poem, 95
Finally	Chen (Monica) Chen	Illustration, 96
Carnival	Lucas Chang	Back Cover

“Through the Eyes of the Actor”

by Lily Kase

There is nothing like the feeling before a show
Partly because you will never be this nervous again
At least until the next performance

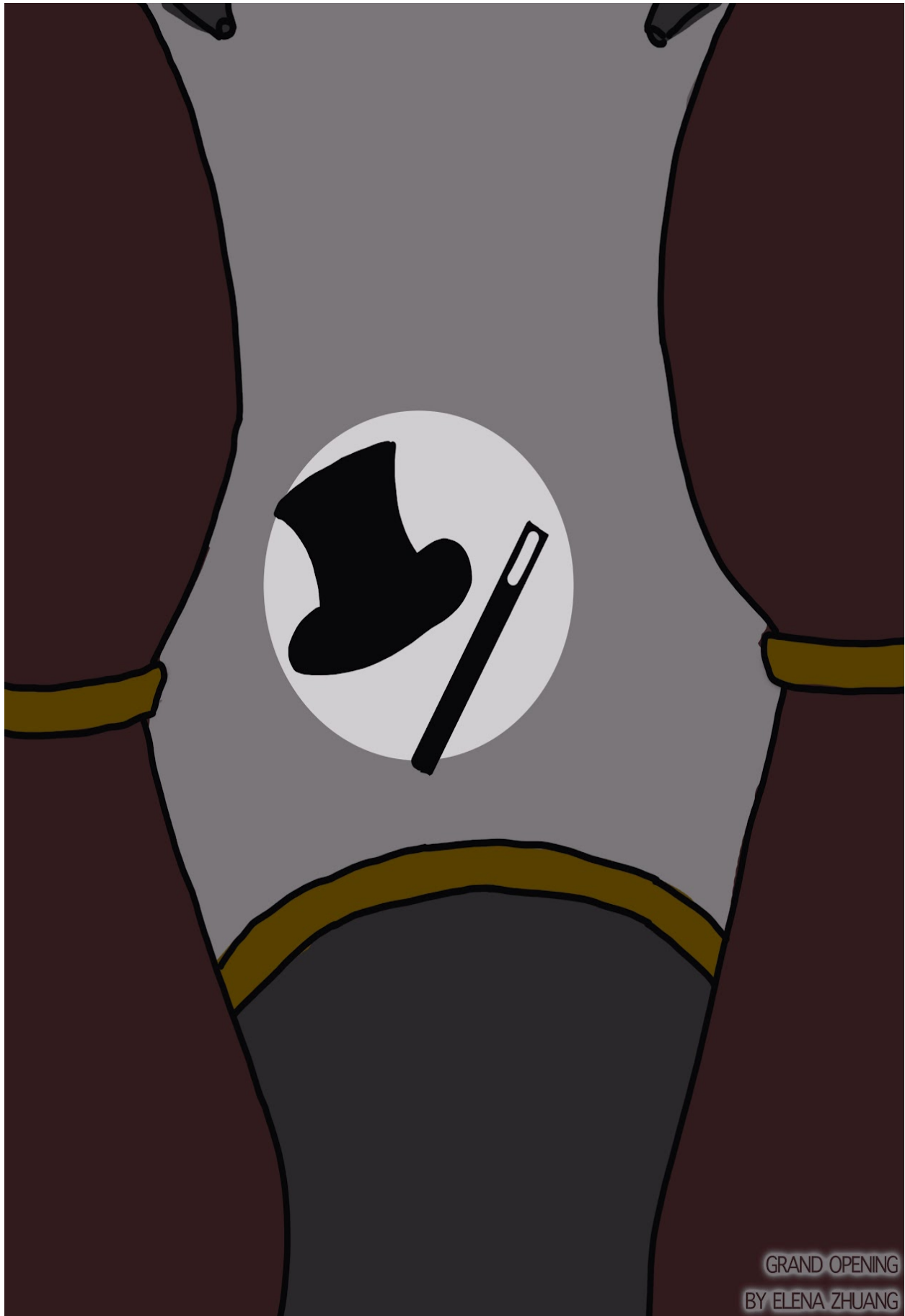
As I get ready for my entrance
I am so focused that the show goes in slow motion
Like when you're starving and dinner can't cook quickly enough
After all I have done, this is it
Will I make a fool of myself?
My tongue is glued to the roof of my mouth

Make it worth it
After all this time, negativity can't win
Can it?
Fear is a state of mind
I am aware of that
But in the moment, I don't believe it

It is showtime...

As I step onto the stage
Eyes glide across me
The hot air of the auditorium brushes my face
I say my lines
Trying to prevent my voice from quaking
I attempt to put on a smile when it feels natural

But as I finish my lines
Reality comes crashing upon me
I'm grasping at the edge
All of my hard work has led to this moment
I know I did well



“The Bookkeeper”

by Abigail Bernstein

“Thunder crashes somewhere in the distance. Rainwater falls on the freshly slain man. The puddles turn scarlet, mixing with the blood leaking out of the man’s torso. A crowd gathers around the corpse and the murderer. Lightning hits a tree branch down the cobblestone road, lighting it aflame. The fire illuminates the murderer’s face, of whom the townspeople recognized as John, and the corpse to be Marcus. John’s smile runs from ear to ear, his eyes filling with madness, it’s clear this man won’t stop until the whole village is dead. The fire spreads to the wooden storefronts lining the road. John raises his sword, warranting screams, echoing throughout the village.”

“No! This is not how it’s supposed to go!”

The bookkeeper stumbles out of bed and runs to his writing desk. Frantically, he erases an entire page, and consequently, the entire day’s event.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let Marcus steal that apple from John! Stupid! Stupid!” the Bookkeeper exclaims bitterly.

He fumbles around for his pencil and immediately starts altering his book.

“Marcus, filled to the brim with guilt, returned the apple along with other oranges from his own orchard as an apology gift to John. All is well, and everyone is content.”

With those two sentences, the murder had been undone, leaving both Marcus alive, and John an innocent man.

“These townspeople are almost itching for violence. With this much revision, I’m surprised I haven’t ripped a page!” remarks the Bookkeeper. “1,532 pages and they’re still in the 1700’s! I’m going to have to add more pages just for it to get to the Napoleonic Wars!”

With that, the Bookkeeper waves his hand, and the book thickens. He watches in appreciation as the words continue to appear on the page.

The Bookkeeper tosses more kindling into the fireplace. With another wave of the hand, the fireplace spontaneously erupts into flames.

“AH DAMMIT, NOT AGAIN!”

The Bookkeeper wildly waves his hands, and the fire is extinguished.

“Damn! Damn! Damn!” the Bookkeeper mumbles, whilst cleaning the soot off of the bricks.

He lights a match and flicks it into the fireplace. He lowers himself into the red, cushy armchair and opens the window curtains. As he reaches for his binoculars, an orange tabby cat leaps from its hiding spot among the books, and onto the Bookkeeper's lap.

"Ah, hello Sphinx." the Bookkeeper says with a chuckle.

He brings his binoculars up to his face to begin his third favorite activity, under reading and writing of course. People watching.

When the Bookkeeper wasn't buried in a hardcover copy of *Oliver Twist*, or correcting the narrator's mistakes in a book of his own, he was sitting by his window from his house on a hill, watching the townsfolk, and trying to import their behavior into his own story. He watches as Elizabeth meets up with Margeret to go to the local cafe. He watches as Paul, the retired naval officer, rants about the war to his wife. He watches as children Richard and Shirley climb a tree. He watches as Shirley falls from said tree, and Richard rushes to take some extra fabric from inside his house, and bandage the minor wound Shirley had acquired. He watches as the fabric begins to stain with red, and as the children laugh over some matter he was too far to hear.

"Ah, that's it! Chivalry! That's exactly what the book needs!" the Bookkeeper exclaims. "And to think, I learned it from two children!"

The Bookkeeper scampers to his book, while Sphinx follows him and jumps to his desk. The Bookkeeper wonders where he could put this newfound trait. He searches through every character the narrator had introduced thus far. Benjamin the carpenter? No. Thomas the blacksmith? It wouldn't work.

"Aha! That's it!" exclaims the Bookkeeper. "I'll give it to Alexander, the magnate. Too rich with inherited money to have a profession. He'll be so kind and chivalrous, people will think he's a knight!"

He flips open to the page being written at the moment. He read the words being inked into the page before his eyes.

"Mary, the Baker's daughter, trudged through the woods, to the hut of her dear grandmother, who she visited multiple times each month." spoke the narrator in a flat tone.

"Narrator, I have a request." the Bookkeeper announces. "I would like to alter Benjamin. Would it be feasible to make him chivalrous?" queried the Bookkeeper.

“Hmmmmmm, yes. That could very well work. Thank you, Bookkeeper.” the book acknowledges. What a spectacle a living book would seem to some people, the Bookkeeper ponders.

“Well, I-” an ear splitting noise erupts from outside his cottage, cutting him off mid-sentence.

The Bookkeeper jumps up, and stumbles backwards. All of the air seems to have left his lungs, when he recognizes the siren. He rushes to grab Sphinx and the book, and get into the underground shelter. The hum of the fighter-jets growing louder, he scrambles over to his fireplace, and pushes one of the stones, causing the entire fireplace to swing open like a door, revealing the insulated tunnel and shelter, with four months’ worth of food, water and books. He pulls the door shut with a *SLAM*, and runs down the hallway. Only when he had made it to the shelter with Sphinx and the book and locked the locking door wheel had he allowed himself to sit down and catch his breath.

There he sat for about three minutes, comprehending the events that had just transpired. He rises with a groan, and ventures off in search of a radio. He only makes it a few paces before an explosion causes the ground to shake, throwing him to his knees. The ground shook continuously. More and more bombs. More and more explosions. More and more destruction. Cans were falling off the shelves, some splattering upon contact with the floor, creating a mosaic of tin cans and beans. The Bookkeeper dove under a table with the book in his clutches, Sphinx trailing mere decimeters behind. He remained there watching all of his emergency materials splatter on the floor, while hugging both Sphinx and the book to his chest.

After another 15 minutes, the shaking seemed to stop. He crawls out from under the table, staining his gray trousers orange with the residue of the can of beans that exploded right in front of him minutes prior. He continues his preliminary attempts at finding the radio and, finally, prevails.

“Plymouth and the surrounding towns were bombed by German Nazi aeroplanes. Multiple dead; even more injured. Fires all over; numerous buildings destroyed.”

“Alright, Sphinx. Let’s go back to our house.” the Bookkeeper mutters, while picking up his cat and his book.

His footsteps echo through the metal tunnel as he approaches the door. He unlocks the door locking wheel, and pushes the door. It takes all of the Bookkeeper's strength, until it finally budes, and opens barely a few centimeters.

"No!" the Bookkeeper utters. "It's all gone."

Where his house had stood a mere hour ago, sat nothing but ash and rubble. Books on everything from the life cycle of insects, to monsters wreaking havoc. From solving bloody, hair-raising murder mysteries, to books about people. Tales of dragons and magic, to stories about love that could not be. All reduced to nothing more than embers. The Bookkeeper sinks to his knees, in mourning of all that he had just lost.

"You're all that I have now, Sphinx." he says to his cat, still not being able to take a full breath without shaking. "My world is riddled with uncontrollable destruction and devastation. It's a constant cycle of violence and sorrow that will swallow you whole and spit you out in pieces." the Bookkeeper recites.

He reaches for his book, now the only one that he owns.

"I may not be able to control my world, but I at least still have this one under my jurisdiction."

He flips the book open to the page that words were appearing on at that moment, making the narrator's monotone voice audible once more.

"William bursts into his cabin, harboring a new discovery. Carefully, William sets a book down on the table. He opened to the nearest page, revealing ink appearing on the parchment, without a pen writing it. Words materializing with no author. 'The book, it's alive! Is this the witchcraft they speak of?' exclaimed William. 'If so, perhaps witchcraft isn't all too evil.' William concluded. 'I shall protect this book with my life and, henceforth, be known as The Bookkeeper.' William announced." The narrator monologues.

"Peculiar. That's extremely similar to how I found my book, the one this so-called 'Bookkeeper' is in." wondered the Bookkeeper aloud. "What if I am also in a book? A mere character in someone else's story? What if my entire life has been fictional, made up by someone's mind, then written on a paper. How shall I ever know?"

“The Troubles of Age”
by Zahara Bendelstein

Smiling on the top of a mountain with thriving trees.

I brought you in for a warm embrace.

We made it to the top, I exclaimed,
while the wind gently stroked against my soft skin.

20 years go by.

Smiling on the top of a mountain with thriving trees.

I brought you in for a warm embrace.

We made it to the top, I exclaimed,
while the wind gently stroked against my not so soft skin,
bags under my eyes, and light wrinkles on my bumpy forehead.

30 years go by.

Crying on the top of a mountain,

the trees are not as green as I remembered them to be.

I looked up to the sky, and imagined bringing you in for a warm embrace.

I made it to the top, I whispered,
as my eyes formed puddles of tears, the wind didn't feel as gentle as it used to feel,
my back was aching, and my voice sounded weak.

I stared at the colorful hues of sunset, and thought to myself,
what a beautiful person you were.

When I make it to the hospitable place you're in,
we will have the warmest embrace yet again.



“Thumbtacks and Other Assorted Items”

by Deuay (NiuNiu) Kong

Games are supposed to be fun, quick things that you’re expected to play with your friends. Games are supposed to end.

Lee never liked Madonna, but there she was, singing along to “Material Girl” in her room on a Sunday night. She sat on her bed, holding a spiral-bound sketchbook, lightly penciling in the rough shape of a skull. The *scratch scratch* sound of the pencil was comforting, because it was as if the world disappeared. It was just Lee, her pencil, and her sketchbook.

Lee looked at her alarm clock, which indicated that she was the only one awake. Begrudgingly, Lee closed her sketchbook and turned off her old vintage speaker. She pulled on the switch for her small lamp, pulled the covers over her, and fell fast asleep.

Lee never liked closing the blinds, because the sunlight acted as her alarm clock. As sunlight flooded the room and the birds started chirping, Lee’s eyes fluttered open. Yawning, she slowly got out of bed and got dressed.

Her dad, barely awake, trampled through the hallway outside of Lee’s door. As his footsteps faded into the creaking of the stairs, Lee exited her room. She got ready for the long day ahead of her.

Lee never liked the school bus, but both her parents worked and it was really the only way she could’ve gotten to school. Lee squinted her eyes as the bright yellow school bus screeched to a halt. As she boarded, she whispered a quick “good morning” to the driver and sat down in the first open seat she saw.

She sat next to a black-haired girl wearing circular-framed glasses. The headband that she was wearing was adorned with dozens of rhinestones that reflected the sunlight onto the ceiling of the bus, dotting it with shards of light.

“Hi Pearl,” Lee cheerfully said, “I like your headband.”

Pearl wore a slight smile and replied, “Thanks, I got it for my birthday.”

This concluded their conversation, as neither was very social.

Lee never liked her teacher, Ms. Silvestre, so she was elated to find out that her teacher was taking a week off. The unfortunate substitute was a shy gangly man who obviously didn’t know how to control a class of rowdy fifth graders.

After a long two hours of doing absolutely nothing but tapping the table out of boredom, Lee's class was led out of the classroom to attend a "quick assembly." As Lee passed through the doorway, a hooded figure rammed into her, muttered an incoherent apology, and ran off further down the hallway. Shaking her head, Lee brushed herself off and then tried to catch up with the rest of her class, which suddenly couldn't be found.

