

The Agathist

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The Agathist

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Advisor's Note

MR. DICKSON

Right now, as the staff is assembling this semester's issue, the outside world is covered in pollen. Cars sport a gross green patina, allergy sufferers sniffle and sneeze, and things are just kinda nasty. Yet, the pollen is necessary for plants to reproduce, to bear the fruits we eat, to grow more and clean our nasty air, to make the flowers we're yearning for after a cold, barren winter. Beauty and ugliness have a weird coexistence.

We can apply this thinking to art as well. Think of the beautiful art that is born from bad times--those heart-wrenching elegies, those simple musical etudes that pull the tears from our eyes. Even the process itself--the frustrated rough drafts and restarts and hours spent staring at the canvas, waiting for something to feel right--can be torture. Yet, artists persist.

When we look at this semester's *Agathist*, I'm reminded of what the title of the magazine means--an *agathist* is someone who things all things trend toward good. It doesn't mean things are good now, but it means that they will be good. The pollen will wash away; the flowers will bloom.

Happy reading of this, our twentieth (!!!) edition. Thank you to the staff for their hard work; thank you to the administration for their support; and thank you, readers and writers and artists, for reading and writing and making.

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How to Shape Stone

REESE ALMAN, 12

Sit, because anger is a poor thing to stand on; it makes the legs shake. Most people think conflict begins the day voices rise, but that is only when it becomes visible. Long before that, it gathers quietly in the small silences — the words swallowed to stay polite, the discomfort explained away, the little slights carried like pebbles in a shoe. No one stops to empty the shoe, so they limp for miles and then blame the road.

When people finally speak, they claim they want resolution. They rarely do. What they want is relief, and relief can be quick and cruel. So they reach for large words. “You always.” “You never.” “You’re this kind of person.” Notice how easily the language jumps from actions to identity. It is easier to condemn a soul than to describe a moment. Labels feel powerful because they end the conversation. Once someone is named like a crime, there is nothing left to discuss.

But nothing grows under a label. No one can repair “always.” No one can apologize for “who they are.” Those words are smoke; you can’t stitch them, can’t hold them steady long enough to mend. If you want peace, you must learn to speak smaller. Smaller than pride likes. Smaller than anger thinks is fair. Say only what you can point to with a steady hand: this sentence, this action, this moment. Show the exact place where it hurt. Pull the thorn, not the whole branch. Precision feels weak, but it is the only thing that heals.

And understand this: a boundary is not a punishment. If distance is needed, take it plainly. Close the door and be done. The door does not need to slam to stay shut. The slam is only the ego asking to be heard. “This hurt me. I won’t continue.” That is enough. Anything more is just an attempt to make the other person bleed the way you bled.

Anyone can win by striking harder. That is easy. The harder discipline is to leave a conflict with both people still human. Not smaller, not humiliated, not turned into villains in each other’s stories. Fire is loud and impressive, but it leaves nothing alive. Water is quiet, almost forgettable, yet it shapes stone and lets things grow. Speak like water.

Existing

BELLA HODGES, 12

The alley and I exist in your shadow

You take up the space you want
Your words are consuming
You allow us to stand close enough to be covered by you
I see you as generous because I can’t see anything else in the dark

My love and laughter exist in your smile

My heart takes your direction
I’ll wait til I see your teeth
You’ll laugh so I know it’s a funny joke to laugh at too
You have given me what must be the best humor there is to have

Life and experiences exist in your presence

I sit still until you tell me
You say how high to jump
You will give me the life lessons that will make me forever
And I will thank you as you taught me

Space and time exist in your light

You won’t just have me
You require it all
You don’t let me be enough devotion for your orbit
My eyes are starting to hurt looking at the sun

House of Cards

MAHLON DAY, 12

Empty chairs around the table
Where we once shared cards and fables
We made a family, resting now in regards
Just memories turned into shards.

Now on my own, I feel discarded,
Alone in life, my friends departed
Three still stand where eight had grown
But even here, I'm on my own

One day more, I miss my friends
I wish that it would never end
The life we built, together, a home
Has fallen like the once great Rome

I dreamed a dream of nights together
Of cards and jokes and summer weather
Kings reversed and Jacks once skipped
In the game that was our hidden script

At the end of the day, our hand was dealt,
All that's left is what we felt
The cards still wait, but none in play
My friends are gone, they couldn't stay

The Audience

MAHLON DAY, 12

If life were playing on a screen,
What would they shout at what they've seen?
Would they agree with what I do,
Or wish I'd choose another path too?

They'd rewind scenes to change the end,
The choice seems clear right to the end.
Trust your gut, you can't go wrong,
But I don't know, my face grows long.

What will they think of me now?
They watch and ask themselves "But how?"
I still don't feel that it is true,
One choice keeps pulling me askew.

I know the one I shouldn't choose,
It isn't wrong, just doesn't soothe.
I ask what's right or what feels wrong,
The answer waits, but won't be long.

I need to choose, but still I freeze,
For choosing won't set my heart at ease.

The World Behind Glass

MASON SIMS, 11

My hand presses thinly against the dense glass, casting a long shadow over the small fish that lay in. My face inches closer as I immerse myself into their small existence. Their small world teeming with life covered by the iridescent sheen of the lights above.

Their world, so small in context but grand as it stands before me. The glass stretching far into the ceiling and dispersing into the lights as a grand blue shines over me, connecting me to them.

I move back and take in their world like a deep breath, all their sights, sounds, and feelings mixing with mine and forming a grand idea and instilling in me a longing that will shape my future.

This was the aquarium.

The vibrant reds and yellows of coral, the rhythmic movements of fins and seagrasses in the ever-going flow of water and time, the grand structures hand carved by nature. All of it astounded and overwhelmed me, leaving me with a sense of fear laced with curiosity that spurred me on and shaped my nature just as nature had done so to the vast seas.

This world and its feelings though separate from me by this pane of glass, phases through into my deepest subconscious. All words and sounds faded around me, cast aside by my mind so that I could be fully captivated by this world.

I felt the flow of the waters, the bumps on the jagged rocks, the feeling of weightlessness as I drift along the current. It was that feeling I liked.

The feeling as if that no matter what happened, the water would still carry me without complaint.

Those captivating shades of blue draw me closer and closer until I can just barely see myself right there within the water. But a hand grabs my arm and tells me we must leave.

I beg and plead for more time as I feel my connection to their world of endless cascading waters and creatures man has never seen before, but my begging falls on deaf ears as I am pulled further and further away.

The shade of brilliant blue fades from my skin as the lights on the glass grow dimmer and smaller until I can scarcely see them at all. My thoughts become muddled as I try and hold on to the feeling I had.

This feeling forms in the back of my mind as something I cannot understand in its entirety.

