

Betty Black, 11th Grade

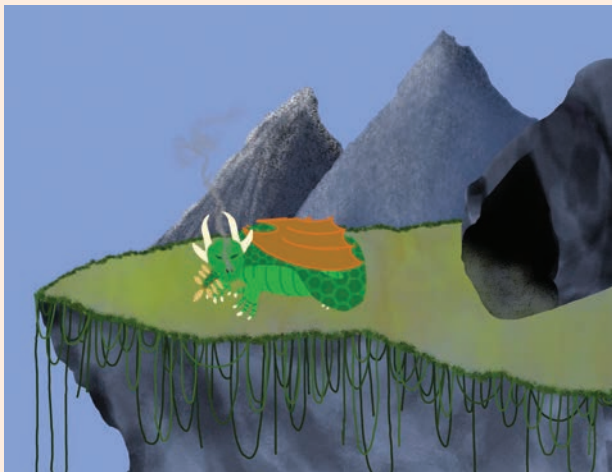


SHELTON UPPER SCHOOL LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Brooks Hartmann, 10th Grade



Rhett Breedlove, 12th Grade



Campbell Davis, 11th Grade



Milo Maurer, 10th Grade

Come Back Down (nonfiction short story)

By Anonymous

I was going to meet my step-cousin for the first time. His name was Timothy, or Timmy, just like my dad. I had heard very little about him, and I had only a hunch as to why.

I remember my baby cousin, Connor, coming to greet me and my siblings as we walked through the large oak doors. He had on a big goofy smile, standing 3'5 at three years old. He was Timmy's step-brother, and my Uncle Tom was his father, the tallest man I know.

I knew Emily, who was Connor's step-sister. She had auburn hair and blue eyes, and was a soft-spoken girl. Timmy wasn't as tall as I expected, but he had the blue eyes. Just like Connor, they were gray-blue with almost silver specks that sparkled in the sun. His hair was auburn and clean-cut, just like Emily. It seemed so right for him to be there, he fit in just perfectly. Connor was obsessed with him, and was always riding Timmy's shoulders and sharing Coca-Cola's with him. I couldn't believe I hadn't met him yet. When he first met me, he gave me a hug, even though we'd just met. He had tattoos over one arm, and we marveled at the intricate designs.

He made everyone laugh, unlike anything I'd ever seen. He was twenty-three, so younger than Emily, though he acted like an older brother. He was always in the backyard with us, playing sports and games like he'd known us forever. My Uncle Tom looked at him in this way like he wasn't sure if Timmy was really there or not.

I remember during meals he would get into fun little arguments with Emily and Uncle Tom. He had this funny way of defending himself, where instead of explaining, he would say, "I just know," with a laugh.

He was so lovely towards my Aunt Katie, even though she was his step-mom, he held no grudges. I remember after meeting him being excited to see

him again. He was so down-to-Earth, yet such a dreamer. My mom looked at me in the car with a wistful smile.

"You know that Timmy's struggled with addiction?" she said to me. I didn't know what to think. No one had even hinted that during the reunion. He was so smart, so hard-working, so warm-hearted, it didn't line up that he was an addict. He had been an addict, I told myself. He was sober now, he was finally going to be part of our family now.

Three days after I met him, he went to a motel by himself. My mother told me the next day with tears in her eyes that he had been found dead from an overdose in the motel.

I knew him for one day. Just one day, but I've written three poems and one song for him. I've always liked to believe that good always triumphs over evil, that everyone gets their happy ending eventually. Timmy's death destroyed those ideas.

But nowadays, I think his dying was a happy ending in a twisted way. For him—at least. My uncle was heart-broken, and I hated how he probably felt that it was his fault. Even now, Connor is seven years old, and sometimes asks, "Where's Timmy?" No one knows how to answer him.

But even though Timmy seemed to be on top of the world when I met him, I think he was in more pain than I could've ever imagined. Often I wish I had said something, mentioned something, and maybe it wouldn't have happened. But it's not my fault. It's not my Uncle Tom's fault. In the end, it's not really anyone's fault—I think.

I just miss him. It comes down to that. But I also believe I'll see him again someday, some way, I think I will. As Timmy would say, "I just know."



Anna Burns, 10th Grade

Anna Burns,
10th Grade

Dance Haikus

By Caroline Yoakam

The rhythmic movements
Encompass the stage as the
Dancers leap and turn.

Concise maneuvers
Are practiced at the dance barre
To perfect ballet.

Excitement and nerves
Arise before stepping on
the stage to compete.



Beckley Wilson,
11th Grade



Davis Dodson,
10th Grade

Running man

By Anonymous

The devil on your shoulder
told me sits there rent free
And maybe it's psychosis
but I'm starting to believe
If I cut you off
you'll grow three heads
then rendezvous with me
Just a family man
A haunted house
and dusty memories

Wrote a book about my life
at the age of just fourteen
Every portion memorized
no fam'ly man to be seen
movies in my head
where in somehow
you're not dead to me
If I turn around
the running man
Will run back home to me

Candy Crush

By Bond Palamar

The letter with a red lip glossed lips imprinted on it looked suspiciously white. It was sitting in Jason's locker when he opened it after seventh period, which was English One with Ms. Ellsen. It was sand paper white, and when Jason turned it around saw that there was a dark green stamp with pine trees in the background and the image of a small town that said: Wish you were here...greetings from Evergreen, Maine! Jason flipped the postcard back and forth several times before crumping it into a ball. He walked over to a nearby trash can and tossed it in. That was the seventh one this week. Jason knew Hannah was getting worse, even though she was all the way in the small Maine town that was Evergreen. It was a beautiful place, with huge rocketing pine trees, and two rivers called McKenzie and Harmon River. He had been visiting Evergreen for the summer last year to visit his older cousin Ricky Harlem. Ricky was pretty cool with shadowy green eyes that were always narrow, and shaggy brown hair that was almost to his shoulders. Ricky never said it aloud, but it seemed pretty clear to Jason that Ricky didn't want him there at all. To make the fact more clear, Ricky ditched him every time he got, always to go hang out with Amara Gordie who he learned later always visited for at least half the summer before going back to the huge hotel that owned suits, the Harmorick, which was in New York City. Amara's dad, Ricky once told him when he was in a good mood, was a horror novelist, and a very good one at that. Ricky was even kind enough to lend him three of the books by the author, Cal Gordie. Cal Gordie's picture in the book *The Outskirts* which was published January forth 1978 when Mr. Gordie was only a Junior in Harvard, looked fairly handsome, and Jason wasn't one to say that type of stuff much so this was rare for him. Cal Gordie had dark auburn hair, the top and crown looked such a fury red that it was almost ginger, and towards the back it was a sort of dark brown that could only be described as dead leaves. And a sudden word entered Jason's mind when he first saw that picture: October. That's a good word for this guy's hair, October...and Autumn, hell I wouldn't be surprised if he was Autumn itself. The books Ricky let him borrow were theses: *The Outskirts*, *Skinner*, and *The Fence Of You And I*. He read them, thought about it a bit, and decided he liked *The Outskirts* one better. It had dark stuff. Jason loved dark stuff, as well as horror films. It was an epic fantasy. Jason didn't like fantasy but he didn't hate it either, the only exception was *The Dark Tower* by Stephen King. His favorite character was Eddie Dean, and he'd always think: Eddie's funny.