Lee never liked the school, because you could easily get lost. Lee recalled that her class was going to an assembly, so she headed in the direction of the school auditorium. After reaching the auditorium, she found that it was empty.

On the stage was a small brown cardboard box labeled with masking tape, "Thumbtacks and Other Assorted Items." Curious, Lee carefully opened the box and peeked inside. A little whirring device with a note sat nestled in some shredded paper. The silver box was alien-like and as small as a hamster. It had one white button on the top.

Picking up the note, Lee read, "Use only when needed."

Lee's eyes widened and she looked around. Still, no one was with her. Lee then shoved the note and the box into her pocket and hurried out of the auditorium.

Lee never liked the assistant principal, so of course that was the first person she bumped into in the hallway. She wore short, black bobbed hair and an elaborate pantsuit.

"Aren't you supposed to be at the cafeteria assembly?" Ms. Wu raised a perfectly drawn eyebrow.

"Uh, yes, but I kinda got lost," Lee replied, uncertainty wavering in her voice.

Confused, Ms. Wu muttered to herself, "Yeah, right."

Lee walked as fast as her legs would carry her and rounded the corner to see the cafeteria.

Lee never liked assemblies, but they were mandatory. She found her class and sat in the only empty seat, which was right next to the substitute. Lee turned her body to watch a short woman in red droning on about Internet safety.

After five minutes, Lee faced the substitute and asked if she could go to the restroom. All of the water that she drank was catching up to her. Lee walked out of the cafeteria and heard a person calling out her name.

Confused, she looked back, and caught a glimpse of Ms. Wu stepping into the cafeteria. Lee paced her way through the hall to return back to the cafeteria.

When she returned, she stopped at the doorway. As her eyes focused onto the scene, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. The device in her pocket started to vibrate.

Game over.

I never liked Madonna, but I played “Material Girl” because it was what “cool girls” did. It was pitch black outside with no signs of stars, because the New York suburbs are always too close to the city. I’m outside of my room, waiting for the bright yellow light seeping from under the door to cease. As soon as it stopped, I counted to one thousand and crept my way up into the attic.

I never liked to close my blinds, because it took away the beautiful morning sky. I rubbed my eyes, threw on my dad’s black hoodie, and carefully trekked through the hallway, making loud noises as I went past my room. I descended the stairs, and once I was out of earshot, I zipped to the living room and avoided my barely-awake father.

He was humming in the kitchen, cutting up slices of ham to put into some sandwiches. Tiptoeing, I shoved open the living room window and gingerly climbed through. The windowsill left my stomach in a dull pain, but I carried on. I followed the path to the bus stop and sat under a nearby tree. During the twenty minutes of squatting on rough, damp roots, I saw myself emerging from my home, carrying a bright red lunch box. Then, I took off to the next stop on the bus route, making sure that Lee didn’t see me.

I never liked the bus, because it was never on time. It must have been ten minutes before the metallic yellow bus came to a stop. I pulled on my hood and let the other kids at the stop board before me. Not saying a thing, I found a seat directly behind where Lee was sitting. Tuning out the noise, I stared out of the window until the bus screeched signaling its stop and the school’s bright blue exterior came into view.

I was herded into the building with the other students. But instead of following the crowd, I went straight towards the bathroom. There, I conjured up a plan. After the initial rush of students and the first bell ringing, I exited the bathroom and made my way to the main office.

I never liked my teacher, Ms. Silvestre, because she likes to send me to the office to hand in notes. After knocking on the door, I asked Ms. Fox at the front desk for a box.

“Why, hon?” Ms. Fox questioned, while clicking her mouse and typing at lightning speed.

Shoot. I remembered that Ms. Silvestre was out for the entire week.

“Um, I forgot to do it for Ms. Silv last Friday,” I stammered, wincing at how fake it sounded.

After a few more seconds of the clacking of the computer keys, Ms. Fox got up and handed me a box. A bit of pale yellow tape hung off the side with the words “Thumbtacks and Other Assorted Items” etched in pencil. I thanked Ms. Fox and looked at the time: 9:15.

When no one was looking, I slipped into the auditorium and placed the box on the stage. I pulled out a warm, metal box and scribbled a note onto some paper that I found on the stage. “Use only when needed.” Then, like a sly cat, I crept out of the auditorium.

Now all I needed to do was wait.

I needed to get Lee alone. So as I saw her walking at the end of the line, I sprinted towards her and lightly knocked her over.

“Ow!” Lee exclaimed, looking up.

I turned away quickly, apologized, and kept moving.

When Lee looked back, her class had already headed towards the cafeteria. I watched and prayed that Lee would go to the auditorium. Surely, Lee started to make her way to the direction of the box onstage.

I never liked the school because teachers were lurking around every corner.

I never liked the assistant principal because she never liked me.

“Ms. Gordon, what are you doing here?” Ms. Wu shouted.

Panicking, my face glowed red and I struggled to form words. Someone knows that I’m here.

“J-just, uh, I-looking for the caf—I mean, my c-class,” I sounded like a toddler learning how to speak.

“Well, the cafeteria’s that way. Don’t be late,” Ms. Wu’s stern voice commands.

I nodded and traveled along the hallways to the cafeteria. I sat at an empty table in the back of the bustling crowd. Soon, Lee arrived, her hand on a rectangular bulge in her pocket.

I never liked assemblies, because they were long and boring.

But Lee left the room to go to the bathroom, which shouldn't have happened. Frantic, I stood up and thought of any way I could make her come back. I ran to the doors and called out her name, but Ms. Wu entered at the same time. Looking more confused than ever, she told me to sit down. I didn't hear her though.

Out of the corner of my eye, Lee was staring at me, her eyes were wide and her mouth gaped open.

Game over.

You never liked Madonna, but there you were, singing along to "Material Girl" in your room on a Sunday night.

"Performance"

by Lila Halpert

Seeing the darkened audience and the bright stage
Peeking out from the wings
Hearing the cue
Emerging into the spotlight
Completing everything just as rehearsed
Ensuring it is at its best
Knowing the viewers are watching
While also performing for yourself
Watching it all go by in a flash
Taking a bow
Already eagerly awaiting
Your next performance



Out Of This World
By Sophia Sontag

“Human Error”

by Regina Cho

I had never been so nervous to go on stage, not even during my other performances at Carnegie Hall. My dress was drenched in sweat and my slippery hands squirmed around the neck of my violin. A performer should never have to rely on luck to get through a performance; unfortunately that was exactly what I was doing. I slowly made my way on stage, wishing I could make my piece sound decent. There were blinding lights coming from every direction, and the heat was uncomfortable. I felt the eyes of the audience following my every move, clearly expecting a lot from my performance. The concert was long, and I couldn't tell if the audience was excited to hear me play or just wanted me to get my piece over with. My fingers felt stiff and refused to move the way I wanted them to move.

During the performance, I looked at my violin and the wall, nothing else. Without perfecting my piece beforehand, I had too many things to worry about. Will the notes be the right pitch? What was the bowing for this section? Will I be able to play this part properly? What if I mess up? What notes are next? During a performance, these thoughts should not interfere with the artist's playing—since they should have been polished while practicing, and a performer should be able to get lost in the music. On the other hand, I was struggling just to play the right notes. Despite all of these concerns, I had to look calm and composed.

It was only after the performance that I took a good look at the audience. One thing you don't want to do is glance at them while performing. Making eye contact or even just seeing someone else watch you as you're playing makes you more nervous, even if you know that they probably won't notice small errors. I managed to get through my piece, but was it satisfactory? Absolutely not.

I remember starting the violin at age seven. Everything in my life was carefree and easygoing, so it was not something I took seriously. Why would I stay home to practice when I could be at a friend's house? Like any other parent, my mom wanted me to play an instrument, and her first choice was the violin. She believed that it helped with memorization, brain activity, fine motor skills, and stress relief. I ended up sticking with it because my teacher said I had potential. The only time I opened my violin case was at lessons, which was only once a week. At home, it stayed untouched in the corner of my room, gathering dust.

Although I wanted to become a great violinist, I didn't know how much time and effort were needed to achieve that. Maybe if I'd had a friend who worked hard, I would have been motivated to do the same. As I got older, I ended up spending more time with my violin. Yet, even after numerous performances, I didn't completely understand how to practice for one. I thought that if I played the piece well at least once during practice, I could play it the same way at the concert. That's certainly not the case. However, if an eight year old makes a mistake, people disregard it, so I did the same.

When I turned nine, my teacher entered me into a small competition. I had no experience and I paid no mind to it, which was a big mistake. If I had known how frightening it was, I definitely wouldn't have taken it lightly. Unlike a performance where you perform in front of an audience, you have to play in front of a few judges. Also, unlike the audience, the judges are evaluating your every move. The rooms can range from very large to very small. Although they are both frightening, small rooms are much worse; you are closer to the judges, and you can see them watching you.

As I entered the small room with my accompanist, I saw two judges. The setting was totally different from a stage. On stage, it's hard to see the audience. However, in the audition room, you can clearly see the judges. Although the environment is less formal, it's harder to perform. They started small talk with me, asking my name, age, and piece, even though I knew they already had all of that information. It was difficult for me to actually start playing. My bow hesitated above the strings for quite some time. I could feel myself getting hotter and I had to keep reassuring myself that I would do fine. The pressure was intense, and it increased as the silence grew. I finally gave my accompanist a nod and she started playing. I didn't have to play until a few seconds later, so I focused on my breathing. When I hit the first note, it came out weak, and I noticed the judges vigorously scribbling something. Another mistake I made was thinking about that first note throughout the piece. Having it sit in the back of my mind was distracting.

I did better than I thought I would in the performance. I was nervous, but I had fewer things to keep in mind. I didn't practice the piece to the finest.

However, the composition wasn't technically difficult, which made it easier to think about how to impress the judges. If I hadn't practiced the piece at all, I certainly would have been thinking about the notes instead of my emotion.

At age eleven is when I worked the hardest. As my songs became more difficult, I had to work harder. Even though practicing was more demanding, I was having fun playing the violin. I entered into many more competitions and I wanted to do well. I realized that practicing a few times wasn't good enough for the actual occasion. At this point, I knew how to properly prepare for competitions and I actually took the time and effort to do so.

As I progressed into middle school, I noticed myself getting lazy, although I did nothing about it. Even though I was home most of the time due to the pandemic, I never picked up my violin unless my mom told me to. There were no competitions or events that motivated me, and with my mom yelling at me to practice, I began to hate the violin. In seventh grade, I always tried to find something to do, other than the violin. I told myself I was doing too much work and I needed to take a break, but I was obviously just making excuses for myself. When my mom told me I had a concert a few months later, I brushed it off, thinking I would have plenty of time to prepare. On the other hand, my mom saw this as a great opportunity for me to practice. The concert was something that was supposed to motivate me to keep practicing, but it had quite the opposite effect. Two months had passed, and I hadn't practiced at all. With only a month left, I tried to cram months of practice into a few weeks, which was easier said than done. Since I hadn't practiced for the past few months, I didn't have any routines. So everytime I picked up my violin, I didn't know where to start. And this was why the disaster at Carnegie Hall took place.

As I got older, I started to appreciate my violin more. It wasn't the fact that I had a concert coming up, or my mom told me to, but instead it became a hobby. When I was bored or stressed, playing a piece would shift my attention to the violin. At times like this, I wasn't practicing for perfection, and I didn't view my mistakes critically. Practices weren't as serious, and I could fool around more. The violin became my safe space and without being conducted to play a particular way, I could do whatever I wanted.

Overall, the biggest mistake I made in the past was giving myself more and more excuses. This is when I started getting really careless, and it held me back from all the improvement I could have made. If I could go back in time, I would definitely have worked harder when I had the time. But since I can't change the past, I should make alterations in my current life. This could start with something big like changing the people I hang around with, or something smaller like practicing for five minutes longer each day.

So, to what degree can I make mistakes? As a child, I was always free to make mistakes, as people didn't expect much. As I got older, there were more expectations, so I set myself to a higher standard. However, small mistakes in concerts weren't so bad. At that point in time, the main focus would be expressing the piece, not showing perfect technique to the audience. It's a different story for auditions though. Judges are looking for everything: technique, emotion, pitch, tone, timing, and so on. Regardless, mistakes are bound to happen. I just try my best to get as close to perfection during practice.

Life is a series of inevitable mistakes and it's our responsibility to learn from them. Without actually experiencing mistakes, it's hard to revise ourselves. There really are no set boundaries in which we can make mistakes. However, there are things in life that make us strive for perfection. When we see people who do everything exceptionally well, they have definitely worked hard to maintain their skill and image. Instead of fearing mistakes, we should learn to modify ourselves from them. The past has already taken place and there's nothing we can do to alter it, so we should focus on revising ourselves in the present. Even if changes are uncomfortable at first, they can help shape a better future for us.

“Alarm”

by Sheldon Tang

I remember the cool breeze while playing soccer, and the excitement every time we scored a goal. My town had a school and a library, where I would go every day. I thought those days would last forever.

But they didn't. During World War II, my town got trampled by a group of soldiers from the Axis Power. I was in my apartment and heard screaming outside my window. When I peered outside, I saw soldiers. One soldier threw a grenade at my apartment. I escaped and ran away. When I looked back, I realized that my town was burning in flames. I thought I would never see my mother again or the rest of my family. I knew that I had to survive this tragedy.

Suddenly, a large blast startled me and I stumbled in the middle of the road. I ran for shelter, while I put my hands up over my head. I took cover by going into an alley. I saw a group of people with armor. Before I knew it, I was accepted into a small army. This “army” was a bunch of French men and women planning to retake control over their country. I knew that it would be almost impossible, but my mother always said, “If you dream it, you can believe it.”

When I decided to join the resistance, I was equipped with a musket and some armor. I was really surprised that we still had this, since the Nazis stormed our roads. I met a young boy about my age named Oliver. He had a dirty face from when he was involved in a bloody incident. He was brave and even spit on a soldier for his own entertainment. We got along with each other, although our traits were the opposite.

Oliver, the revolution, and I slept in the remains of houses with alert men standing guard. Food was like gold, as we were on our knees scavenging the ground. The leader of this resistance was a chubby man with a long black mustache. His name was Finn. Finn Arndt is how he introduced himself. Finn assigned missions to our crew, like gathering supplies or claiming some land. These missions sounded impossible to me. When I shared my feelings about these missions with Oliver, Oliver said that I was crazy.

“Come on, Hugo, do you want to be shy and never fight, or do you want to get out there and beat those people to death?”

Finn assigned Oliver and I to explore the streets and see if there was a weak spot. The moment Oliver and I stepped onto the street, we were easily spotted. The first instinct I had was to run, but Oliver grabbed on my shirt. Suddenly, the Nazi soldier shot a round at us. Initially, I thought that the Nazi shot me. But as I turned around, I saw Oliver grabbing his leg with a bloody red hole. I pulled out the pistol that Finn gave to me and pressed the trigger. Before I knew it, I shot down three soldiers. Then I carried Oliver to the base. I felt nauseous and my head was pounding. When we got to the base, Finn and the others were running up to me. They grabbed Oliver and put him on a bed. I stumbled on a brick and fell to the ground.

I woke up with a wet cloth on my forehead. I looked around. Nobody was in sight, but the walls and floor were so clean. *What happened?* Suddenly, I saw a body. His head was down and appeared to be sleeping. I stood up and shook his head. He woke up, following with a yawn. I realized it was Oliver and asked him what was going on. He shook his head and said that he didn't know what was happening.

Then, the door next to us opened and a woman appeared wearing a white shirt. She turned out to be a nurse. While Oliver and I talked to her, we realized that we had both been in a coma for almost four years.

After hearing the shocking news, I asked her in a hurry, "Wait, is the war still going on?"