Like a part of myself is locked away with the only key being submerged deep into a cacophony of words and thoughts that lack all meaning without it.

As I am dragged away from their world, a piece of me remains there, and a piece of it remains within me. My mind vainly grasps at a word to describe it until I finally am able to grip it tightly: purpose.



Untitled

JOSIE MCCORD, 10, ACRYLIC

Oh Parents, Where Art Thou?

LARISA LOTT, 9

It was dark
 I was a kid
 Leaving the crib
 Went out the door
 Parents I call for
 Into the wood
 Still all good
Pluh plump
 I hit a stump
 This is not great
 I have a scrape
 Up off the ground
 All is sound
 Now there's a snake
 "I'm about to get ate"
 Run faster
 What a disaster
 Finally, light
 Oh, so bright
 Twas a house
 Is that my mother's blouse?
 "Baby", I hear
 "Mommy, Daddy!" I cheer!
 Hug them I do
 I really, love you

Little Lady's Day

PIPER CASTRO, 11

Her stuff was in the garage. The garage stayed cold in the early months, or it used to. Every year shorts season came back earlier and earlier.

"Aren't you excited for tank tops?" She said smiling, fuzzy hat covering her ears, nose flushed red.

It was late January, the sun out. I sat out on the porch, popsicle in hand, watching my sister write "Garage Sale" on cardboard from the recycling pile with a fat sharpie.

"How's that?" She asked, sparing me and my brother a glance over her shoulder.

My sister, Frances, was in charge nowadays, twenty-three and a fresh college graduate.

She worked night shift at the hospital, so her fiancé, Tommy got us up for school and made our lunches.

"Why do you write your 'r's like that, bro," Andrew giggled, standing up from the wood deck.

"Shut up, oh my god. Is it not legible?" Frances frowned, fussing over the sign.

They bickered over it for a bit, and I stood up, handing her my popsicle stick, which she took without looking. I ventured into the open garage, eyes adjusting to the lack of light.

Boxes and totes sat on the metal shelving racks. My sister spent hours out here, sorting through everything during her time off.

A clear, plastic tote caught my eye, a cute lacy book and other trinkets visible through the side. I carefully slid the small container off the shelf.

Glancing back out the open garage, my siblings nowhere to be seen, I

bent down, crouching over the little memento box. I popped off the clear lid and pulled out the lacy book gently, it was a lavender colored, hardback journal, 'Celeste' written in swirly, thick cursive letters on the front.

The smell of the book, and the box too, set me back a bit and my movements stuttered. It was musty, like an old library book, but the small fabric cutouts and fuzzy hat must've still carried the previous owner's perfume as I breathed in deeper.

Her. I thought, her stuff tucked away in the garage throughout the cold months, waiting. I looked back again, chewing my lip as I stood up, book in hand as I went through the garage door to the kitchen.

Tommy was there, cooking ground beef in a pan. He smiled gently, "Hey, little lady, you okay? Ready for lunch?"

I blinked, freezing before I nodded, quiet. "Mhm, jus' gotta do... something in my room. Call me down when you're done," I nodded casually again, turning the corner, padding up the stairs, door clicking behind me.

I sighed, opening the book as I didn't take another step further, back to the door as I sat down crisscross applesauce.

"C'est dix-sept février, 1963!"

My brows pinched, lip jutting out as I realized my plan was quickly foiled by a language barrier. Then I froze, page after page, it was all in French. A language barrier? In... my mama's diary? I set it down on the carpet, stumped. Then the corner of a photograph sticking out of the pages caught my eye. I pulled it out, eyes widening.

She was beautiful. Wearing a poofy tulle dress, gloves past her elbows, tiara nestled in her fluffy short hair. I stared at it, in awe. She was up on a wood stage, bouquet in her hand, the picture must've been taken mid laugh, but she was stunning. The camera quality left her framed by the poorly lit background, almost as if she was emitting light she was so radiant.

I breathed softly, blinking quickly as I came back to my senses, turning it oalways used when she was trying to wring out my lies. I looked down at my lap silently, pulling back the covers as I revealed the lacy, lavender journal.

Her brows raised as her lips parted to say something before she bit her lip, carefully confiscating the old diary.

"Mama took a French class in high school, y'know," she started with a small fond smile as she opened the book.

"That's why the beginning's all in French. She did pretty good too, she went on to use it all the time. She spent some time in France studying abroad for college. That's where she learned to make a lot of French seafood, not that I'd ever eat any of it. But she was okay with that, always said

"It's a mature taste." She always reassured me and made some butter noodles instead. Grandpapa Frank's picture is still in here," Frances hummed, flipping to the small picture collection in the back. She turned it over and looked over at me with her sleepy hazel eyes.

"He used to call me Duchess," She closed the journal, placing the picture on top of it. "It was inside joke with him and Mama, something from when she was little, she said. She was his little princess, and I was Duchess."

Frances frowned softly, pursing her lips.

"He died when I was little, a few years before Drew was born," She stood up, journal in her hands. My eyes caught her sparkly nail polish before I gazed up at her.

She sniffled, "Alright, little Lady, you need to go to bed, 'kay? Big day tomorrow. You excited for the garage sale?" I nodded, feeling more content even with the quiet sadness in the air. I held a hand out to her and she leaned down giving me a hug without a word. I felt her warm breath on my neck as she shivered. After that she left with a wave, her nose red as she smiled at me.

I fell asleep after thinking about it all too hard, the explanations lulling my mind to sleep.

Tommy woke me up the next morning and helped me get ready. We came downstairs and Frances was plating some scrambled eggs for breakfast, Andrew still upstairs getting dressed.

Later we set up the folding tables and grabbed the totes of the selected unnecessary items, Tommy marking little price tags as Frances passed the items to him, and Andrew was in charge of bringing the totes while I assigned to coloring the sign.

After a hot January day, we ended up selling most of it and were able to swing by the thrift store to drop off the remaining stuff. That night we got celebratory fast food and Frances let us get ice cream cones.

As we came in the front door I noticed a new frame on the table in the entryway. It was one of the photos from the journal, the one of Mama and Grandpapa out on the front lawn, smiles on their faces.

I breathed softly, blinking quickly as I came back to my senses, turning it over, I realized there was a caption on the back. 'Princess Celeste circa '65' it read.

"Lunch! Tacos!" Tommy sang up the stairs, banging on the railing a bit. I huffed, quickly placing the photo back in the book, lugging the thick journal into my arms.

I spun around a bit looking for a hiding place. After awkwardly stuffing the thick book into my toybox, I skipped downstairs, secret heavy in my chest.

