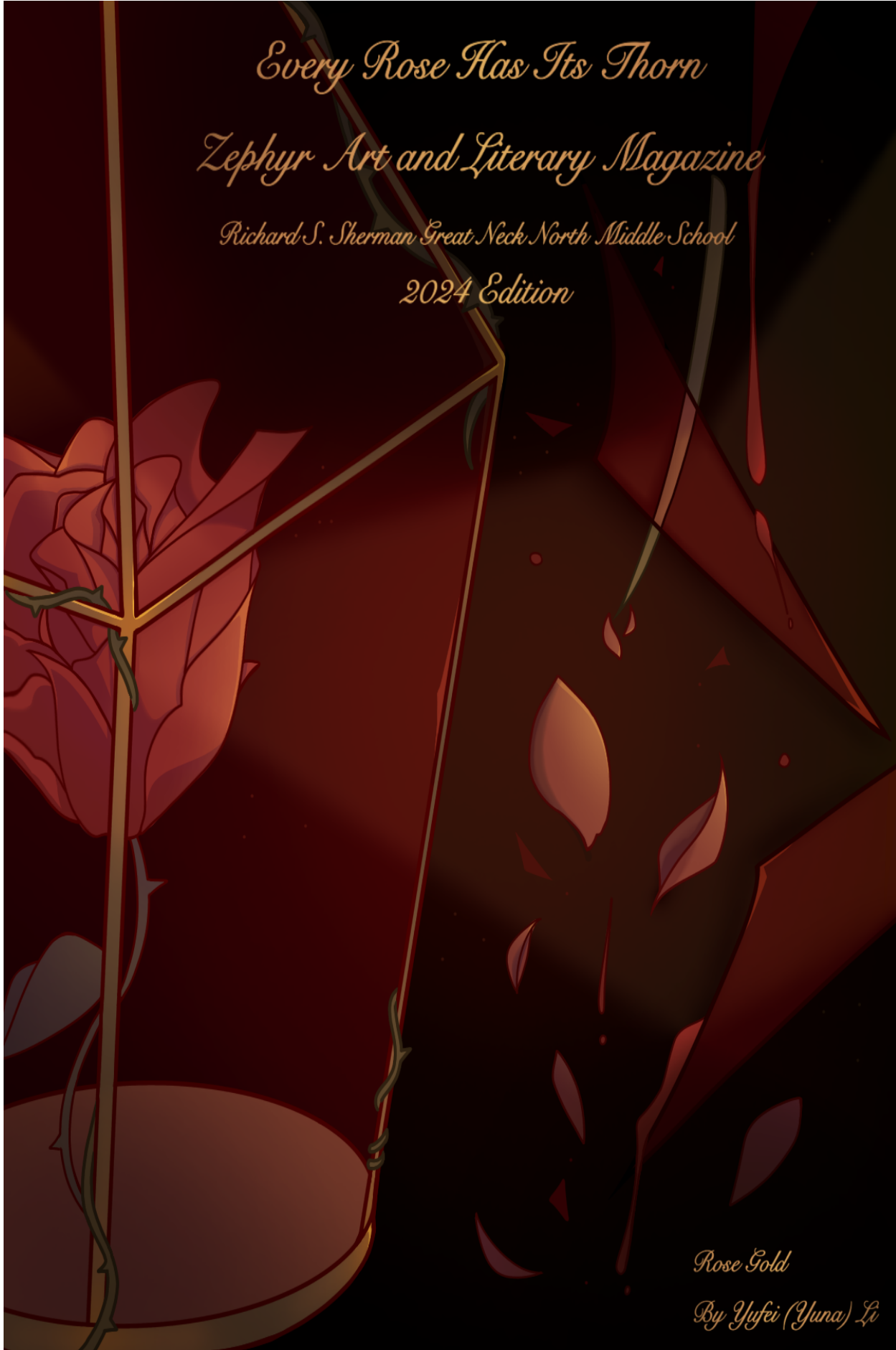




Every Rose Has Its Thorn

Zephyr Art and Literary Magazine

Richard S. Sherman Great Neck North Middle School

2024 Edition

Rose Gold

By Yufei (Yuna) Li

ZEPHYR LITERARY MAGAZINE

A Magazine of Art and Literature
2023–2024 Edition

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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

"Every Rose Has Its Thorn" was imagined by the students of the *Zephyr* club. This famous proverb is generally used to teach an important fact about human nature: nobody is perfect. Similarly, there is rarely a good or positive circumstance that is not accompanied by some aspect that is negative or unpleasant, and vice versa.

Our members wanted to highlight the duality of nature that usually presents itself within a piece of writing. The poems and short stories found in this year's magazine incorporate challenges, conflicts, questionable characters, bad times, but also good ones, as well.

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“The Rose of Love”

by Paige Klein

if love is the sole action
that can drive out the hate
why must it be so difficult
to love

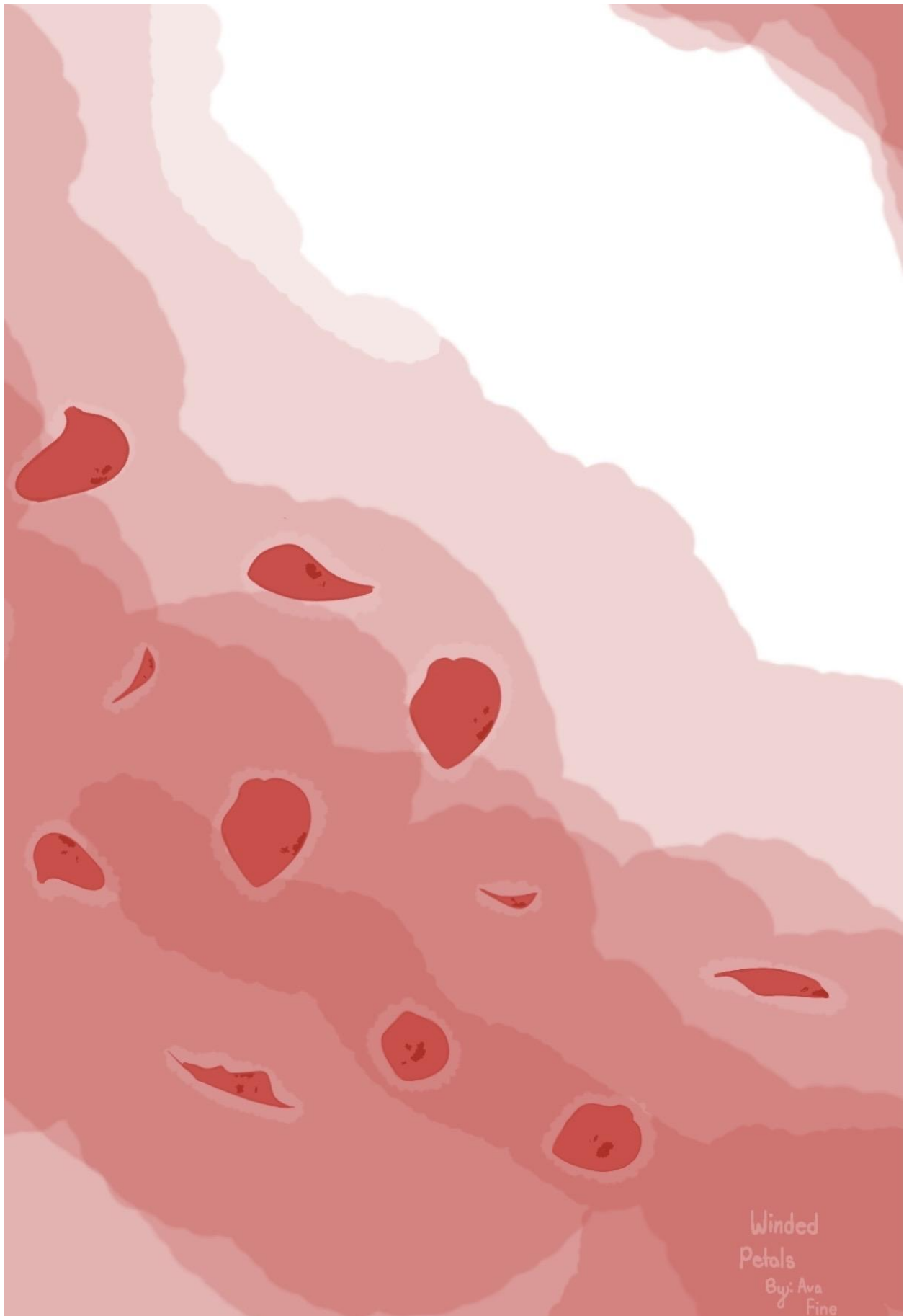
the rose that is love
is thorny and sharp
yet the beautiful bud
that flowers at its core
is enough for the sadness
the doubt
the hardships
to vanish
if only for a time

they say
every rose has its thorn
but look upwards
instead of keeping your eyes
downcast
and you will find that
what every rose has also
is a most lovely blossom

“Balance”

by Lila Halpert

Every day has its end;
every enemy has a friend.
Every society has its faults;
every start soon will halt.
Every cub has its claw;
for every indifference, there is awe.
Every joy must also mourn,
for every rose has its thorn.



“Trampled Petals”

by Amelia Chang

In times of trouble we turn to those we trust,
those that we hold dear with no delay.
They're worthy of our trust and they're wonderful in all ways,
because of their innocence and dedication to the things they do.
Until then, no one, not even you,
understands how much you value them until they're out and about.
Sometimes, they simply walk away and shut you out.
Other times, they drag you through twisting hallways trailing you behind,
crying for help, feeling confined.
One single betrayal,
one insignificant, blank glance down at you—
like you're unimportant in everything you do.
It's like a blow to the chest,
thorns on a gorgeous rose slicing your vulnerable flesh.
Every rose has its thorns,
every flawless, and exquisite one of those pure blossoms has a place,
a place where it can take everything away, where it can transform.
It can slice your skin open, prick and prod just as easily as a wrong turn,
a step in the wrong direction can burn,
can crush everything you've ever loved,
just as easily as a person can crumple delicate petals, how they're shoved.
All is hurtful, twisted, torn—
There is no rose without a thorn.

“Words, He Abseiled Down to Us”

by Kylie Deng

That fateful day when all was proved wrong and right
For eternity and a day or two, He, words, had been
And so the world fell unknowingly into an ink-black blight
‘Twas our words against others’ words, a war no one would win

Believe me, one should not fear blood as much as words
Because what was trampled upon was not loved ones nor oneself
Was it the riches He stole, close friends He had purged?
Nay, ‘twas one’s pride, one’s image, one’s reputation, not one’s wealth

His pen was wielded in His nimble fingers as lethal as a spear
Its tip, black, and cruel, and sharp in a single, fatal point
He twisted the words in a way that evoked naught but fear
And He only wondered why no one else had bothered to join

They were afraid of His brilliance, as much as they were afraid of the truth
He brought both with a strike of his pen, a ruthless splash of ink
Some admitted He was sparking wild flames, most didn’t want to
They had to believe Him, as there was nothing else they could think

The chaos words have brought about, silent and yet so strong
The beauty they have gifted us, weaving tales with perfect rhyme
Words are a rushing stream, we simply get pulled along
Let us revere in the fire-like light that is each “Once Upon a Time”

For when people truly die, it is when their ideas are forgotten
With Him around, curved marks on paper become memories inscribed
Entire personalities, thoughts, are ensured to remain spoken
Pay attention to wholesome, empowering stories and try to ignore the lies

“We don’t need a list of rights and wrongs, tables of dos and don’ts: we need books, time, and silence. ‘Thou shalt not’ is soon forgotten, but ‘Once upon a time’ lasts forever.” – Phillip Pullman

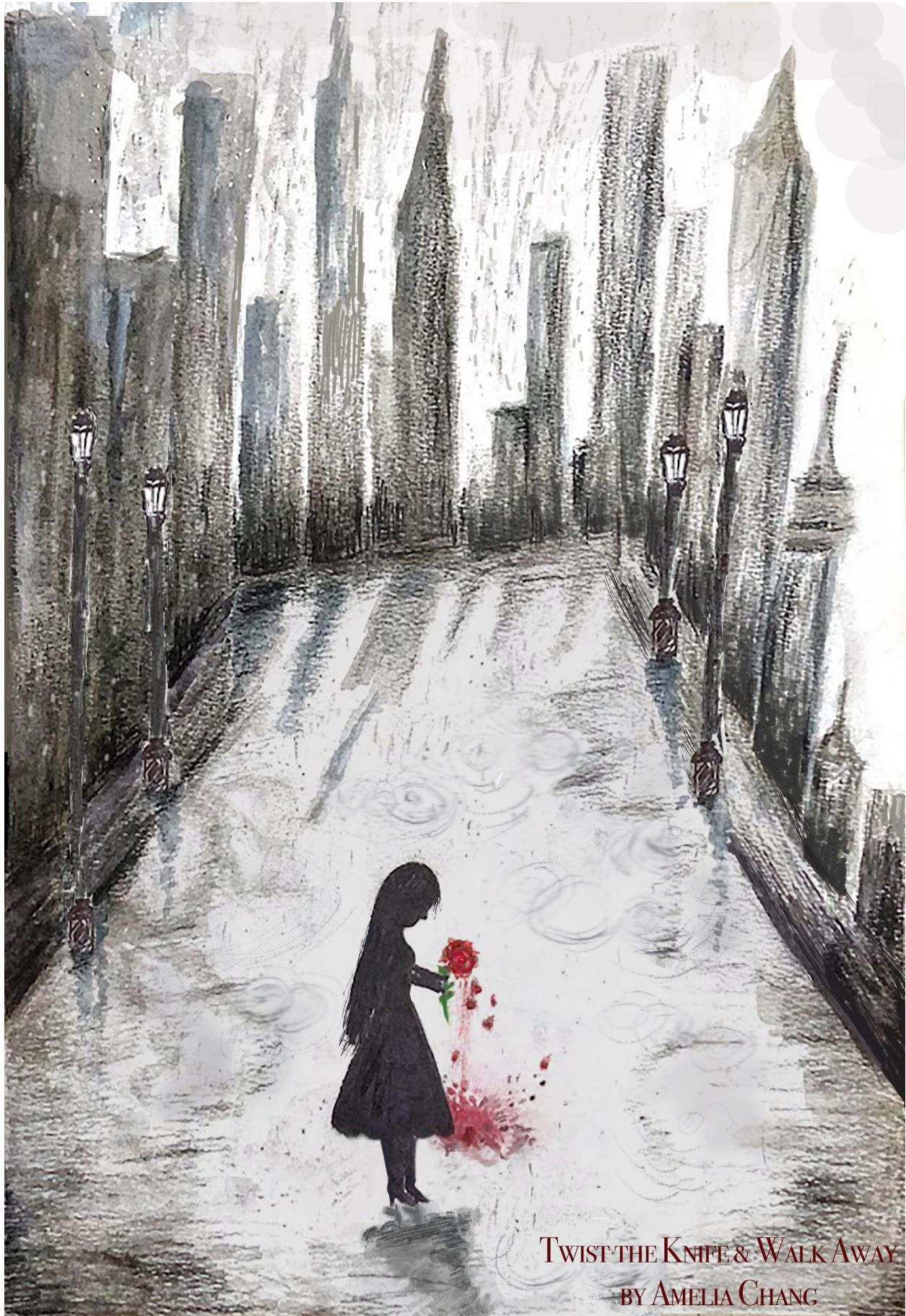
“Thorn and Rose, Intertwine”

by Elizabeth Guan

A girl is a rose
roses are beautiful
Gaze into her eyes,
See an abyss
If you dare,
step closer,
feel the warmth of her lips
With damp petals,
illuminated as the sun is held aloft
With colors of wine that intoxicate
as the moon approaches
calling the beginning of the night

A girl is a rose
roses have thorns
Thorns of emotions
Shadows of their wrong-doings
Memories of Pandora’s box,
the devil’s sweet grin
Crushing others,
by ensnaring spells
The act of becoming senseless,
blind for love

A girl is a rose
roses have deaths
Leaves dry and fold
like the golden ages of youth
The winter peeks in,
petals fade and fall
And as the beauty wears,
all that is left
are the thorns,
The true state of a rose



“Wholes”

by Sophia McLaughlin

The sun peaks up from its bed behind the clouds, rays shining down upon the earth, making their way through my bedroom window. Earth's sun is much smaller than the sun back home, its rays dimmed by clouds and pollution. Back home, we called our sun Askia, meaning light in our language. The strong rays and powerful heat would burn the earth to a crisp. There was a reason why many people died on hot days of the year. People would often find the bones of loved ones, like sketches of who they had once been.