The nurse smiled and said, "No, the Allies won. France is still healing from the war, but we are free."

Suddenly, the rest of the revolution busted through the door.

After a bunch of hellos and embraces, Oliver asked, "What happened to Finn?"

Silence was the response, so I assumed that he was dead. The quiet moment was interrupted when a young boy named Christopher told us what happened.

"Finn tried to kill us," he explained.

"What do you mean?" Oliver asked, in his harsh voice.

“After you guys were in bed, Finn got a knife and charged at us,” said Christopher.

“Yeah, we had no choice but to kill him,” added another boy.

I realized that Finn was a traitor, and also realized that he was trying to kill us off one by one. All of those impossible missions were planned to purposely kill us. I looked at Oliver and noticed him crying. It was hard for him, since he basically grew up with Finn. Now, he comes to understand that he was a traitor.

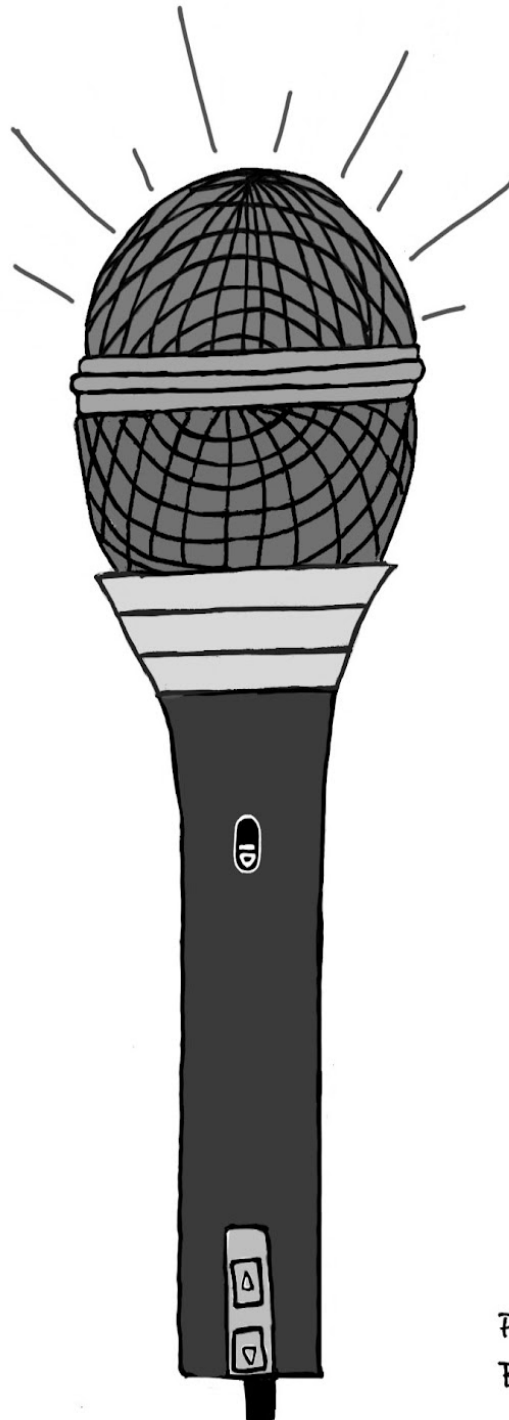
After we were released from the hospital, I was instantly shocked to see my mother standing in front of me. She greeted me in French, and I couldn’t even respond with words. I quickly gave her a tight hug that lasted forever.

After years of studying, I finally got a job and was a wealthy man. Oliver and I spent all of our free time together. We would often have breakfast together and then walk to the park where the Eiffel Tower...

Beep, Beep, Beep!

“Hugo, you’re late for school!”

“Uhoh.”



Please Listen Up
By Chloe Nazar

“Words Are Powerful.”

by Letizia Kaya

I glance at Olivia and take an empowering step onto the stage. My feet pulsate due to the sound waves exiting the effervescent speakers. My eyes desperately squint from the intensely luminous lights. I hear the large crowd clapping, some cheering, some whistling. More and more people flood the room to the point that it's overflowing. So many people came.

What if I mess up? What if they laugh?

I take a glance toward the audience and see all of the camera flashlights staring at me like hawks. Suddenly, the clapping stops abruptly and everything goes silent. My heart begins to race, as if it would burst out of my chest. My temple begins to moisten. I desperately try to remember the anxiety exercise that my psychologist recommended. I think it went like this. Name 5 things I can see, 4 things I can touch, 3 things I can hear, 2 things I can smell, and 1 thing I can taste. I can see 1. Olivia, 2. The Host. *What? Why are there teen girls in the crowd holding up mean signs?* I also see the microphones, and 5. The camera streaming. I can touch 1. My jeans, 2. The texturized curves at the tip of my fingers, 3. The rough texture of my blouse, and 4. My wrist. I'm able to hear 1. The crowd clapping, 2. The tech guys talking backstage, making sure that everything is in place, and 3. Olivia's deep breaths. *I guess she's nervous, too.* I can smell 1. My warm, vanilla perfume and 2. Olivia's expensive smelling, floral one. I can taste the awful, metallic taste in my mouth.

As I scan the room, I notice people begin to fill the open chairs.

Shoot, it's about to start.

“Good evening folks, today we have guest speakers Maddie Brown and Olivia Blanc. We are going to begin our TedTalk with the prompt, ‘What is one moment in your life where you realized you were abusing your power, where you realized you needed to make a change?’ Please give them another round of applause and a warm welcome!”

I took a deep breath, one too deep.

I think they can notice how nervous I am. Oh well, it's now or never.

“When I'm in class, and the teacher talks about the topic of bullying, it really hits me hard. It may be a theme in a book, or actions presented in videos, or even revealing student interactions they witnessed. No matter what it is, it feels as

if it's directed towards me. It feels as if I'm reliving all that I went through. Bullying cannot just be defined as a physical action, because I was severely affected by it – mentally. It isn't just something that fades away after time. The harm bullies conduct can be compared to something written in stone. It's *permanent*. It has many side effects; loneliness, sadness, sensitivity, and even masked behavior. When you're smiling, but dying on the inside.

My name is Maddie Brown and I'm not a victim of bullying; I'm a survivor.”

My speech is interrupted by some girls laughing and chatting. My eyes locate them and recognize a resemblance. One looks like Amanda.

Just continue, Maddie.

“Prior to my mortifying experience, I was always known as ‘the funny friend,’ ‘the loud one,’ ‘the happy friend,’ ‘the girl who brought Amanda into the group.’ That was until I witnessed that people were having fun *without me*. August 10th, 2020, was when it was introduced to the public. It wasn't just exclusion; it was public humiliation. I posted a video of myself dancing a self-choreographed dance to “Beauty and The Beat,” by Justin Bieber. Who thought something could be so ‘funny’ to others? Little me thought that I'd be the next TikTok star. Instead, all of my ‘friends’ made fun of me. Instead of getting views for my skills, I received views due to their videos which promoted how ‘dumb’ I looked. Little did I know, their prolonged bullying had just taken off.

If only I knew what one, innocent video would initiate. If I would've known, I would have never hit that red ‘post’ button. They created ‘fanpages,’ made group chats of slander, and abashed me. People became embarrassed to be seen with me, so I was left abandoned, bare, and defenseless. I remember being called annoying, weird, fat, a lizard, and their ‘idol.’ All of these words had such a strong impact on me. Everytime those words are voiced, I get intense flashbacks. It is like PTSD, so I call them my battle scars.

The bullying soon advanced. Many people became aware of it. Not a single soul did anything. They either kept quiet, laughed along, or joined in. How would you feel? I was a 10 year old girl, who simply posted a video of me dancing. Who would think that prepubescent fifth graders could be so harsh? As a result of all of this, I was completely stripped of my personality.”

Oh no, I feel tears beginning to settle in my eyes. My vision blurs for a few moments. I rapidly blink them away. *I have to finish this strong. C'mon Maddie, you've got this.* But I feel so judged.

Olivia looks at me and gives me an affirming nod. I think she saw the signs.

“Due to all of these events, I feared sitting with people. All because of the stupid thought that I would come off as annoying. I stopped participating in class regularly, afraid that my peers would make fun of me every time I spoke. I stopped joking around in public. I became ‘the quiet kid.’ I hid in the fourth bathroom stall during lunch; I went to extra help during my free periods.

These girls had painted such a bad picture of me. No one was ever happy for me after the incident. They all saw me as their enemy. They just couldn't share happiness with me. A win for me was worse than a loss for them. After many failed attempts at friendship, I felt even worse. I was always betrayed, or left for someone else. I was led to believe that I was the issue.

On many occasions, girls would approach me during lunch. They would say things and I couldn't defend myself. I was left vulnerable, bare. Hence, I'd be hiding somewhere just to avoid them. As my middle school experience advanced, pieces of me were chipping away. I began to question if I was feeding the bullies more to make fun of.”

Wow, that actually wasn't too bad. I grab a tissue and lightly dab my eyes, absorbing the tears that are rolling down my cheeks.

My eyes shift to the crowd and I see some older women getting emotional. I see others just sitting there, and others who seem bored.

Olivia ‘clicks’ her microphone on and takes off.

“I was there and I witnessed it all happen. Good evening everyone, my name is Olivia Blanc and I was the bystander. I noticed Maddie and how she changed. I recognized how her true colors shifted to just a black and gray spectrum. I was the bully's best friend; I was part of the ‘friend group.’ I recall receiving a FaceTime call from Amanda, Maddie's ‘best friend,’ telling everyone to create fan pages on that August 10th, just a few hours after Maddie had posted her dance video. I remember being part of one of their FaceTime calls, and feeling guilty that they saw success in their plan to shut down Maddie. Our goal was to ruin Maddie's reputation before middle school even began, so she wouldn't be a threat to us.

It has eternally impacted me. I saw Maddie avoiding the public, hiding in the bathroom, sobbing during the first period of the first day of school. I just left her,

because I was afraid and I didn't know what to do. I could also tell that Maddie feared me. Her body language spoke volumes. I never spoke up until later on. The fear of losing my friends, becoming weird, and possibly becoming the next 'Maddie,' was what prevented me from advocating for her. I will eternally regret abusing my power. I will endlessly regret not standing up for Maddie on that day in August, before everything was already written in stone."

If she would have stood up for me earlier, my whole life would have been altered.

"I realized that it was really getting bad when Maddie started showing up to school with bags underneath her eyes. I also recall never seeing Maddie in the cafeteria anymore. I remember Maddie deleting every single social media app she had ever downloaded. I remember seeing Maddie switch from wearing brightly-colored clothing, to wearing black sweaters everyday. I remember how Maddie never revealed her true, beautiful smile to the world. I was the only one who noticed these changes, and I desired to help her.

I was always different from the mean girls, at least in some way. I participated in the teasing, but at least I felt guilty. The other girls never had a hesitant thought. As I started to recognize how much this was altering Maddie, all of the reasons why we should stop began to pile up. It was driving me crazy. It was like a neverending siren in the back of my mind.

When I finally gained the courage to stand up for Maddie, I saw her run off into the bathroom sobbing. I desperately followed behind her. As I opened the stall, Maddie stood there, fidgeting like crazy. She was abruptly dialing her mother. It destroyed me to see Maddie like this."

I will never ever forget that moment. I finally saw some light. I realized that I was reaching the end of the tunnel.

"I asked Maddie why she had run off. She started explaining to me that she thought my act of kindness was just a hoax. That's when I started to realize just how broken Maddie was. We had all completely ruined her sense of trust. Quite honestly, I didn't know what to do. We couldn't take back what we had already let out of our mouths, nor what we had publicized. As we were talking, Maddie began to really open up to me. The words kept flooding out of her mouth. A big lump began to form in the back of my throat. I started to feel nauseous. The realization hit me. We saw how Maddie's behavior at school had changed. However, we didn't realize that Maddie's mornings and evenings outside of the school building

were impacted, as well. She spent most of her waking hours crying, and wasn't able to get a decent sleep most nights.

When I finally got the courage to use my voice and truly stand up for Maddie, I noticed her face change. A part of me never wanted to stop standing up for her, but a part of me was also noticing how my old friend group stopped talking to me. A part of me noticed the dirty looks that I would receive in the hallways when I'd walk with Maddie from class to class, or the whispers I heard as we walked past people. Yet, everytime I'd speak up for Maddie, a part of her would come back. Color began to fill her face again. That's what motivated me to keep speaking up for her, and to make a change.

That's when I also started to wonder why we ever disliked Maddie. Our conversations were so genuine, and we always laughed. It turns out that Maddie was really fun. All of those hangouts without her would have been better with her included."

I never ever thought I'd hear those words. I remember opening my iPad and seeing all of my friends having playdates without me. I would cry to my mother on a regular basis. I thought there was something wrong with me that whole time.

"Definitely not," a girl in the crowd remarks.

Some audience members let out chuckles, while others gasp in shock.

Who would say such a thing?

I turn my microphone back on and begin to speak.

"Words are often far more murderous than bullets. Simply standing up for someone can change their entire life. If you ever disagree with something, use your voice. Advocate for yourself or for that other person who may not be able to advocate for himself.

I want to make a difference. I aspire for there to be a world where kindness is spread twice as fast as rumors are. I aspire for there to be a world where social media is used to expose talents, not to spread hate. I aspire for that dream to become a reality. I aspire for there to be a world where no one will have to go through what I went through. I aspire for there to be a world where no one is judged based upon talent, looks, gender, or race. I aspire for that dream to become a reality. Each and every one of you is in charge of what comes out of your mouth, and what YOU spread."

I've never felt more empowered.

Suddenly, another chuckle comes from the audience. My eyes instantly shift to locate who it is. It was that girl with the purple crew neck shirt.

“Thank you all for coming. Please promise us one thing: you will spread positivity and use your voice for good.”

Olivia shuts off her mic and smiles at me. Her eyes shimmer with pride.

The crowd instantly breaks out, collectively clapping. Most audience members even stand up. That’s when I have a realization. The words that just came out of my mouth made an impact on every single person in this room.

As soon as the audience starts to exit the arena, I hustle down the stairs to locate the girl. As I explore the venue, many many people stop me and congratulate me on my success. It gives me a warm feeling inside, knowing that people have benefited from my experience.

I finally locate the girl with the purple crew neck shirt, and I run up to her as quickly as possible. I can’t lose her. I tap on her back, trying to grasp her attention. As she shifts her head towards me, I greet her. I notice her eyes have an awful amount of highlighter on them and pounds of mascara, just like Amanda always wore it.

They must be related somehow.

I greet the girl with a warm smile, and the stare that she gives me in return almost burns a hole through my body.

Just. Like. Amanda.

“I think I noticed you laughing in the audience as I was up on stage. I just wanted to point out that nothing I have experienced was funny in any way. I find it disturbing that you think it is ok to raid my performance and promote hate.”

“Okay, Maddie...”

My fists curl in hatred. My teeth clench and I squeeze my thumbs. Anything to stop me from saying something I’ll regret.

I walk away having one final awakening.

I can’t stop going on tour. Amanda’s negative influence still exists.

“Excitation From Afar”

by Zahara Bendelstein

Cars are honking, as they are in a traffic jam on a busy Wednesday afternoon

Families embrace each other and smile as they are told what their pleasurable plans over the upcoming vacation will be

A wave of men enter their business offices, wearing shipshape suits; one after another, they tuck their button down shirts into their unsullied pants, to look immaculate and professional

Women are seen walking their strollers, seeming quite exhausted, as their babies cry perpetually, even as the babies hold a biscuit in their left hand, and a pacifier in their right hand

Children are hurriedly escorted out of their school busses and into the crowded building profuse of chaos and education

Despite the annoyance the chaos may bring to a person; a ceaseless cycle of life, day after day, having to endure the same schedule; one might find the loud chatters of the city to be relaxing and cherishable

The excitement and vibrant lights of the city, through a window blemished with fingerprint smudges, bird droppings, and a coating of dust, is still to be found halfway decent, if one doesn't have the chance to participate in the exhilaration themselves

If the only activity one could do, is optically canvassing the excitation from afar.