It being Saturday, we all crowded around the TV, tuning in for movie night. My sister picked it out, something about, "This was my favorite movie when I was your age!" Andrew groaned, grumbling about being thirteen and still stuck watching little kid princess movies. I, however, was enthralled by the TV. The beautiful gowns and women captivating me. Seeing the lead find her fairytale ending hit me as I felt my chest pounding, my conscience heavy.

After dinner and after we got tucked into bed that night, I had stealthily slipped the journal into my bed, trying my best to read the handwriting. I soon realized that there was little notes kept in the back of it, more

pictures too. I mumbled the words to myself, finger following along like Tommy had taught me.

"Due on May third... Biology lab on Friday..."

I huffed, wondering where the mentions of her palace were, her chariots? I tried the pictures instead. The second photo I found was of my mom but even younger, along with a graying man, the two smiling out on the front lawn. "The Princess and Daddy," I hummed.

Suddenly, my door creaked open, and I jolted down, eyes wide.

Frances slipped in, the cat stubbornly tailing behind her. She came over, brows furrowed as she tilted her head, looking at me. "Whatcha doing up so late?" She frowned.

I looked away, avoiding her eyes guiltily. "Nothin'..."

Frances sat down on my small bed, raising a brow at me, the look she always used when she was trying to wring out my lies. I looked down at my lap silently, pulling back the covers as I revealed the lacy, lavender journal. Her brows raised as her lips parted to say something before she bit her lip, carefully confiscating the old diary.

"Mama took a French class in high school, y'know," she started with a small fond smile as she opened the book.

"That's why the beginning's all in French. She did pretty good too, she went on to use it all the time. She spent some time in France studying abroad for college. That's where she learned to make a lot of French seafood, not that I'd ever eat any of it. But she was okay with that, always said 'It's a mature taste.' She always reassured me and made some butter noodles instead. Grandpapa Frank's picture is still in here," Frances hummed, flipping to the small picture collection in the back. She turned it over and looked over at me with her sleepy hazel eyes.

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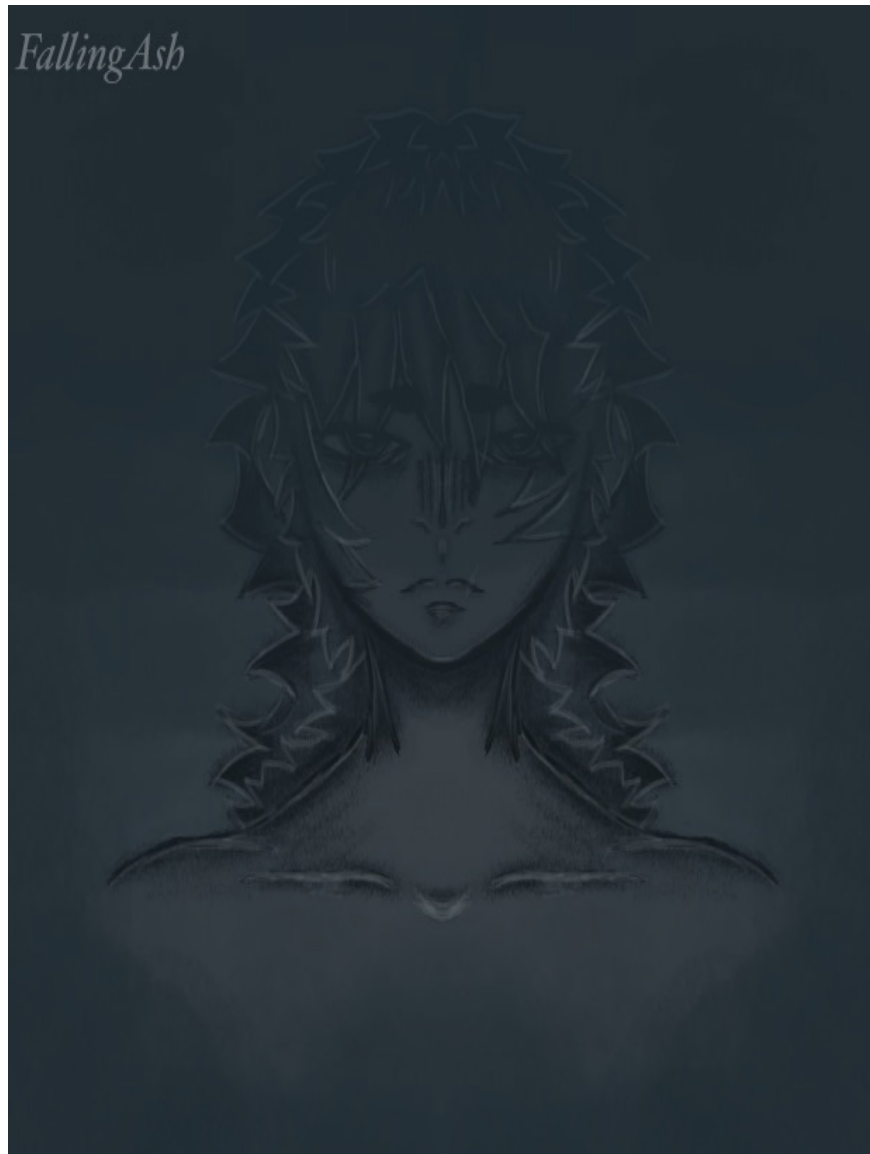
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Drowned in Sorrow

ANNA DENSON, 9, DIGITAL

Exclusion

KENZIE DAVIS, 11

Exclusion is grey.

Exclusion tastes like the sting of salt inside a mouth full of ulcers,
And smells like the heavy intoxicating aroma of Lilies.

It feels like suffocation in a confined room,

And sounds like the harsh wind during a tornado storm.

It looks like a single grain of sand in the palm of your hand,

Exclusion is a closed door in an open house.

One Day, I Finally Realized You Had Already Died

PENNY PAN, 11

We lived on the same short street for years. Their house sat two doors down, a low house with a sagging porch and a patchy lawn where mari-golds made brave attempts at life. Adeline kept her kitchen window open in the afternoons; laundry dried on the line sent the smell of soap into the lane and the air carried it into my own hallway when I passed. Philip liked to sit on the porch in a hand-me-down wooden chair that had a missing slat and a dented arm. He kept a small glass on the step — sometimes tea, sometimes a nip he warmed between his palms — and he would lift it slowly as if measuring the light.

At first Adeline's lapses were the sort everyone forgives. She mislaid her spectacles. She called a story by the wrong ending, then began it again. We all said the word people fold into around these things: age. Philip listened. He never interrupted. If she told a tale twice, he let it have its two tellings. He answered as if the sentence were new. There was a steadiness about him that became part of the household furniture.