Just thinking of Askia makes my heart burn with sorrow and memories that have been buried deep inside of me start to pour out as salty tears. I wipe them away. I've already cried countless tears for the loss of my friends, my life, and the one person who kept me going. The one person who, despite what was happening in his life, still cared for me when no one else did. When I had been cast aside like something broken, something unwanted, he picked me up again and held me. He made me feel alive. And now that he's gone, I feel dead again and a gaping hole has been left inside of me. My entire race was wiped out, and now I have to live on earth alone, with no one to guide me.

I push those feelings aside like I have been for the past six months, two weeks, and four days. I push the covers aside and roll out of bed like I do everyday. I walk over to my closet, where dresses of many different shapes and colors hang, waiting to be worn. Women on earth are expected to wear dresses with bright colors, and skirts that are long and feminine, with curled hair that looks gorgeous without effort. At least that's what a girl named Marilyn was wearing. Her full name was Marilyn Monroe, and her face seemed to be plastered onto every establishment and talked about by everyone on earth.

I pulled the blue dress out of the closet, and put it on. I flattened out any creases I saw and pulled the rollers out of my hair. As I slowly tugged them out, beautiful, full curls started to form. I brushed them out with my fingers and sprayed some hairspray on them. On my dresser sits the one thing I have left of my life before earth. A pendant. From him. From Charles. I pick it up and feel the cold metal against my warm hand.

If anything happens, know I will always love you.

His words haunt me as they are repeated over and over again in my mind. Does he still love me even if I can't see him? Even if I don't feel his love, is it still there? Engraved on the pendant is the royal family's crest, who were killed like the rest of our population. On the back of the pendant, the word *Kalua* is engraved, meaning love. I put it on like I do everyday, and hope that wearing it will bring him and his love back to me.

On my way out, I spotted the newspaper sitting next to my white heels. I bent over to pick it up and read the title. The New York Times was printed on it in swooping cursive letters and its title in bold black ink. May 16, 1953 is the date. As I left the apartment building, New York City surrounded me like a blanket of smells, sounds, and sights. Honking horns, people talking, food from all kinds of places followed me as I walked down the street. Buildings tower over me like giant blocks of steel and concrete. Mostly men walk down the street, going to work or getting something to eat. I sometimes see couples or families, mothers holding their childrens' hands. As I walk further down the street, I see a young couple, barely as old as me. They walk down the street holding hands, talking to themselves with smiles on their faces. Their happiness makes me jealous, makes me question why they get to be together but the love of my life was taken away from me. I wonder why God made them happy and made me sad.

As we go our separate ways, I realize that more and more things remind me of Charles. People on the street, everyday things, all make me feel like he's somewhere in the world, and just out of reach.

The diner's not too far from my apartment, but if I'm one minute late for work Rob is not going to be happy, so I race as fast as I can through the crowd of people. As soon as I get to the door, Rob is waiting for me like an eagle waits for its prey.

"I'm on time," I tell Rob, whose face remains stern.

I check the clock on the back wall, which proves me right.

"Barely," he mumbles, "and take off the necklace," he finishes, as he runs off to the kitchen.

Rob was very strict with jewelry. Ever since Stella dropped her ring in a customer's food, jewelry has been banned from the workplace. I got away with wearing the pendant by tucking it under my dress, but I forgot today. Its purple-gray color is pretty noticeable next to my blue dress. I put my purse down where Stella has hers, and place the pendant down next to it. The first few customers start coming in and the work day begins.

The diner is always packed. Mostly men, they flock to the diner like ducks to bread. They usually come before work or at lunch break, wearing their fancy business suits and talking about their jobs and kids. Their conversations are shallow, and so are their lives. Are there any good men left in the world? Or did I have the last one?

The door opens again, and a man with a pale suit walks in and sits at an empty table. He doesn't wear a hat like many of the other men, and doesn't talk with them too much. His name is James, and he's a regular at the diner. Seeing him makes the day feel lighter, a reassurance that everything is going to be ok. Ever since I first saw James, I felt a kind of connection to him. When I first came to earth, I felt like I was in the middle of a raging storm, spiraling out of control. My entire race was wiped out, and I was alone in a sea of emotions and surrounded by people I couldn't trust. Charles used to be my anchor, my constant in a place full of uncertainty. But now he was gone, and I was spinning around in a tornado of grief and confusion. When I met James, he felt like another anchor. Another constant in my life. Like a replacement for Charles. But could anyone really replace him?

"Hi there, James," I say, as I walk over to his table.

"Hi there, Marilyn," he says back, with a smile on his face.

He's always smiling.

"The usual?" I question.

"Yes, please," he returns.

"Coming right up," I say, as I head towards the kitchen.

After I take his order, I look around the diner. Every table is filled and customers are waiting to take their seats. It's going to be a long day of work.

I'm exhausted by the end of the day. All of the customers were served, and the diner just closed. I had the chance to say goodbye to James as I left, since he usually stays with Rob to play cards after the diner is closed.

I walk home in silence, the street mostly empty except for a few men, probably getting home late from work. I turn the corner and find my apartment building. As I walk in, I can't shake the feeling that I forgot something. But that's impossible. I only brought my purse, so I can't have forgotten anything.

A short while after I got home, a knock came at the door.

"Who is it?" I ask, as I take off my heels.

"It's James," a muffled voice says from the door.

Surprised, I open the door. James is standing there, still wearing the clothes he wore at the diner. He isn't smiling. He always smiles. In his hands, he holds some kind of chain.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"You left this at the diner," he replies, as he opens his palm to reveal what he is holding.

Charles' pendant.

My pendant.

"Rob gave me your address, so I thought I'd bring it to you," he admits.

I take it from his hand, and hold it in mine. The memory rushes over me again. It feels so distant, like I'm looking at someone else's life instead. The once happy memory has been tainted blue by the sadness of grief and loss. I stare at it longer, unable to take my eyes off of it.

"Thank you," I say, finally, looking up at James.

He looks at the pendant for a moment, and then looks at me again.

"Where'd you get it?" he asks, his voice monotone, his eyes transfixed on the pendant.

"A good friend," I reply reluctantly, unsure if I should be telling him this.

His gaze resembles a search light, trying to find something in the dark. What is he looking for? The question makes me uneasy, as I quickly close my palm around the pendant.

“Good night,” I say, as I start to close the door.

“Kalua,” he says, suddenly.

I stop. I turn around and slowly open the door again.

“What did you say?” I ask, staring at *him* this time.

“Kalua,” he repeats, slightly louder.

I am shocked. I thought I was the last one. Who is he? Has he been hiding this whole time, just like I have? Am I not alone? I try to read him, try to see who he is—

“If anything happens, know I will always love you,” he says, as tears fill his eyes.

The world is silent. Time is frozen. It’s just me and him now.

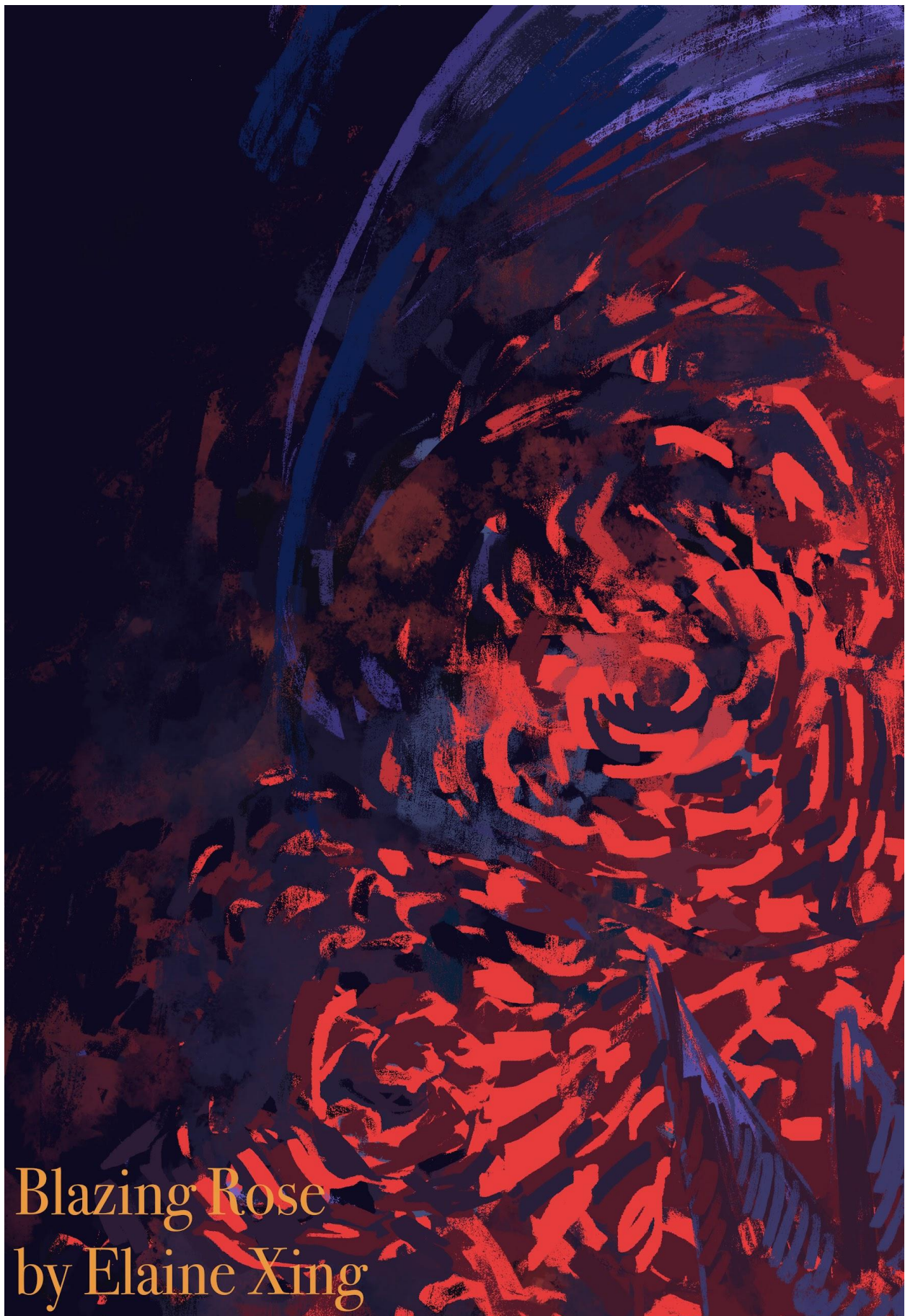
Him.

Charles.

I run into him and embrace him, like he’d be taken away from me again if I did not. It’s been so long since I’ve felt him. His skin, his kindness, his love. I’m no longer stuck in the storm. I know I’m not alone and I have someone who will hold me, who will care for me, who will put me back together again if I’m broken. Of course James felt like a replacement. He was the same anchor, just found in a different way. More memories come again. *Happy* memories. I used to grieve at these memories. I used to push them away and hide from them, but now I pull them towards me. I embrace them like I’m embracing him, pulling them back into my life and feeling them. Feeling the happiness of them.

Our love is like a candle. It burned out, but it came back stronger. I can feel it now that I’m close to him, close to his heart. I can *feel* his love for me, pouring out of him and into me. Loving him is like having candy, tasting the sweetness of it as the sugars fill my body, filling me with a kind of euphoria I’ve never felt before.

I feel like I’ve finally found my place on the earth. My place in the universe. It’s with him. It’s being together with someone that I know loves me and someone who will be with me until the end of our days. Even though we’ve both lost so much, we gained each other again. And that makes us whole.



Blazing Rose
by Elaine Xing

“A Thousand Years”

by Sabrina Wu - Hu

Giant slopes of bark, of brown,
Tall, the golden trees stand upon the ground,
Encircling me, dancing around me,
The whistles of the wind matching their ritualistic whisperings of being free.

For, it's the trees, the trees,
And their golden leaves,
Slowly drifting downward like I'm lost in time,
Golden confetti falling into each other like a perfect rhyme.

The violin sings,
My simple brown cottage far from my phone's incessant pings,
In this world where quiet isn't common,
But all at once not rare,
Smelling of fresh air.

For, it is my closet asylum,
Full of that silent golden hum,
The only place where I don't want to die,
The only place where I let myself cry,
And let strewn upon my face, these ambivalent tears,
Because this is the only place of mine safe for a thousand years,
There I lie.

But when rain falls, it's too heavy to lift,
Drip, drip...

Killing the golden trees with this acid rain,
Noose of flesh holding me tight like the guardian angel who I threw away,
I let it fill me with its awakening burning pain,
Violent red streaking my face as I lay,
Erasing this world now void of light,
Sobbing as the deluge brings me to my plight.

It was safe for a thousand years,
But a year too many floods my home with tears,
And after the tears dry,
Let the gasoline fill this wonderland,
I finally light the match in my hand,
And let fire reign.

“FALALALOOPSY”

by Misha Segal

Pandemonium. A word that describes my life. We learned that word in 7th period English class. Mr. Manova is probably the nicest teacher alive. But apart from that class, life doesn't love working out for me. I'm in nine different clubs that I didn't even sign up for, including Math Olympiads. Yeah, *Math* Olympiads. My worst subject. Even worse (which I thought wasn't possible after being put into Math Olympiads), I've been given a role in the fall musical. By the way, I can't sing, I can't dance, and I can't act. Also, I'm afraid of public humiliation.