See The Show
Samantha Baybabayev

“The Irish Reviser”

by Kendall Aufenanger

Long ago lived a young man by the name of Devland R. Quade. Quade lived in a small village in southern Ireland; he was a prodigy, adored by everyone in his town. But he was different. He wasn't really the person everyone assumed he was. He controlled everything with just a small thought. But how could one small thought change the fate of a town? This is the story of Devland Quade, The Irish Reviser.

* * *

Days had passed since Quade's last revision. He hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary in town in the recent days. It was noon, the perfect time for his daily stroll. Walking out of his townhouse, he leisurely strolled down the street.

What to do, what to do...

Letting his feet move on their own, he wandered throughout town, greeting the commoners. He watched groups of girls and boys stare as they watched him pass. He was the town's writer; he wrote entertaining stories for the enjoyment of others. He watched children run along the side of the road, giggling as they chased each other.

Walking into the town center, he mindlessly roamed the area, passing all kinds of stalls and shops. The aroma of fresh shepherd's pie filled Quade's nose, as he began to search for the source. With each twist and turn, the smell grew stronger and stronger.

“Over there!” a woman, whom he recognized as Erin O’Sullivan, screamed from one of the stalls.

Swiftly turning his head, Quade unconsciously moved into an alleyway, watching the scene before him unfold. He couldn't do anything until something happened; his only option was to watch. A masked man grabbed golden goods from one of the stalls near the back of the path, and began to flee the scene in a matter of seconds. Moving behind to the back of the stalls, Quade hastily ran in hopes of getting a better view of the man before he managed to escape.

Through the side of Quade's eye, he could see the man's figure run down the street and out of the town center. Sighing, Quade ran through the shadows of the streets. He needed to find the man; he needed to see his face.

The man had regrouped with what he assumed to be other thieves. They had met in an abandoned outdoor alleyway, about half a mile away from the town center. This was far enough away from any neighboring houses that could give up their location. They had their profit from the day laid out on the dirt floor in front of them: gold goblets, jewelry, and coins. Each one of them took their masks off to observe their treasure further.

Each one of them was well built. They could easily beat the average commoner, if needed. Carefully, Quade took in each of their faces, their voices, and their features. He made note of what made them different. What made them stand out. Quade had dealt with petty thieves before. He even believed that he had managed to get rid of all of them in the village. Leaning back against the stone wall, he stepped away slowly, retreating back to the center. With each step he took, he risked getting caught by a bunch of thieves that were much stronger and bigger than he was. With jagged breaths, his calloused hands rubbed against the cold, rough wall.

Sunlight temporarily blinded him as he reached the center again. People murmured as he passed by, each of them eyeing him as he walked.

"That's the same direction that the thieves went," Micheal Stanley whispered to his maiden Eithne, while stepping back as Quade passed.

"That's Devland. Do you think he's going to do something? I've never heard of him stopping a thief or anything along those lines. He's just a writer," Finila Walsh whispered.

It was true, he was just a writer, or so the town thought. Each of his thrilling stories was based upon the people he had erased from the world. See, before Devland was born, the town was reckless. Almost everyone owned some sort of weapon. It was almost every night that someone was robbed or killed. That was until Devland turned ten, one year after his parents were killed in an armed robbery. That was when he discovered his ability.

That day, he vividly remembered the men who viciously murdered his parents. Out of pure rage, he imagined them leaving this world and convinced himself how much better the world would be if they were never a part of it.

Though the men disappeared, his parents never came back from the dead, and that was the day he learned he could change the fate of the world.

Narrowing his eyes, Quade quickened his pace out of the town center. Throughout his journey to his house, Quade felt as if everyone was watching him. He felt as if every word spoken was directed at him, and every motion he made let people know his intentions. This wasn't a new feeling though. Every time Quade planned to revise a part of fate, he felt as if everyone knew, as if his secret was out. The rest of the walk, Quade shifted his gaze to the ground, in hopes of easing his nerves. Although this didn't ease his nerves, he was able to partially distract himself until he made it back to his house.

Opening the creaky wooden door, he let himself inside and then moved to his study to prepare for the change he was about to make. Settling himself into a wooden rocking chair, he forced himself to remember the previous events. He made himself remember as much detail as he could. What they were doing. What they were saying. What they could have been thinking. He needed to have a reason that all thieves should be taken out of his town. He needed to convince himself that they (and everyone like them) needed to be erased. Quade had learned that in order to change fate, he needed a reason. More so, he needed himself to believe that he had a reason.

Furrowing his brows, he leaned forward, letting the memory of them disappear from everyone in his village. Everything they had taken would be returned. Everything they said would be forgotten. Everything they had done would never have happened.

With a fresh quill he wrote. *All of those who steal shall be punished, and the punishment shall be eradication.*

Without opening his eyes, he felt the world shifting, as he changed the fate and memory of many. Cautiously opening his eyes, he grabbed a neighboring piece of parchment. He wrote why he was changing fate, and what punishment he thought was necessary. Crumbling it up, he threw it into the fireplace. The ashes of twelve years of changed fate lay in that same pit. He mentally reminded himself to burn that later. Letting his eyes close, he allowed himself to drift into a deep slumber, as he usually did after revising a portion of fate.

* * *

Waking up the next morning in the same chair he had fallen asleep in hours earlier, something felt off. Leaning back into the rocking chair, Quade replayed the events of the previous day. Usually the day after a revision, Quade would be able to go on with his day with no problem. What did he do differently that could have changed that? He found a reason to abolish the men and he stated what their punishment should be, so why did it feel different?

Being a Revisor came with some struggles. After each revision, one could feel nausea, headaches, and drowsiness, but never a sense of...regret.

Maybe if I relax, I'll calm down.

Closing his eyes and steadying his breathing, Quade took in every sound he heard, the birds chirping, the chatter outside. Listening closer, there was no chatter. Slowly sitting up, Quade carefully walked towards his closed window. Leaning in closer, it was confirmed. Walking out of his home, he was faced with a ghost town. Slowly gaining speed, Quade ran down the street in hopes of finding the people of his village.

Back in the now empty town center, Quade almost felt like he could see the people from the day before. The thieves, Finila, Eithne, and Micheal, all of them appeared as hallucinations, except for one.

Micheal was walking around the quiet center, humming to himself and carrying around some fresh fruit.

Micheal, oh Micheal!

He had to get to Micheal. He had to find out what went wrong. Hastily stumbling toward Micheal's figure, he reached forward, gripping his stiff shoulder. Almost immediately, Micheal moved away startled, causing Quade's hand to slip.

"What are you doing, Quade?" Micheal furrowed his brows questionably.

"Micheal," Quade began stumbling over his words, "where is Eithne?"

Quade moved forward, stepping directly in front of Micheal.

"Eithne? Who's that? I've never heard of her," Micheal responded, while his eyes wandered everywhere but Quade.

"You don't remember who Eithne is?" furrowing his brows, Quade looked down at his hands.

What did I do?

"Should I remember her?" Micheal asked, instead of answering the question.

"Yes! Of course you should! What have I done?" dragging his hands down his face, Quade ran off.

He had to undo this, or at least try to. Jogging along the empty streets, Quade's mind filled with possibilities of what could have happened.

Was it possible that many people were a part of that group of thieves this whole time? No, that can't be it. I would have noticed, wouldn't I? Ugh! I've revised fate so many times. Why is it that now something doesn't turn out how it's supposed to?

Forcefully opening his door, it clattered against the stone wall. He stormed into his study. Luckily, he hadn't burned the piece of parchment that contained last night's revision. Uncrumpling the page, he read it over.

What did I do wrong?

His eyes moved down the page, dancing around the words. Then, he saw it.

"All of those who steal shall be punished, and the punishment shall be eradication."

All of those. Three words that must have changed fate too much. He didn't specify that he only meant to abolish the gang of men that he saw. Instead, he wrote that everyone who had stolen would be abolished. No matter what one has stolen, even if it was just words, they are gone. Running his hands through his hair, he couldn't believe he had made such a simple mistake. Flipping through paper, he frantically searched for a fresh piece. Grabbing the closest quill, he forced it into the ink bottle. The bottle tipped over from the force, causing the ink to spill all over Quade. Ignoring the mess, he lifted his quill onto the paper. Splashes of ink sprinkled the page, as Quade's quill danced across the page.

Fate, undo what I have done. Let all of those innocent people who deserve to live have another chance at life. My judgment was wrong.

Quade tried to relax, but it just felt impossible. Sighing deeply, Quade ran his hands down his face. How could he do such a thing? He had gotten rid of his neighbors. They were all gone, as if they never existed in the first place. Rocking the chair back and forth, he attempted to lull himself to sleep. To his surprise, it worked. He slowly drifted to sleep.

His thoughts, however, followed him into his dreams. All he could think about was what he had done. For twelve years of his life, he had eliminated bad, evil, and selfish people. He thought that he was doing it for the greater good. He never thought about what would happen if he took his gift for granted and made a mistake. That is, not until now.

That morning, Quade believed that it was all a dream; a horrible, long dream. He tried to ignore the doubt that still lurked in his mind, but that small amount of hope pushed him forward. Taking deep breaths, Quade walked out of his house, hoping that maybe everyone would be where they were supposed to be.

The second Quade stepped outside, like a wave, the truth hit him. The street was still a ghost town, just as it was the day before. His first thought was to find Micheal. Sprinting to the town center, he ran around passing empty stalls and shops. The more ground he covered, the more the worry grew in Quade. Sweat trickled down his face; Micheal was nowhere to be found. The only other place Micheal could be was at his house. Quade forced himself to run faster than before. The more time he wasted, the more the panic grew inside him.

Soon enough, the small, straw-roofed cobble house came into view. Running up to the door, Quade frantically knocked. With each knock, the door shook more.

No answer.

Banging on the door again, Quade began to fidget with his hands.

No answer.

He couldn't wait any longer. Barging into the house, he looked around. Nothing was there; the house was empty.

This has to be the correct house, right?

He knew he was right. He knew this was Micheal's house. Slowly walking back to his house, he couldn't believe it. Everyone was gone and it was all his fault. Did fate not want anyone to live? Attempting to fix one mistake turned into another. He couldn't understand why everyone was gone. There were no children, no adults, no obnoxious juveniles. Fate had decided that nobody deserved life. So why was he still alive?

He couldn't understand what was happening to him. All he knew was that he was the reason everyone was gone. He was the reason the children in his village would never experience a full life. So why would he? The question traveled throughout his mind, but there was only one answer.

As slowly as he could, he walked to his house. He was hoping to delay what he had already decided. But everything comes to an end.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his front door for the last time. Leaving the door open, he walked into his study. Reaching his dark oak desk, the same one he

had used to write hundreds of stories of the people he abolished, he opened the drawer to the far right. He shakily reached in, grabbing the iron dagger. Moving to the rocking chair, the same one he had *killed* his own innocent people in, he sat down. As the chair rocked backward slightly, he lifted the dagger toward his sternum.

Don't think, just do; you deserve this!

Attempting to present a brave face, he placed the cold metal against the thin piece of fabric that separated the dagger from his skin. Slowly digging into his chest, he twisted the knife.

His scream echoed throughout his study. But as soon as it started, it ended, and so did his life.

**“Mere Happiness”
by Zahara Bendelstein**

Gaining consciousness at eight in the morning,
without the urge to return to dreams
Eyes glistening as their direction points to the sight of endless mountains
No work, homework, or stress could be seen
Getting splashed by the water of a fountain
Consuming an almost too perfect chocolate fondue
with strawberries as red as rubies
Walking for hours and hours on end
Watching a comedic movie
A warm breeze sweeping against the cheek
And then finding oneself closing their eyes to think
If only all days were as favorable as this one



“Blooming Flowers”

by Elena Zhuang

Bringing color in and out of our world

In our pain

And in the saddest times

Flowers bring us tears

In and out of a different country

Entering a world without him

Our greatest enemy

Flowers are our best friend

They'll listen to our sorrowful tears

Will sway along with our joyful laughter

Loyalty is vowed through each petal

Our secrets are kept

Empathy is their strength

Because they have suffered

Stepped and kicked upon

So no one knows if they are truly artificial

Because in the end, we have both suffered

But in the end, flowers bloomed



“Watching Eyes”

by Eliana Amaya

Each morning around 6:00am, when the sounds of the symphony of birds overshadowed the constant business of the people below, she waited for something entertaining to happen near her. At least at a far enough distance for her to watch.

She observed people as if they were books. The characters unfolding right in front of her. She only did this because she was always in the middle of something. Favorable, imperfect, upright, or boring, she was always somehow stuck in the middle. Being watched. Like she was the only thing that was keeping Earth's rotation. Or like she was playing a character on a show that was never aired. Either way, it was creeping into her mind the more she thought about it. There was no way that she could end up exactly like that one character from the decades-old movie her father would always tell her about. The Truman Show?

"No, no. Stop lying to yourself. Nobody is watching you," she would often repeat to herself.

It was like her daily affirmation. Instead, it was to keep her own sanity in check, rather than to let go of the negative thoughts she had in her mind. Unfortunately, it was just feeding the gut feeling that she had in her stomach every morning, afternoon, and night. It wasn't always like this though. This sudden fear just happened to be caught when she noticed small things changing. For example, the worn-down doll that she had had since childhood suddenly lost the crack near its left eye. The feeling that someone had replaced the eyeballs with video cameras took hold of her brain, causing night sweats. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone or something out there was watching her like a hawk. In fear, she asked her mother if she could investigate the toy. Expecting some sympathy from her own mother, the one person she actually trusted, it came as a shock when instead she was ridiculed and yelled at.

"Stop being ridiculous, Cielo, you're just daydreaming. *Donde no hay imaginación, no hay horror.*" (Where there is no imagination, there is no horror.)

She was never really a person to be trusted by her own mother after this incident. After all, she was a pathological liar. This was one of her hallucinations; one of her lies to cure the itching and enticing feeling of loneliness she felt.



ANIMAL CIRCUS
BY MIA LI

“The Fox and the Bear: A Fable”

by Nathan Zhong

Once upon a time, in a magical forest, the annual New Year’s festival was beginning. It was the most important festival of the year, and all of the animals were buzzing with anticipation and excitement. They chatted about what the decorations should be, what food to serve, and especially who would be granted the highest honor, the right to perform the sacred festival tradition - the dance of peace.

This year would mark the 100th anniversary of the festival, which was created to celebrate the joining of all the animal kingdoms of the forest. Every year, the top two animals would engage in a competition to win the floral crown, the highest honor for all dancers in the forest. The festival was a 7-day celebration. On the final day, all of the animals would rush to the town square and watch as the chosen dancer performed the dance of peace. This year, the two best dancers, Ferdinand the Fox and Barry the Bear, would compete for the floral crown.

Ferdinand was clever and wily, true to his nature as a fox. Barry was hardworking and determined, and always willing to do whatever it took to succeed. The two couldn’t have been more different, except for their shared passion and talent for dancing.