Real funny, I think I almost choked on my Gatorade once when reading his dialogue. *The Outskirts* also had a bit of romance, which Jason Gilbert didn't mind at all, even secretly wishing for it sometimes. Most of the time he was disappointed, as most writers could never write proper romance. Always romance, and wanting to have sex and stuff, which Jason didn't approve of all that much. He liked small, tangible ones to say the least. His second favorite book was *Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire*, with *The Outskirts* by Cal Gordie winning first place. He liked the name, the story, characters and all the other stuff he'd forgotten about. And when he read *The Outskirts* it was also the day he met Hannah Quindell, the first girl who had a crush on him. He'd met her on Apollo Street, at Edequere Market on a Wednesday afternoon, with the sun shining mighty high and all bright like a light bulb. She had short brownish hair that he felt was starting to lean more towards black, her eyes were a dull dark brown that looked sunny and empty at the same time. It had chilled him, and he thought about those eyes again, how black and soulless they seemed to be. But that was crazy! Hannah didn't show any signs of a psycho did she? Maybe, though he couldn't remember and now, standing in this nearly empty lime green checkered hallway, a hot feeling creeped up his spine and up to his brain. He flicked some sweat off his forehead, and watched some of it disappear on his finger tips, all wet and warm. Hannah, he remembered ever so fondly and terrifyingly, was nice at first, and they even shared a kiss on the Carving Bridge and carved their initials into it with Hannah's buck knife: J+H was what it said. A kiss, that was it. Just a kiss. A kiss that somehow, Jason didn't know, convinced Hannah that they were deeply in love, and so she started to ask him to marry her, several times in the course of the day. Jason just politely declined each time, which made her angrier than before. Then on his last day in Evergreen, she had cornered him in the Pines and tried to slit his throat with her buck knife. Jason had asked her what the hell she was doing, to which she responded with, looking him dead in the eye: "If I can't have you, Jason, then nobody else can..." With that she had lunged, and nearly stabbed one of his lungs but he avoided, and shoved his way through the thick bramble until he stumbled up onto Castle Street. He had glanced down, and saw she had managed to lay a nasty wound on his left hand. It wasn't very deep, and the bleeding stopped a minute or two later. It had stung, but he had blinked back tears and ran all the way home to his big older cousin Ricky Harlem. Aunt Amy and Uncle Michael

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had asked him what happened, and he told the full story, meeting Hannah, repeatedly asking him to marry her, all of it. Once he was done, they looked at each other, pale like the ghost of death. Uncle Michael said, "Well, ain't that somethin. A crazy girl named Hannah Quindell, always knew she was a crazy bit-" Aunt Amy shot him a look that could kill an army, and he shut his mouth, but he did swear under his breath. She turned to Jason, who was nervously looking out the window in the kitchen, to see if Hannah would come by and try to break in.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

"No." Jason replied, trying to sound casual but ended up sounding scared, which Ricky seemed to smirk at.

"Well, why don'tcha pack, and we'll take care of that Hannah Quindell girl." Jason nodded and headed past them, up the stairs, and had started to pack. At the bus station the next day, they waved, and hugged goodbye, with Ricky punching him in the arm for flinching during a horror movie that summer.

"That's for flinching during Terrifier," he had said, his eyes glowing but not meanly this time, almost brotherly it was in a way a brother would smack you in the head for doing something stupid than shove you behind them when a bully named Michael Tranch punches you in the nose. It was a weird paradox. Jason had rubbed his arm, the one Ricky punched, and said in a hurt tone of voice, "Okay, but it was Terrifier...everybody flinches at Terrifier." Ricky didn't respond, as he went over to kiss his girlfriend Jessie Goldvitch, which Uncle Michael and Aunt Amy didn't seem to approve of at all. Jason knew they would yell at him later once he was gone. Jason was about to get on the bus, but not before a certain person with shoulder length brownish hair came swinging by in a too big blue hoodie, jeans, and a pair of new sneakers. It was Hannah Quindell. She was beaming, and smiling too wide, a smile Jason didn't like at all. She looked like a predator about to pounce on her prey like a lioness. Jason stepped back, one foot out on the sun kissed pavement, the other on the first step in the bus to Harrow Indiana.

"Hi, Jace." she said, smiling sweetly.

"Hi...Hanah..." Jason replied, his voice monotone.

"I got you something."



"Cool," he said, glancing at the buck knife. She nodded, and took out an envelope that said on the front: Wish you were here...Greetings from Evergreen, Maine! She handed it to him and Jason quickly shoved into his pocket.

"I put some of those Candy Hearts in there." said Hannah, beaming with pride.

"Nice." Jason said back, slowly stepping back. "Cool, uh, well I gotta go, see you next summer." He waved a half hearted goodbye to her and stepped inside the bus. He found a middle aisle seat, and put on a Spotify playlist. He fell asleep as the bus stopped in Derry, and awoke when it arrived in his home town, Harrow. Things died down pretty quickly after that, the whole Hannah Quindell incident shook him up pretty bad. But then February rolled around, and as Jason stood in the empty Harrow High hallway staring at his locker where the postcard had been before he'd crumpled it and tossed it, Hannah Quindell was in her room in Evergreen Maine on Hancoon Street, sitting at her desk. She hummed as she began to lace a red candy heart with Cyanide. She carefully put into a Greeting from

Evergreen Maine postcard, which was filled to the brim with other poisoned candy hearts. Hannah sealed the postcard in the envelope, and the next day went outside in the snow. As she dropped it into the blue mailbox she said in a sweet voice, "I told you this a thousand times before, Jason, and I'll say it again: If I can't have you, then nobody else can." The postcard fell, and it thunked against the mailbox. The snow began to fall harder, making it a small blizzard.

Shots Fired

Short Story & Illustration by Charlie Wolf

The stars flickered ahead of them as they hid beneath the space station port. Outside the roar of the cockpit, its warning lights, dirty smoke, and analog chiming, glared hundreds of thousands of screens. They flickered in the peripherals of the starship visor, displaying countless advertisements that hid the carefully placed cameras nestled behind their shells. No matter where the pilots hid, no matter how carefully built their ship was, they could not escape The Trinity's eyes.

Risten pushed her way through the primitive starship and shoved the cockpit door open.

As the door slid to the side, she was hit with the thin blue fog of hydraulic smoke and the loud disco that blared from the speaker between the two seats.

"800,000 units for one job!" Halo called over the music, tossing Risten a cookie out of the box that sat beside him.

"What do they want? For us to infiltrate the Center of Intelligence?" Risten shouted sarcastically, catching the cookie. It was rock hard, at least a half-week old. It was some of the last food they had left, as resource recovery had gotten sketchy with them not being allowed to show their faces in cities. "And will you turn that stupid music off?!"

Halo rolled his eyes and flipped a series of switches, and the music died. "You're no fun."

Risten squeezed through the controls and sat down in the second control seat, next to Halo. "Seriously, though, what do they want?"

"They want us to shoot down some more government fleet drones, as per usual, except this time, they want us to collect the computer brains from the wreckage." Halo said, cracking the knuckles of his three-fingered hands.

Halo was a mothlike, umber colored humanoid alien from a distant desert planet. Like the rest of his species, he was a pacifist towards organic beings, and historically lived on-planet – traits deemed barbaric to galactic sector B9441, where he and Risten were both stranded. These traits made him an abomination before the manufactured society that remained on space stations to avoid the wreckage of the planets left behind.

"Not bad." Risten said, engaging the starship's thrusters and cloaking mechanism. "And they're gonna pay us 500,000 units? That's easily enough to get us a ticket back to our home galactic sector." Risten was human, a member of the Sámi tribe and an ex-fighter pilot. She followed religion – something the authoritarian three big tech companies known as "The Trinity" deemed primitive and a means to lead people away from their true purpose – to be



Charlie Wolf, 12th Grade

their own idols through technology.

From a young age, all citizens of the B9441 galactic sector were told that there is no god but for themselves, that violence is peace, that nature is only a means to be harvested for resources. As such, Halo and Risten were shot down by government fleets of the sector, deemed heretics, and ordered to be vaporized.

The ship's thrusters sputtered as the pilots eased the craft out into the void, its cloaking device camouflaging its primitive, winged exterior.

Not even ten minutes out, the radar pinged. A pinpoint appeared on its surface, flickering in the haze – a government surveillance drone.

"Ooh! We got a stray!" Halo sang, pushing the thrusters into a higher speed. "Are the guns engaged?"

"Hell yeah." Risten said. As the turrets clicked into place, she felt suspicious. Drones never travelled alone, and they never stayed as close to the space station as this one did. Something was wrong.

"It's probably glitching, quit worrying so much." Halo said dismissively, his antennae picking up on Risten's quick heartbeat.