“Almond Eyes”

by Kylie Deng

(Inspired by “Irish Eyes,” by Rose Betts)

My mother says I have almond eyes
Glow with the gold of a wandering mind
They reflect the world when I look towards the skies
And even more so when I let them cry

My father says I have sun-streaked hair
Brown like the bark of an oak somewhere
Like the satin petals of a blooming plum
Like the soil where there grows a chrysanthemum

My nana says I have happy feet
Strong like the bamboo, graceful like their leaves
And I dance to my own song of truth and soul
Like the vines that entangle an English rose

My sisters say I've a restless mind
I twirl and weave and I'm hard to find
Like a song from the wind that you caught one day
I get under your skin 'fore I slip away



Blood Red
by Kylie Deng

“I Wish”

by Noah Nerayoff

I wake up. I brush my teeth. I make my bed. I go to school. I come home. I go to sleep. I wake up. I brush my teeth. I make my bed. I go to school. I come home. I go to sleep. It's the same thing every single day.

So why is today different? In the morning, my alarm didn't go off. But I woke up just in time to catch my bus, and the extra ten minutes of sleep I usually waste felt very refreshing. But my brother, who usually uses my alarm to wake up, was late to school and got detention. Refreshed, I scored 100% on my test and had a clear mind all day. My brother, on the other hand, was very tired and slept through his exam and failed.

During lunch, we got onto the line together. I asked for the last chicken sandwich and my brother was left with macaroni and cheese. He is lactose intolerant and had some bad stomach issues afterward. After school, my brother wasn't allowed to attend tryouts and didn't make the track team. I, on the other hand, did make the track team.

I felt like today may have been my best day ever. My brother was feeling horrible and had his worst day ever. I wanted this day to never end. I then considered the meteor showers that were scheduled for every night this week, and I remembered how last night I wished on a meteor that my luck would change. I made another wish for this good fortune to last forever, and then climbed into bed.

The next day went even better for me, but my brother's luck grew worse. I figured there must be something linking our luck, so I did some research. I discovered that for every action there is an equal reaction, and this was just an example. That night, I wished for everything to return back to normal, despite how much I longed to keep this amazing luck. The next morning, my alarm didn't go off and I slept in. This resulted in me being late to school and getting detention.

That was when I knew the curse was over.



Caged Rose by Shira Khoda

“The Distance Between Us”

by Lily Kase

When I was little, I had a family away from home; a group of friends in school so close we stuck together like glue. We used terms like, ‘BFF’ and wished upon dandelions that we would stay close forever. And for a while, it seemed like we would. I mean, we were so close that our parents became inseparable, as well. Looking back, I know we were all innocent, too innocent.

Eventually sports season would come, then summer, and new classes along with newer, cooler, more exciting friends. Some of us were left behind. Of course, time passed and everyone came back, but not completely. Once or twice a week a few of them would abandon me for their shiny, new friends.

As I got older, we grew further apart. Not purposefully. There were no big fallouts or fights. Just some of us were more athletic, popular table material, or nerdier than the others. For a while, the distance between us was so small. Whenever I saw one of them, I pretended it wasn’t there. I acted like I didn’t have new friends that I maybe even liked better and had more in common with.

After one of us moved, it seemed impossible to remain that close. Even though she hadn’t even moved out of state, it was more distance than I once thought possible. We all tried to maintain the friendship. I mean some of us really, really tried, but I wasn’t that innocent anymore. So as I felt the distance stretch from yards to miles, I didn’t fight as hard as some of the others. Maybe I should have.

I don’t regret it too much, because soon afterwards the rest stopped trying, too. It wasn’t cool for boys to play with girls anymore, so they left. It wasn’t possible to be popular and play with nerds, so they left. So I made new friends, but still I can’t help but wonder...if I hadn’t stopped trying, would we have managed through Covid? I think that the separation may have been inevitable though, we were all too different.

During Covid, we were worlds, galaxies, debatably universes away. Zooms were our only source of communication, and most of them I was forced on by my parents who were still attached at the hip to theirs. Some of the Zooms were fun, I have to admit. Others were boring. Too much time, too many phases had passed since we’d last spoken. So we had nothing in common anymore. We had little to talk about.

By the time Covid ended, more of us had switched schools, and others just weren't my first choice to hangout with anymore. When we'd see one of them in public, my mother would ask me why I didn't go over, but it was hard to explain. I just don't fit in with them now. Maybe it's because I'm an old soul, or maybe it's because I've stopped trying to be likable. You either like me or you don't, and sometimes I doubt they do.

Now, at 13 years old, we rarely talk or even text. The few that I still see sometimes wave to me shyly in the halls of school. Once or twice a year though, we all get together. And on those nights, there are no nerds or popularity schemes, no clicks, no vendettas, no fights. We are all just five years old, sitting on the blacktop being 'BFFs' again.

“Nothing at All”
by Amelia Chang

Tell me,
what is love?
Is it a gift to whom you profess your devotion,
a promise that they'll always have room in your heart?
Or is it a melancholy whisper of a dream,
a longing wish sent to the heavens at 11:11,
a fantasy of heartwarming sweetness?
Or is it the most enchanting and charming of all,
deceptive and bitter, yet seemingly so lovely to the heart?
Is it the passion that envelopes an artist's strokes;
the penned writing of a broken poet?
Or does it often mean nothing at all?

“Who Are You?”

by Kylie Deng

to be able to fully understand anyone is a gift,
to see past the unveiled truth that lies beneath one's mask,
a powdered visage of fabricated stories and myths
that make separating truths and falsities a daunting task.

this ceramic visage one flaunts as a trophy to be won
shows nothing but unwavering confidence and arrogance.
i ask; how does one like yourself see your reflection
and not feel the need to deliver a blow to the blaring annoyance?

however, a fist only goes so far, even with reason
if one does not understand the weight of a carefree lie,
if one cannot comprehend the message hidden
beneath the cold, empty sneer of a mask, where one cries

automated responses, they become a daily routine
and no one seems to notice how meaningless we now are,
how our smiling porcelain faces crack as the voice inside screams
not understanding the lies painted on top of each other

at least some of us can make a difference on this tiny, cruel planet
but you cannot take credit for someone else's powerful song
look in your reflection, what have you done? who have you met?
then you will truly see the face you've boasted for so long



“Career Day”

by Sophia McLaughlin

I know that my family is poor. They always have been. Dad’s paycheck barely covers the expenses of food and shelter, so it surprises me when Rex comes out of the bathroom wearing nice looking clothes. His shirt looks freshly ironed, even though we don’t own an iron. His belt looks polished and new, definitely not from dad’s closet like mine is.

“How do I look?” he asks me, combing through his gelled hair.

“Gorgeous, darling,” Mom runs up to Rex, showering him with compliments before I can say a word.

Dad also appears and gives Rex one of his special ties.

“Do you think I look gorgeous, Leo?” Rex looks toward me, making mom remember she has a second son.

I can see the happiness fade from her face as she looks at me. I’ve always known she was more fond of Rex. He was charming, attractive, and in her eyes, more than I’ll ever be.

Sometimes I wish she could at least pretend to notice me. Or like me. Maybe once in a while she would notice my grades in school, or the science competitions I win. She could at least acknowledge me for once instead of only being a great parent for Rex. Always showing up to his soccer games. And his basketball games. And his lacrosse games. She could at least try to pretend that I wasn’t the unwanted twin.

Dad checks his watch, a present from his office. A smile creeps across his face, “It’s almost time.”

My anxiety rises and my hands get sweaty.

Mom turns back to Rex, the happiness returning to her face, “I think we’re ready.”

We walk out of the house and into the packed square. Every male and their parents are there, wearing their fanciest clothes. Only then do I realize I’m the only one who wasn’t given a special outfit.

A few years ago, Tillie Weatherman tried to stand in the square during Career Day, as she was known to fight the laws against women in the workplace. After the patrols removed her from the square, she was never heard from again.

But today is my Career Day. All of the work I've put in, getting good grades and winning those science fairs, all for this. A chance. A chance to do something great, to finally be worth something. Maybe for once Mom can see me without having a dreadful look of disappointment on her face. Maybe if I can make a change in this world, she'll finally see Rex and I as equal. Maybe.

Several heads turn when Rex walks by. I wasn't the only one who knew we couldn't afford his outfit. Most of the other people in our sector can't either.

The square is completely filled by now, as the televisions all around us turn on with a bright flash. President Gray's face is on the screens, his neatly gelled hair resembling Rex's. He calls himself president, but he's more like a king. His word is final and there is no one to stop him.

"Good afternoon citizens of New America," he begins, his booming voice echoing through the square.

I've heard parts of his speech from past career days, but never as loud as now.

"Today is a very special day for all of you. You, along with the rest of the young men at the age of 17, are going to be given their careers," he pauses, presumably for applause, but instead the crowd is silent.

"Approximately one week after this day, you will be asked to move to your designated sectors and begin your designated work. This year, the job offerings include manufacturers, matchmakers, educators, merchants, and a new job, scientists."

Scientists. That sounds perfect. Something that could make mom proud. Something that could make a difference in this world. Something I know and like doing. I let my mind wander for a moment, just imagining what I could do as a scientist. Maybe I could be the one who finally solves the nuclear crisis. We could finally make all of America livable, like it once was, before World War III and the atom bombs. Before radiation poisoning claimed the lives of billions.

President Gray starts to speak again, drawing me back to reality. In order for that to happen, I have to become a scientist first. I have to.

“Additionally, for the first time in ten years, the government has decided to reinstate the elimination,” he continues.

A gasp fills the square. Maybe even the whole town.

“Overpopulation and overcrowding has caused the government to reinstate these laws for the foreseeable future. Those who have been selected will be escorted from their homes and taken to the elimination center in one week,” he pauses again and the crowd grows silent.

“Now, for the most exciting part, to read off the names,” he announces.

It’s crazy, because President Gray actually seems happy. As he reads off the names, I glance at Rex. He looks back, flashes a quick smile, and turns away just as fast. Even if Rex isn’t nervous, I am. This day defines the rest of our lives. I’ve been even more nervous since the mysterious man showed up at our house a month ago. I saw Mom, Dad and Rex talking to him by the front door one morning, like kids keeping a secret. It got even more suspicious when they shooed me away until the man left. I tried eavesdropping on them, but they were too far away. I sometimes wonder if Mom, Dad, and Rex do keep secrets from me. They’re all so close. It’s like they’re the family and I’m just an observer. Watching them live loving, happy lives.

I look at Rex, in his fancy shirt and fancy hair, and I start to feel sorry for him. He’s getting all dressed up for today, but for what? I know what he’s like. What he’s good at and bad at. The career system knows that, too. It pains me to think this way, since he’s been so good to me throughout my whole life, but I just know he won’t get a good job. He’s always been the only one who has seen me, made me feel appreciated. But I don’t think the career system likes him as much as me or the people in our sector.

“As in previous years, the elimination will be read first,” my mind wanders down another dangerous path.

What if Rex gets eliminated? No, that won’t happen. Will it? He’ll find a job. He’s got plenty of talent. He’s strong. And...

President Gray starts to read off the list, which seems to be under the camera. It’s strange that a piece of paper decides who lives and who dies. He reads off names very slowly, and takes long, painful pauses in between. Gasps and tears and shouts are heard from around the square. But every time the cries get louder, so do the televisions.

“That is all for the eliminated,” he states.

I can feel the relief passing through the crowd after he says that. He grabs a new piece of paper from under the camera, a part of it showing. I’ve never seen paper before. There are barely enough trees for air, so paper is banned in most places. Well, all places except the president's house. He likes to bend the rules for himself sometimes.

A man comes up behind the president, whispering something in his ear. His face is covered by shadows, but he still seems familiar. The president turns his attention back to us, his expression the same.

“It seems I have forgotten someone,” he takes a pause, “Leo Caddel.”

No. No, no, no.

Everyone is dead silent, as shocked as I am. Heads turn and eyes stare. The air is sucked out of my lungs, and my body freezes. My breathing gets faster, louder. I turn to Rex for help, guidance, a look of reassurance. Something. But he gives me nothing. He doesn’t even look at me. I feel like running. Running away from everything. Running with the little air I have left in my lungs. Soon they’ll be empty.

I think of the man that came to our house. Talking to everyone but me. Did they know? Was he there to tell them I was getting eliminated? Everything is getting more confusing. My thoughts are racing, trying to comprehend what is happening. Surely there is something I can do. Something I can be useful for. Surely there’s a job for me. There’s got to be.

But maybe Mom was right. Maybe I really am worthless. Maybe she was right to favor Rex. At least he’s useful enough to get a job.

The rest of the reading goes by in a blur. More people’s names are read, and this time some people are actually happy. They’re probably just happy to be out of this sector. Almost any job is better than farming.

After the merchants have been read, everyone has a job. Except Rex. Did they forget about him? Of course, there’s still one career left.

“Now, for the last career. This career has been specially made for someone in this sector. Someone in this very square has the capabilities to improve our society in ways we’ve never seen before. This very person has the capabilities to help stop our ongoing nuclear crisis,” President Gray boasts.

This doesn't make sense. I should be the one getting that career. That wasn't made for Rex. He barely knows what an atom is, and he's supposed to help solve the nuclear crisis? But I could. I can. I've made theories and ran experiments about the nuclear crisis. I've presented my findings at multiple science fairs. All Rex has ever done is play sports. I've never seen him get higher than a B. This should be my career. This is my career.

Anger builds inside me as Rex's name gets called as the great scientific mind of our time. And I'm left to die.

The week passes by painfully slow. No one talks to me, not even Rex. My life replays in my head as I try to figure out what happened. What went wrong? It doesn't make any sense. The more I think about it, the more confusing it gets.

Mom and Dad are showering Rex with gifts, telling him how much they love him and how proud they are of him. I wish they could have done that at least once with me. At least once before I die. Now I really know how much they love me. They probably wanted me to get eliminated, for all I know.

It doesn't take long for there to be a knock at the door. A tall man is there, his hat shadowing his face. I realize that it's the same man that was on television. The man that likely told the President to eliminate me.

"It's time," is all that he says to me, but it's enough for me to understand.

He gives me time to say goodbye, but it's not like there's anyone to say goodbye to. Mom and Dad give me a hug, but don't say anything. It's the first time they've shown me that much affection. I guess they have to pretend they love me in front of the government.

The only person who really says goodbye is Rex. He gives me a tight hug as my eyes start to tear. It feels wrong that this will be the last time I see my brother, so I hold him a little longer.

"I'm sorry," is the last thing that he says to me.

The walk to the train station is quiet. The man doesn't seem in the mood to talk. It's not like there's anything to talk about anyway. Except for what Rex said.

"Why do you think Rex said he was sorry?" I ask the man.

There was no harm in asking. I didn't want to spend the last few moments of my life in silence anyway. The man thinks for a moment, taking his hat off. I can see his face now.

"Could possibly be because of the mix up," he states.

"What mix up?" I question.

The man stops walking, "You don't know?"

That's when I stop walking, "What?"

"The mix up. When I first came to your house about a month ago, I was to inform you and your family of the special career we had made for your brother. However, there had been a mistake. We thought you were a scientist. But, your parents explained that you, Leo, were not the one we were looking for. Rex was indeed the true scientist. Must have been a simple typo. So, we made the switch," the man explains.

Satisfied with his explanation, he continues walking. I stood there, stunned. My parents really do hate me. They're willing to lie to the government because of how much they despise me.

"Follow me please," the man seems unphased by this shocking news.

Well, I guess it's only shocking to me. I notice him still walking, not caring that he's escorting someone to their death. It annoys me how careless he is. How careless everyone in my life has been. As a last effort, using the little bit of life still inside of me, I stay put.

"No," I mutter.