On the day before the week-long contest, the town's mayor announced the dance: the dance of peace. It was an extremely difficult dance, requiring delicate movements and great strength and flexibility. It was perfectly suited for Ferdinand, with his limber and flexible body. This dance would be nigh impossible for Barry, as his body and skills were not well suited for the dance. Many animals were talking about how it was certain that Ferdinand would win. Nevertheless, Barry’s determination wouldn’t let him back out of the competition, and after learning of the dance, he returned to his dojo with fire in his heart, determined to prove everyone wrong.

“I won’t back down,” he thought to himself, “I’ll prove them all wrong!”

Meanwhile, when Ferdinand learned of the dance, he smirked, “This’ll be too easy. Barry will never be able to perform this dance as well as me. I won’t even have to practice!”

Ferdinand, like many others, thought that Barry would definitely lose.

As the day of the competition for the floral crown drew closer, Barry was constantly revising and perfecting his dance. He knew that he would have to work harder than ever before. He understood that dances with elegant and delicate steps were his weakness, and he analyzed his shortcomings to perfect his movements.

While Barry worked hard to perfect his dance, Ferdinand was lazing around his home, drunk on his assumption that he had already won the competition. When his friends told him that he should start practicing, he grew indignant and claimed that he knew that he would win for sure and that there was no need to practice. Soon, Barry's dance improved, while Ferdinand hadn't even begun to practice.

The day before the competition, the atmosphere in the forest was brimming with expectations. Animals were excited for the competition and the beautiful dances they would see. Ferdinand, however, was panicking. He hadn't even begun practicing, and had no idea how to perform the dance! He cursed his past self for being so lazy and desperately began looking at the steps in the dance. He practiced the entire day and night leading up to the competition. His previous arrogance and confidence melted away, as the realization that he might not win the competition slowly settled in.

On the day of the competition, all the animals of the town crowded into the town center, all jostling and pushing for a better view of the stage. Ferdinand, who usually viewed dances as opportunities to show off and would usually be elated to perform in front of such a huge crowd, was filled with dread at the thought of having to perform a dance that he had no preparation for. Barry, who usually felt nervous when performing, was confident in his abilities to perform the dance. As the town's mayor began finishing up his speech, Barry was called up to the stage to prepare for his performance. The judges stood to the side, waiting for the contestants to begin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, Barry! He is a phenomenal dancer that has performed dances in hundreds of competitions, and was named Rookie of the Year! Please give him a round of applause!" the mayor announced.

As Barry began to perform his dance, the whole town was transfixed. He leaped and twirled, and did seemingly impossible moves for someone with his body. At the end of his performance, the audience jumped out and gave a round of thundering applause. Even the judges seemed impressed, as they discussed amongst themselves the rating of the performance. As Barry did his bows and waves to the crowd, Ferdinand began to walk up the steps to the stage. After seeing

Barry's beautiful performance, he knew that there was no way he would win. As he began to perform, his movements were worse than usual, and the crowd was obviously disappointed. At the end of the competition, the judges handed out the scores, and deemed Barry the winner.

Ferdinand was distraught at his loss. He was angry at himself for not practicing more, and for instead believing that he would surely win. Barry was proud and happy for his victory, because he knew he deserved it after all of his hard work. At the end of the competition, Barry walked over to Ferdinand.

"Ferdinand, when I learned of the dance that we would be performing today, I thought that I would lose. However, I worked hard and learned from my past mistakes to perfect this dance. I hope you will learn from this, as well. We'll meet again in the future."

Ferdinand understood that he would have to work harder in the future to succeed, no matter how much the odds were in his favor.

On the final day of the festival, Barry performed the dance in front of the whole town, and everyone clapped and cheered. Ferdinand watched from the side, and although he was disappointed that it wasn't him dancing, he knew that he learned a valuable lesson. As long as you work hard and learn from your mistakes, there's nothing that you can't do.

"The Secret Behind Halloween"

by Zahara Bendelstein

Kids are playing and laughing
Smiles stretch across their faces
The children start crying
As blood drips down their laces
White sneakers stained with blood
A heart ripped out of a little girl
Her liver is misplaced
Her mother screams, "Where are you Pearl?"
And finds Pearl's heart, out of place



Outshine by Erin He

“A Dark Night”

by Megan McGirr

(Author’s Note: The characters of Percy and Annabeth are owned by Rick Riordan.)

“Stay away!” I yell.

I watch the hunter near. Stake in hand; his fierce look seeps into my soul. It makes me tense. Me, a pureblood, tense over a human. I’m so weak. My shoulders drop from their tense state. I am weak and I will die that way. But I can’t die weak! But what can I even do? Convince him to not? Show him the good in vampires? I guess I’ll try.

“You will die and the end of this unholy bloodline shall commence,” he declares, as he nears.

“I swear we aren’t evil! Please hear me! I have never hurt anyone!” I cry out in dismay.

“Save it,” he snaps back.

He leaps forward, his stake nearing in slow motion. I watch as my demise nears, its sharp front promises death. No escape. But then, right before it is too late, I see a sword come crashing down on it, slicing the weapon into two. I fall backwards. My hands catch me in time. I lay there, my knees curled to my chest and my hands behind me, as I watch an unknown boy fight with the slayer. A girl joins in and they begin to overpower him. Who are they?

Moments later, the boy comes over and helps me up.

“You’re freezing. Are you okay?” he asks, worry showing in his green eyes.

“I’m fine. Who are you two?” I ask.

“I’m Percy, and over there is my friend Annabeth,” he answers, pointing to the girl. “If you don’t mind me asking, who were those people and why did they have stakes?” he questions.

“They were crazy people, uh following new crazy trends, you know? Just crazy people,” I say, eyeing him nervously.

A boy with a sword and a girl with a dagger. I wonder which would stab me first if I told them that they had just saved a vampire. Yeah, one of those blood-sucking things that people make up stories about. I’m one of them; we are real, afterall.

“You're really pale and cold...like dead cold. Are you sure that you're fine?” he asks again.

“Yeah! I’ve always been more of a night fan, you know? So I never really have a chance to be tan. I take pictures of things at night, like the moon or those creepy misty forest photos. I sell them to the company I work for,” I attest.

My story is weak, but I’m hoping that they will believe it.

“No offense, that’s an odd job. But that’s still interesting. What's the name of the company?” he questions.

“Oh, um, I work for many companies.” I answer.

“So, I guess he thought that you were a vampire,” the boy states.

I sigh. Thank God he stopped asking questions. I nod. I sense someone coming. I don't know who, but I know that it is time to leave.

“Anyway, thanks! I should be going now,” I quickly utter.

I begin to walk off before there is a sudden scream. I glance around and notice the girl. She has two hands wrapped around her neck, as a bloodthirsty vampire begins to grab her wrist.

The boy rushes over and stabs him with his sword. I know it will do nothing, so I grab the stake next to the slayer. My body screams at me to drop it, but I override my instincts and push the boy away. Then I quickly kick the vampire's ankle and he lets go of the girl in a struggle to stand.

“Please, my friend, kill me. I have succumbed to the thirst. And please take this. Keep it or find them and give it to them,” he begged and fought to maintain control.

I look down at a gold coin and a dagger, both hold his family's symbols. I have no time to investigate further. I have to do this. I push the girl away and jab the stake into the vampire’s heart. I pull the stake out and he falls to the ground. His eyes close as if he were sleeping. I rush over to the girl. Her eyes open and close as she struggles to stay awake.

“Move, please!” I begged the boy.

I place my hand on her wound as she closes her eyes. I have only seconds now. I close my eyes. *Heal please!* I beg. I watch as her wound heals slowly. It is working. I sigh and a dizziness sweeps over me. The boy carefully places me next to the wide tree behind me, and then does the same with Annabeth.

“Okay, who are you?” he asks sternly.

"I'm a pureblood vampire. Please just don't hurt me. I'm not crazy like him," I confess.

"A vampire! Those are real? So are werewolves also real?" he questions.

"Yes," I sigh, wondering when he'll stab me.

"Well, I knew the gods were real. I never thought vampires were. That just seems too weird. Like do you really burn in the sun and hate garlic?" he asks.

I begin laughing in between sentences, "No, I'm quite fine with garlic myself. I'm almost sure that's a myth. I do burn in the sun, but it depends on some weird things. So I don't always turn to ash when I see the sun," I answer.

"You can be photographed and videoed right?" he inquires.

"Yes, but please don't get any ideas. I'd rather not be on the news. Imagine what my vampire friends would say. They would never let me live that down. And then my Royal family would be chased down by hunters," I sigh.

"Well, don't worry about it. I won't say anything. But I do have another question. How can vampires heal people? No offense, but don't you just drink blood?" Percy questions.

"No, we have powers...kinda; but not healing. I don't think most vampires have healing powers, except for themselves. I only have the special ability because my great, great, great grandmother was a witch. I got my magic from her," I admit. "Now, if you don't mind, can you explain to me why you have a sword, and how you know that gods exist?" I inquire.

"I knew that you'd ask me that. Well, I'm a demigod son of Poseidon. I have this sword to protect me because many monsters want to kill a demigod, especially one as powerful as me. And by monsters, I mean like really weird creepy monsters," he confesses.

"That makes sense, I guess. I understand that when I was younger, humans and other random things would also be hunting me. It's the most dangerous time of a pureblood's existence, because you're at your weakest," I admit, pausing with a long sorrowful sigh. "Gold! Chrysanthemum! Come please!" I call.

My two owls fly down together and land on my shoulder. I pet them. They sense my mood and snuggle closer to me. Sighing, I continue to pet them. I watch as Gold burrows into my blonde hair.

In the moment of silence, I look at the items the slain vampire has given to me. The dagger has two symbols. One is of a woman standing over a sword, weeping. The other is...

“Oh no! Oh no, no, no, no,” I cry out.

“What?” Poseidon asks.

“This family symbol is one of mine. I just killed a family member. Oh my goodness!”

I stare down at the symbol of a dragon crouched down in an attack position. Its wings stretch open, as its tail curls up to its outstretched wing and fire blazes behind it. I take out my dagger and gold coin. To my dismay, they bear the same symbol.

“It’s not your fault; they won’t blame you,” he says, in a comforting tone.

“No, no, it is not my family that I’m worried about,” I pause and point to the other side of the coin. There appears the woman weeping over a sword. “This family has very beautiful vampires, which means many other clans would be joyful to marry them. That also means that they have family ties to very powerful families,” I finish.

“Well, Annabeth and I can help you. After all, you saved her life and mine,” Poseidon points out.

“Your debt is paid; you saved me first,” I remind him.

“I still want to help. So, come on, teach me what I need to know about these vampires,” Poseidon states in a brazen fashion.

“All for Nothing”

by Phoebe Hoffman

Charles Nupelang is getting ready for the big night. His show night. The opening night. But, when Charles is stressed, everyone is stressed.

“Shoes, check! Costume, I’m wearing it. Check! Hair, check! Knowing my lines, not so much. Uh oh, uh oh, uh oh, uh oh! Mr. Uush is going to kill me!”

Charles then began pacing around his dressing room, screaming his head off.

“Charles, what on earth are you screaming about?”

The audience will soon find out.

“Stage Fright”

by Lily Kase

My pulse quickens
I race around backstage
Adjusting my microphone
My stomach is a jar full of butterflies
My palms are sweaty
I approach my director
“I feel sick,” I say
“It’s just nerves,” he says, “you’re on in five.”
I step onto the stage
It feels familiar
Like seeing a relative after a while
Then the stage curtain opens
My heart is beating fast
The opening number begins
Finally, I sing
The pressure of my stomach melts into my voice
My notes ring loud and clear



Just Like Magic
By Niuniu Kong

“No Celestial”

by Elena Zhuang

There are 33 celestial gods in mythology and I am one of them. I will admit I did have a bright future once, as I was born a beautiful princess inheriting my mother’s beautiful long brown hair and pearl blue eyes. But not everything can last. Everyone has a secret that will come to light sooner or later. So here is mine.

“Princess Celeste, wake up. We have much to do today,” the familiar voice of my Maid, Herla, sounds through my ears, as I slowly open up my eyes.

“Good morning, Herla,” I reply sleepily. I rub my eyes and take a big breath in, smelling the sweet smell of syrup and vanilla, “waffles for breakfast?”

“Yes, the queen wants you to join her for breakfast as soon as you're ready,” Herla says, as she opens up the curtains, blinding me.

“Ok, I’ll be right there,” I say, slowly getting out of bed and walking to the sink to wash my face.

“What is this?” I ask myself, examining a peculiar mark on my face.

“Celeste, hurry up, the food is getting cold!” My fathers loud voice echoes through the castle.

“Coming!” I reply back, covering up the mark and quickly getting dressed in a purple dress from the new season catalog. I neatly tie up my hair and take one last look at my outfit.

As I arrive at the dining hall, my father and mother sit there immersed in a conversation with the royal informate, George. I quickly take a seat at my chair and Herla brings in my waffles. I thank her and focus my eyes on my parents. I take note that they are worried about something as I take a bite of my waffles.

“Is something wrong?” I ask, taking some strawberries.

“Nothing is wrong, honey. You don't have to worry,” my mother replies, faking a smile.

I turn my attention back to my waffles and walk back to my room when I’m finished. I look back into my mirror to see the mark again. This time it is shining purple through the reflection.

“Herla!” I call, hoping for her opinion and wanting to see if she can help me get it off.

After waiting a few minutes with no reply, I walk to my door and peek out into the dark hallway. I look left and right, the light beaming from the windows.

“Herla?” I call once more, waiting for a reply.

I walk out into the hallway to see where everyone is. The loud conversations are no longer sounding through the castle. I cannot even hear my father’s voice, which usually echoes into my room.

“Celeste.”

I hear a voice from behind me. I hastily turn around, my heart pounding in my chest. *Who was that?*

“Herla, is that you?” I call out to whoever is there in the shadows.

Suddenly, I hear the sound of heels clacking on the smooth glass floor. I turn around to face a woman. Her purple hair flows behind her as she walks gracefully towards me. She is wearing a beautiful white satin dress. Her eyes are the same pearl blue as mine. She is in front of me when she finally speaks.

“Hello Celeste, it’s time,” she says with grace. “We have been watching you for a long time, and we have decided that you are ready.”

“Who are you?” I ask hesitantly.

“It doesn't matter who I am. We don't not have a lot of time, Celeste. They are coming,” she replies, this time with a hint of urgency. “When you wake up, it will all make sense.”

Suddenly, she disappears into the dark hallway of the castle and I’m back in my room.

“Celeste,” I hear my mother call, “are you awake?”

I gently open my eyes to my mother’s panicked face.

“Mother,” I say, sitting up in my bed.

“Herla walked in on you collapsed on the floor,” my mother explains. “Are you okay, Honey? Does anything hurt?”

I think about whether I should tell my mother about the mark and the woman, but I decide to bring it up at a later time.

“Well, it's almost dinnertime and today we will be joined by the royal family from the West. So, please, wear something nice,” my mother says. “If anything bothers you, please tell Herla immediately.”

With that, my mother exits the room, leaving Herla behind.

Was that woman just a dream or was she real? I wonder if my mother knows anything about it. Come to think about it, they both have the same pearl blue eyes and the same beautiful long hair that drags behind as they walk.

“Do you need anything, Princess?” Herla asks me, interrupting my thoughts.

“Oh no, I’m fine,” I reply, forgetting that she was there.

I watch as Herla bows and walks out, the door closing it behind her. I climb out of bed to look into the mirror to see if the mark is still there. It seems to have disappeared and I feel a sense of relief. *Maybe it was all a dream after all.*

At dinner, my family seems to be immersed in conversation with the family from the West, but I am still pondering what happened to me earlier in the day.

“Celeste, is something bothering you?” the Queen of the West asks me.

“You seem to be contemplating something deeply.”

She smiles at me and I look up, not realizing I have been picking at my food.