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"I can't help but worry. Quit being so nosy." Risten hissed as she locked the turrets onto the target. "Let's kill this thing."

As they pulled the triggers simultaneously, the starship's visor lit up with the light of the bullets, revealing the drone's silhouette as it was sliced in half

Risten pumped the thruster handle forward, and as the ship shot closer, Halo engaged the tractor beam.

There was a loud clunk as the drone's computer brain was sucked up into the ship's cargo hold.

"YEAH!" Halo and Risten shouted as they high fived.

"Now all we have to do is take this metal turd back to Leonard, then we're finally out of here." Halo said, stretching. Leonard was the man who had helped them build the ship, the man who brought them bounty messages every month.

"You know it!" Risten said, staring at the blinking lights of the cockpit.

WHOOM!!

The pilots yelled as the ship shook violently, and, for a split second out of the starship visor, they watched as the sleek exteriors of government enforcer ships shot by, shimmering in the starlight.

"WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?!" Halo screamed, engaging the thrusters.

"THE DRONE BRAIN! IT'S TRACKING US! IT WAS A SET UP!" Risten shouted. "HEAD FOR THE ASTEROID FIELD!"

They shot through the enforcer lines, the brilliant flashes of laser bullets lighting up the void of space. The ship rattled and sputtered, its right wing shattering as one of the enforcers sliced it with a phase-beam.

"EJECT THE STUPID THING!" Risten shouted, forcing the ship into a barrel roll as they shot into the asteroid field.

Halo slammed a button, warning alarms blaring throughout the cockpit as the brain was shot back into space.

KRAK!

The pilots screamed as a bloodied, familiar exosuit helmet slammed into the starship visor, a message scratched into the cranium: "to conform is to live".

"Oh God... That's Leonard's-" Risten stammered, staring at the helmet as long cracks began to

spiderweb across the starship's visor.

"EXOSUITS! NOW!" Halo shouted, slamming his spacesuit helmet over his face, clicking it into place on his shoulders.

Risten quickly did the same, coughing as the purified oxygen shot into her lungs.

The pilots screamed as the ship jerked, quaking under the force of another enemy phase beam.

"Not again... We can't lose everything again..." Halo whispered, his voice shaking.

Risten quickly cut the ship's power, watching as everything went dark. They had to play dead.

They sat in the darkness, watching as the ships stalked by, their shimmering exteriors bearing The Trinity's logos.

Risten turned to look through the starship's cracked visor, and in a cold dread, saw the carefully laced wiring, cameras, and sensors that lay within the asteroids' dust. Nowhere was untouched. Nowhere was unseen.

Hours began to pass. All of the ship's oxygen had been lost, and the cold was beginning to seep through the pilots' exosuits. They sat side by side in the darkness, staring in terror off at the unceasingly surveilled wastes of space. They were no better off than Leonard, no better off than everyone before them. They were mice in a lab, only kept alive for the sake of the game; only kept alive to keep an example of what would happen if rules were broken.

The fleet began to slink off, leaving the pilots alone in the darkness. The ship was in ruins, and even if it could still function properly, the power had been off too long. It wouldn't start again.

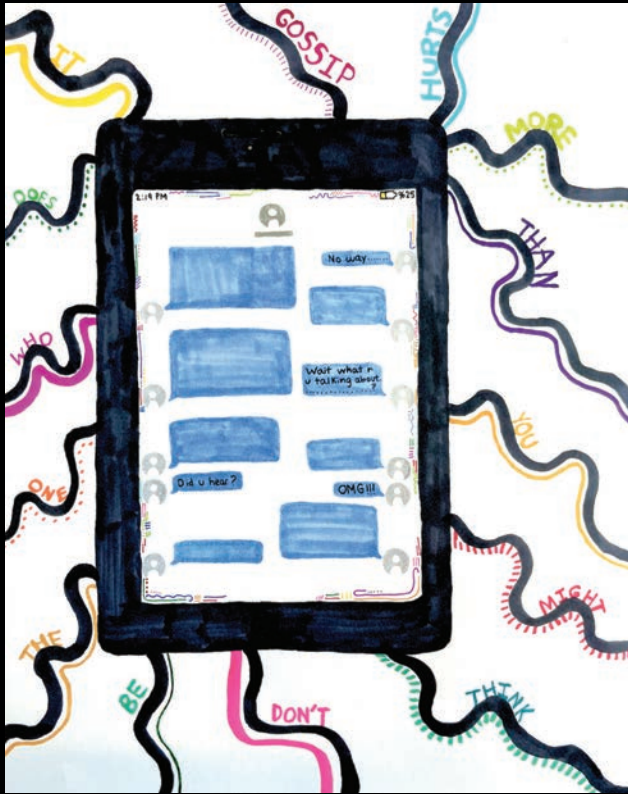
Halo put his head on Risten's shoulder as she glanced at a flash of light on the dashboard.

"You seeing this?" Risten asked.

Static pulsed through the tiny LED screen, an unknown signal surging through the dead machinery. The pilots were suddenly filled with a strange sense of hope as they recognized the signal, only left to wonder why such a thing would ever reach them.

"It's a transmission." Halo breathed.

And just as fast as the signal appeared, it flickered out of existence, leaving nothing but a binary message on the starship hard drive behind. There was still hope.



Caitlin Mahoney, 10th Grade



Caitlin Mahoney, 10th Grade

LUCAS

By Jed Sells

Lucas could feel all of the eyes on him as he walked into the crowded lunchroom. The whispers and the funny looks from kids who had no idea of the real story. He kept his head down and went quickly to pick up his tray and milk. Lucas could feel the sweat slowly start to trickle down his armpits, so he clamped his arms to his side. He mentally tried to slow his breathing as he made his way to his usual table with his friends, Doug, Ryan and Ben. These guys had been his friends since first grade,

but he could still imagine what they were thinking about him. No one had really discussed what had happened and he knew it was bound to come up soon. What if they didn't want to sit with him?

Lucas sat down in his regular seat and gave his friends a quick look. Doug and Ben were discussing the math homework from last night, while Ryan looked on, lost as usual. Ryan was not a big fan of math. Of the 4 friends, Ryan was the worst student

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but only because he never really studied. He was friendly, popular and what some might consider “the class clown”. Doug was the oldest and had the best grades. He hoped to be a doctor one day and with his drive for success, Doug would probably make it. Ben, the youngest, was an average student, and well-liked. He dreamed of being a pilot and had already started his flight lessons. Lucas listened in while his 3 friends chatted, but his mind went back to the weekend.

Friday had been a regular day, like any other. Lucas went to school and then walked home with his friends in the afternoon. He had his learner’s permit, like most of his friends, but hadn’t gotten his driver’s license. Friday was a beautiful fall day, with leaves still on the sidewalk and a bit of a chill in the air. The boys threw a soccer ball back and forth as they walked toward Ryan’s house. Ryan and Doug had plans to play video games. Ben had an eye doctor appointment, so his mom picked him up earlier in the afternoon. Lucas waved to the boys as they went into Ryan’s house but continued down the sidewalk. He lived 3 streets over from Ryan, next door to Ben. Lucas needed to get home so that he could get ready for Rachel’s party. He knew he had only been invited because his mom and Rachel’s mom worked at the same company, but he was still excited. Rachel and Lucas used to be good friends before he changed schools, but now they only see each other a few times a year. Lucas’ older brother, Tyler was going to drop him off at 7pm and he planned to ride home with a neighbor, Ashley, who was also going to the party.

Ashley! She was another story altogether. Ashley was a little on the wild side. She was a year older and went to school with Lucas. Lucas’ mom liked to say that “Ashley was a troubled girl”. Lucas was really surprised when his mom suggested that he ride home with Ashley. He wasn’t thrilled about it but his parents were going to a late movie so he didn’t have any other way to get home unless he took an Uber. Lucas had a good time at Rachel’s party. It was her 16th birthday and she had invited a lot of kids. They played games, ate pizza and tons of snacks, danced and played karaoke. Lucas even took a turn at singing a song with Rachel. About 11:30, people started to leave and Lucas went to find Ashley. He hadn’t seen much of her during the party, but he thought she was sitting out by the pool. He looked through the sliding glass door and gave Ashley a little wave. Ashley made a weird smirk and then covered her mouth with her hand. Lucas thought he saw a glass bottle in her hand, but then Ashley hid her hand behind her back. He saw Ashley slowly making her way to the back door.