Then one afternoon she wanted the cake from the bakery in town. It is a small place, with a fogged window and brass rails and trays of pastries dusted white with sugar. The lane to town runs beside the river; it is an honest half hour of walking from our village if you follow the path where the stones shift underfoot. Philip's back was not young. Standing or sitting for long had made him careful of his movements for years. Still, the next morning he tied an old cap on his head and left. He came back before dusk with a paper bag wrapped in waxed paper; the pastry inside still smelled warm, butter and almond. Adeline sat at the kitchen table and, after a moment, did not remember asking for cake. Philip did not remonstrate. He opened the bag, took a piece, and ate it like a man finishing a small duty.

Adeline wanted the same cake again a few days later. So, Philip walked again. And again. Each time the sequence was the same: the walk out to town, the waxed bag, the return before it grew quite dark. Adeline would look at the wrapped box as if at an object with someone else's name on it. Her face would show no want. The pastries ended up on

Philip's plate, bitten into slowly, as if the sweetness were consolation. We noticed the repetition from our windows. Neighbors began to ask one another in the doorway: how could she forget the wanting but be so pleased when he came home?

One damp afternoon I saw Adeline bent over a small notebook. She wore her reading glass low on her nose and marked the page with careful, uneven strokes, each mark a small, blunt stroke. Philip came in, looked at the paper, and smiled in the way people smile at a child's drawing. He folded the sheet and put it into his pocket. Later the block would whisper: she is counting his trips.

Those tally marks unsettled us. How could she forget wanting the cake, but still keep count of his trips? We are used to tidy causes and tidy effects; this was neither. Philip started to show her how to hold a fork, how to bring the cup to her lips, how to look again and say the person's name aloud. He repeated the same motion until muscle remembered what mind no longer would.

Time wore grooves into the years. Adeline's face dimmed in the way faces do when photos are left in attic boxes. Sometimes she would look directly at Philip and not know him.

Adeline's death arrived one winter morning with little fuss. For a while, light sat wrong in the rooms; boots were left untended; the garden forgot to be tended. After the small ceremony, life bent toward routine again. Philip kept his chair. He kept the glass on the step. And he kept the notebook.

I began to see him in the late light. He walked the river path as he always had, though slower. Sometimes he returned with a paper bag, sometimes with his hands empty; sometimes he spoke to no one, and sometimes he told a passer-by with a bright, steady voice, "She's at home waiting for the cake." He said it plainly, like the weather report. Nobody tried to correct him.

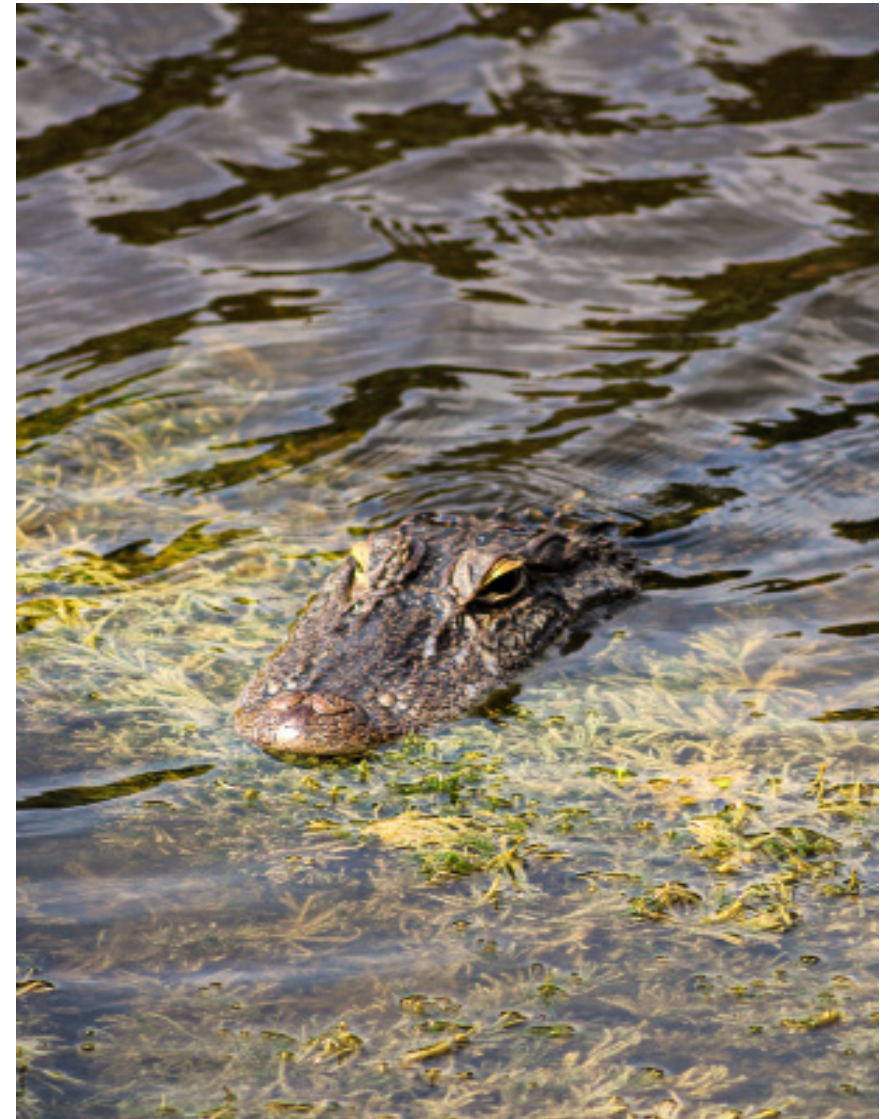
When he got home — and many afternoons he did — he would draw the book from his pocket and mark another stroke. The pencil moved with a hand that trembled and, at times, steadied. He treated the page like a ledger, and each mark seemed to comfort him in a way the world could

not. What had once been Adeline's doing now lived in his chest pocket; the tally had been learned. Where she once added the strokes with a quick childish pleasure, he added them with a slow deliberation, as if sealing a letter.

Years passed until the sight of him beneath the sycamore at dusk. People would pass and he would stand up and set off along the lane. I would sometimes fall in with him for paces and he would say, "She loves that cake. I must hurry." His voice held the tenor of someone who kept a promise.

There are many ways for a life to disappear. A body can be taken by sickness; a heart can stop. But the deepest end is not death.

When someone asks me if death ends everything, I think of Philip at dusk with his paper bag and his score of marks. To be remembered is a kind of survival. Death is not the end of a life. Forgetting is.



Baby Gator

ADDISON WARNER, 12, PHOTOGRAPHY

Where Time Goes Soft

JAYDEN WINSTEAD, 10

She lies where the meadow forgets its edges,
grass stitched warm by the afternoon,
sky spilling blue like a secret
meant only for her eyes.