“Oh, I’m very sorry,” I apologize. “It’s been a busy day.”

I hear the Queen gasp as I look at my mother. *What’s wrong?* My mother looks at me with panic rising in her face.

“Is something wrong?” I ask, looking back and forth between them.

“Oh dear, there's something on your face,” the Queen says.

“Oh, it's nothing to worry about, Your Majesty,” my mother quickly interrupts. “It must be a temporary tattoo that my daughter was playing around with earlier today.”

The Queen’s face relaxes, but my mother does not seem to be content.

Later that night, my mother enters my room.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“Nothing is wrong, Celeste,” she continues. “There is something I would like to...” she stops for a second, looking a little nervous.

“Is it about the mark?” I question.

“Well, yes. You see, it runs in my family,” she begins. “Has anything strange happened to you recently?”

I think for a second if I should tell her about the lady with the purple hair and the same pearl blue eyes.

“Have you seen a lady with purple hair?” my mother continues, almost reading my thoughts.

I look at her, confused. *How did she know about my dream?*

“Yes, I did. Is something wrong, mother?” I ask, concerned.

As if on cue, a sudden shimmering purple smoke blasts into the middle of my room. I cover my eyes to protect them from the light shining out of it. When it finally clears, the lady from my dreams appears again. This time, she's wearing a shimmering purple gown with her hair tied in a neat bun.

My mother is standing in front of me, facing the lady.

“It's you!” I say. “You're the lady that was in my dreams!”

“Yes, it is me again,” she replies, and then faces my mother. “It's been a long time, my sister.”

Sister? My mother is this lady's sister? I look back and forth between them.

“It has been a long time, Saranyu,” my mother replies. “Are you here to take my daughter away?”

“Well, it just so happens that your daughter is a candidate to be the next one,” Saranyu replies. “I'm going to help her and take her to the academy.”

My mother's face relaxes.

“Are you going to protect her well?”

“Of course, sister. You need not worry.”

My mother turns to me and kneels down.

“You're going to go to a safe place, where you will learn about your identity,” she tells me, as she moves a piece of my hair away from my face.

“What about father?” I reply, a little scared of where I will be taken. “Am I really leaving you?”

“Don't worry about your father. He knows,” my mother replies, sweetly. “This is Saranyu, your aunt. She will take great care of you.”

“Enough talk,” Saranyu interrupts. “Sadly, we do not have time to be idling around.”

“Goodbye Celeste,” my mother says, standing up as she puts on a serious face again. “How far are they?” she asks her sister.

“I would say about thirty miles,” Saranyu answers.

“We need to hurry Celeste!” my mother replies, urgently.

Where am I going? Who is coming? Many thoughts crowd my brain, as I hug my mother and walk to Saranyu.

“Ok, dear, this might feel a little uncomfortable,” she says.

With a wave of her hand, I’m suddenly flying through space.

What is happening? One second, I’m in my room, and the next I’m flying into a pink abyss? A few seconds later, we arrive on land and I drop to the floor. I feel nauseous and look up at Saranyu.

“It’s okay,” she says, “you will get used to it sooner or later.”

I stand up slowly to face a large village full of bustling people. Saranyu starts walking and I follow her. As I walk through the village, I realize that everyone has the same pearl blue eyes as I do. We walk through valleys and across rivers. Finally, Saranyu comes to a halt in front of a large castle. It is bigger than any I have ever seen.

“This is where you will learn and live for now,” she says, opening the door to the lively students.

Some have the same purple hair as Saranyu; others have the same beautiful brown locks that me and my mother have. As I admire the beautiful painted brown walls and the jade floors, a girl who looks my age approaches. She has purple blue hair and the same uniform everyone else is wearing.

“This is Ratri,” Saranyu says. “She will be your roommate and classmate. Ratri, please treat her with care.”

Saranyu walks away and leaves me with Ratri.

“I love your dress,” she states. “Our dorm is this way. Come with me!”

“What is this place?” I ask her.

“You don’t know? This is where celestial gods train,” she announces.

Celestial gods? I thought those were fake. My mother always told me tales of them, but I never thought they were actually real. Then again, if this was a school for celestial gods, why am I here?

“Here we are!”

The sound of Ratri's voice startles my thoughts, as I bow and open the door. It's not as big as my old room, with a window seat. The two beds have much space in between them. One bed is already lined with stuffed animals and bedsheets. The vanity is full of nail polish, makeup, and other essentials.

"Your side is over here," Ratri says. "Although it may be different from your palace life, it's still very comfortable!"

"How did you..." I'm cut off.

"Know? Everyone at school knows," she confirms.

"Oh really?" I'm shocked.

"Anyways, I'll leave you to unpack! Since it's late, you should get rest. I'll take you to your classes in the morning," Ratri promises.

I walk over to my bed and pick up the uniform that is already waiting for me. I guess I will be attending class tomorrow. I get dressed into the satin nightgown I brought from home and get into bed.

The next day, I awake to the blaring noise of Ratri's alarm.

"It's time for class," Ratri says, already dressed in her uniform. "I'll be waiting for you outside. Be quick. Class starts at 10."

I check my watch. It's already 9:50! I quickly get dressed into the uniform I found yesterday and open the door to Ratri and my bustling new classmates.

Our first class is Nature with Mr. Dyaus. We arrive at class on time and I sit down next to Ratri in the front row. Mr. Dyaus arrives at the bell.

"Today's topic is how to create rain or water," he says, holding up a plant.

With a wave of his hand, he creates a small rain cloud that waters the plant.

"Now you try," he demands.

Everyone in the class gets their own plant. I watch as Ratri waves her hand and creates a raincloud. An 'A' suddenly appears on her nametag. She smiles as I look back to my own plant. I try waving my hand, but nothing happens. I look around the room, noticing that everyone has already gotten their A's.

"Ms. Celeste," Dyaus says, walking up to me, "is something wrong? Why hasn't your rain cloud been created?"

"I, I don't know how to do it," I say nervously.

Mr. Dyaus walks away as an 'F' appears on my nametag. My classmates start laughing at me and I just want to hide.

"I guess the royal princess never had to water her own plants," a girl with beautiful purple yellow hair says snarkily.

The bell rings and I follow Ratri to the next class.

“Don’t mind her. She's Surya,” Ratri says, trying to break the silence.

“She's always like that since her mother is in charge of the sun.”

When we arrive at our next class, which is Dueling, I recognize Saranyu.

“Is that Saranyu?” I ask Ratri.

“Yes, she's the teacher for dueling,” she explains.

I sit down with Ratri and the other classmates, forming a circle. Saranyu stands up and walks into the middle of the circle. She's holding a sword.

“Today's duel,” she says, “Surya vs. Celeste.”

Did I hear her right? I'm supposed to fight Surya? Today?

I look at her, puzzled, and Surya walks into the middle. I stand up and walk to face her.

“The rules: you may duel with swords and your own powers. You cannot use foul play or bribery. Lastly, you cannot use potions to poison or kill your enemy. Okay?” Saranyu announces.

Surya and I both agree to the rules.

“This is going to be so easy,” I hear Surya say, as we get into position.

“Start!”

I pick up a sword from the floor, as does Surya. She starts charging at me, as I dodge and try my best to avoid contact. Since the start of the duel, I have only been on the defense. Surya has been slashing and hitting me every chance she gets. Suddenly, there's yellow light surrounding her sword, as she slashes at me one more time. I lift up my hands to dodge it and close my eyes, hoping for the best. I hear the gasps of onlookers around the classroom, as I slowly open my eyes. A purple shield has appeared around my hands. It is blocking the sword from hitting me. Surya’s sword breaks.

“Stop!” I hear Saranyu say, as Surya drops what's left of her sword and my shield disappears. “Celeste wins.”

I drop my sword and look at my hands. *Did I just do that?*

I look up to see Surya giving me a nasty look.

“Congratulations, Celeste, I can't believe you beat Surya!” Ratri says later at dinner. “No one could stop Surya and her yellow power slash until you.”

I intake some macaroni and cheese as I nod to Ratri.

“You don't know? Surya is Suranyu's daughter, so she must be really mad to lose to you in front of her own mother. You know, you should be careful.”

I almost choke on my food. *That means Surya is my cousin?*

On cue, I hear Surya's voice behind me.

“Hey princess,” she says, “why don't you go back to your pretty palace?”

“Shut up, Surya. You're just mad you lost,” Ratri defends me.

“I went easy on you on purpose, Celeste. Next time you won't be as lucky,” Surya says snarkily, as she walks away.

As I return to my dorm, I recap everything that has happened today. I consider the magic purple shield my hands made and the powers other students displayed. They were all so new.

I wonder if that kind of power exists in me, too.

During the next few days, I strive for better grades and fight more duels.

“Celeste, let's see your rain cloud,” Mr. Dyaus says.

I take a deep breath in. *I can do this.* I open my hand up and raise it above the plant. I wave over it and wait a few minutes. Suddenly, a big rain cloud appears and starts to water my plant. A large ‘A+’ appears on my shirt.

“Congrats Celeste! You finally did it!” Ratri acknowledges.

“You learned how to water your plant. Congrats Princess,” Surya scoffs.

Though Surya's words might have irritated me in the past, now I'm confident in myself and my powers.

Surya rolls her eyes at me and the bell rings. As everyone files out of class, Ratri catches up to me.

“Congrats, you finally have control over your powers!” Ratri comforts me.

“Thanks to you and your helpful critiques of course,” I state.

Later that night, I sat on my bed, wondering how my parents were. I miss them.

Suddenly, a loud alarm sounds. I look at Ratri with a face of panic.

“What is that?” I ask her.

“Oh no! Quick, we need to evacuate,” she replies.

I follow her out of the room, as everyone else storms the halls in panic. The students are losing their composure, while the teachers are trying to set an example and give directions.

I take a small glimpse out of the window. A dark figure the size of a giant is outside. My eyes open up as I look behind me. *What is that?*

Suddenly, I let go of Ratri and someone pulls me to the side.

“Celeste.”

I turn around to face Surya.

“I know you’re going to be surprised by this, but you’re the only one who can help us,” she announces.

I stare at her. *Is she serious?*

“What are you talking about, Surya?” I reply. “We need to evacuate before it's too late.”

“Don’t you get it? Didn’t you see how scared all of the students and teachers are?” she asks.

I think back to the teachers and their panicked faces, as they were trying to act calm and give directions.

“Ok, Surya, tell me what I need to do.”

“I heard from my mom that you have the blood of one of the most powerful celestial gods. My mom says that the reason she brought you here was to defeat the oni. The monster outside,” she discloses.

Surya continues to explain how I have already developed my powers to a level where I should be able to activate the blood of the celestial god inside me. She says I can defeat the gigantic creature outside, but I think she's just joking with me. This might just be one of her pranks.

I walk away from Surya and continue to evacuate with the rest of the students. *I couldn't have that blood inside me. There's no way.*

As we are led outside of the school building, I notice Saranyu and the rest of the teachers fighting the creature. I watch as the creature effortlessly knocks all the teachers down. Suddenly, I feel a throbbing on my cheek. Ratri looks at me, puzzled.

“What's that on your chin?” she asks, as she moves her hand up to my face.

It must be the purple mark from the time that Suranyu first appeared. Maybe Surya was right. Maybe I can fix all of this.

“I’ll be back, Ratri,” I say to her, already on my way to find Surya.

I walk through crowds of students.

“Surya!” I call out to her.

“Celeste?” she replies, turning around to face me. “What is on your face?”

“I don’t know, but I think it's connected to what you were telling me earlier.”

She comes closer, examining my mark with her hands. She lets out a gasp.

“Celeste, I’ve seen this before. You are the chosen one! I was right!”

I look at Surya with my eyes, asking her to elaborate. She sighs and says, “We have no time to waste, Celeste. Can’t you see that all of the teachers are no match for the oni? You have to summon a sword to fight the dragon with! I can help you,” she attests.

I take a deep breath, “Ok, what do I have to do?”

Surya summons a book into her hands and flips to a page with a beautiful woman on it. She is wearing a white dress and has the same mark that I have.

“Spread your arms and call out, Celeste has arrived!” she demands.

Seems easy enough.

I take a deep breath and spread my arms.

I close my eyes and say the words, “Celeste has arrived.”

Suddenly, a shimmering dust clouds my vision. The cold feel of something heavy drops into my hands. As the dust dissipates, a beautiful blue and white gemmed sword appears in my hands. It shimmers in the moonlight.

“Hurry Celeste! They need you!” Surya yells.

Suddenly, I am running faster than the speed of light towards the monster. I don’t know what I am doing, but I feel a sense of familiarity as I jump up to meet the monster. We are face to face and I land a powerful slash. The blood splatters everywhere, and I hear my classmates cheering for me, but this is not the end. The monster quickly regains his balance and lets out a loud growl. He starts targeting me and running after me, but I’m too fast. I quickly run in circles around him. He gets dizzy and loses his balance. I take this chance to run towards him. With all of my might, I summon all of my power into the tip of my sword. It creates a blue beam of light, as I slash it into the monster. The monster falls to the ground with a loud boom. I quickly move out of the way so that I am not squashed.

I stop at a distance, gasping for air. All of my classmates start running towards me. I am embraced with a million hugs, even though I still can’t believe I have killed the monster. I catch a quick glimpse of Suranyu. She signals for me to meet her in her office after the embracing is done.

When I arrive at Suranyu’s office, she greets me with a cup of coffee. Her hair glistens in the moonlight as I walk closer to her. I always admired her beautiful long hair. It reminded me of my mother.

“Celeste,” she says, “I wanted to find the chance to tell you about your origin and the power you hold. Your mother already knows, and so does your father. When you were born, there was a celestial spirit that needed a body to live in. Your parents decided to house her in you. Of course, they did it to also protect you. They thought that if you had a powerful spirit inside of you, you would never be hurt.”

“But, that's not how it works, is it?” I reply.

“You’re right. The god inside you cannot protect you from everything, because it is only a spirit. The main reason you killed that monster out there was because you were on a higher level than he was. Of course, the god helped you control the sword and gave you that sense of familiarity. But the rest was all you. So, this is my formal invitation. I would like you to study here at The Academy Of Gods,” Suranyu offers.

She waits for my answer.

“You will be able to learn how to control your powers here and-” she continues, hoping to persuade me.

“I’ll do it,” I announce.

“Really?”

“Yes,” I affirm. “I have made up my mind. If I can save people with my powers, and if I can learn how to use my powers correctly, I don't even need to choose. I want to use my strengths for the greater good.”

“Alright then,” she says. “Class is officially in session tomorrow.”

She smiles and I smile back.

It’s my turn to create my own legacy.



“Just One Line”

by Phoebe Hoffman

Sam Sean was cast as an extra in a movie. His line is the first line in the production. It’s also his only line. Hello.

As his director once said, “JUST GET IT RIGHT!”

“And, Action!”

“Uh, uh, um, line?”

“We’ve gone over this 500 times! It’s hello! It’s just one line! Hello!”

“Okay, I think I got it.”

“You better. Okay, three, two, one, action!”

“Hel-he-ha-hallo?”

“Oh come on! It’s hello! Sam Sean, what on Earth goes on in your brain? You only have one line in the entire movie. It’s hello! Never, in my twenty years of directing, have I met or worked with a person who couldn’t remember the word hello. The line is hello; have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay then, action!”

“Um, sir, I forgot my line.”