Lucas waited by Ashley’s car while she fumbled to find her keys. He couldn’t put his finger on it but he thought that something was off about Ashley.

As he slammed the door, Lucas realized that Ashley smelled like alcohol. Lucas looked at her as she cranked up the car. He started to say something as she pulled away and sped down the street. Ashley was driving like a crazy person and ran the stop sign at the end of the road. As they pulled out of the neighborhood, Lucas yelled for her to stop. “Stop, stop, just stop!” She laughed and pulled to the side of the road. “What????” Lucas opened the car door and hopped out. He told Ashley to get out of the car and give him the keys. Ashley leaned over, shut his door and pulled away. Lucas tried to call his parents but there was no answer since they were at the movies. Lucas had no choice but to walk the 2 miles back to his house. As Lucas passed Ashley’s house, he noticed all the lights were out. He made his way back to his house and waited for his parents. The next morning, they got the news! Ashley had hit a parked car and slammed into a tree about a mile from home. She was in ICU at the local hospital and was in a coma.

Lucas knew that rumors were going around the school now. He heard them whispering and could see all of the weird looks. Everyone thought he had been with Ashley in the car, and maybe even drinking too. They were saying that he ran off and left her when she hit the tree. The police knew the truth though, and his parents. They had all met at the police station, with Ashley’s dad and Lucas had told them what happened. Rachel had also told the police that Lucas had been in the house all night, and he was not drinking. Police found a bottle in Ashley’s purse that was almost empty. Her parents said it might have come from their bar at home. Ashley’s mom was sitting by her bed at the hospital waiting for her to wake up. The doctors felt that she would wake up but they didn’t know what the damage would be.

Lucas brought his mind back to the lunchroom and his friends at the table. He couldn’t help but think about how rumors spread so fast and how quickly people were to believe what they heard. A lot of these kids had known him for years, but they were still eager to think that he would get drunk and leave a hurt girl alone in a car. It shocked him but it also hurt him. Lucas knew that he had repeated things about other kids. Not terrible things. He never thought he was doing any harm. He had seen the excitement though when kids had a good piece of gossip. Lucas only realized now how much damage things like this could do. Lucas knew that eventually the truth about Ashley would make its way around school, but right now he would have to survive the looks and whispers. Lucas knew that in the future he would feel differently before he joined in on the school gossip.

A SEEDLING OF HOPE

By Carter Weisberg

Lights, all I could see were lights. Light particles bounced and reflected off one another in the infinite mirror maze called Eternity. Here there was constant daylight. Panda-Express, our supreme leader, kept it that way. It was disorientating and confusing, just like the Party wanted it to be for prisoners but over time, you got used to it. I had no prior memory of any other people here with me but I held hope they existed within Eternity's vast unmatched depths of mirrors. So far, I have encountered no one. So, I kept on at my drudgingly slow pace: right turn, left turn, left turn, then another left and a right. More and more blank space appeared before me with each turn, all punctuated with distorted reflections of myself. Why was I here?

Panda-Express disposed of all its disloyal subjects within Eternity which was supposedly located in Madagascar but honestly, did anyone really know for sure? Back before I found myself in the maze, I dimly remember Panda-Express posting about Eternity on Facebook and Instagram and even on highway billboards. "You Cross Us, You Pay, For All Eternity" was the Party's famous warning emblazoned under the glowing image of the Giant Panda. The only real memory I got to keep during my stay at Eternity was my disloyal deed of Food Violation. Long ago, Panda-Express outlawed all food that wasn't 3-D printed meat and I apparently was found growing a seedling. I don't even remember what kind of seedling it was nor why it was in my possession. No matter because in return for my defiance, the Party gave me Eternity to contemplate my mistake.

For the past five years, I have been attempting to put the pieces together with the dim memory I had of my life before Eternity. Here, the Party was watching me through the mirrors. The feeling was familiar and omnipresent. Surveillance felt normal and routine. I am reasonably sure that before I was here in Eternity, the Party constantly watched us all through our personal devices like computers, phones, watches and TVs. Here, I was a rat in a maze, always on display to hidden eyes all around me. Left turn, left turn, left turn, right turn. With each turn the scenery was the same: endless mirrors. The climate was always the same too: 25 degrees Celsius according to my government issued Panda watch-tracker. Incidentally, the Party's sacred number was 25 referring to the year 2025 when Panda took control of the world.

Abruptly, my watch-tracker beeped: "Prisoner! Time to initiate the sleep cycle!" As my eyelids drooped and fatigue wafted over me, I slid down one of the mirror walls to rest with my knees hugged tight to my chest. "Cam! Cam!" My eyes sprung open, as big as saucers. A voice was calling my name, my actual name, not my labeled name Panda-Express gave me: Express-Disobedient-Subject 0987918271.

Was I not alone? Was there someone else like myself scrambled within Eternity's seamlessly infinite walls? What was happening?

BAM! In my excitement I sprang up, bashing my head into a mirror and although this was a mildly common occurrence within the mirror maze, I felt surprisingly dazed. As I scrambled to my feet, Eternity suddenly went dark, like someone had flicked off a giant light switch to my world. That someone had to be Panda-Express, punishing me by manipulating the day/night cycle to squash my hope and further confuse me as its prisoner. Right? The mirror maze was now impossible to navigate in inky darkness so I froze, outstretching my arms like spokes on a compass trying to regain my bearings. My watch-tracker glowed faintly on my wrist "24." Wait...24? Something was definitely wrong. Suddenly, a high pitch screech emanated from my wrist. That everpresent feeling of being watched evaporated. Cracking glass screamed in my ears! The mirrors were shattering!

The next thing I registered was complete silence. Confused, I crawled over the wreckage and noticed the outline of one of the mirrors glimmered with a faint orange light. I felt drawn to the shards and as I touched them, pieces of the mirror maze fell away leaving a hole the size of my head. Tentatively I peered outside my prison. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, a desolate city scape met my gaze punctuated by tufts of grey smoke. Skyscrapers littered the ground like broken toy robots discarded on a nursery floor. As my eyes continued to focus, I noticed small fires smoldering in the distance. They resembled tiny barrels of orange sparks encircled by swaying shadows. I frantically rubbed my eyes. The shapes were in fact small clusters of people huddled around makeshift fires. I wasn't alone? Eternity was broken? Panda-Express had fallen?

I pushed myself up out of the broken mirror hole and wriggled out of Eternity. I stumbled ahead towards the group of people warming their hands around the crackling fire. As I abandoned Eternity, I stuffed my hands in the pockets of my regulation Panda pants as surprisingly cold air bit my face. The inside of my right pocket felt unusually gritty. It had been home to the occasional lint ball in Eternity but this felt odd. As I lurched forward into the night, I stared at my right hand. My fingers were coated in moist, black dirt and in my palm rested a single sprouted seed. A smile escaped my lips as I sprinted into the night.

CRYING OV3R U

Reflection Piece & Song Lyrics by Sahil Sundaram

I began to write “CRYING OV3R U” in early spring during my freshman year of high school. During that time, I had just gotten over a very dark time in my life, and I wanted to write a song about getting over it. One day, I had a dream that there was a Megan Thee Stallion song rapped in Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter (it was not real, obviously.) When I woke up, I had this thought of, “Hey, why don’t I write this into a song?” The first verse uses iambic pentameter, so each line is ten syllables long and sounds like a heartbeat (ba-BUM ba-BUM ba-BUM ba-BUM ba-BUM.) I then decided to mix the lofi rap genre in this with honeyed vocals that you would hear in NSYNC or “Life Goes On” by BTS. To this day, “CRYING OV3R U” remains one of my proudest

accomplishments in songwriting. It helps remind me that my negative emotions, even if I don’t feel them anymore, act as a way to unlock the most genuine versions of myself. I hope you enjoy “CRYING OV3R U” as much as I do!