A breeze kisses her pale skin,
knees dusted with red dirt,
heart loud as cicadas
arguing with the flaring sun.

Clouds wander past, slow and unafraid,
shaped like a life she hasn't made yet.
Time loses its grip,
melting into the smell of hay
and distant quarreling.

Out past the fence where the green bends,
Dad and granddad won't give an inch,
won't buckle,
One talks of change, one swears by the past,
Dust in their drawls, roots holding fast

Their words wander across the horizon,
Carried by the breath of the land.
Like an old dirt track,
they both still gallop.

Her strawberry hair fans out,
laying over the array of wildflowers,
while thoughts drift-
half-wishes, half-fears,
all unfinished.

She is nowhere she must be,
Nothing she must become,
Just a girl breathing in July,
Engrossed in her own head,
And the pasture surrounding her.



Time Away

FRANCES OWENS, 11, PHOTOGRAPHY

The Sight of Her

ANONYMOUS

I see your face in every love song
Your warm brown eyes invite me in
I would never leave your loving gaze
How could one say this is sin

I seek to see every side of you
I would climb to heavens for one more glimpse
Share with me your every thought
And I will recite them late into the night

You wash away the lingering rain
You rest ever long in a garden of sound
You are much more than a blur in a crowd
No one to compare could be found

For you only I will go for tomorrow
I knew nothing of anything till there was you
All I ever want is held within your smile
Let me take a step and I will race across the ocean for you



Untitled

ABBY HUANG, 9, PHOTOGRAPHY

Delicate

LONDON SMITH, 10

Hummingbirds are delicate

They clip their wings

Marriages are delicate

The broken ties and rings

Flowers are delicate
plucked from the stem by snippings.

Dresses are delicate

Rippings, tearings, and
burnings

A heart is delicate

The classic
shatterings

This
page delicate

I
have ruined it all

Coin Toss

MAHLON DAY, 12

There are two sides to every story,
or at least that's what they say.
The truth is somewhere in the middle,
where no one wins the day.

I reach to catch it in my hand,
but watch it slip instead.
It strikes the floor and starts to spin,
uncertain where to land.

I stand there still and wait for it,
as if it knows the way.
Too scared to make the choice myself
and hurt someone today.

I think I know which side is right,
yet still I stand unsure.
For "right" has wounded me before
and left a mark I can't ignore.

And maybe that is why I wait,
watching the silver glide
because the moment that it stops
I'll have to choose a side.

I cannot choose who to believe,
so I find a coin to toss.
It flies upward to the sky
a silver judge of loss.

It wobbles, circles, catches light,
refusing to decide.
As if it knows that choosing once
would mean one truth survives.

It keeps on spinning endlessly,
as if it understands
no side is ever fully right.
The truth slips through my hands.



Snail Shells

ADDISON WARNER, 12, PHOTOGRAPHY

The Freedom of Nature

JAMES PROCTOR-DICKSON, 10

I want to be a cloud.
I want to float freely.
I want to go wherever the wind decides I go.
I want to look at the world drifting beneath me.
I want to be free.

I want to be water.
I want to flow freely.
I want to be the melting snow atop a mountain.
I want to have surprises in life, leaving me guessing where I'll go next.
I want to be free.

I want to be the wind.
I want to flit freely.
I want to go wherever I please, whenever I please.
I want to dance with the grasses, push and pull the waters, fly with the clouds.
I want to be free.

I want to be a leaf.
I want to flutter freely.
I want to be strongly rooted, yet able to escape what holds me down.
I want to lilt along, dancing with the wind without a care in mind.
I want to be free.



Cold Water

ADDISON WARNER, 12, PHOTOGRAPHY

Dream World

LEXI SMITH, 9

The sun set over the hill,
Around the flowers and field.
Winds blew, shaking nearby trees,
Their leaves browning for the coming fall.
A boy's laughter scares the crickets,
Who chirps their songs of joy and grief.
We sat on scratchy cloth,
Singing songs and playing games.
The boy with hair of stringed gold,
Freckles, and eyes of the deep sea,
He roared and stomped as a beast.
I was older and a mother.
We picked up the blanket,
Along with a handful of grass.
The golden-haired boy skipped,
And I walked slowly behind.
We came to a house of white wood
In the wide, rocky path of the house,
Sat a black car, low and gleaming
We walked in the house.
And it hit me like a bath of ice.
I woke in my room, frantically searching.
I was still a fifteen-year-old girl.
And the boy I once called son
Was lost to a different world.
One far away that took my happiness.
I sat in bed listening to the fan.
I wanted my paradise back,
What was once light was now dark.

To The Milk That Expires on my Birthday

EMILLIANO VALDEZ, 12

Thank you.
Thank you for the reminder on the balance of our universe.
Because a day about celebrating our life, marks the end of yours.
We humans have a perfect record of when we were brought into this world.
You live only to rid yourself by the date stamped across the front of your cell.
Yet the world makes it all fair.

Because we share this special day.

Humans live by the unknown of our death,
and you are haunted by the knowledge of it.
We live to find our own purpose,
and you are free only if you follow it.

We both fight battles we can't win.

At the end of the day, our purpose is what we make it.
Your existence is meaningful regardless of any date.
So maybe we should start living like it's our last day,
and maybe you should celebrate how far you've made it.
Instead of feeling sorrow for the life we cannot live,
it's time to appreciate what we already are.

So thank you,
For the reminder.



Mary's Mess

MARY ROBERTSON, 12, ACRYLIC

Closing Time

RESTON CAFFELLE, 9TH GRADE

I wipe the counter as the lights dim.
 Sticky rings mark the wood.
 Bar stools rest upside down.
 My hands smell like citrus and soap.
 Outside, streetlights warm the sidewalk.
 The last bass note fades into traffic.
 Cars pass without slowing.
 My reflection wavers in the dark glass.
 I count the register once more.
 Tens and ones in careful stacks.
 The numbers blur together, and
 that means I'm almost done.
 I hang my bar towel on its hook.
 My feet ache inside worn shoes.
 The ice machine rattles, then settles.
 When I lock the door, my
 shoulders loosen a bit.
 Tomorrow can wait until night.
 I walk home knowing the quiet won't last.