He turns around, staring me right in the eyes, his once lifeless ones now showing the slightest hint of anger, "Excuse me?"

"No. It's not right. I was supposed to be a scientist. My parents tried to trick you. Don't you see? They hated me so much that they wanted me dead! Can't you see that? Couldn't you see how little they cared about me? This wasn't supposed to happen!" my words come out frantically, like prey pleading with its predator.

A small part of me hoped that my words could convince him to do the right thing.

"Now is not the time to make up stories," his tone is serious. "You either come with me willingly, or I will drag you to that train station, dead or alive. Do you understand me?" he demands.

No, no, no. I start to panic when I realize that there is nothing I can do in this situation. The decisions have already been made, even if they aren't the right ones. I am going to die today.

Tears started to trickle down my cheeks and anger starts to boil up inside of me. What did I do to deserve this? Why couldn't my parents just be happy with me? What was so special about Rex? Now, because of them, I'm being sent on a death train that I wasn't

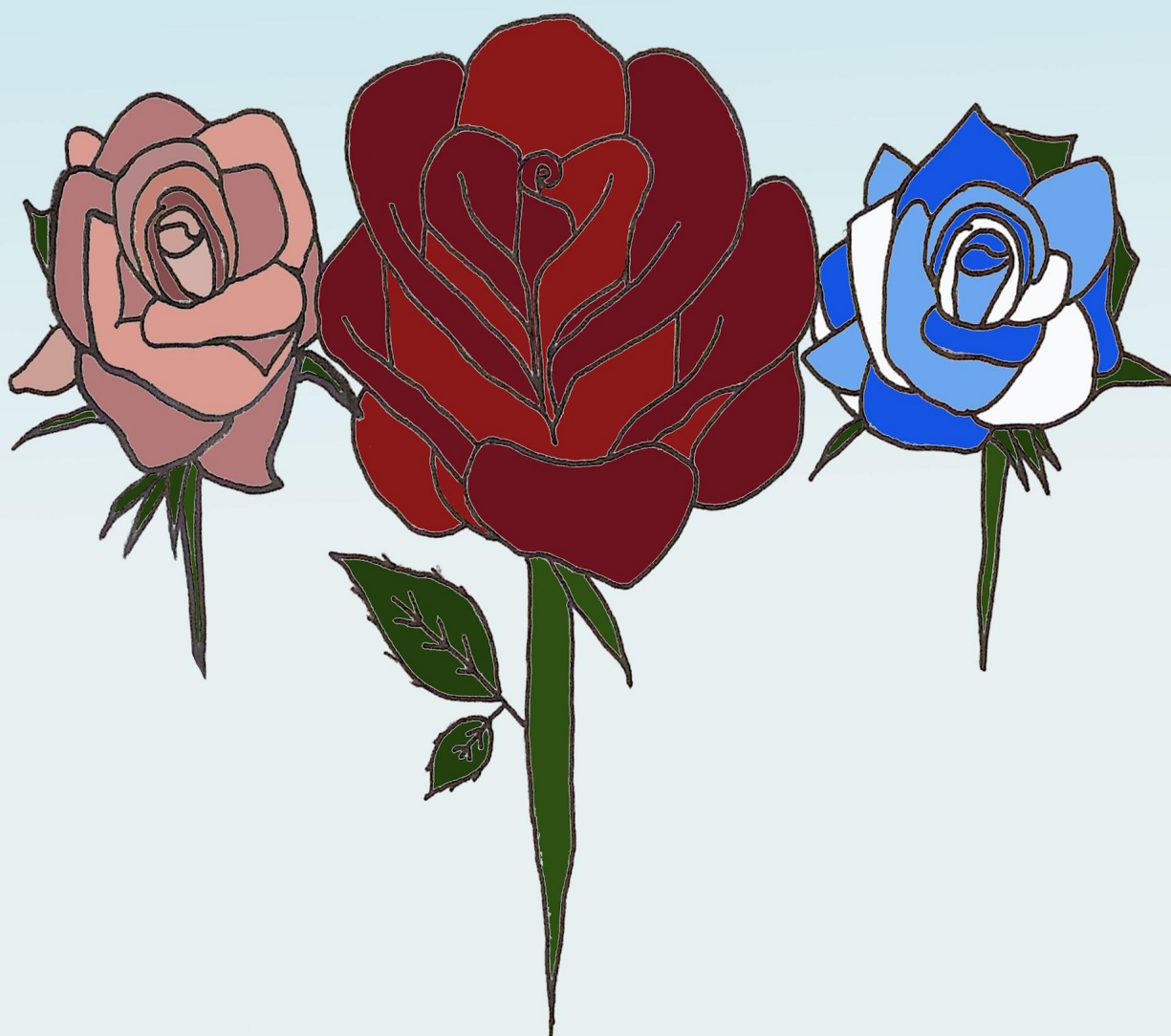
supposed to be on. This time, instead of just standing there, I do something about it.

I run. Just like I wanted to in the square on that dreadful day. I run as fast as my weak legs can take me, fast and far from everything. Far from the man, far from my sector. I wish for the thousandth time that I was Rex. I wish I could have his body, his friends, his love. I wish I could feel just an ounce of the love that he feels everytime he walks into our house. And for the first time, I feel angry towards him. His charm, his looks, his perfectness that I can never have. For the first time, I have a new perspective.

This is all his fault. It's his fault Mom and Dad love him more. It's his fault that our names got switched. And it's his fault that I have to die.

As I keep running, I think about Rex and Mom and Dad, and Career Day, and life for the last time, as a sharp pain explodes down my back. Electricity shoots through me. My nerves feel fried, my heart feels worn out, my brain fractured. As I collapse on the ground, the shock still feels its way through me. I think about everything one last time. How worthless everything was. The science fairs, the grades, all to try to impress Mom, to make her and Dad love me. All to waste. Everything that I did, everything that I tried to do. It was all for nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The last thing that I see is the man's annoyed eyes, his fat hat, and his black taser. Then everything fades to black.



The 3 Roses
by Sunny Wang

“Inspiration”

by Sabrina Wu-Hu

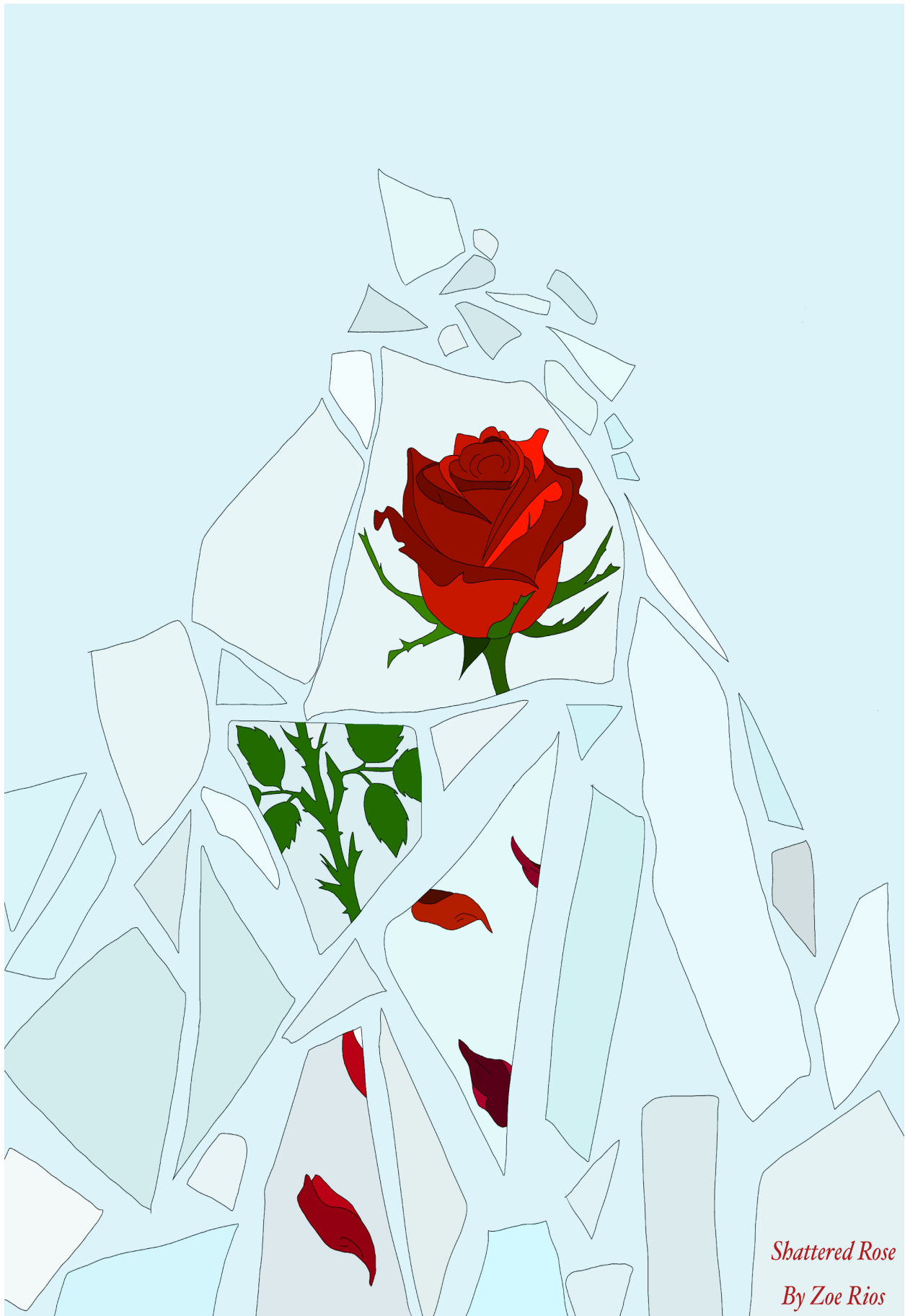
Inspiration, it was such a confusing concept with its shining white bright yellow in the glowing blue sky of the mind. It followed me around dancing with the spurs of creativity, lending it light like the sun igniting a fire. The fuschia and bright oranges of creativity's limber blended with inspiration's yellows to form a blaze in the dark void of my night, my mind. That's how it was.

My world, full of distant nights, stories lighting up my skies, falling like stars, like angels to their grace, with their grace, and as I eventually learned, from their grace. The shooting stars fell to make my dream alive, my one wish arrive. Yet in the cold darkness, even in the warm summer lights, no star fell upon my page. As the years took their wages from the sun, it faded, leaving my days shrouded in mist. The years, satisfied, but the day not, forced my days to steal more from my stars, until their flames flickered and they tumbled into my world.

As my mind would slowly take in the light, it tried, it cried as it morphed the fire into sounds, into syllables, into ink. For either the stars bursted out of my head onto my page, burning holes through my dark words, lighting up my paper, or unlit words fell from my mouth to my pen to my paper with no light, just a cold faded memory of the sun on a foggy day. Inspiration burned only one way, lighting up only my stars. So as desperation and isolation cemented me in my world, I shaped my lights. I shaped them even as they burned through me. It seemed I was the one being shaped. And even as my forests burned down, I still tried to mold the fires into letters, into words, into pages, more and more stars falling, dying...

Yet in the cold embrace of night where sleep fights its way out of my desperate grip, the words call to me. Stumbling in the dark creaking room, I slowly creep into my chair. Listening to the crickets chirp, the branches dancing, the moon twinkling, I find a single remaining ember of my sun. Sitting upon my black chair, covered in the blanket of night, I find my words ablaze, no stars, no wish, just words. In a moment of solace, not molding anything into ink, not lighting my words on fire, yellowing my paper, I let my stars die, my wars subside.

Though my nights, no longer starry, my world cold and dark, I find more light. The light of words. I let the grim reaper reap what I've sewn. No, I haven't fallen like the stars did, for they fell down the drain, in my rain. I have fallen down a broken rabbit hole into a hurricane's eye...into a word wonderland.



Shattered Rose
By Zoe Rios

“Takeover”

by Raquel Friedberg

I look in the mirror
A dead girl stares back at me
She looks pathetic and weak
Suddenly I'm in my 11 year old body

And my ball of guilt
Has been revived
Diffusing slowly
Somehow eating me alive

I'm losing my control
I'm exceeding insane
Before I know it
All I can hear
Is her silent
Deadly pain

They urge
For my smile now
Pray it crawls
Its way back up

But even after
All I've tried
It's still pershing
Deep inside
My cold and empty
Lifetime

Though I found
The wrinkled up map
To where it may be

I don't believe
In *my* world
It will be
Returning back to me

But maybe in my coming life
Will this ongoing knife
Begin to dull and compress
My sorrow and distress
For all that's in
Her heartache
Of reality

Despite all this
Storms pass through
No matter how painful
Or cruel
They appeared to be

I refuse to let my regret
Take over
What is left inside of me

The obstacles I faced
And the challenges
That attacked me
Have been set free
And forgotten
Along with the girl
Who stared back at me



“Posie’s Party”

by Danielle Katz

Posie had always wanted a sister, so she could have a best friend. So obviously she was excited when she found out that her parents were adopting a daughter. Her name was Rosie and she was eight years old. They started to decorate a room for her. They worked and worked until that room was perfect.

When Rosie came, Posie noticed that her parents did not care for her as much. They got less and less stuff for her and spent all of their money on Rosie, not even caring about Posie. She was so lonely that she went to school early and visited her friends' houses just to stay away from home. Her parents quickly realized and they started to do even more with Rosie instead of talking to Posie.

On September 20th, it was Posie's birthday. She chose to have her party at a rock-climbing place. Before climbing, the group meets two coaches named Ava and Jordan. Ava and Jordan go over some general safety rules and explain different climbing techniques. Then, the coaches review practice falls. This is when climbers go into poses and fall on the mat to make sure that they will be unharmed should they actually fall from the wall. Lastly, the group does some stretching together.

Once everyone is strapped into a harness, it is finally time to climb. Posie gets to go up first. She is surprised that her spoiled younger sister isn't given this honor. She approaches wall number 30 with confidence. All of the walls at the venue are numbered based upon their difficulty level. Posie, unlike her sister Rosie and most of her friends, is a skilled climber. This wall is actually 30-feet-tall and considered high difficulty. More difficult walls like this one have a chair that can be used for resting approximately halfway up. At the very top of each wall is a red button that makes a *ring-a-ding* sound when tapped. Climbers tap this button to cue the trainers at the bottom of the wall that they are ready to descend.

Posie has never climbed this particular wall before, but she has climbed walls that were slightly lower and easier. Posie slowly began to climb, traveling from rock to rock. Before she knew it, she had made it to the 4-foot mark. A few minutes later, she had made it to the 6-foot mark. She was being extra careful that she did not step on the wrong rock, which would make her fall or have to climb

backwards to fix her error. She did this until she made it to the 12-foot mark, the 14-foot mark, and the 16-foot mark. Every once in a while, she would look down to see how far she had traveled and how much she had accomplished.

By the time she reached the 18-foot mark, she was getting nervous. She was afraid that she might never make it to the top. However, she was reminded of the break chair at the 20-foot mark. That was when she regained her confidence. She had been climbing for years, so she knew that she could do this. After all, she decided to have her birthday party at the rock-climbing place so that she could show off to her friends and her parents. For once, she would be able to have the spotlight instead of her sister Rosie.