*DISCLAIMER: This song is not meant to be “a diss track” or to bring someone down in any way! When I wrote this song, I was going through a lot, and was angry at a lot of people. The emotions I feel now towards these people are not the same as they were back then. However, I feel like this song is one of my greatest works, which is why I wanted to post this. I have no harsh feelings towards ANYONE!!!

CRYING OV3R U

*Hey there girl, I think it's been forever
How's it goin'? I hope you're doing better
I remember when you told me you were stressed*

*Back in Tokyo when you got together
In the snow when you gave him your sweater
I could feel my heart rip slowly out my chest*

*You did not know just what you had, yeah
You made the glass walls that I cracked, yeah
Took every piece of hate you gave me
And the love you tried to fake me*

*I am not mad, I'm doing fine yeah
I found the color in your white lies
You dimmed my light but I still shine through
Now you're stuck with less and you know it too*

*Cause I ain't crying over you
I'm floating high not missing you
You left me when I was at my low
Now I soar above the view*

*Now I'm quiet in your mind
Soft like smoke you couldn't find
All my tears have dried, I'm through
'Cause I ain't crying, crying over you*

*I ain't bitter, I'm just clear now
Played the game, and found you out
Used to drown in your silence
Now sunshine fills your stormclouds*

*You were glass-I saw through
Every crack, every move
Left my texts on read cause you were too afraid to
tell the truth*

*Got peace where the pain was
Got shine where the shade was
I could see his Pinterest page-
And it gave me deja vu*

*Sayin' he nice, but he ain't me
Find the perfect guy (hey now!) in your dreams
No more texting friends, cause I'm finally free
It's time you cut your losses, and you sow what you
reap*

*You did not know just what you had, yeah
You made the glass walls that I cracked, yeah
Took every piece of hate you gave me
And the love you tried to fake me*

*I am not mad, I'm doing fine yeah
I found the color in your white lies
You dimmed my light but I still shine through
Now you're stuck with less and you know it too*

*Cause I ain't crying over you
I'm floating high not missing you
You left me when I was at my low
Now I soar above the view*

*Now I'm quiet in your mind
Soft like smoke you couldn't find
All my tears have dried, I'm through
'Cause I ain't crying, crying over you*

*Now I'm quiet in your mind
Soft like smoke you couldn't find
All my tears have dried, I'm through
'Cause I ain't crying, crying over you*

*Kept the lights off just to think
Sipped regret in every drink
Looked back at all the texts
Found no truth in what you sent*

*I ain't cold I'm just complete
Found myself from beneath defeat
You moved on and that's your lie
I moved on and that's goodbye*



Lola Bridges, 11th Grade

A HANFU IN A WORLD OF WOOL

Short Story by Jack Mullins

My Majesty said I shouldn't have worn my Hanfu dress when going to speak to those Romans in their hideous brown wool tunics—maybe that's why I ended up in this loud prison. I just came to speak about possibly starting a silk trade with the Romans, and their emperor found this offer so disrespectful that he chose to send me to a prison where I looked like a beautiful woman made of silk in a world full of wool. I feel like this might be all for me. These Romans don't seem too pleased to have me here. I'm just happy that I'm in my home's clothing.

I believe that my Majesty just wanted the money and profit from this trade, but I cared more for the possible mixing of cultures that might result. We seem to live in a very separated world, and it's my dream to see this world coexist better. I doubt it will

ever happen, though. At least the journey here was great. I received many rude looks the farther I went from China, but there's something one feels when being different in a repetitive world.

I really do think that my chances of going back home to my Majesty would rise if I would just wear that brown tunic rotting near the wooden door. It's just over there, resembling the rising idea of conformity that I believe should be dying. One needs to be proud of their true selves, and this Roman culture I'm seeing through this cell doesn't seem to follow that well. I don't really know what it is that is compelling me to be this way. If I'm going to die here, stuck in this cell, I believe that I should die as an original human—not as a victim to the plague of conformity that this world is suffering in.

LULU

Nonfiction Short Story by Mrs. Meylor

There are some people in life you come across who do one of two things:

They teach you how to love, or 2. They teach you how to receive love.

Brown waves. Dark brown eyes. Round cheeks. The same birthmark as her mother— on her left hip. Her lisp. Her need to fall asleep with at least fifteen stuffed animals, never one less. Her absolute devotion to sweets— again, like her mother.

It's the tiny habits and tendencies, the small details that will change without warning. And I'm the only one who feels certain I'll remember every single one. I swear I will. Even though I know time will steal most of them.

But for now, they're mine to notice, until something new appears and I fall in love all over again.

Strawberry cake. Pink food coloring. Sprinkles (the rainbow ones, not the chocolate). Whipped buttercream frosting and the freshest strawberry jelly layered inside. Baked in a glass dish. Three birthday candles that have been sitting in my junk drawer for who-knows-how-long, their bitter wax dripping down the sides, melting into the icing like it belongs there. The cake is built slowly— starting with flour and sugar and milk. It holds its weight, even when it's messy. It requires patience. And even when you try to make it perfect, it still comes out a little slanted.

But the crooked ones always have the best filling. It's chaotic. It's sweet. It's sticky.

I want to keep building it just to prove I can.



Lyla Woodbridge, 10th Grade



Betty Black, 11th Grade



Ava Sudbeck, 11th Grade

THE LIBRARY OF MYSTERY

By Anonymous

Kyrie was a unique boy; he wasn't like the rest of the kids in his class. What set him apart was his love for reading. Kyrie lives in the town of Maple Meadows, a small Victorian town known for local businesses and beautiful homes across the lake. Kyrie is in the 8th grade. One day after school, he leaves to go to the library, his favorite spot in all of town. After walking in, he does the usual, says hello to his favorite librarian, Agatha Merryweather, the sweet old lady, and then he soon sits down in his designated spot at the very back of the library by all of the challenging books. While he's an 8th grader, his reading level is as if he were a senior. But he noticed something is a little off today, the bookshelf that has been there since he was born has been moved, and he can't seem to find where it went. After taking a close look around the library,

he noticed that everything had been rearranged. Kyrie finds a suspicious coin pointing him in the direction of a very mysterious hidden door. Kyrie is shy, so it takes a lot of courage for him to do something out of the ordinary like this, but this time he feels adventurous and sneaks into the secret passageway. What he finds is very mysterious: a bunch of old letters from hundreds of years ago that have never been mailed out. He finds this very weird. Why are all of these here? What does this mean? After looking around for about an hour, Kyrie found something even more extraordinary, a singular golden letter. After he picks this letter up, he figures out this isn't an ordinary letter; it's a letter addressed to him.



HAGREDGE FOLLOW

By Deshawn McClelland

I left my island home of Zealand with my crew, sailing on my father's old ship to continue the explorations he once led. I said goodbye to my mother and father, watching them grow smaller and smaller until they disappeared into the horizon. As we departed, my mind drifted back to a poor old man I had met earlier. He had told me, "Go do something great!" I hadn't understood what he meant, and eventually dismissed his words as nonsense. The day was clear when we set sail, but exhaustion crept over me as the hours passed. I finally lay down and fell asleep. A violent jolt woke me at midnight, and my sailors stirred in alarm. The ship had come to a sudden stop. When I rushed to the deck, I realized we had drifted off our intended route and onto one I had never planned to take — a route marked on the map as *Hagredge Follow*. For a moment I wondered if it truly was an accident... or if something had guided us here on purpose.

I recognized the route on the map immediately. It was named after the tallest and most heroic figure in Zealand's history — James Hagredge, whom we called *Hagredge Follow* because following him always meant freedom and safety. He once led his troops to Antarctica to protect our island, taking risks so terrifying they gave me goosebumps as a child. But after the war, he never returned, and his disappearance became a legend. Years later, I set out for Europe with my sailors on a trade mission, but one morning I woke up freezing, and the crew was complaining loudly. When one asked where we were, I told him, "It's summer, but we're in the coldest place on Earth." Antarctica. I ordered the sailors to stay with the ship while I explored. I wanted to prove myself a brave and worthy captain, even though the cold bit into my bones.