Green

CHARLOTTE MOULDER, 11

Traffic Laws 101. Green means go; red means stop; yellow is per your discretion. Green is the symbol of nature and all things true. A color people are naturally attracted to due to its representation of new beginnings. As you grow up, joy becomes old and you turn green over the things you used to love. But, when you were just a kid, the grass was greener. It didn't itch as much while you rolled down the hill dotted with dandelions. The dandelions you wished upon to give you the freedom that all the "big kids" have. Now you are a big kid. You begin your search for a new beginning. A new green light. Something to grasp, to fulfill the missing sense of wonder and happiness that the swing on the playground gave. The weight of the world rests upon your shoulders as your childhood innocence leaves. Rain begins to pour as the dark rolling clouds settle beneath the sun. Light slowly diminishes from the sky, leaving your mind to settle in the darkness. The forest becomes dark from the rain-soaked bark on the trees, making the greenery seem alive. Through the leaves, the clouds build heavier. Leaves are dripping wet, moving with the soft sway of the branches, striving for a way through the clouds. As a kid, you would have found a mud puddle or a tree with low, thick branches to climb. Now you're entrapped in a world full of darkness. Each leaf seems to drip hard droplets of water on you, and the greenery is not so green anymore. The leaves seem to miss the sun too as you look through the branches for any glimpse of sunlight. A path shines through the forest and as you emerge, you realize the world hasn't changed colors. The innocent kid you once were, is now seeing the true weight of society. Light fails to shine through, leaving you fighting for something green.



The First Bloom

JOHN TEASLER, 9, PHOTOGRAPHY

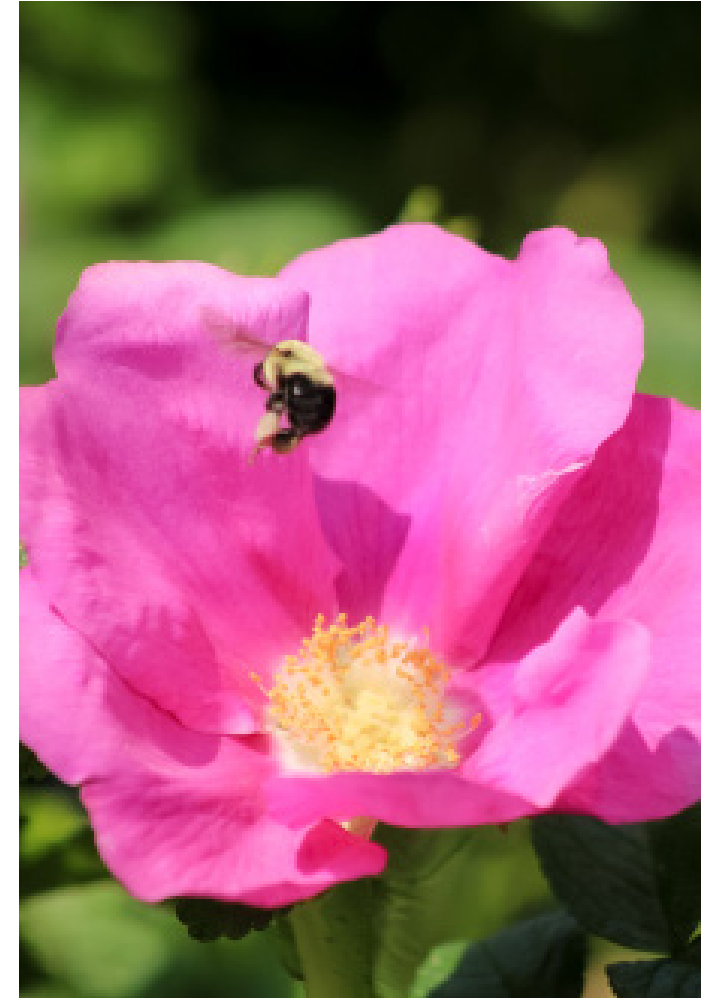
The Seed

ABIGAIL JONES, 11

Fly oh fly, sweet soul of mine,
Towards that deep horizon line.
May you find what you desire, May it set your heart on fire. Find that
spark that lights you whole, Let it always guide your soul.
Happiness is hard to find,
So don't you dare make it hide.

Through peace and pain may you stand,
Even when choked by Fear's hand,
Climb out of the darkened well, Make your story one to tell.
It is when we feel so low,
That our pain deserves to show.
Fight with every tooth and nail,
'Til the winds recatch your sail.

There are no more words to say,
Take this message as you may,
Hidden words for those who need,
May this poem be the seed.



Bumble Bee

ADDISON WARNER, 12 PHOTOGRAPHY

It's the Phones

EVA CLAIRE COURSON, 10

The first step you take in your already drowning, cliques together, huddled whispers, deep stares.

I'm drowning in the despair of expectation, how am I meant to swim if I am never taught to kick, how am I supposed to succeed if just thrown into this ocean of uncertainty and unfamiliarity.

These people don't know me, yet they think they do, these rules think they teach me but all they cause is resentment to brew.

These strangers I recognize with too much knowing, and whispers that just keep going and going.

They say it's the screens, or the headphones that suck us in, but what it really is, is the underlying weight dragging us under.

Lungs fill with assignments and due dates. Pressure and social engineering.

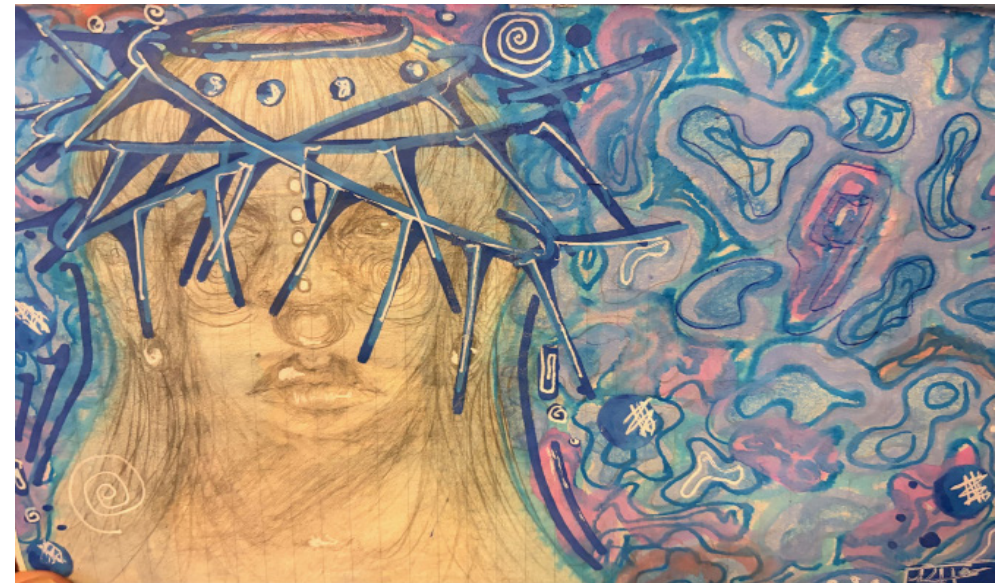
If I am not pretty, I will not be doing it right, if I do not make straight A's I will not be doing it right.

If I'm too skinny, or too fat, too this or too that I will not be good enough.

I must be cool but also perfectly smart.