A few minutes later, Posie reached the little rest platform connected to the wall and pulled herself onto it. Posie took a deep breath and looked down at her friends. They were all smiling up at her. She rested only for a minute before continuing her climb. She had witnessed climbers rest too long, and then they weren't able to continue up the wall. Posie did not want this to happen to her.

Posie just kept telling herself to climb two more feet. And each time she reached another marker, she told herself the same thing again. She breezed through the 22-foot mark, the 24-foot mark, and the 26-foot mark. Posie was almost to the top of the 30-foot wall. She could barely contain her excitement. For a moment between the 26-foot mark and the 28-foot mark, Posie looked down. She got a little bit dizzy and scared herself. Her whole body froze up. Posie was afraid that she might not be able to continue.

After another minute, however, she conquered her fear and continued climbing. A few more minutes passed and Posie finally reached the top of the wall. She curled her fingers over the ledge and felt for the red button. She quickly found it and pressed it. As expected, the button made a *ring-a-ding* sound. Posie heard cheers from below.

She looked down and noticed her friends grinning faces. However, when she looked towards the corner of the room, where her parents had been sitting, she noticed that they weren't even looking in the direction of the wall. They were bending over and talking with Rosie, who appeared to be crying. How could they miss this? This was the single most important and exciting climb Posie had ever taken, and her parents were more concerned with her little sister.

Posie began to slowly descend the wall with the help of Ava, the trainer, who was on the other end of her harness. It was hard to hide her disappointment.

Posie and her friends climbed for about another hour and then her dad called everyone over to the party room where they would have cake and open up presents. Posie noticed that there were two presents in the corner of the room with Rosie's name on them, and that really upset her. It was her birthday, so why would her sister get any gifts? Then an employee brought out a birthday cake with the candles already lit. That was when Posie realized that there was another smaller cake on the tray with her sister's name on it.

Posie lost it. Even on her special day, her sister needed to take the spotlight!

Posie started screaming at the top of her lungs and everything went dark.

Suddenly, Posie was being shaken awake by her mother.

"Posie, wake up! What's wrong?" mother questioned.

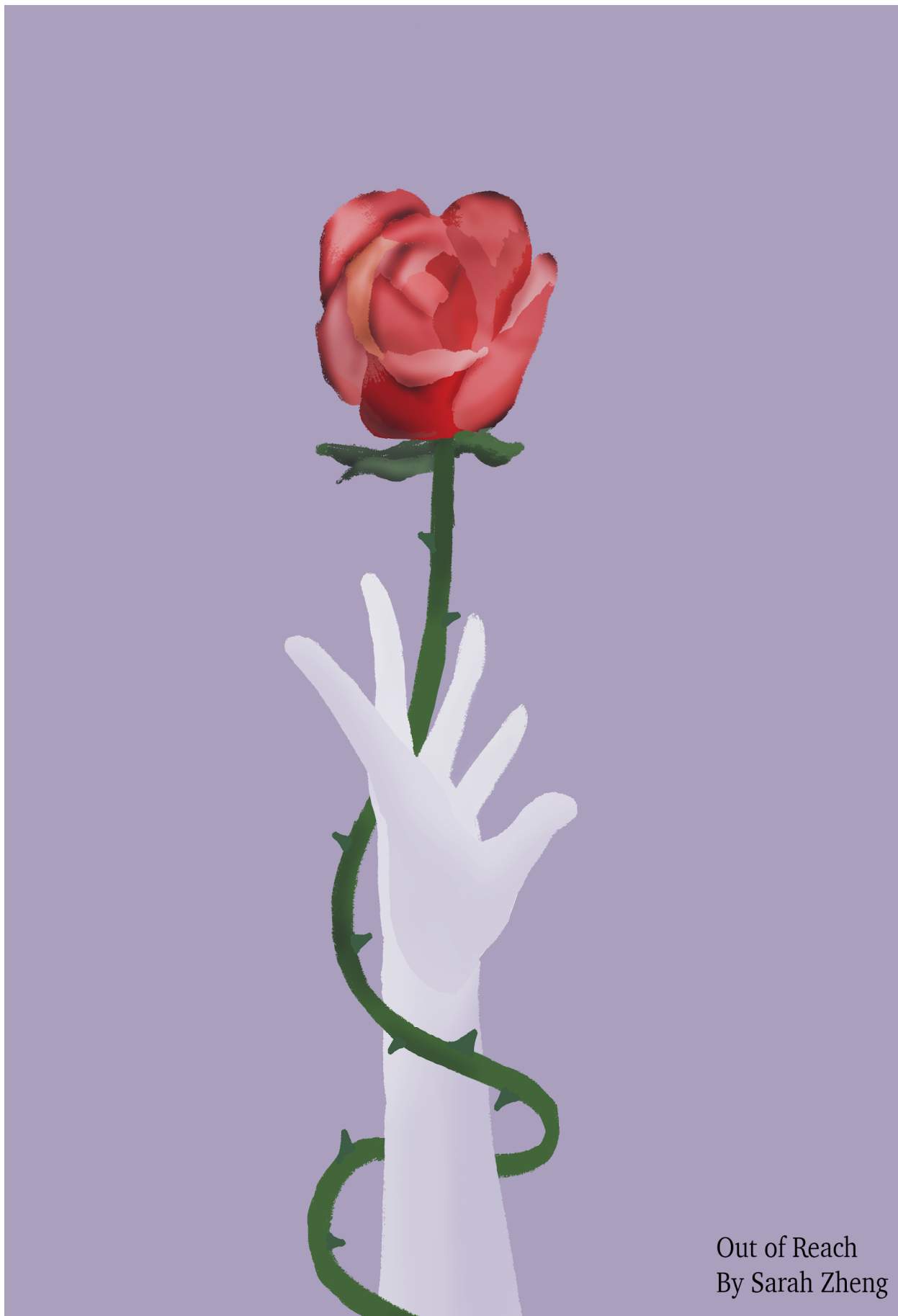
"I've had as much as I can take of Rosie," Posie confessed.

"Who's Rosie?" mother questioned, confused.

"What do you mean? She is my spoiled adopted sister," Posie uttered.

"You're an only child, Hunny. You don't have an adopted sister. Wow, you're really burning up! You must have a fever," mother determined. "Maybe you should stay home from school today."

It had all just been a bad dream. A nightmare really. That was when Posie realized that she actually enjoyed being an only child, and she never asked for a sibling ever again.



Out of Reach
By Sarah Zheng

“The Glass Garden”

by Amelia Chang

Outside the glass wall,
the garden looks beautiful.
It's flourishing and thriving,
flowers are blooming,
streaming into the ether.
A bright future is seemingly in store.
But do we see the thorns protruding from behind that glass?
Do we see the hours and years put into this garden?
How the garden had once been a dead, barren wasteland—
but how it had picked itself up and carried on.
How its own roses had poked and prodded it.
How delightful the roses look.
How gorgeous a sight.
How hurtful the truth.

“Broken, Like a Promise”

by Amelia Chang

I'll always be too childish for you,	
like I never grew up.	So I'll slaughter this defining part of me,
I'm always too much of an idiot,	because who am I
such a fool to think	without those that I love?
you'd like me just for who I am.	What would my life be
I'm always too ignorant,	without those that I love?
good for nothing.	Nothing,
I'm always too emotional, too <i>dramatic</i> .	because I'd be broken.
I'll never be your favorite,	So to anyone
even if you still matter most to me.	who will take a moment for me,
Why am I still hoping, you ask.	who will give me just a fleeting glance,
Because I need you.	goodbye, farewell.
I need you too much.	



The Seed

By Carol Li Sun

“Wait”
by Kylie Deng

Around you, wind whipped, sharp and clear
Around you, a flute is played, its player's hands sheer

And the night sky above that's seen too much
And the night sky above that warns against rush

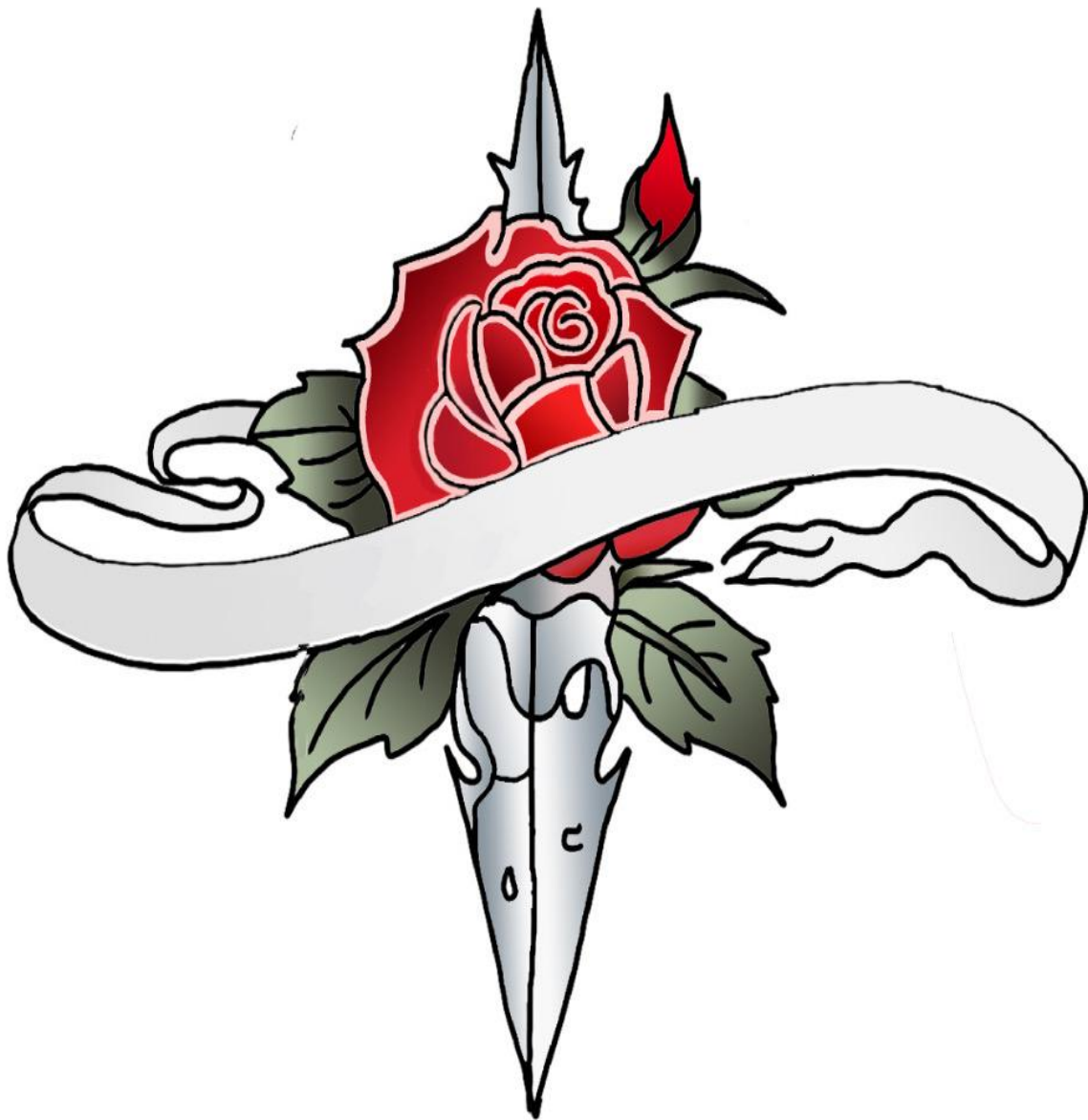
And in the sky, there hangs a full moon
And in the sky, it sings like a great bassoon

And there above, the moon gleams, knowledgeably bright
And there above, it pours into a river fine, silver light

And surrounding, stars twinkle understandingly
And surrounding, they make way for the moon, it seems

And right below, leaves glisten, touched by the stars
And right below, crickets chirp, bathe in lights from afar

And you are there
And you are there, still — no —
Waiting



The Red Sword
Lilly Orenstein

“A Goodbye”

by Megan McGirr

I looked around the meadow. The beautiful golden sky cast its rays down onto the dew sparkling on the grass. The birds sang out in chirps. Their beautiful songs echoing throughout the meadow. For once, I could have a break. My duties as an advisor to Crystal could wait for now. I had free time for once.

Free time felt so weird. I was in the midst of a war. My friend was just killed. I had just discovered that my friend's murderer was my dad. It was all so much. Life just kept hitting me with one issue followed by another bigger one. I hadn't had any time to think and actually process. My friend was dead. My best friend turned out to be my sister. My mom is most likely dead. My sister might be in a relationship, which means she'll leave me.

And to think...I once had a normal life. For four years, I lived with my sister and my mom. We lived well in a small herd in the north. Nothing ever happened there. Until one winter, when my mom started panicking. I didn't understand why. It was just a snowstorm. *What's so bad about it?*

But then, my childhood innocence disappeared with the blink of an eye. I was forced to leave with my sister and travel to an unknown herd to be with new pegasi. I hadn't known them; they weren't family. They were strangers. When I finally reached the new herd, Crystal had greeted me with open wings. Crystal took a special liking to me, even though I was angry, quiet, and hated everything and everyone. If anyone tried to get close to me, I would push them away out of fear of being hurt again.

I didn't realize how much of a mistake that was. I let my past stop me from discovering my true friends. I was happy when I finally let go of my old self and freed myself from a cage of hate and self loathing that I didn't realize I had locked myself in. Life was getting better and I found my family, my home. I had a purpose now. And I wasn't about to let that purpose fade. I fought for everyone in my new home and would die for them all. Even though I sometimes acted harshly, I cared about everyone there.

I thought about this all before being pulled from my thoughts by a tap on my shoulder. It was my sister Cloud. Cloud's glowing white mane flew around in the gentle breeze. Her fur had a slight gold tint. Her eyes shone bright with joy and love, like always. My sister was always the strong one, not letting anything bring

her down. I didn't understand how my sister could handle being so happy all of the time, when there was so much hate and spite in the world.

"Hey, Crystal said to come get you," Cloud announced.

"What for?" I questioned.

I didn't want to leave this moment of peace. I prayed that my sister would say nevermind. But, of course, my sister insisted.

"I'm honestly not sure, but she said you have to come," Cloud persisted.

Sighing with hidden annoyance, I nodded, "Fine."

I let my sister lead me out of the meadow. I glanced back for a second, wanting the peaceful feeling the meadow brought me to come back, but it did not.

We wandered through the forest, the trees casting down their large shadows. Looking up, I saw the gold glow from the sky illuminating the tops of the trees. It was beautiful.

After a few minutes of walking, we arrived back at the base camp. Many pegasi from the herd greeted me. I nodded to them. As I approached the large hut that housed Crystal, I became more aware of how everyone was behaving. They acted more in awe of me. *Why?* I didn't do anything. Maybe Crystal would explain. I entered the hut.

"Hello Starlight," Crystal greeted me.

Crystal stood tall, her powerful aura intimidating to most, but not to me. She was a beautiful pegasus. Everyone wanted to be her mate, but she denied them. She'll never take a partner, for reasons that even I do not fully understand. Because Crystal was the daughter of Moonstar, she had a golden glow over her. In the dark, she was fully gold or white. I thought her golden form looked better. She really appeared like a goddess.