After three days of searching, I reached the far side of the island and heard playful tapping. Emperor penguins—thousands of them—marched along a path marked by enormous footprints. I followed the trail, trying not to scream when I realized how massive the prints were. Suddenly, polar bears charged from both sides. Before I could react, a towering figure with a crystal sword appeared, cutting down the bears and driving the rest away. I thanked him, but he walked off silently. Something

about him felt familiar, so I followed. He was nearly nine feet tall, with a long beard, guiding the penguins as if they were his troops. When I asked his name, he said nothing, so I turned to leave. Then he finally spoke: "You... Zealander?" When I confirmed it, he said he had protected Zealand long ago. My heart pounded. "You must be Sir *Hagredge Follow*!" He nodded slowly. He even recognized my father, Abram Nezzar, calling him one of his greatest soldiers and closest friends.

I urged him to return with me to Zealand, but he refused. The penguins, he explained, were ancient spirits who watched over Antarctica, and they had chosen him because their time was nearly over. When I asked how long they had left, he answered, "Ten days." I told him I would help, but only if he promised not to vanish again. I reminded him how deeply his disappearance had wounded our people. He insisted the penguins needed him more than Zealand did. But he also revealed something I had never known: I was meant to be king of Zealand. Our current ruler, a cruel cyclops named Gargantuan—my half-brother—had betrayed us after Hagredge won the war. I told Hagredge we had to stop him, but he warned that Gargantuan was too powerful. When he shouted that he would not return, I shouted back that Zealand needed him and that he couldn't break our hearts a second time. He walked away without answering.

When I returned to my ship, my sailors had abandoned me and sailed to Europe. Furious and freezing, I waited alone through the night. At dawn, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Hagredge stood behind me, sword in hand, looking more magnificent than any painting. "You were right," he said. "I shouldn't have left. When we return, you will be the hero this time." I proudly told him my name — Christopher Nezzar — and asked how we would get home without my sailors. He smirked. "You think I don't have a ship?" We boarded his vessel and sailed back to Zealand. The people rejoiced when they saw their long-lost hero. Hagredge defeated Gargantuan, reclaimed the throne, and became king once more. I became the hero of Zealand. As for my sailors, they were sent to Madagascar instead of Antarctica—so they could "move it, move it." And that is where the story ends.

THE JOURNEY OF THE SHADOWS

Chapter 8: The Tragic Pound

By Kingston Moore

Arianna dashes through the cobblestone streets, both her young sons cradled in her arms as she tries to avoid the potholes of the streets around her. Despite the fear ensuing around her, the shouts and cries coming from voices she knew well, and the cries made by the Sicilian soldiers who dismounted from their horses and without hesitation seized all that was around them. Moments later she set both her sons down and rushed inside her home, quickly located just a few items to put in her two small bags. She knew she had to be quick and thoughtful for there was a chance this was the last the boys would ever receive from her. "Mama let us come with you! I want to find those toys-" Tiziano asked, as he tugged at her dress as he rushed into the house behind his mother. "No Tiziano you can't. Not right now my boy. I need you to wait close to the door with your brother and trust that Mama will be right back. Just a moment longer here so please stay." Her words were firm as she left Tiziano and Alfio. At that moment it was starting to dawn on Tiziano just how close to danger they were.

Just outside their house, Sicilian soldiers were raiding the streets that he'd always thought of as safe, as a component of the place he called home. And now his own home wasn't even safe enough for him to remain within the four walls that he'd always considered safe. "I'm scared. What if the soldiers come?" Alfio asked, his voice a mixture of anguish and confusion as he tried to cradle himself and avoid breaking down and crying. Tiziano couldn't bear it any longer, he rushed towards the window and was horrified by what he saw. Soldiers who didn't seem at all far from their house. Just before he could get a good look his mother came rushing back, tears in her eyes as she held two small bags. At the very top of the bag, underneath the food she'd packed there was a small poetry book, one that he immediately recognized as being Alfio's. Right alongside it was his only sketchbook, a rectangular shape book with a few of his favorite drawings inside. Tiziano felt helpless, as he watched his mother set down the bags and frantically moved towards the candle in the kitchen which she blew out with simply a single sigh.

His heart raced like a racing horse, ready to take off with nothing but the rider and the saddle on top of them. A part of him wished that as the horse he could control the rider, ensuring he could save himself, Alfio, and his mama. As he stood there sniffing he felt his mother's gentle hand pull him and Alfio into a tight shoulder. She began to speak gently, "Oh my sons...my beautiful special little boys." she said as she choked back tears, her urge to cough, and the strong force within her that wanted nothing more but to dive into her boy's arms and

hug them and tell them goodbye. Just as she was about to speak, Alfio and Tiziano both fell into her arms, their arms wrapped tightly around their mother's shoulders. For just a moment it was as if a little cocoon of safety existed amidst the chaos of the world around them.

A few seconds later it was broken when Arianna pulled away, remembering her role not just as their friend but as their mother and protector. "Alfio. Tiziano. I love you with all my heart which is why I'm doing this. I will not let you hide and put yourselves at risk by staying here." "But mama-" "No. I just won't risk my beautiful boys like that. And to make sure that neither of you are risked I'm going to need you to prepare yourselves. I know you have it in you, my sons, which is why I want you to take what it's in this bag and run. I want you both to run...run faster than you've ever run before. Listen to mama when she tells you this. Know that when you are running you cannot look back at what's been. Run into what is and what will be and not backwards.

Mama will try to be on the outskirts of town but there is the chance that I won't be there. If that happens I want you to keep looking forward. Never ever let your guard down. I know it's a lot...and it's dangerous but you need to know Bellandi and his men do not rest. Whoever turned in those names didn't rest and those soldiers didn't rest either. Otherwise they wouldn't be raiding through the streets on Holy Saturday. Giulia is trying and she's holding them off but they're coming and they'll be out there looking for you. So when the time comes at night, you both will leave this city. Go north to the mouth of the Simeto River, where the river meets the sea. Then continue north through Catania all the way to Messina. When you get there go to the harbour. Giulia will try to meet you there. And if she's not there, find a man named Massimo Talluto, a good man who served with your papa in the war. He's a fisherman and if you ask around I know you'll find him. But I will pray, my sons, that it does not come to that.

And one last thing when you...when you make it to the Simeto River stay there and wait until sunset for me and I promise you mama will fight...I will fight harder than I ever have to be there. But" Arianna paused, swallowing her tears and coughing inside her. "But if I'm not there you can't break down. I want you to know that I'm not there, that you all must remember me and the strength that I know is instilled in both of you. You're ready and you'll carry on." "But mama we're scared! And you're young. You're a little sick but young. You have time-you" Alfio sobbed loudly as he leaned his head into the lap of Arianna. She gently stroked his hair and said

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"Alfio be strong my son. I love you and the strength within you will always be there with or without me. Do not break down my son. Do not break down." Her words, gentle but strong, seemed to have the effect she wanted. Within seconds Alfio lifted his head from his mother's lap, fighting back the tears as he looked at her in her gentle, beautiful eyes. As Alfio's tears streamed down his face Arianna, like with Tiziano, used her thumbs to gently wipe the tears off his face. She then kissed him on the forehead before continuing "I know the world feels like it's falling apart right now but trust me my boys when I tell you it's going to be alright. Mama is here now and I love you both, more than you can fathom. I love you my brave Tiziano. You're fearless, artistic, you're a leader, and you have this...heart of a lion that I promise you will harness something great one day my son. Never forget that. And Alfio...my little poetic prince, you too will do great things. You're kind, diligent, hard working, and I promise you my son...you are going to be incredible one day with all you have going for you my little poetic prince. And together with your faith and what makes you boys you I know that you will make it. You will thrive my sons and always remember...always to remember the inner strength that the Lord gives you. That he has embedded and instilled within you."