I must be easy to swallow, or the rest of high school will forever be hard.

So, you smile, and turn away, because of course it's the screens that made all of this disarray.



Darcy

KOFI HANDY, 9, WATERCOLOR & PENCIL

No One Can Die

ANONYMOUS

No one can die. With one scientific breakthrough everyone around the world felt at ease being finally released from the cold grip of death. No more would they have to glance back in every alley or flee from any weapon. Entire crimes erased; entire careers lost. Companies fall after another. Why have to work when you don't have to worry about what you will do for the rest of your life? In fact, why need an economy when you don't have to work anymore. Why need a government? What is stopping anybody from doing anything. A festival with no end. Alcohol, cigarettes, drugs? Why not! You don't have to worry about the side effects now. Nothing is wrong; nothing could go wrong. Everyone is living their best lives for the rest of existence. That was until it started: The Hunger. We don't need to eat but we still feel the hunger. With no deaths and new life springing everywhere, how does everyone eat? Everyone scrambles over the last food sources as unending wars are raged upon each other to which no one can truly win. The last of the food is stored by the elites of the world, leading all those left to starve until death. That is, if they could die. Instead, all we are left is this gnawing hunger eating away at us day by day. An infinite hole consuming our very being and growing every waking moment. It is an unending hell for those without food. They try every way they can to eat and if they can't do that, they try to find every way to die. People devouring others while they scream to stop. People hanging from ceilings cursing every time they manage a breath. This isn't living anymore; it's torture. I can't live on like this. Even now my hunger grows more and more like an endless black hole that cannot be satiated until none is left. There is only one way out of this. I must bring back death.

Hunger looms behind me in my shadow as I walk the desolate streets of what was once a prosperous city and is now a battlefield mixed within a graveyard. People lying on streets gazing at the sky with empty eyes some not noticing-or not caring about-the rows of teeth clenched around their midsections, gnawing away hoping to find something to satiate their stomachs. The more sensible ones huddled around a man set on fire for the slight comfort of warmth. I shamle through the streets passing along light poles without power that now are used by others to hang themselves. Their groans and cries for help drowned out by the sound of gunfire.

I move as fast as my emaciated limbs could move me through a small battlefield of a few groups of people shooting, getting shot, and standing up only to repeat their actions until no ammunition is left. A stray bullet grazes the top of my scalp as I try and move through them. The pain jolts my brain

to alertness and stops me from slumping over and giving up right there.

A little past the faux war stands the lone building that countless unending wars have been fought over. The laboratory where immortality was discovered. It is supposedly where the rich and powerful are hiding with all the food you could ever want. And, more importantly, where the rumored cure is. No one has gotten in before as they have either given up on the thought entirely or are stuck in the endless war I narrowly evaded becoming a part of.

I want to move forward but a part of me halts my movement. Why am I wasting all this time? What do I even hope to accomplish by being here? Is there even a cure for this eternal punishment? I nearly stumble to the ground never to get up again, but then I am given a cruel reminder of why I made this journey in the first place. My stomach groans louder as if to shake the very foundation of my being to dissuade me from even attempting to escape its unending maw.

With that small push, I slowly creep toward the front entrance only to find it boarded up. The thought of giving up finally pierces my inner thoughts as I collapse onto the floor and gaze at the sky. The world around me starts fading away with the only reminder that I still live being that infernal chaos in my stomach. Just as my vision clouds and my mind begins to vainly imagine myself in a paradise far away, the shimmer of a window catches my eye.

Stagnant air permeates out of a broken window far above. My head thrusts upward as I break away from my trance. My body moves on its own with a newfound vigor. I lunge at the building and claw my way upward. My nails scrape away at solid concrete and cold metal as I make my ascent. Even a moment of hesitation would mean my immediate fall. This was the last energy I had to move forward and if I didn't, I would never move again.

The sky grows larger as the earth seems farther away than ever, and my dream is within my grasp. Glass shards pierce my hand as I clench at the windowsill and propel my body through the window with the last of my vigor.

My body falls loosely on the floor with my face on the ground staring at it. I can hardly move at all anymore, but I push through my exhaustion and slowly tilt my head upward. I had to see what the truth was no matter what it was.

My face turns pale with shock and my mouth agape, but once I realize what I see, a slight grin crosses my face. Hunched over on a wall in front of me with dust and silken webs covering it was a skeleton staring back at me with hollow eyes.

Death always finds a way.

Dear My Darling,

ANONYMOUS

Do you think about me the same way I think about you?
Not in an obsessive way. The way flowers sprout in the lungs and grow
from
the throat.
But the way children watch snow fall
Peaceful, gentle and full of wonder
"What's he doing right now", "Would I be annoying if I messaged
him?"
And most importantly, "Is he thinking about me?"
The type of mindless wondering that makes me worry about being
cringey
or childish. Especially considering we're not lovers.
I'm not worried about that. I'll write and think of you the same way
regardless. Do you every write about me the way I do? I don't mind if
you
don't. Please don't force yourself to do something that doesn't come
naturally. Especially to impress me. You already have
I adore you, my darling. Never forget that.

Click

MADDIE GARLAND, 11

In silent rooms, where shadows play,
A phone in hand, I start to sway.
A number dialed, a hopeful plea,
Will you answer, will it be you, for me?

Each ring echoes, a beat in time,
A question whispered, a hopeful climb.
Through circuits humming, the message flies,
To your waiting heart, behind your eyes.

The silence stretches, a moment vast,
A universe hangs, built to last.
Then a click, a voice, dispelling fear,
You answered, my dear, you're finally here.

Untitled

MARY LOVE, 10

Please do not fault your dog for his nature. He does not have the privilege of expressing himself as elegantly as you do, but he will try. When he barks, he does not aim to hurt your ears or irritate you. He does not have your gift of speech. He does not mean to hurt or scratch you when he jumps to greet you upon walking through the door. He had been waiting all day to see you again, as he will again. How can he be expected to know he is made of sharp teeth and rigid claws? When he comes wagging his tail and knocking fragile things off the coffee table, do not scold or scorn him, his only crime being that he does not know how to be anything other than a dog, and his only sin being that he loves you.



Giant Marshmallow

JAMES PROCTOR-DICKSON, 10, PHOTOGRAPHY

Nine Lives

PIPER CASTRO, 11

Bright
It's bright in here
He curls up on the couch
Eyes closed tight
Sleep, he dreams of a fight
A war of sorts

The armies he leads,
A true Bonaparte
He will never be beat
Though paws make it hard
To wield a sword

Dark
It's dark in here
He jumps off the couch
Stretching out, tail high
Off to meow into the night
To bother those asleep

He riles up the resting dogs,
And bats at closed doors
Considering himself an important cog
In the defense of the floors



Sweetie

ADDISON WARNER, 12, PHOTOGRAPHY

Perfect Time

BAILEY ADAMS, 11

Time is a revolving clock,
winding constantly—steadily, consistently.
When will one know
when or where the perfect time will be?