The Best Show In Town!
By Chloe Kamali

“Just Mercy”

by Ethan Yu

(A review of *Just Mercy*, written by Bryan Stevenson)

Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* is a penetrating indictment of the corrupt American legal system and a stirring tribute to the indefatigable human spirit. In this exposé of racial injustice and institutionalized discrimination, Stevenson lays bare the shameful reality of a society driven by prejudice and hatred. The book provides a vivid portrayal of the grotesque environment that Stevenson, the main protagonist, must navigate as he struggles to defend wrongly convicted black men. It reveals the seething anger and hostility towards people of color that underpins much of American society, particularly in the South, where Jim Crow laws still hold sway.

Stevenson's account exposes the venality and selfishness of those in power, from the police to the judges, whose only concern is to preserve their own status and authority. The story of Walter, an innocent man sentenced to death for a crime that he did not commit, is a searing indictment of a system that cares nothing for truth or justice. What is particularly striking about this book is its relevance to contemporary America. The prejudices and inequalities that Stevenson describes are still very much alive today, and the urgent need for reform is all the more pressing. In conclusion, *Just Mercy* is a damning indictment of a society that has failed to live up to its ideals. It is a powerful call to action that demands a reckoning with the past and a commitment to a better future. It is a book that should be required reading for anyone who cares about justice and equality.



Drumroll Please
By Elissa Becker

“Dawn of Doom”

Written by Braydon Chen & Brandon Cohen

Edited by Jayden Leung, Kevin Livian, & Sheldon Tang

“Alright men, let’s move yer stinky no good bottoms and pick up yer crossbows!”

The squad tried to follow what the commandant was saying. Sweat dripped from my forehead as I dragged myself up, though I had been tied down with the heavy metal armor. The hot sun was a blazing hell hole that swallowed up all hope of ever seeing the great King again. My eyes were burning and my whole body was in pain. I trudged over to the camp and picked up the cot that Roland was laying on. An arrow had hit his arm yesterday, while we had been hiking up the ridge. We’d taken care of the archer with dark harshness and a blade through the chest. I felt my cheekbones move upward in a worried glance. I picked him up and felt my clinching plates of armor cut deep into my simple leather tunic. I was exhausted.

“Dawn!”

I was actually afraid of killing. I must be the only man in the whole land of England that didn’t want to join up in the knights platoon. I happened to be good with a sword, that was the only reason I was here. My Ma and Pa were too poor to get me new armor. The only thing that I had that was new was my coat of arms. My dear shield that I had vowed never to drop and desert was wrapped tightly around my arm. I joined because I wanted Pa to be proud of me.

“Dawn!”

“Yes?” I questioned.

“Get over here, ya coward,” the commandant barked.

“Yes sir,” I replied with as strong of a voice as I could muster.

I trudged over the rocks to the commandant. I carried Roland on my back as he groaned in pain, a bag slung over his shoulder. It contained his chest plate, sword, and shield.

“It’s a stream. Go and fetch that fat cob! He’s laying around again, isn’t he?”

The trees danced in the wind as the whole team started to step into the dark forest. It was quiet; too quiet. The commandant turned his head to us.

“Keep your heads up,” he whispered.

We started hiking up the large mountain that contained lots of rivers. The rivers had fish jumping out of them and then diving back into the darkness.

“Remember lads, a sitting duck is a dead one,” the commandant spoke.

All of a sudden, the arrows came. *Thwip, thwip, thwip*. An arrow hit my back, but I barely felt it. I also heard a yelp, but I wasn’t sure where it came from.

“Move behind those rocks,” the commandant bellowed.

An arrow flew by my ear and I screamed. I dropped Roland behind a rock and I ran to another one. I was too big of a coward to help him. I dropped down to my knees and felt my leather knee pads block out the small pebbles. I stared at one for a moment and thought to myself. *That rock is larger than my courage*. I threw myself behind a boulder and drew my sword.

I sat down and took a deep breath. I felt as though I hadn’t taken one since the moment Mathew had been shot. I turned my head slowly. I heard the start of a man breathing his last breath. I spun around quickly and grasped my sword. There was the commandant, lying on the ground. Blood was trickling down in a steady stream leading from his mouth. A knife stab welded into his stomach, which left a gaping wound. He was gurgling blood, gasping for breath. He seemed to be clawing at the air, as though it would fix him up.

On top of him was a dead Frenchman. A sword tip was protruding ever so slightly through the back of his chest. The blade was cloaked in a bright red liquid, bathed in the blood of an enemy of which I pitied. I pitied him that he should die so young, and die for the wrong land. The enemies were swarming us at every turn and from every direction. Arrows whistled past me as I sprinted to the rock where I left Roland. He was dead, an arrow notched nicely in his leg. I cried as I ran at him, praying that I would not be trampled. I looked at his face. His eyes were staring at me, but not quite. They were staring through my head, to something behind me. His lifeless glance ended as I slid his eyes shut. I then felt a sharp pain smash into my back. Then everything went dark.

14 Years Prior:

I crawled up the tree. It was a sycamore tree. It was my favorite kind. I loved it since it had been here as long as Ma and Pa could remember. It was green and smelled like peace and serenity. The clean air entered my nose as I breathed calmly. I remember that day like it was yesterday, only it wasn’t. Pa had walked out of the house with a large knife and a chicken.

“Pa! What are you doing, Pa?” I yelled down from the tree.

“What are you doing up there?” he yelled back.

“Just thought I might enjoy myself for a while,” I called back, happily.

He frowned as he mumbled, “Make sure you don’t fall.”

He walked back to the house. Then I lost my grip. I grasped for the tree, but missed. I hit the ground hard, tumbling in the grass. I could feel tears trickling down my cheeks. I crawled to the porch, my face pale with blood.

“Get over here, you weakling! I told you not to fall!” my father hissed.

As I dragged one foot in front of the other, I prepared myself for the punishment that was sure to come.

Present Day:

I woke up with a start. I was in a small tent; the sun was blazing through it as I was covering my eyes. I was woozy and in bad shape. I could see soldiers running to their posts as the fight continued. I had no idea where I was. I crawled out of the tent. I was burning in the heat; it felt like my body was melting. I walked to the biggest tent. About twenty soldiers were laying on the ground. Most had arrows sticking out of their bodies. Some coughed up blood; others were already dead.

I saw a Frenchman entering the tent, his sword bloody and his face scarred. He was young, probably around my age. He saw me and we stared at each other for a moment. He said something and pointed at a jug of water. I was scared now. I pulled out my knife, but I didn’t want to kill him.

Suddenly, blood spurted in my face and I doubled over coughing. I heard a scream, then all was quiet. I gasped for breath and felt around my body for where the blood came from. I was perfectly fine. Instead, I glanced up and saw an ax lodged neatly into my young enemy's head. His eyes rolled back as a blood stream poured down his face. It was too gruesome to look at.

Behind him was the cob. His water jug slung around his shoulders and his chubby face peppered with blood. He looked haunted and his mouth was agape. He whimpered a little and put his head down, letting the dead man rest. Then he turned, dropped the water, and ran with his chubby mass. My mouth was open in shock, as blood poured off of me. I ran out of the tent, my feet moving rapidly.

A soldier yelled frantically. I saw a man chuck a knife at me. Swords were smashing and clinging intolerably at each other. I saw knights jump out from the woods, but something wasn’t right. They wore different armor than us.

I realized it was an ambush; we had been tricked. An enemy knight used his sword and tried to slash me in the head. Thankfully, he got hit in the head by an arrow before he could get close enough to me. More soldiers came running with injured men to bring to the doctor. Arrows rocketed by as I tried to dodge them.

An enemy charged at me and slashed me in the chest. I fell with a thud, but I felt no pain. I looked up, incredibly confused at how I was still alive. Then John came. The enemy was stabbed through the stomach. I was mortified. The enemy fell on me and my stomach sent a throbbing pain to my chest. I stayed down for a moment until I heard a scream. Then silence again.

I looked up once again, still trying to pry off the man's dead body. There was John, an ax locked in a v-cut on his chest, gooey pink and red liquids oozing from his broken body. Collapsing under the weight of the heavy ax, his shoulder fell to the ground as the ax slowly etched itself out of his head. The enemy knight walked over to me and stabbed me. I yelled. The sword cut through the flesh of the man on top of me. I rolled my eyes back, pretending to be dead. The enemy knight looked closely at me, then he turned around and joined the battle once again.

Gripping my sword, I stood up and started to retreat into the woods. I could feel my lips cracking from the coldness, as it slowly breached my body. With my left leg dragging along with my right leg, I pushed myself forward. I eventually met up with other soldiers from my squad who also retreated into the woods. They had deep cuts in their face and blood trickling down. Some wounded soldiers were limping, desperately trying to find a medic.

"Alright lads, we'll split up in twos and try to find shelter," the general announced.

My friend Mathew and I traveled through the woods. He had been my friend ever since I was strong enough to carry a scythe. The leaves rustled and crunched as we searched for shelter. Finally, we spotted a small hut in the distance. We walked to the hut and cautiously entered. Inside, we discovered two large pieces of meat, some wool cloth, and a small fireplace.

"I think we should go," I whispered nervously.

He took a moment to look around, making multiple furtive glances.

"No, I think we're safe here," he responded.

I heard some rustling in the bushes, so I walked toward the sound. Suddenly, a man with a long beard lunged out of the shrubs. He grabbed his sword and swung it at me. I closed my eyes so I didn't feel the impact. Then I heard a loud *clang*!

I peeled my eyes open to see my worst nightmare. Right in front of me was Mathew, a sword cut right through his back. I was devastated.

“I’m sorry,” he managed to say, just before collapsing to the ground.

I yelled as I dropped down to my knees, but quickly stood up again. I punched the bearded man in the face. Sharp pain entered my fist as I balled my other fist and threw another punch. He fell to the ground and held his face. He looked up at me and smirked. He grabbed my leg and dragged me to the floor. I kicked my foot at him, hoping he would let go. His hand snapped back and I turned around and swung my sword at his neck. He was decapitated.

On the ground next to him was Mathew. He had an enormous black hole in the middle of his body. His eyes were frozen wide open, as fear boiled up in him. He gasped for breath and whispered that he was cold. He then began to cough up blood. I couldn’t stand the sight anymore, so I ran away as fast as I could.

My shoes were flopped across the dirt. I started to cry while running, leaving Mathew laying on the tree. I could still hear him calling for me. I ran through the cobblestone streets of England, as the inky black waters gave a reflection of me. I saw myself; I stopped and stared. My face was full of scratches and little streams of blood escaped the open cracks. My reflection seemed different. My big blue eyes were staring right back at me. Tears started to form in my eyes, as I dropped to my knees on the cobblestone. I placed my hands on my face and started to sob.

Why am I such a coward?

After some time, I stood up and picked up my sword. I looked around for the first time. This city had been taken by the enemy a fortnight ago. It was a very dangerous place to be. I looked around and saw bodies in the streets.

I staggered through the streets as I looked for a place to stay for the night. The peaceful serenity did not last long, as the recognizable sound of stomping boots rang in my ears. Timid and afraid, I looked for an escape. I found a small house and snuck inside, but I was followed. I dove under a chair, but the enemy grabbed my shirt and pulled me towards him. I started kicking my legs, but his grip held on. He thrashed me in the neck with a wooden stick and I couldn’t get back up. He then dragged me out of the wooden house with his fellow soldier.

My body was too weak to try to escape the grip of his hand. When I tried to squirm, he held onto my neck even harder. At this point, only a little air could squeeze through my throat. I saw a fire burning in the distance and noticed soldiers fighting. This time, however, the soldiers fighting each other were on my side.

These soldiers were surrounded by the enemy soldiers, who were chanting and cheering. They appeared to be in a battle arena. I quickly realized that they were battling for entertainment purposes.

Meanwhile, the enemy soldier mercilessly pushed me to keep moving. The more steps I took toward the battle arena, the more scared I became. I saw some soldiers being removed, as they were replaced with new ones. I could tell that I was next. I was pushed into the arena and a metal door shut loudly behind me. Across from me, a man with dark gray eyes and brown hair was also pushed into the battleground.

Once both metal gates were locked, one of the enemy soldiers grabbed a flag and waved it around. That's when the fight began. The man started to sprint at me with his fists curled. His eyes were filled with sorrow and fear. I bent my knees and prepared for impact. He was getting closer by the second. I waited for the perfect moment. Then, when the moment came, I bent down and let the man fly right over me. He yelled in horror as he fell into a snake pit. French chanting echoed in the arena, as I sat down to take a breath.

Suddenly, one of the French soldiers collapsed in the street. Another French soldier ran up to him to see what had happened. To their surprise, there was a knife lodged into his neck. A horn sounded and English soldiers began charging the city. One English soldier grabbed me by the arm and took me with him. He brought me back to the English base, but I didn't last that long.

I collapsed to the ground, so they carried me to a mattress for injured soldiers. After an hour of resting, the sergeant arrived. His eyes were gray and foggy.

"You're going back to the battlefield," he said in a dark voice as he smirked.

He gathered up a group of men, including myself, and showed us his plan. He told us about charging the enemy's base. He promised that if we followed his orders, we would win the war.

We gathered up our equipment and headed out to the forest. We arrived at the enemy's base after about thirty minutes. Their flag was prominently displayed, swaying back and forth in the wind.

"Get in the dirt holes before the enemy sees us," the general murmured.

Then, out of nowhere, arrows started flying. The soldiers started panicking and I was still the same old coward, so I ran into the dirt hole. All of the soldiers were taking cover in the holes of dirt, as the general of the other army ordered

more arrows upon us. Enemy soldiers were flinging arrows everywhere. If I took a step outside, I would surely be shot. I watched as my comrades were shot. Soldiers were screaming in pain or praying in fear. Not one soldier dared to charge out of the dirt hole.

At that moment, something inside of me snapped. Without explanation, I stood up. I was done being a coward. Because of my cowardice, too many people had lost their lives. I had always been afraid of something or someone: Pa, bullies, the commandant. But I was done running away now. I was going to run towards them.

Without warning, I ran out of the dirt hole. To my surprise, I wasn't filled with fear, but rather with anger. My living comrades were gaping at me in shock. I sprinted as quickly as I could toward the enemy line as arrows flew past me. Arrows hit me in the chestplate, shoulder pads, and leather boots. One arrow hit me hard in the leg and another shot into my arm as blood poured out of my skin.

I did not stop. Instead, I jumped up to the top of the barrier of the enemy's wall. The enemy general looked at me in shock. I took my knife out of my back pocket, lunged toward him, and screamed. I screamed out all of my pain; all of the lives I had ended as a coward. I stabbed down hard on his chest, right where his heart lay. His eyes opened wide, pleading for mercy that I would not show. He fell backwards and tumbled down the barrier.

At that moment, an arrow slammed me in the head. I collapsed into the dirt, my eyes closing. I could see soldiers from my squad charging out of the dirt hole and killing the enemy soldiers. I smiled as I gurgled on my own blood. Even as the arrow seeped deeper into my skull, I smiled. I was no coward. I hadn't let my King down. I had done what I wanted to do, so everything felt right. Now, I could be reunited with Mathew and my Ma.

My eyes slid shut as I took my last breath. My body drifted on a soft cloud to a better world. A world free of war, evil, peril, and death.



The Show Has Begun
Daniel Goldberg

“Break a Leg, but Not Really!”

by Phoebe Hoffman

“Good luck with your performance, Will!”

“Thanks!”

“Break a leg!”

“Break a leg?”

“Yeah, break a leg! Do you not know what that means?”

“Oh, ok, be right back!”

Will grabs a ladder, climbs to the top, and then jumps off, pushing his leg towards the ground.

“Will! I didn’t mean it! When I said break a leg, I meant good luck! It's figurative language!”

“Too late.”

Will falls to the ground, landing on his leg.

Suddenly, the director appears.