As she said this Tiziano's lips quivered, but despite the motion overcoming him he fought the strong urge within himself to sob. He knew he had to be the brave and fearless boy that his mother needed, that his brother needed, and that the Lord who instilled strength in him needed him to be. "Now my sons. Evening is here and the soldiers-they'll be here soon if they haven't already made it here. You must-" Her words were cut off by the sudden loud knock at the door. "Miss Monreale! We request that you come for interrogation! We know you are ill but we will give you twenty seconds to get to open this door before we light this house up! 1, 2, 3!" "Go my sons, and remember your inner strength and that your mama loves you now and always." Tiziano and Alfio tightly hugged their mother before rushing into their room where they rushed to the back window that led to the area where they grew fresh plants and vegetables. The boys climbed out that window, quickly throwing their bags in the grass while they jumped down behind them. As Tiziano jumped he saw the last glimpse of his mother who walked towards the door to let in the soldiers into the house. As they landed on both feet in the grass they grabbed their bags and took off running out from the back of their house and down the familiar hill that led away from their house. As they were running Tiziano felt his heart skip a beat, the air suddenly became cooler, and he felt dizzy, as if all the strength within him was being challenged by a great external power. As he looked back at the house he felt his life crumble before his eyes within a second as the house engulfed in flames.

The home-his sanctuary-the place where he'd been allowed to live the first seven years of his life as

a boy was burning and he was going to have to escape and find a new place for him and his brother. Despite the loss of his home right before his eyes, Tiziano had a strong feeling that his mama might make it and that he would see her again either that night at the amphitheater or at the mouth of the Simeto River. "No!" Alfio cried loudly as he looked at their home burning before his eyes. "Alfio no! This is no moment to break down, remember what mama said. We must go to the amphitheater and carry on no matter what. We cannot let anything break us down. Come my brother-" "But Tiziano our home" Alfio whimpered as Tiziano grabbed him by his right hand and pulled him down the hill and through the wild cobblestone streets. As the two of them ran through the streets, Tiziano kept his one goal in mind-to make it to the amphitheater.

As he and his brother rushed through the chaotic streets of Syracuse they could hear the screams and shouts of people whose homes were being raided by Bellandi's soldiers but nevertheless the brothers kept it moving as they darted past the small homes of innocent people being thrown out of their homes and beaten brutally in the streets. As they made their way through Piazza del Duomo past the church and the bustling market they ignored the stares, the shouts, and the many fingers pointed at them as they sprinted through the square.

As they made their way down a dim thin street the brothers felt intense exhaustion. It was as if all the running and the panic they felt racing in their pounding hearts was finally catching up to them. "Ti-Tiziano." Alfio muttered as they stopped. "We-we don't have a mama anymore" "Oh Alfio you don't know that. Mama said she'll meet us" "No Tiziano. You know it and I know it too. Mama isn't coming back, she's dead and I'm...I'm not sure how we're going to do it just the two of us brothers. Without Giulia. Without Mama. How can we" Alfio's words broke apart as he fell into Tiziano's arms, sobbing his eyes out because there were no potential maybes. Alfio knew mama was gone. He could feel it in his soul that she'd died a moment ago during their big sprinting away from the house. She was like so many poor souls in Syracuse that night, just another target practice for the Sicilian soldiers who had ruthlessly murdered her. She was gone and for the first time that day it finally resonated with him that he no longer had any parents. It was just him and Alfio, and together they would have to face the world head on not as the children of a Syracuse seamstress but as the Monreale brothers who feared nothing or nobody. As Alfio sobbed aggressively in the dim corner of that street, Tiziano leaned his head against his brother and started sobbing too. Boyhood was over and now he would have to be not a boy who hid behind adults but a young man who could face and handle things on his own. As the brothers stayed in that dark dim corner all they could think about was what they'd just lost rather than all the dangers that lay ahead.

THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

By Brooke Blackmire

Thunder and lightning are often seen as though they are the same, two sides of a single coin. However, they are not identical. Lightning is sudden and sharp; it flickers for a fraction of a second. Thunder is a deep, booming sound that rolls loudly throughout the air. Still, people rarely separate them. We say thunder and lightning as though they must always arrive together.

Lightning is first to appear bright, immediate, and impossible to ignore. Thunder follows soon after, slower, accentuating the moment that has already passed. Lightning shows itself instantly. Thunder, however, is a reminder that something powerful has just occurred.

Maybe that is why people cannot separate them. Not because they are the same, but because they help reveal one another.

In many ways, thunder and lightning mirror people's personalities. Some are like lightning, bold and strike the world with sudden energy. Lightning strikes fill the sky with light, drawing attention without trying. Others are like thunder. At first, you won't see or hear them, almost as if they are hidden behind the brightness. But once the lighting fades, their voices roll in strong and lasting, revealing a depth that was always there.

Perhaps we compare the two not because they are identical, but because together they tell a fuller story. Thunder and Lightning; two forces that are never truly the same yet somehow feel incomplete without one another, just like the people they resemble.

THE WARPED WORLD DOWN UNDER

By Anonymous

Another below ten-degree freezing day. It felt like the millionth time the weather had been frigid, liquidy snow, but it was only the first week of January. Christmas was over, school had started, and my mother was dead. I am grateful we were able to spend Christmas together, but it was hard for me to feel jolly and festive knowing it would be her last. My mom, known as Lacy by family and friends, had been battling lung cancer for the past two years. The doctors warned me, my dad, and younger sister that she most likely wouldn't make it for the holidays. They weren't exactly right on that, but she did die a few days after Christmas. I am feeling the said "grief" I was told I would feel once my mom died. However, it hasn't really affected me as much as I thought it would. I have anticipated the day my mom would perish like the autumn leaves and the emotions of deep sadness that I'd feel for so long and now that it's come, I just feel...empty. It feels like I might have already dealt with the true grief before my mom passed away. I really don't have time to think about my mother, though. This is my last semester of high school and I still don't have a clue of what I want to do with my life. It's hard when people expect so much from me and I don't deliver anything. I'm like a feather, going wherever the wind takes it. Except in my case, the wind is my family, teachers, and peers.

My dad and grandmother think I should follow my mom's footsteps and become a manager for her best friend's makeup brand called Glow Up. It is extremely popular and even has its own store. It would be good to do it so I can carry on my mom's legacy, but it's not what I truly want to do. I can't think of any career that would really interest me. I guess maybe being a writer would be cool, but

that's not exactly a "stable career", as my family would say. All of this is too overwhelming. I just want to dig up a hole under ground and slowly disintegrate. It would be nice if there was a place where I can just forget about the terrors of life and do whatever I feel like doing.

To clear my head, I go on a walk in the snowy weather around the vast neighborhood I live in. The below freezing temperatures outside make my body feel numb, to the point where I start to feel a bit of warmth. I had been walking for around 40 minutes when I stumbled upon a colossal, mystical forest. I have been living in the same house for around 10 years, yet I had never seen this place in my life. I was thinking to myself, "Was this forest always there?" Maybe I'm not in my neighborhood anymore and somewhere else completely. The forest had sharp wooden trees with branches covered in snow on each side. There was a path in between the trees that looked like it went exceedingly far. Most people have a strong dislike for winter because it's when the trees lose their leaves and it becomes dark and cold outside. I don't really like winter either, but I have to admit, this scene looks...beautiful. The snow looks fluffy and a little crisp, which makes me want to just lay down in it. I land on the ground and lay on my back, looking up at the twinkling evening sky. At this moment, I feel peaceful, not wanting the snow to ever end. A few minutes pass; I sense that I am slowly sinking into the snow. My emotions immediately shift from peacefulness to panic. I fall abruptly and am somehow in a completely different place under ground from the snow. I gain consciousness and sit up, trying to observe where I am. It looks like a normal world with countless trees and houses, but there was something off. There

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weren't any real people around, only miniature versions of them. Suddenly, a blue crystal mirror appeared on the trimmed grass in front of me. It was so beautiful and looked like it was made of real ice. I picked it up and saw a reflection of myself. Though, it didn't look exactly like my current self. My reflection looked older, stronger, like someone who already lived the life I was frightened by. "You can't keep running away," it whispered. Is this a reflection of me from the future? How could this be? I then responded, "but I have to, there is no place for me in the real world!" My reflection sighs, not accepting what I'm saying. "You can't just expect to immediately find your true purpose in life, it takes time. I was going to argue back, but the reflection then said, "you may argue with, "how would I know this?", but trust me, I know." It read my mind. "Well, how do you know??", I questioned. "Because I'm you 38 years from now."