When they get everything right?
When their behaviors align with their beliefs?
When they are the best person
they could possibly be?

How can one measure that time,
knowing time is never-ending?
There will be no moment perfect and square,
each one arriving with its own challenges to bear.

Will one's moral character
withstand the blows of time and prosperity,
or will it never come to be?

A perfect time where one has design—
to control the variables of infinity,
increasing without bound,
no limit to notion,
so constant.

Or let it run wild with the millions of dreams that died waiting for that
time
There is no perfect time, and there never will be—
just fragments one must learn to piece together
into the perfect puzzle,
then step into the new picture they created
with the confidence of a child of a king,
which is more perfect than anything.

Perfect time is a myth
passed down from those too scared to learn how to fly,
or the ones who clipped their wings
so they would fit into The Box everyone else conforms to ,
not knowing they were meant to reach ceiling others couldn't fathom of.

Perfect just perfect what is what was and what could be

Real or fake what is left to be determine, by the one who seeks it

Perfection is a false sense of self
people continue to believe,
letting go of what could be
instead of accepting: this is just me—
the true, the real, the authentic.

Because perfect time is a dream,
something you can never obtain.
Perfect doesn't exist—
just a made-up thing in a way
to settle those who live in the imaginary,
grasping for something unreachable.

The Youth Cycle

CASS EVERETT, 9

0-5

Little little boys
Who play with their toys
Little little girls
Whose teeth shine like pearls
There is no thought in their head
Except: "I don't want to go to bed"

6-8

A group of little boys
They play and destroy
Sandcastles and their sister's stuff
To them this is enough
A little girl sees an older girl
How? I want to look like that now

9-11

Small boys see small girls
They think there gross and are going to hurl
Small girls see small boys
Their heads fill with noise

12-14

Boys and girls begin to like each other
They don't listen to their mother
They say they love each other
Until they want another

15-18

So many bad choices
They have hurt others with their voices
They have matured tons of times
When there older will they stay inside the lines
"I remember being jealous of older girls
But their teeth don't shine like pearls"

19-21

College is rough
So is their lover who says life is tough
All they do is study and drinking
"When will they leave me? After this assignment I'll be free."

22-35

They grow up and have kids
They pray their life isn't as bad as theirs is
No fights and darkness
Just happiness on Christmas
Then those little little boys and little little girls grow
Then the cycle continues
As inevitable as the winter snow

The Arena

MAHLON DAY, 12

I brush my teeth,
Turn on my fan,
Climb into bed,
And drift to sleep.

I wake again
But not in bed.
I'm in the woods,
With trees ahead.

I climb up high
To get a view,
And see some others
One or two.

I want to ask them
Where we are,
But something feels
Terribly wrong.

One kid strikes
Another down.
I shout for help
No one's around.

I stay up high
Within my tree.
I choose to hide
From what scares me.

Then heat arrives,
And smoke rolls in.
The flames begin
To dance and spin.

I scramble down
The burning tree
And race to find
A stream or sea.

I pass a girl
Who's hurt and weak.
She needs the aid
She cannot seek.

I choose to help
But when I do,
A knife cuts deep
And drives right through.

I jolt awake
Back in my bed,
With a racing heart
And skin like lead.

Helping you
Was my mistake
My final choice
I should not have made.

And then I see
What fate had planned.
The cards were played
But not from my hand

A Mortal Life

LEAH STEPHEN, 9

You had a fever, but you forced yourself out of bed,
You'll hate me for saying but I know you wept,
I think you were frightened, but perhaps I have gotten ahead.

You always feel like you're running out of time,
Running against the magnetic pull of mortality.
You've run so fast; the soles of your shoes are torn.
It hurts, you can't breathe, you're gasping, but your lungs are gone.

I know you hate December,
Where everything dies and you become aware of your mortality.
When it's just you and I, I can find immortality.
I could never be angry at you; I don't have the time.
The hole in my heart can only be filled with your presence.

You had a fever; so please go back to bed.
Have you run out of time?
Why'd you stop running? Keep running for my sake.
My hands are empty, I have nothing to give but,
I know one day, you'll be better,
And until then, you'll have me, I promise.

Crossed to Connected

MADDIE GARLAND, 11

In realms of life, where paths entwine,
A bond emerged, a friendship divine.
Like stars that gleam in darkest night,
You entered my world, a radiant light.

Through laughter shared and tears we've cried,
Our spirits soared, side by side,
In every moment, big or small,
I'm grateful to have you, standing tall.

With hearts connected, souls ablaze,
A friendship forged that forever stays.
In this journey, hand in hand,
An amazing friend, in this wondrous land.

At Last, a Quiet Place

CASS EVERETT, 9

I limp over to a tree and put my back to it and slide down, sitting on the forest floor.

I close my eyes and take deep breaths as bombs faintly whistle and holler in the distance.

Boom

Boom

Boom

I put my right hand to the side of my ribs and feel warm liquid rushing out.

But I feel so cold.

Boom

I take in my surroundings and get the presence of sadness in my heart. A forest.

Boom

It was huge and thick, and you could barely see where you were going, especially now in the dark.

Boom

I look up and the rain greets my face as I see a huge white ball of light in the sky.

That's weird because it is night and the clouds made by humans have taken over the sky; stealing the moon from everyone's view.

Boom

Maybe it is the light that I have read in books. Maybe it is a hand reaching out to take me to golden fields of wheat.

Boom

Maybe not for I have done so much to get me here. Right here. In this forest. Slowly creeping to the ball of light in the sky.

I plant my torch into the ground and take it in, this final moment.

Boom

Boom

Boom

I am meeting a better fate than most. Better than the victims of that awful sound echoing across the forest.

Boom

Better than the people that spoke out at the start, saying we have become too creative, and we should not yield this much power.

Boom

Better than the fate this forest will soon meet. How the garden will bow to the will of humanity and shrivel and catch fire.

Boom

My torch slowly went out as chills covered my body, and the light in the sky spread across the land.

Boom

Boom

I close my eyes and pray that the garden will not bow to humans, and this forest will not burn.

Boom

I close my eyes and take in the air. It was so fresh. The rain no longer kissed my face. I felt warm as a breeze passed through my hair. I opened my eyes and was taken by surprise to a golden field of wheat and a beautiful sunny day.

Hopefully the forest is ok.

Boom

Frogs sing and crickets chirp in the forest. A deer finds a person sitting on a tree, a victim of the war. But none of that matters because the forest finally meets what it has heard about for so long.

Boom