Cloud awkwardly stood behind me. I wondered if she'd be dismissed or stay for whatever Crystal had to say to me.

"Hello Crystal," I responded.

"Cloud you can leave now," Crystal announced.

Cloud nodded as I watched her exit.

It must be important if Cloud has to go.

"How have you been, Starlight?" Crystal asked.

"Fine," I answered.

"Hopefully my news will make your day better," Crystal paused.

"And what is that news?" I asked.

“Well, you solved the case of who murdered Glory. You cleared Winter's name. Fought bravely in the war. Came back from horrors and trauma. Did your best to be the greatest warrior. You care about this herd and would die for it, yes?” she questioned.

I know where this is going.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Good. I want to offer you Glory’s position as lead general of the herd. I know it’s a lot, but I trust that you can handle it,” she admitted.

“Is that why everyone is looking at me differently?” I questioned.

“Yes, they don’t know for sure, but they assume you’ll be chosen for this role. And you can have this position if you say yes,” she urged.

“Morning Glory should have it. She was Glory’s sister,” I protested.

“She’s too heartbroken. I already asked her and she declined,” Crystal responded.

I paused.

Is this what I want?

I mean it was, but it was Glory’s role. I know she’s dead, but still. I couldn’t just take over her position so soon. But then again, I could honor her this way...while protecting the herd from evil. I sighed.

“Yes,” I quietly uttered.

“Then I bestow upon you the role of lead general of this herd, my second in command, my advisor,” she declared.

I stood proudly, as she hugged me. This was it; my goal was finally complete. I felt a tear roll down my cheek. I hadn’t shed tears in a while. I felt all of my emotions flood out. Happiness, sadness, anger...everything I had bottled up.

This was the final end to old me. With this role I’ll start anew. I’ll be kinder. I’ll be more trusting of others. It will be hard, but I will try my best...for my friends, for my family, for Glory.

Goodbye old me.



“The Legend of the Woman Shrouded in Rose”
by Kylie Deng

A maiden cloaked in a ruby red
Mysterious, beautiful as the night
They all want to kiss her forehead
They’d love her as a wife

Encased in the center of silky scarlet petals
The velvety cloth flows with her every graceful move
She leaves behind a trail of stunned faces dusted with rose
And a simple, careless, query, “What is there to lose?”

Walk up to the crimson beauty and offer her a dance
Light up at the sight of her silently nodding, “yes”
Watch her sway along with music, unbelievably elegant
Let her lead you to the gardens, let your mind become a mess

A maiden cloaked in blushing red
Mysterious, beautiful as the night
They all want her in their beds
They’d love her as a wife

Shimmering starlight casted down onto you young ones
Your heart beats passionate red like her cherry red lips
For the sweet taste of the forbidden fruit, you long
And she grants you a cherry red kiss

One vermillion gown, two naive, vermillion cheeks
She knows you’re ecstatic, as if you could soar
All it takes is a wrong word, all it takes is a blink
A thorn in your side, vermillion on the floor

A maiden cloaked in a blood red
Mysterious, beautiful as the night
They all fear ending up dead
Their hearts carved out with a knife

You’ve been seduced, enchanted
In her spell you weren’t aware of
You’ve picked and cared for the rosiest apple
But she never picked up on your love



A Bleeding Rose
by Ezra Kim

“The Rolling Dice”

by Brandon Cohen and Jayden Leung

The clock, ticking while moving its slow hand through the diameter of the circle. I jiggle the dice in my hands and let them roll. They spin across the wooden table and give me three exact numbers. A 5, a 9, and a 2. I lean back on my chair, tilting it just enough that it doesn't fall. My father, Charles Ken, who I am trying to beat for the sixth time in a row, lets his dice slip out of his hands and land in the most comforting way possible. I am happy, especially when I have these opportunities to finally have fun with him. He's always at work, and I'm always left alone at home.

I've always wondered what job he does. Whenever I ask, he always responds by telling me it's a secret and then immediately changes the subject. As predicted, his dice roll and land on 7, 8, and 4. As I'm about to challenge him for another rematch, the doorbell rings. My father tells me to stay in my seat as he looks through the peephole. He stands paralyzed for a moment and then rushes to me. I stash one of the dice in my pocket.

“Go to the basement now and hide in the corner,” he quickly says, while pushing me towards the basement door.

“What's going on?” I ask him.

Someone starts to knock increasingly loudly.

“Stay quiet! I'll lock the door behind you,” he whispers.

“Wait, where are you going?” I question, starting to panic.

“Don't worry about me, I'll be fine,” he states, while closing the door.

I want to ask more questions, but he locks the door from the outside. I listen to what's going on as best as I can. I hear the front door open and loud voices emerge. There's some shouting and then a gunshot. I freeze in terror. I nibble on my fingernails as footsteps grow closer to the basement door.

I creep down the stairs and hide in the corner behind some boxes. The door breaks open, but no one comes down the stairs. Instead, I notice something fly down into the space.

A grenade!

I stand up, attempting to run, but it explodes. I feel some metal material hit my head. My body stings, yet feels numb at the same time. I grasp one of the boxes as I turn toward the stairs. My head is spinning and my vision starts to blur. I try not to lose consciousness. I limp myself through the basement, still half alert, and quietly peek up the stairs. There are still a lot of voices.

I struggle up the stairs and try to reach the door. A soldier appears and drags me through the house and to a car. The general is standing outside, but I can't tell what he is saying. I keep hearing echoes bouncing around my head.

Wait, where is father?

I look around and yell for my father. One soldier grabs and forces me into the vehicle. We begin to move, and I realize that I am fading in and out of consciousness. I notice a Nazi sign on a big building as we drive. I'm not the only one in the car. There are more kids, too. I feel too dazed to think about anything, so I rest my head on the window. I faintly remember a memory from when I was little. My father was talking to another man, saying something about a resistance that he was a part of, and a mission to save an American paratrooper that was found in the woods. The Nazis didn't get to him yet, but it sounded like my father wanted to get to this man first. Maybe it was to help him, though I don't understand why that would be so dangerous. The car enters what looks like a concentration camp. The soldiers open the car door and make us exit. They walk us through the camp and I see people suffering. They are trying to get their work done, but they are just too weak. I feel something in my pocket.

The dice.

We are forced to get into a straight line. I wait there for a few moments until a soldier approaches me. The guy narrows his eyes to take a closer look. He points his finger to the left and the next person goes.

Why am I here?

I attempt to speak to one of the soldiers, but he just keeps pushing me forward. I start to get nervous. The soldiers finally leave us. One of the kids from the car approaches me. He tells me some rumors about this place. He says that they will kill us if we don't behave, or if they catch us drawing or writing. I am terrified. I tightly grasp the dice in my pocket. How much I want to play with it.

“I have a dice. Are we allowed to play with it here?” I ask the child.

“I don’t think so,” he responds, shaking his head.

A new soldier screams at us to get to work. I yelp because he catches me off guard. There is a pile of rocks that needs to be moved. I don’t know how I’m supposed to move them. They are so large and heavy. I try to pick one up, but I feel my bones start to shake like they’re on fire. Sweat piles upon my forehead and trickles down like when the grenade hit the ground. It changed everything, but I have to forget about that. I drop the rock and sit down, breathing heavily.

I quietly remove the dice from my pocket and toss it on the ground. I roll a 3. Another child spots me. He asks if he can play. His hands are muddy, but I let him join anyway. More kids gather around me and I don’t understand why they are so amused.

It’s just a dice.

I like it though, being in the spotlight. The game ends abruptly. A soldier approaches the group and all of the children start to scatter. Except one of them stands still, so scared of what might happen. I turn around to face the soldier. He grabs me and I try to fight back, but I am too weak. The soldier kicks my legs from behind and I fall backwards. Everything starts to become a blur.

A group of soldiers has assembled and they grab my shirt and drag me away. They lead me into a separate room and throw me in. A latch clicks behind the guards as they exit. I run towards the door, but it is locked and sealed from the outside. I immediately feel weak, so I sit down. I remember that I still have the dice in the palm of my hand.

I realize that this wonderful dice is both my savior and my destroyer. It helped me during all of my times of struggle. Especially those times when I was alone. I remember, I would keep this dice next to me when I completed my homework or when I was afraid of the dark at night. My hands start to shake. But if the dice has always helped me, why did this happen?

In the end, this dice was both a blessing and a curse.

I gently close my eyes and I loosen my grip on the tiny cube.



“A Reaching Hand”
by Elizabeth Guan

A ripe apple waiting to be bit
A shadow reaches out a hand
Slowly the fog arouses,
In the empty field you stand

Extend your hand in greeting
The silhouette calls to you,
In the morning dew
You know your time has due

Inside a shaking mind
A million thoughts rush
You want to fight,
But naivety brings a hush

It lures at your soul
So you accept the hand
With each breath you are cut
And filled with sand

Its cloak swishes
Leaves the blade in your heart
The shadow floats away
A river pulls you apart

So you cup the blood in your hand
In the empty field you stand



Overgrowth
By Isabella Lian

“Bam-Bam Island”

by Elizabeth Guan, Lila Halpert, and Catherine Lei

Welcome to the Bramsbal Reform Pamphlet

It's been 4,913 years since the last Dark Age, and all the problems of the world have been eradicated. As we're sure you already know, the World has been United into one large family: no wars, no land disputes, and no nations. Wealth is distributed evenly, and nobody is above or below anyone else. Gambling, alcohol, drugs, violence, and any other form of immoral or unethical behavior are all banned to keep the People healthy. What a diverse and lush place our World is, all thanks to the original Saviors who solved the world's problems all those hundreds of years ago. Bless their souls. Of course, those who disobey the laws — such as yourself — are sent far away from civilization to work in intensive labor programs such as the one you are standing in now to help change your character. These rehabilitation centers also provide all of the natural resources such as wood and metal for the government and the People. You'll be helping the World function, while also building your moral and ethic code so you never inconvenience our society again. It's a fantastic system, designed by our very own High Ruler. Rest in the knowledge that by the time you've served your sentence, you'll hardly remember your time here!

Serving the United World and its People,
The Saviors

I used to believe all of this before I truly saw and understood the horrors of these labor camps. This brochure is the same one given to all of us, the “violent, dangerous, degenerates and outcasts,” and used as the publicity material that the People of the United World are bombarded with at every turn. The government (if you can even call this form of ruling a government) — composed of the Saviors, the High Ruler, and all of those posh-looking, sycophantic men with pristine titles just for show — said they were trying to help us, fix us, save us from what we would've become if our rule-bending tendencies went unchecked. How ironic that has become.

Flipping through the pages of the browned and weathered brochure, like the thousands of times I had before, I scan furiously to try to find anything, anything at all. Is there even a possible way out? I ponder wistfully about the whereabouts of my family. Every night I yearn to be with them, to see them just one more time. My mother, who'd never been anything but kind, and father, who always tried to make me laugh. Do they miss me? Or did they follow the High Ruler's laws and condemn me for as long as my sentence lasts, turning me away, deeming me as a disgrace? But most of all, I miss my little sister, Jamie, who's barely five. Does she remember me? If . . . no, *when* I go back, *when* I find her again, will she even know who I am? My mind flashes back to the last time I saw her, in the dim courtroom this day, a year ago.

I remember the *bam-bam* of the gavel as the judge gave out the final sentence.

"As the Third Elite Judge of the Saviors, it is my responsibility, duty, and pleasure that I stand here today before the People and formally declare this young man guilty of first degree assault and vandalism. With all the power bestowed upon me, I hereby sentence Elius Dane," he paused, then raised his gavel, ready to announce my punishment, "to four years of Bramsbal Reform, no more and no less. We all hope for the better in you next time."

Bam-bam. I remember the ear-splitting screams from my father, the wails from my mother, and worst of all, the wide-eyed, bewildered look on Jamie's face as two burly guards took me away, into the dingy "Holding Room" that looked rather like a prison from the Dark Ages.

The memory fades away into black and I place it back into a dark hole inside of me. I am back in the dusty old dwelling that we Exiles are forced to call home. My stay here has only been seven years — so far — but others have been here for decades longer. Blinking back salty tears, I take a deep breath in and blow out, concentrating on the beat of my heart, like my fears will be removed with each exhale.

Yet somehow, no matter how hard I concentrate, I know, I just *know* my fears will never cease.

Things are simpler when you're young. At five, I thought the worst day of my life was when I fell onto pavement while playing tag, scraping my knee in the process. At twenty-five, I know the worst day of my life was when my mother was stripped from me forever.

Sure, the official from the Saviors who came to our house, his face showing no emotion whatsoever, had told me and my ailing father she would only be gone for one year before returning.

It's been nine.

Things are simpler when you're young. You don't have to make the big decisions all on your own when you're just a kid. For example, three years ago I made the choice to move my father to an assisted living facility almost half a day's HyperLift ride away. He's a shell of the man he once was; if he didn't still wear the golden wristband that he's worn every day of my life, I wouldn't even know it was him. I only see him once every few weeks, when my packed schedule allows it, but the Medics there do a better job caring for him than I ever could. When you're young, you don't have to deal with the burden of knowledge you have no business knowing — like what I discovered as I began to research the labor camps in the second year of my mother's disappearance. Of the tens of millions of people sent to the Bramsbal Reform labor camps, very few returned, and even then, they couldn't remember anything.

I was shocked. Could the crimes of the previous lawbreakers be so bad that they never were allowed to exit the camps?

Then I remembered my mother. The official never told us what crime she was being sent to Reform for. "For the security and genuinity of our society, I am not obligated to speak upon her misconduct," the official said when my father had asked. We hadn't even been allowed to see her one last time. In all my years of knowing her, she had never even hurt a fly. There was no way she'd committed a crime big enough to warrant the labor camps.

Something wasn't right.

That piece of knowledge is what propelled me to get a degree in investigative journalism. In the third year of my mother's disappearance, when I was nineteen, I enrolled in University 643, one of the United World's many colleges, otherwise known as Torcuil University. I originally had wanted to study to become a Medic, because nursing people back to health has always interested me. But after that, I knew my life's purpose no longer lied in medicine, but rather

uncovering the facts and revealing them to the public. Well, at least the facts in relation to my mother's disappearance, and what actually goes on at Bramsbal Reform.

The next five and a half years of my life were spent studying the art of journalism at Torcuil. Then I began internships at several under-the-radar news networks. But I was always the intern, never someone who would actually be sent to write about the big scoops, and definitely not someone who could be trusted to go to the labor camps and cover a story of her own.

Until now, that is.

Brrring! In relief, I set the bricks I've been carrying to the construction site onto the ground. All across the dusty yard, I can see my fellow Exiles instantly doing the same. The bell signals the start of the thirty minutes of reprieve we get during our twelve-hour work day, which in itself is a mere fraction of our eighty-four hour work week. We Exiles stagger our way to the mess hall, exhausted and backs ready to break.

I stop by the water pump for a quick drink and meet up with my only friend here, Todd, who isn't very coordinated, mentally.

"Lester! Long time no see! Have I shown you my collection of butterfly wings? Wait a minute, you're not Lester. You can't be. He died two years ago. I'm so sorry, Elius. That's your name," he chuckled nervously. "How's your day been?"