The older version of me got closer to the mirror which made the air become more windy. "I didn't just come here to tell you what you're doing wrong," it said softly. "I came to you because this place...the tiny people, silent houses, and still trees, everything is frozen in time. This is what your life will become if you keep trying to hide from your problems. A world where everything is small, safe, and lifeless." I reflected on what the future me was saying for a bit. "Wow...I never thought about it that way." I continued to walk around the meager world, questioning my decision to come here. "Now do you see what I mean? Do you really want to be stuck here in this never changing, colorless world?", my reflection asked. "No, I don't...I don't want to stay here. There are people in the real world that love and care about me." My older reflection nodded and smiled warmly at me. "And it's okay that you don't know what you want to do after you graduate, you don't have to immediately figure it out. It's okay to take your time." I felt a little better after it said that. I looked around trying to find somewhere I could leave, like a magical door or something, but I

couldn't find anything."How do I leave this place?" My older reflection pointed to the ground which confused me. "You leave how you came here", it answered. It was right, I did come from the ground. "Does this mean I have to make a hole to escape?" The reflection nodded. I groaned in annoyance, but if that's what I have to do to go back home, I will do it. Around 15 minutes later, I finally dug a hole big enough for me to escape out of. When I was about to pick up the mirror to leave with, it said, "I forgot to tell you that I can't be taken back to the real world."

"Oh...why?", I asked. "Because it will cause problems in the real world that can affect you immensely." I wanted more of an explanation. What problems would be caused if the mirror came with me to the real world? Would it affect anyone else besides me? All of these questions came, flooding my mind. "I'm sorry, I can't answer any of the questions you are thinking about"

"Okay...but can you answer this one question I want to ask?", I pleaded. "Maybe I can", the reflection replied. "What was or is your career?" The reflection chuckled at my urgency for such a simple question. "This answer will disappoint you, but it is best if I don't say. You need to go on your own path to find the answer." I was balked by the reflections answer, but I did understand where it was coming from. The reflection of my older self unexpectedly jumped out of the mirror. "I just want to say goodbye and wish you luck before you leave," my future self said. I felt a bit emotional saying goodbye to my future self even though I had just met them. We had a long embrace, holding each other tight. "It was so great meeting you," I said. They smiled, winked at me, and went back into the mirror. I then put my head into the hole and saw a crystal blue magic portal. I felt a little hesitant to go in, but knew it was for my own good.

I went in head first, aiming to find my true path.



Melaku MacConnell, 9th Grade

THE CHANGES THAT SHAPED ME

By Phoebe Rupp

I spent my whole life wanting the next thing to happen. Growing up, you anticipate what your life will end up being like, hoping you have the best life. Most of the time, people are not living in the moment; they anticipate the future. Growing up has always been something that excited me, but now, when I think of the next couple of years, I am scared because I know how quickly they will go by. I did not expect these past couple of years to go by as quickly as they have. Growing up, I always daydreamed about my future. I planned every detail, thinking about getting my licence, endless summer nights with my friends, high school relationships, and my first kiss. Often looking ahead rather than living in the moment. When you're young, you can't wait to grow up and experience everything; you think that your life will be like the movies. Countless times, you and your friends would talk about the parties you would attend, the people you would become friends with, the cars you would drive, and when you would have more freedom.

Anytime I would hear parents say "I don't know where the time went", I would laugh and think they were crazy, but the crazy thing is that I don't know where the time went, how I got here. Looking back, I remember all the times I would daydream about high school and going to school dances and eventually moving out and attending college. Now I sit in my high school classroom, wondering how I got here. I don't know how, but one day I was in my middle school class, and now I am a junior applying to colleges soon.

One day, you're in elementary school on the playground, doing flips on the monkey bars to get that one cute boy's attention, and the next minute you're laughing with your friends about how stupid the boys were being.

Flash forward to middle school, you get to experience more homework than ever before, and you make friends who you will grow up with you. There will be good and bad parts. You will experience your first "heartbreak." You will go to your first school dance with your best friends and make memories you will never forget. Within a blink, you are in 8th grade, and it is your last day of middle school. One thousand thoughts are consuming your mind, you are scared you won't be good enough, worried because your friend group fell apart, going to highschool felt so far yet so close.

Freshman year, you join a team that carries you through the hardest moments and becomes a second family. A junior girl, Summer, mentors you and helps you navigate this new, complicated world. There are nights when you doubt your abilities,

staying up until one-thirty in the morning thinking about everything you have to do and everything you fear you can't.

Sophomore year brings even more work and stress, but your friendships stay strong. You try out for an officer position on your drill team, even though older girls make you question your worth. Despite the doubt, you earn the role your coaches created specifically for you. At the end of the year, you meet a boy who becomes your first real love and your first high-school relationship.

Junior year arrives, and you're now captain of the drill team—everything your younger self dreamed of. But the classes you chose are rigorous, and you experience failure for the first time. Instead of giving up, you visit your teacher every day to raise your grade.

Then your relationship begins to unravel. After hearing rumors of your boyfriend cheating, you eventually learn they're all true. You spiral, unsure what parts of your relationship were real and what were lies. You cry through nights of heartbreak, wondering how someone who claimed to love you could hurt you repeatedly. Panic attacks follow each new discovery, and you question yourself more than ever.

But you grow. You develop emotional maturity, learning the difference between lust and love. You learn to read people better and set boundaries to protect yourself. You realize that sometimes you are not the problem—people come to you with wounds you cannot heal. You learn that you cannot fix people.

You begin focusing on yourself and what makes you happy, discovering that learning to be alone is one of the greatest gifts. You start mentoring a younger girl the same way you were once mentored, hoping to have even half the impact Summer had on you.

Senior year is approaching, and it's time to get ready to leave. Years of anticipation leading up to me walking across the stage, which I now fear. As I sit here, I think about having only one year left on Chargerettes, and I get sad because it doesn't feel like my time is almost over, even though I have only one year left. Thank you to the years of change and confusion leading up to now, because now I know, despite being terrified for what's to come, that I will adapt to the new life I am starting as soon as the cap leaves my head.



Madeline Cofer, 11th Grade



Madeline Cofer, 11th Grade

THE LANGUAGE LEARNED THROUGH CHAI

By Jenah Ramji

Growing up, I would visit Nani and Nana
We would sit at the table while they drank Chai
In the winter and the blazing Texas summers
We would join together and they would drink Chai
I always wondered
What was this drink?
Why would we join to drink it?
Why was this delicacy so significant?
Until
I was thirteen
My grandfather offered me a cup
We sat together at the table
To drink Chai
It was that day when I realized

It was culture
It was what kept us connected
One day I was a little girl wondering what my
grandmother was stirring in
the pot
And the next day
I was sitting at the table-
Drinking Chai with my grandparents
I was taught to “find someone who savours chai and
life at your pace”
I didn’t understand it
Until
I was sitting at the table drinking Chai
With my Nani and Nana

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Thank you to every student who submitted something. Sharing your writing or art is not easy. It takes courage to let other people see your thoughts,

your imagination, your experiences. We’re proud of you for putting your work out into the world.

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And finally...
Happy 50th Birthday, Shelton.
Fifty years of classrooms, conversations, creativity, growth, and community. We’re proud to be part of this chapter, and excited for all the ones still to come. Here’s to the students who came before us, the teachers who shaped generations, and the voices still finding their way onto these pages.



Sasha Fairman, 11th Grade



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