“Will! We need you! The show goes on in five minutes! Get up and get moving! Why are you on the floor anyway?”

Will can’t speak. He tries, but nothing comes out of his mouth.

His friend Jill speaks up for him.

“Funny story. So, I told him to break a leg before his show. And he grabbed a ladder, climbed to the top, and jumped off! What goes on in his head?”

“Do you not understand? Will takes everything literally!”

After a moment of silence, the director speaks again.

“Will, I know you're in pain, but we need you. So get up, and get moving.”

“But, he can’t,” Jill exclaimed

“But I can! Do you know why?” Will questioned.

Jill and the director look on in confusion.

“Because the show must go on!”



“The Four Symbols”

by Elena Zhuang

There once lived four symbols--gods. Each of the four gods represented a different direction, with a host of powers and personalities following suit. By seniority, from oldest to youngest, they were named the following: Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermillion Bird, and Black Tortoise.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much to do as a god. The youngest, Black Tortoise, quickly became bored. He dwindled in the empty streets, watching as uninteresting mortals passed by. While his brothers focused on studying the human realm and various other monotonous tasks (according to Black Tortoise), the youngest brother began to plan mischievous pranks on his siblings. It started out small: a roll of toilet paper hung on the tree branches, messing his brothers' hair. But it quickly spiraled into burning houses in the mortal realm and even destroying his brothers' gardens! As slow as Black Tortoise was, he was still quick-witted and intelligent.

One day, Black Tortoise decided to prank his oldest brother, Azure Dragon. He flew to the East, where Azure Dragon's castle laid, and pounded on the door, demanding for an audience. His concerned brother opened the door, and Black Tortoise weaved an elaborate lie about Chimeras marching their way. Azure Dragon leapt into action, not even hesitating to question the validity of his youngest brother's words. He ordered 10,000 of his troops to guard the eastern border. Not only that, Azure Dragon also flew to the South and the West to warn his other siblings.

Silently laughing, Black Tortoise returned to his own palace and spilled his plans to his wife, White Lotus. White Lotus was, to say the least, not amused. She slipped out one night and traveled to Azure Dragon, knocking on his door and whispering about her husband's plans.

Azure Dragon was infuriated by his youngest brother's actions. He stormed to his megaphone and shouted into it, demanding Black Tortoise to appear at his palace. His screams were so loud that the grounds in the mortal realm shook, causing rocks to tumble down and cracks to appear in the earth. The mortals dared not curse the gods in public, though they did in their hearts at the heavy destruction. Black Tortoise, meanwhile, did not know of the circumstances, and

traveled to the palace, only for his eldest brother to tear him with furious, nearly incoherent words (a futile speech that Black Tortoise didn't even bother pretending to listen to).

Afterwards, Azure Dragon dismissed him with a flippant swing of his wing, and summoned his other two brothers and White Lotus for an urgent meeting. The brothers agreed that Black Tortoise had taken his "pranks" too far and that he did not show any repentance for his actions. Eventually, the three brothers decided to imprison their brother in the mortal world, living on only a land surrounded by water. White Lotus argued, trying to compromise for her husband, but in the end agreed to the plans, as long as she could stay with him on that piece of land.

With that plan in mind, the three brothers carefully planned to find Mother Nature. They wanted her to create the prison for their little brother. Once they found her, they fell to their knees, begging and begging her to build the land. Only her expertise and power could trap Black Tortoise for eternity.

Mother Nature opposed this plan at first. She didn't want to use her powers to trap, but rather to let her animals breathe. However, after hearing about Black Tortoise's wicked endeavors, she finally consented. Out of her open palms, Mother Nature let the land take root in the middle of the ocean. Magic called and trapped Black Tortoise on the land, forever. However, Mother Nature accidentally used too much power, creating more of these lands than intended--what we now call "islands."

Now, Black Tortoise could only rule the North from his small island, isolated for all eternity.

“One of Us”

by Phoebe Hoffman

11:59PM: One more minute until the big day. My big day. Midnight. That means only 18 hours until my big debut; my show. I may only have three lines and a one-word solo, but it's still my big day. I'm always prepared. I can speak and sing the entire show by memory, just in case. Anyway, time for some shut eye, as if I'll get any tonight.

6:00AM: It's 12 hours until curtain. How was your sleep last night? Probably better than mine. All night (in my head), I was acting out the entire show. Every time I messed up a line, I had to go to the script and check it. Then I had to start over. I don't know why, but I had to. I guess I'm nervous. Yet, somehow, not about the lines or the staging. Something feels off. However, at the end of the day, the show must go on! And I must perform.

5:50PM: I'm backstage. Something odd is already going on. Benjy Döof, one of the leads, is gone. He has never missed a rehearsal and wouldn't dare miss the show. I swear I saw him at the coffee shop this morning. He was doing just fine. And Montgomery Swift. She has a small role, but yet she is more committed than John Long, the other lead. She wouldn't miss this for the world. Dead or alive, she would come. But she's not here either!

6:30PM: The show has been going on with Montgomery and Benjy's understudies. Something is off; very off. Every time I hear the audience's applause, it gets quieter. Way quieter. And groaning. I hear groaning and screaming in the background. I fear that tonight, my big night, may be my last. Each time the clock ticks, I feel my heart pounding harder. Anticipating your doom is a lot more stressful than it actually happening.

“Harley! You're on in five, get ready!” Jim, my director, shouts.

My heart feels as if it's going to explode. I caught a glimpse of how big the audience was when the performance started. However, when I step out onto the stage, it is only half its original size. Now, the groaning and screaming is so loud that it makes my ears ring.

Something is deadly wrong, and one of us is to blame...



Lights, Camera, Action
By Yael Lyakhov

“Revision”

by Chen (Monica) Chen

Friendship and socialization are two things that I would consider to be vital to any human being. However, sometimes it may be hard to find a true friend, a friendship that is worth putting in the effort for and keeping. Friends, in many ways, are very different from family. You can choose who your friends are according to your experiences, standards, relationships, and life. Nevertheless, the path to finding who you really want to keep in your life is difficult. As kids, you can get to know someone for a week and suddenly call them your best friend for life. But that “life” is really just your first or second grade life. You try so hard to keep them by your side, but when you’ve finally let them go, you realize that you are so much better off without them.

As a kid in elementary school, I cycled through friendships every year. Not by choice, but because that is just how life wanted it to be. I am a very sentimental person who gets attached to people fairly easily, and when they hit me with the “Hey, I’m moving,” or “I’m sorry, I don’t want to be friends anymore,” I go through a lot of emotions while trying to make it seem like I’m perfectly fine.

In third grade, my best friend from the former two years said that he wanted to hang out with the others. That was fine. It was great that he found another group of friends. I found a girl in my class, as well, and the year went by quickly.

In fourth grade, I was on my annual agenda of hanging out with a new friend, because my third grade friend started to hang out with other people without me. I’ve known the girl since first grade. She was very kind and had beautiful dark hair that was braided in different styles every single day.

As per usual, I thought to myself, “Yes, finally! A friendship that will last forever. We will be the best of friends. We will never leave each other.”

Sounds unreal, doesn’t it? It was. Not even two months into fourth grade, she told me that she was moving out of town. Great. Now I have to find another group of friends to avoid being called a “loner.”

Congrats! You just found your new best friends. Four of them this time! Great job!

Everything is perfect. I already knew half of them to begin with. How hard can it be? We hang out during recess, draw together, play games, “dance,” chat for ages. We hung out at my house once and one girl dropped a scissor on my ankle,

making it bleed. She didn't apologize, but that's fine. It was an accident. I forgave her because that is what friends do, right? It's wonderful. It's everything I've ever wanted. A group of friends that would stick with each other until the end. Who would talk about their feelings with one another. That would laugh and cry together. It's love. It's everything anyone could ask for.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to be friends anymore."

I accompanied many of my friends to break off their friendships with the girl that dropped the scissor on my ankle. I would have broken my friendship with her, too, but I was already too attached to ruin what we'd created, even though it would have been for the greater good. I could see that even as a nine year old. A friendship that we had built for the past six months, disintegrated in a matter of a week. I supported all of them in their decisions, but I couldn't support myself in doing the same.

Our friendship continued. Another one of our friends moved away for the fifth grade. While we would go to each other's houses every weekend, we would get into stupid arguments like what glitter color to put into slime. But the arguments would always be resolved. We would hang out in school everyday while waiting for dismissal. Sounds like everything is going fine though, right?

As Covid-19 knocked on our doors and put all of us in lockdown when we were in the fifth grade, it was the final straw. It was the trigger that shattered the thin glass that was our friendship. During this time, I wanted to keep in touch and text or call once in a while. She didn't feel the same way. She basically disappeared from my life in one day.

As a teen in middle school, I prefer to try my best to keep my friendships. By choice, but sometimes life makes it hard. Since Covid-19 had taken two years away from our ordinary schooling, taken our fifth grade graduation ceremony, removed socialization, broken many friendships, and more, I was terrified to step into middle school for the first time in seventh grade. This was mostly a result of worrying if I'd find friends.

I ran up to two girls that I recognized and introduced myself again. They didn't recognize me, but that was okay. We got to know each other well and hung out at lunch. When clubs started, one of the girls and I joined the same clubs, since we had similar interests. It seems like a great idea, right?

One of those clubs was stage crew. When we started to rehearse for the musical, everything went downhill. She would begin to blame me for things

without getting to know my side. She once tapped my head lightly with a drumstick as a joke, and I tapped her head lightly with my finger back. She then said that it hurt. I apologized, but she took it further by ignoring me for the rest of rehearsal. Not a big deal. Maybe she was just in a bad mood. Many times, I would just be doing my assigned job. Someone would mess me up or interject, and she would whisper yell.

“You almost broke my arm!”

“Ugh, you didn’t put it on the tape!”

All the blame was on me, while she didn’t even try to listen to my perspective. This time, I’ve got more experience and thought that maybe she wants to make a “better” impression on others. However, it still doesn’t feel good to continue being blamed for nothing. Meanwhile, I can’t do anything because I feel bad. I removed myself from many of the clubs we had together for the rest of the year, in order to decrease the time we spend together. We are still friends and we talk everyday. Nevertheless, I can’t deny that I am more cautious now when it comes to what I share or do with her.

I have no doubt that things like this will happen again in the future. I could have stayed sad or mad, but I think I’m better off without that stress. The summer of seventh grade, this topic came up while I was in the car with my mother. She asked me if I was happier now without as much contact with that friend. I must admit that a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders. A weight I didn’t know was there before. A weight I kept on denying the existence of.

One of the things that my dad always says is that in life, there will always be those types of people. But sooner or later, I will learn how to deal with them. I will let them go and find people who are right for me. These experiences are common and have an effect on people. Whether that effect is positive or negative is up to you. Sometimes, you just have to learn that those people are not right for you. Sometimes a friendship wasn’t meant to be, and it is one that you have to leave. Even after leaving and forgiving, you occasionally have thoughts about your past, because those people will forever be a part of your story.

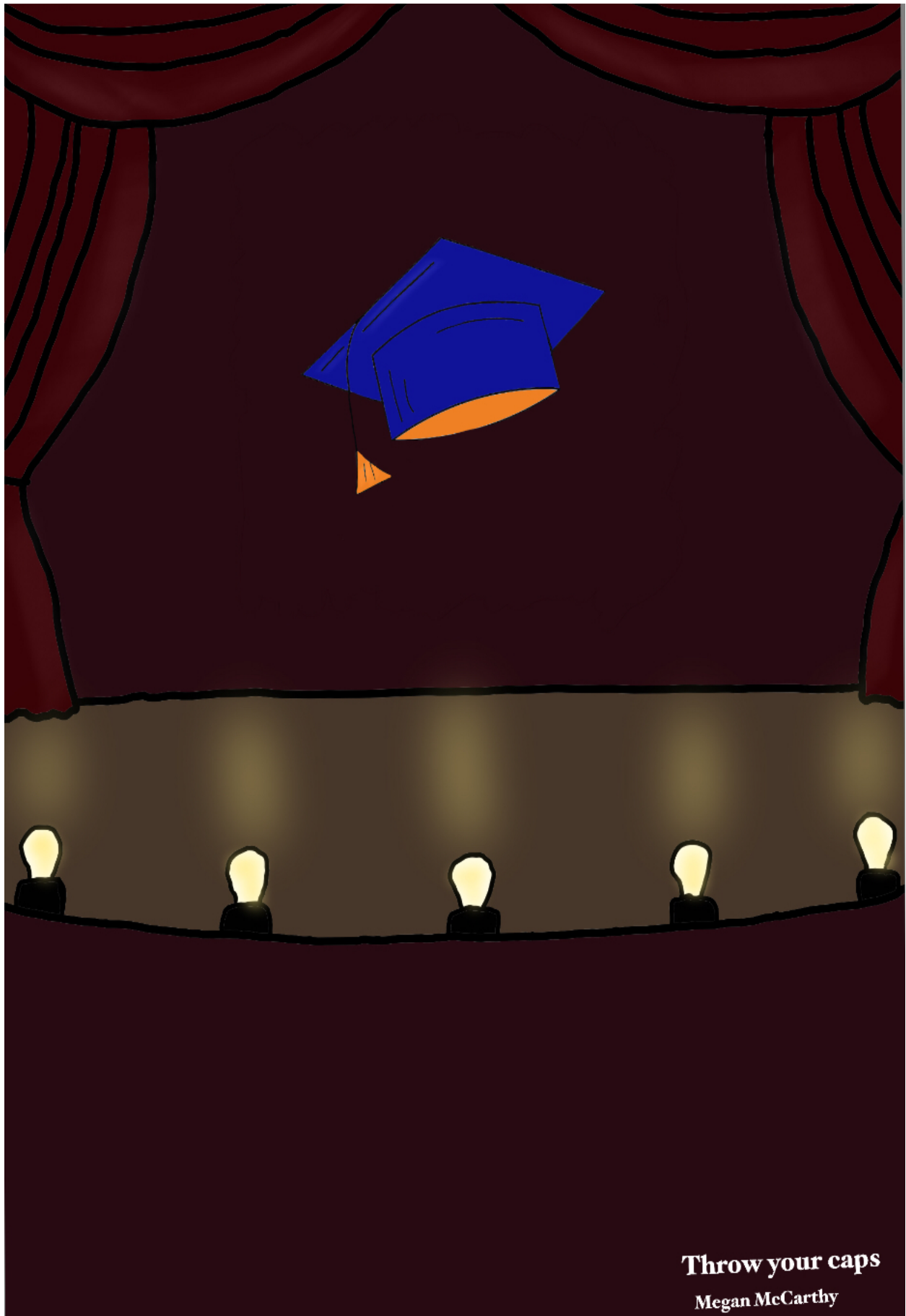
However, they don’t bother you, because you have learned that they are only one page of your story, not the entire book.



“Presentations”

by Zahara Bendelstein

People are watching, eye contact is made
Reassuring oneself that all will be okay
Eventually the chatters all come to a stop
Seats are settled in, and now one must talk
Erasing all the other things that are in one's mind
Not being able to speak quite on time
The students begin to all roll their eyes
And one's breath starts to shake
Trapped in utter despair
In the classroom, presenting is unfair
One is nervous and jittery at thought
Not a pleasant presentation, a lesson was taught
Speaking in front of a class is a lot



“Goodbye, Junior High”
by Zahara Bendelstein

Must everything come to an end
My friend
Must the caps be thrown
Into the unknown
To step into an ever so large building
It mustn't be the end, but the beginning
Children eager to leave junior high
To wave goodbye
But inside they cry
For their teachers helped them pick up their wings and fly



Finally
by Chen Chen



Carnival
By Lucas Chang