Todd is different from the rest of the inmates. He's been here since 4876, for murder and fraud, after he murdered his two brothers who were also named Todd. Back in 4860, identical triplets Todd, Todd, and Todd competed in the United World's Tenth Annual Triathlon under one name — Todd Thompson. Turns out, the first Todd held the world record for four hundred freestyle and had swam across the English Channel. The second Todd was a professional marathoner, and held second in the world for the fastest marathon completed. Finally, the third Todd was number six in the world for cycling. The plan was that the brothers would switch places between events and, as a result, each would only need to compete in one event rather than three. As one can guess, the Thompson brothers won, leaving the money to be split amongst the trio. But the marathoner grew jealous of his brothers, since he was the ultimate mastermind behind the scheme, and in a fit of

anger he killed the other two for the money and the title. He wasn't caught until 4875, and the trial finally took place in 4876 where he got a life sentence. And now, he's standing next to me with wandering bloodshot eyes and gray hair, waiting for the daily slop served in the mess hall.

I've become Todd's only friend in this dark place, and he's become the only one of mine. He would tell me stories of days before the United World, back when countries coexisted peacefully, or tales of war and bloodshed between the countries. Who knows where he learned all of this, but it's nice to think of a world so different from our very flawed one. He taught me the ways of this prison and made the labor here less painful. But staying in such a place for so long takes a toll on a person. I'm not sure how much longer I can hang on.

I'm sitting in my boss's newly renovated office, admiring the new wallpaper and freshly painted deep green walls, waiting for today's assignments. I tap my foot to the beat of the quiet classical music playing downstairs.

As an intern, one of my jobs, in addition to replenishing various writers' coffees and making sure all of our publishing tech is working properly, is to compile data sets of the public's responses to our articles. One of the managers hands me the binder of feedback on the last two day's copies of the World Tribune. I scan over some of the headlines — *Great Leader Outlaws the Game Monopoly, Leading to Global Recall of Beloved Board Game; Woman Emerges From Coma in Hospital 3046, Shocking Family; Which Are Better, Gummy Bears or Cornflakes? Poll of 200 answers the question.*

The feedback levels are depressingly low — reportedly only 15% of our readers walk away satisfied with their purchase. This month's feedback report is going to be another very sober one. I curse under my breath and try not to imagine the consequences. There's nothing newsworthy happening in the United World anymore — it's what's happening outside of it that needs headlines.

A sense of dread washes over me as the chief editor, also head of interns, Ramesh Lancaster, hands me another binder of today's stories. I have to remind myself everyday why I am here. *This is all for Mother. If I can't find her, I can at least help the other families who have been hurt.*

Suddenly an idea comes to mind.

“Hey, Ramesh,” I start, swiftly wheeling my chair to face him.

“It’s Mr. Lancaster to you,” he snaps.

“Er, yes, Mr. Lancaster,” I scowl. We’ve known each other for years, yet he still belittles me. “We haven’t had an interesting headline in months, and I know for a fact that sales have been dropping since the article about the wildfire in the Icelandic state.”

Mr. Lancaster slightly frowns and runs his hands through his hair.

“Continue, Ms. Jane.”

I take a breath.

“I have an idea to get us out of this hole. Tens of thousands of people get deported to Reform but few ever come back. And those who do have no memory of the place whatsoever. So what if someone who just happens to have a connection to the Bramsbal Reform makes an investiga —”

“No,” Ramesh says, as he shakes his mousy haired head. “No, Jane. That’s too dangerous. You’d be putting the whole department — no, *the whole company*, at risk of censorship.”

“You don’t think this headline will be a hit?”

“If you want to get fired from this internship, potentially bankrupt the entire Tribune, and lose your shot at all future job offers, go ahead.”

“Come on —”

“You know how closely the Saviors scrutinize the papers.”

“If my article doesn’t bring us out of this hole, I’ll *let* you fire me,” I daringly say at a volume a little too loud, drawing eyes from other writers. Ramesh shoots daggered looks at the eavesdropping writers and lowers his voice.

“Fine, you can do a research paper on the Reform Centers and get it published, if that’s what you’re trying to say. But remember, I still need someone to write up the feedback on the Breaking News column, so I’ll give you a month to finalize the article.”

“Yes! Thank —”

“Thank me later,” he cuts in. “They threatened to cut my paycheck if I couldn’t get another successful paper by next month. Your story better do well.”

He shoots me a menacing look, and the next thing I know, he’s out the door handing a stack of papers to Earl, my coworker. Motivated, I finish sorting today’s stories by 2:00pm, allowing me to spend the rest of my day scouring the United World Public Files, or UWPF, to search up the location of the reform. I have a

contact from my last internship who can help me hack into the files when I'm back on my personal computer. But right now, I'll see if I can find anything by using the UWPF. I know it's a long shot, given how closely watched and edited the UWPF is by the Savivors, but it's my best shot for now.

Hours fly by and the afternoon heat pours in, but still no luck. In frustration, I bury my head in my hands and let out a scream that resembles a screeching cat. A very concerned janitor pokes his balding head into the room.

"Everything alright, miss?" he asks.

"Oh, yes, everything is alright," I reply.

The janitor nods and returns to mopping the floor as I close my laptop. I peek out the window and lo and behold, it's completely dark outside. Exhausted and hungry, I lumber toward the HyperLift and go home for the night.

After lunch, I get assigned to lumberjacking, which in my opinion is the best option out of all the jobs for repeat offenders. Despite it being incredibly dangerous and the tremendous amount of pure strength it takes, it's the only job for us Repeats to get any fresh air. Coal mining and brick laying don't count because of the ashes and dust, and they both make me have a hard time breathing.

First-timers are lucky. Most of their jobs are along the lines of marking trees, diving for pearls, cutting bricks, or harvesting produce to be shipped to cities. Apparently, this is my third time here, but I don't have any recollection of my prior sentences. I would protest, but I've learned that if the government says something, then that's that. Todd taught me that the selection of "jobs" gets more and more dangerous depending on how many times you've been sentenced, hence the title Repeats.

I step outside of the dingy mess hall and head with the rest of the inmates down to the woods. There, we're supposed to cut down trees marked with disease. Additionally, we have to build webbing in the unmarked trees so one can move swiftly without climbing all the way down. With a poorly crafted harness on, I begin making my way down from a huge redwood, when I catch a glimpse of Todd, huddled up with two other inmates in a discreet part of the woods where the trees grow dense. I quickly scurry down from the tree and creep towards the trio,

fearing the others are harassing him. But as I near the three, I start to catch onto parts of their conversation.

“Escape? You can’t be serious. This place is more fortified than the Great Leader’s own mansions!”

“I haven’t been here that long to get *that* desperate for escape. This place definitely did something to your head.”

“Easy for you to speak, Desiree, you’ve only been here for a year.”

Desiree rolls her eyes and sneers.

Todd cuts in, “Calm down, I have a plan. I’ve done something like this before, and there’s only a forty-two percent chance you might die.”

“All of you, quiet down,” one of the inmates, Randi, says in a hushed voice. “There could be a guard anywhere. Are you *trying* to die?”

After that, the voices die down and the rest of the conversation becomes incomprehensible. I move on, trying to forget what I’ve just heard. But the question remains in my head. *Is Todd trying to escape?*

Later, I interrogate Todd about the incident in the woods, which he denies ever happening. I try again at dinner time, where after a lot of pestering, he finally fesses up.

“Okay, kid, you really want to know? Fine. I’m trying to get off the island. If I spend another year here, I’m actually going to go insane,” he admits.

“I know that, but how do you think you’re going to get out of here without dying? You know they’ll shoot you as soon as they see you leave.”

“Trust me on this. I’ve spent the last five years here devising a plan. I’ve had plenty of experience in the past with stuff like this,” he says and winks.

I exhale. Todd speaks with so much conviction, and he’s so confident in his escape plan. I think about what he said, about going insane if he spends more time at the camp. He’s not wrong.

Todd gets up, ready to return to his sleeping quarters — nothing more than a glorified rock in the shape of a mattress.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Elius.”

“Wait,” I call after him, just quiet enough to avoid detection by the guards patrolling the mess hall. He turns around, and I make my mind up right then and there. “You’re right; I can’t stand this place much longer. Please...let me join you.”

Todd flashes a crooked grin, “I thought you’d never ask.”

I didn't want to have to do anything illegal to get to the camps. And yet here I am, with some highly illegal hacking tech, like I'm some sort of cyber criminal. We all do things we don't want to — isn't that right?

It's just that I don't have any other choice. I have to find a way into Bramsbal Reform. After I got back to my apartment, I contacted a close friend of mine who sorts the United World Government's private files. Like many others, he lost both of his brothers to the Reform. Now he has the same mission I have: to uncover what really happens in the camp and possibly rescue his loved ones. He'd given me the tools to get into the system. Now I'm here, trying to follow his admittedly vague instructions to hack into any files related to the camps. That was all earlier tonight — or was it already yesterday? I don't know how long I've been up, but if I had to guess, I'd say it's around 3:00am right now. I should feel tired — completely exhausted, really. But all I feel is adrenaline (and maybe the side effects of the ten coffees I drank earlier) as I insert the tech and press all buttons with shaky hands, unlocking the labor camps' secrets with the hum of the machines and the clicking of the buttons. My eyes flicker across the screen at top speed, scanning each file over and sorting through their contents faster than a mosquito flies. Well, I suppose that's one thing university was good for. I nearly miss the file titled: CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION INTENDED FOR GREAT LEADER EYES ONLY.

Geez, how obvious could the government get? I click on the file and it takes me to a very official-looking report, dating back to the year 1020, on the construction of a labor facility on a string of islands in the Pacific. The file had blueprints, a series of starting and completion dates of various structures, and finally, a list of all of the flights to and from the islands from 1023 to the present. This has to be fake. It's too good to be true. I do some background checks on the dates and flights. Sure enough, I find several flights containing workers to and from the islands in the files of various construction companies. There are even accounts of flights going off the radar and coming back on in the area around the islands. But even with all of this evidence, something still feels off. Then again, not a lot of people go digging around in the government's illegal files to get into a reform camp. I contact my mole, asking if he's able to get me a flight to the island. Then, I close the laptop and pray that I don't get caught with this information.

I wake up in the middle of the night to my phone ringing. Reluctantly, I drag myself out of bed and pick up the phone.

“Hello, this is Jane Smith-Bachelor speaking. Who is this?”

“Hey Jane, sorry to disturb you at this time of day, or night, but —”

“But what? Wait, am I getting arrested? Please don’t tell me you blew my cover.”

“It’s not that. I got you the ticket. Turns out, the Great Leader lets people buy a ticket to the island if you send a formal request. Your flight takes off from Airport Five at 6:00am tomorrow. More like today. Whatever. Be there at 4:30. I’ll have your ticket.”

“That’s fantastic! But how did you—”

Per usual, he hangs up. I check the time, and it’s 2:30am. Great. I start to pack my bags and book a taxi to the airport.

I arrive at the airport at 4:26, four minutes early. I’m beginning to think that my contact is playing a big joke on me, because the place is absolutely deserted. There’s just a single flight attendant and two security guards waiting at the main entrance.

Then I realize that he probably isn’t waiting for me at the front entrance, since that would raise suspicion. The ticket is for Jane Smith-Bachelor, and seeing a man standing awkwardly holding a plane ticket at four in the morning really isn’t the most normal thing. I go in through a side entrance and I finally see the guy, dressed in a trench coat and deerstalker hat, smoking a pipe in the middle of Terminal 3. I ignore the strange assortment of clothes and ask for what I need.

“Hey Sherlock, where’s the ticket?”

“Shhh,” he points to the security camera above us. “They can hear us.”

“Really? You’re concerned about a camera when you’re dressed like this, standing in an abandoned terminal at four in the morning?”

“Alright, alright, here’s the ticket.” He hands me the plane ticket, only it’s purple instead of the normal white.

“What is this?”

“As I was going to say, this is the ‘special ticket.’ Most government ‘flights’ to Reform send you to a fake island, with paid actors pretending to be happy prisoners with fantastic traditions. You are not going to the main section with the

lawbreakers. You are going to the private flights section, and find the attendant wearing a purple scarf. She'll take you to your plane."

"Are you sure this is right? What if it's all a trap?"

"So what? They're just going to send you to the island anyway," he responds.

He's right. I thank him and check in at the counter. I go through security and go to the gate and wait. About an hour later, the flight attendant in purple finally shows up and checks my ticket. Finally, after weeks of research and a lifetime of yearning, I board my flight to Bramsbal Reform.

I stand in the cold as the wind blows through my hair. I glance out at the sky, dotted with golden stars and my fate laid out. *Please don't ruin this.* Just two hours ago, we were still back in the small cabins where most Exiles sleep, safe from the risk of being caught.

I blink a couple of times, trying to process Todd's plan. Staring at his plan, I take a deep breath. My future now depends on a couple scraps of paper with ambiguous writing and small drawings. How reassuring.

"Any questions?" Todd asks. His wrinkly hands fidget with anticipation, folding and unfolding the paper.

"You're sure that you can pull some strings to get that helicopter?" I ask.

He starts pacing and nods. "As long as my accomplice makes sure that the helicopter is in position, everything else should be pretty simple. We need to sneak out in exactly three minutes to dodge the patrol guards." He gestures at the timestamps of when guards switch duty. "The only risky part is getting from the cliffside down to the beach where our transport will be waiting for us. We may have to do some wall scaling. Remember what I taught you about that."

"There's a narrow staircase down to the beach from the cliff. We could take that route," I offer.

"No, it's too far along the cliff line. The guards will be able to spot us easily from the guard tower. Especially since that guard tower has a sweeping light."

"Alright," I say as Todd clasps my shoulder. "Let's head out."

The darkness acts like a natural protection, shielding us from the guards that parade around the whole camp, preying on runaway Exiles like me and Todd. With Todd leading, we make our way through a narrow part of the forest and through a small stream. I'm assuming that he chose the safest, yet longest, path for us to travel by, considering that we only encounter one straggling guard who is quickly taken down by Todd's unprecedented kick from behind. We tie him down to a tree and then continue along. The moon grows brighter, illuminating the descent down a deserted pathway heading towards the beach. We creep by many patrol huts, but with Todd's expertise and the knowledge that he has passed on to me, we dodge each one successfully.

After what feels like an eternity, but is probably more like a hour, we arrive at the beach. Gracefully, we scale the cliff's side and before we know it, we drop gently down onto the sand.

Todd looked at me with his famous grin, most likely about to say something along the lines of "We did it" or "Freedom, at last," but he's cut off by a rough voice.

"Put your hands up. Now. Or I'll shoot."

From behind us, I feel a flashlight shining down on our necks. Slowly, I put my hands up and gulp, sweat breaking out on my forehead. It goes without saying that we've been caught.

Todd begins to stammer. "Here, here. We don't mean any harm. We just got lost and uh...stumbled across this area."

"I said, put your hands up!" another guard barks.

"Come on, fellas. I can explain."

From behind, we hear the clicking sound when one loads a gun. Todd shuts his mouth, knowing there is no use.

"Come with us. Don't say anything or you'll be shot," a third guard shouts.

Begrudgingly, we are led back to the main area of the camp with guns pointed to our backs. However, we aren't escorted to our usual sleeping quarters. The guards take us to a separate dungeon cell, situated next to two patrol huts.

"Try sneaking out now, you two," a short guard sneers. He pushes me and Todd into the cell, slamming the jail door shut. The lock clicks and the guards stomp away. And with that, silence takes over.

I'm going to be brutally honest about my first impressions of the Reform. What a mess it is. Huge piles of garbage are spread across the island, tangled wooded areas are scattered about, and people — the lawbreakers — work at difficult manual labor. These conditions are awful. Even from far away, I can see that much. The inmates chop down trees, step into mines, cut bricks apart. So this is what the government doesn't want you to see. This is what they've been hiding.

My plane lands around 6:25am, and I stumble out, the sun just barely peeking out from the horizon. I'm stunned. I don't know what I thought Reform would look like, but it isn't this. As soon as I get out of the plane and walk down its exit ramp, taking in my surroundings in horrified awe, it takes off, leaving me behind.

Apparently my contact forgot to tell them to wait for me. I'm stranded. I really can't turn back now.

I flip open an eraser-sized recorder, speaking directly into its microphone. "This is Jane Smith-Bachelor, reporting for the World Tribune. I've just landed at Bramsbal Reform, where every day thousands of lawbreakers are —"

One worker nearby is hacking apart a tree stump. As he sends his ax into the wood, a chunk of the tree goes flying, colliding directly with my hand. My recorder goes flying off the island, into the deathly waters off its coast. I suppress a scream. With no way to record my thoughts or others' quotes, I'll have to go purely by memory for my article now.

I've got no way off the island. No way of documenting it. No person who could help me. The worker who just sent that splinter my way hasn't even looked up, hasn't noticed that I'm even here. I'm completely alone.

I can't help it. Tears begin to prick at the corner of my eyes as I start hyperventilating uncontrollably. *Why'd you even come here, you idiot? What did you think you would find?* I berate myself, unmoving from my place at the foot of the island. No one looks at me. No one cares. To these lawbreakers, I'm as inconsequential as anyone else. This was a foolish mission. I was a fool to think I could change things, to think I could fix these camps, to think I could find my mother —

No. *Pull yourself together, Jane. This isn't what Mother would have wanted.* I need to find her and expose the disastrous truth of these camps to the United World as a whole.

I wipe my eyes, adjust my coat, and brush off my shirt. While I'm here, I'm going to find out as much as I can. I walk away from the worksite, shuffling towards a more out-of-the-way nook in the woods. If the government was hiding something, they wouldn't place it in plain sight — they'd legitimately try to conceal it.

Before I know it, I've stumbled upon a clearing in the woods filled with many huts, seemingly for the prison guards. I look around, trying to memorize it for my article.

Something catches my eye in the corner of the clearing, down by the beach. It's a cell. Like some kind of dungeon you'd find in the Dark Ages. I move towards it, curious. Through the bars, two disheartened men, one young and one old, sit, mumbling to each other. From their filthy outfits, I can tell that they're lawbreakers, but their placement out here tells me that they definitely have a story to tell. I walk towards their cage, intent on reaching them, but a guard steps in front of me.

"Who do you think you are?" he asks. "Where are your permits to be back Here?"

I gulp. He loads his gun.

"If you don't have any identification, I have no choice but to eliminate you."

Three more guards join him, all looming over me. The two prisoners are staring now, ready to witness my fate.

I should be scared at this point, but I've got some tricks up my sleeve. After all, you can't become an investigative journalist without knowing how to defend yourself.

The sun rises slowly. The day goes by slower. The guards come to visit us every so often, giving us scraps of food. But now, some excitement has finally broken up this monotony. A woman simply walked into this clearing like she owned the place, managed to knock four guards out, and is now speaking to me and Todd through the bars of our cell. She says she's from the mainland, and that she's here to help us. Come on. What kind of blasphemy is this? She's obviously an inmate gone insane or some sort of spy.

“Who the hell are you? Don’t lie!” Todd asked for the ninth time, as he grabs the vertical bars on the jail cell door, gritting his teeth.

“Like I said, for the millionth time, I’m from the mainland. I work for the World Tribune, and I’m here for a story.”

The woman stands with a strange amount of dignity and a straight back, things I haven’t seen in a long time. She looks to be a few years younger than me, and she’s wearing a long gray coat over a dark business suit, with black heels that make her look like a little bird perched on a branch.

“What do you want? How did you even get here?” I ask, cutting straight to the point.

“Well, it’s a long story. Turns out the government actually lets people from the World buy tickets and visit the island. It’s to make these camps seem less suspicious.”

I eye Todd and he shrugs, just as confused as I am.

“But, it turns out they send these flights to a different, manufactured island with actors, making the camps seem like paradise. But luckily, with help from a mole, I came here on a plane that directly transports a new wave of...inmates. However, the government still fails to cover up the question as to why people like you rarely come back. That’s why I did so much digging to get here. My mother was sentenced here almost a decade back and I’m trying to find her. Or at least uncover what really happens here,” she explains.

“Okay, sorry to disappoint you, but you flew in on a plane just to find that all us Exiles do everyday is relax on the beach and flounce around, enjoying the view,” I say sarcastically. “Also, how did you manage to dodge all these guards?” I gesture to the five unconscious guards laying on the ground next to the woman.

“Oh, let’s just say that when your grandfather and father were both black belts at Krav Maga, you pick up a thing or two.” She uses the heel of her foot to prod at an unconscious guard.

I nod, impressed.

“I could teach you one day, but that’s besides the point,” she continues. “I was wondering if you could get me a story. You think you could do that?”

“A story? I’ll give you a story. An annoying woman gets kicked off the reform island by a sixty-year-old man after pestering him with her annoying voice,” Todd sneers and rolls his eyes.

“You know what?” I lean forward, whispering. “I’ll give you a story...”

“Really?” The woman’s voice becomes louder with excitement.

“If you help us escape,” I finish.

The woman stares at me with squinted eyes and finally says, “Fine. But you have to help me find my mother. And if you don’t, I won’t hesitate to knock you out, as well.”

I nod reluctantly and Todd grumbles but agrees.

“Alright. Let me get you out of there. A pin tumbler lock. Hmm.”

She pulls a paper clip out of her bag and bends it into an L shape. Then she sticks her miniature wrench into the keyhole. Todd and I wait anxiously in anticipation.

“Can you two stop breathing so loud? I need to concentrate to find the binding pin!” She scowls and continues, eventually pulling out a small metal pick.

After five intense minutes, she pulls back from the door. My heart jumps with excitement.

She opens the door and extends her hand in greeting saying, “My name is Jane Smith-Bachelor, but you can call me Jane.”

“Listen up, Jane, I can see you have a lot of personality, but when it comes to this, you follow our directions.” I puff up my chest and nod at Todd.

“Ah, I see. Well, I’m not sure how much I can rely on someone who is all bark but no bite.” Jane smirks. “I’ll listen to whoever I want, sweetheart.”

“Enough!” Todd cuts in. “The helicopter that I managed to get is still in position from last night. We don’t have much time before the guards find it, so we have to move as quickly as possible.”

“There is only one place your mother could be — the women’s sleeping area. But now that I think of it, she wouldn’t be there considering that it’s almost noontime. She’s probably building the new guard patrol tower or mining in the mountains up north,” I say.

“Great. So we have no idea where she is,” Jane says.

“And I’ve never been in the women’s division of the camp before, so I’m not sure about the layout and whatnot,” Todd adds.

Jane's face twists in worry and tears start to form in her hazel eyes. "Well, let's get to the female division," she chokes out. "It's something to start with. We can't just stand around here all day."

"Alright, follow me. We need to get you dressed in something a little more reform-appropriate." I lead the way to the bunkers, where I have Todd hide Jane outside while I steal someone's brown pants and mud-soaked flannel shirt.

I run back outside and toss the clothes to Jane. Her face wrinkles in disgust and she mutters something about being civilized. We continue to the east end of the island along the shoreline, where it is less fortified and less people work because of the jagged rocks. The sun beats against our backs and each second drags along. Finally, we reach an area along the shoreline where the rocks become less sheer and we're able to climb on them.

"Elius," Todd whispers into my ear. "Why don't you help the little lady along the rocks and before you know it, you'll end up with the love of your life." He winks and I mime gagging.

Turns out, Jane doesn't need any helping. She is quick and graceful on her feet, and maintains a quick pace.

I've never been to this part of the island. About halfway along, I notice something out of the corner of my eye. The other two see me staring and follow my gaze. From afar, it looks like a giant shed-like building with a pile of rocks behind to it. But when I squint hard, I make out the shapes of many, many dead bodies.

Don't scream, don't. I scream. *Breathe, you stupid idiot. Breathe.* I can't breathe. Just thirty feet away from me lies a makeshift morgue, if that's even what this could be described as. In a large basin, about twenty feet wide in diameter and twenty feet deep, lies a heap of bodies nearly overflowing the perimeter.

I quickly scramble closer to the bodies, still perched on the rocks. I had removed my heels to get a better balance. At the top of the pile, just a few feet in front of me, is a lady. Not just any lady. I recognize her blue eyes, which now stare up at me lifeless, and her thin face, pale from exhaustion and starvation. My vision starts swimming, and I tell myself, *This isn't her. This isn't her. It can't be. Anyone can have brown hair and blue eyes. Maybe it's just a coincidence.* But then I notice

the small golden band around her wrist, the one object that the guards let her keep. The same thin bracelet that my father wears every day, even now in his weakened mental state.

I found her.

My mother, this whole time, was dead. Tossed aside like she was nothing but another candy wrapper or soda can. It takes every muscle to stifle the fury building up in me. Every nerve in my body wants to break down and cry, my heart feels as if it's been wrenched out and smashed into pieces.

How can the Great Leader let — no, encourage such treatment of his people, his citizens he swore to protect. If he were so great, how could my mother be dead with dozens of other innocents, in a pile being left to rot on a deserted island?

In that moment, my heart skips a beat. I hold my breath and an incredible silence takes over.

Every society, no matter how perfect it may seem from the outside, has its unsavory methods, its issues, its problems that it covers up.

Every utopia has its flaws. Every rose has its thorn.



Rose Gold
By Kai Choi

“Rain Down Like Little Drops of Your Memory”
by Kylie Deng

When streetlamps glowed like fireflies
Flitting about in the darkening skies
And the rarely silent streets contentedly sighed
As the chatter and rush was drowned out by **rain**

When the sky was a deep, knowing, blue
Barely seen behind the cold mist, it knew
The tears shed, what you were going through
As sky wills you to look high up, not **down**

When glowing brighter than any lamp on the street
The moon offered wisdom and light and peace
The stars winked with little smiles understanding
As their love reflected off those eyes I still **like**

When the autumn air was anything but stifling
And cool, piercing wind whipped ‘round, singing
You were taught a lesson by the nature of this city
As before this, you were naive and knew so **little**

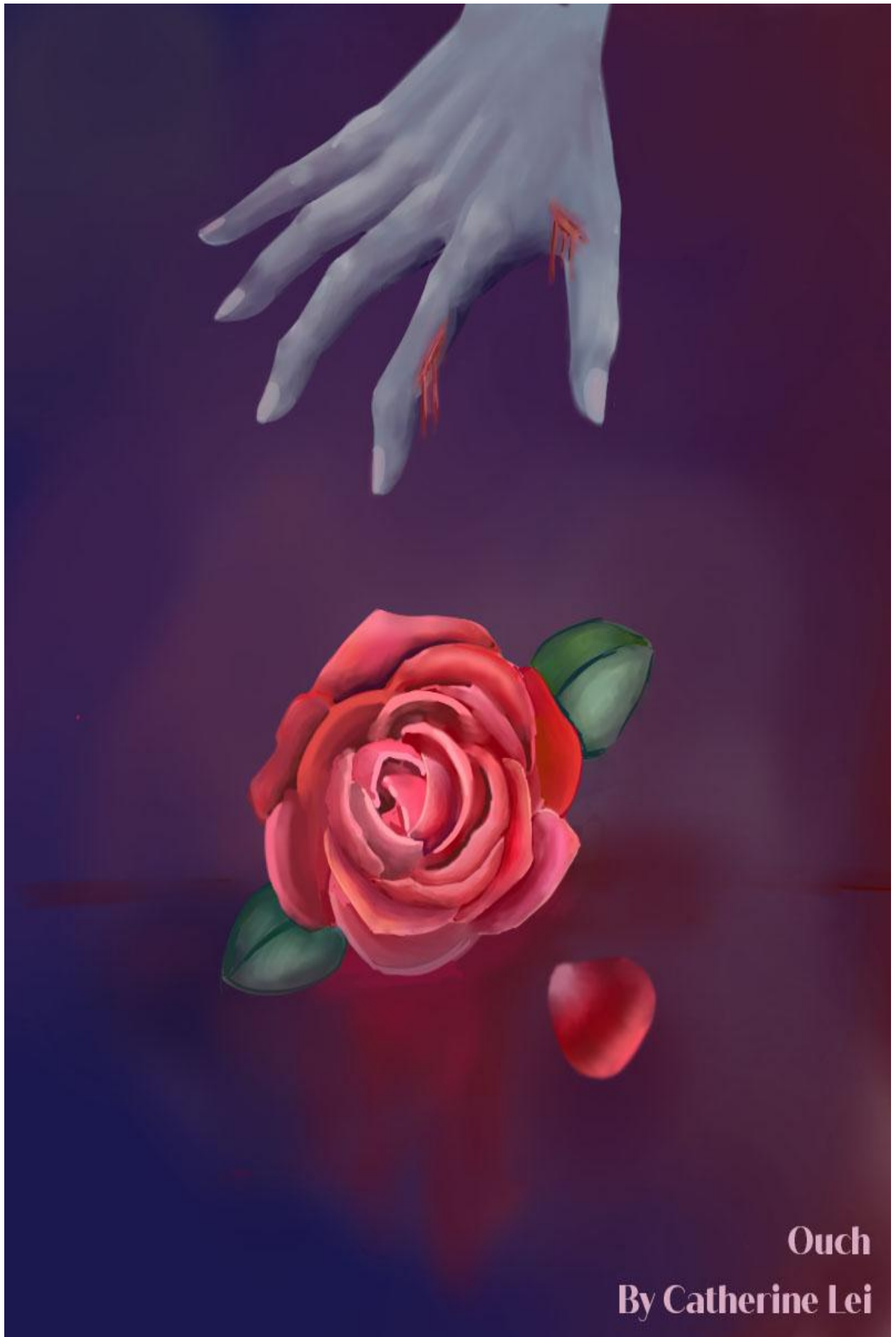
When a double of each streetlamp shined below
Its light a bit warped, wavering, and flowed
with the steady, gentle, harmonious rain so
As the stiffness falls and your guard **drops**

When you, under the guidance of the moon
Thought: *“How could I have been such a fool?”*
The stars explained how you’d leaped far too soon
As there were some things you didn’t yet know **of**

When the sky gave you a glimpse of light
You would be forever grateful for this, in hindsight
I miss you, but wish for you to thank the night
You were my something, but I was **your...**

everything. I apologise, it was all my fault, yet you remain my
favourite **memory.**

So I'll wail in misery and guilt and let it all come crashing down,
Let it **rain down like little drops of your memory.**



Ouch

By Catherine Lei