

# young voices





**Flower Mask**  
Christina Dinh, 17

# welcome to young voices 2021

## **GET PUBLISHED!** in Young Voices 2022

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artwork, comics, photos...

### **Front Cover**

**Dreaming**  
Emiliya Volchenko, 17

### **Back Cover**

**Empty Highway**  
Jane Forrest, 15

A journey through the pages of Young Voices is a journey through the minds of young Torontonians. At every stop, we are reminded that although this past year took away a lot from youth, it didn't take away creativity and a blazing spirit. From eye-opening poetry on topics like the model minority and 2SLGBTQ+ experiences and passionate prose on current and alternate realities, to poignant photography and profound visual art, the pieces selected by the editorial team — composed of youth volunteers and professional writers and artists — explore an eclectic range of themes. The creators of these works, all 12 to 19 years old, blend medium and subject in unique ways that will immerse you in their worlds. Their art will reach you — let you escape, hurt, hope, accept, and reflect. We thank the contributors of the 2021 issue for their stories and hope to hear yours soon.

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# Big Red House

*Vanessa Egan after Olivia Gatwood*

I've been saving up my rusty pennies  
So that maybe when I'm older I can live in a big red house  
That's loud  
That's all mine  
With red floors and red curtains  
A fridge overflowing with cherries too sour to taste  
Chestnut coo-coo clocks to stifle the timid chatter of my teeth  
Closets full of blisters and bruises gathering dust in the dark

And it'll have lots of ghosts  
Fearless ghosts of every girl the world has ever mourned  
Waltzing down slender hallways  
Ghosts that braid each other's pigtails as they prance by  
That never stop humming  
Ghosts that can sleep soundly with the doors unlocked and the  
windows open  
They'll tell me to do the same

And on move-in day  
When I walk through the door  
I'll open my mouth for the very first time  
After years of biting my tongue  
I'll let the blood trickle out  
I'll paint the walls with it  
Then I'll drown all my dresses in the bathtub

And when I get lonely I'll invite the cardinals for tea  
They love red as much as I do  
Love the way she cannot help herself  
I'll build wings out of the feathers they leave behind  
In the hopes that one day I might muster the courage  
To fly back to you  
To tell you all about this red house  
About how I know her  
How I know blood and ghosts and blisters and bruises  
How she stains and screams and burrows in every vein  
Of this big red house  
That's loud  
That's all mine

**Vanessa Egan, 19**





**The Clock Is Ticking**  
Salina Guo, 17

## You Choose

I am water, gliding effortlessly across the smooth rocks, cascading across the grass, swirling and forming lacy sea foam that curls luxuriously around your toes. I am peaceful, gently lapping against the sand; I ripple and curl upwards in waves that drag seashells to the shore. The sun beats down on me and creates patches of shimmering flickering light that reflect many colours. I am home to the coral reefs, a vast country of vivid plants and a necessity in a variety of ways for an abundance of purposes. I am home to the creatures of the sea. The sleek, shiny dolphin that flashes a toothy smile at its friends, whistling orders at its pod. I am home to the whales, giant animals that are the guards of the ocean — the stingrays, harsh and unwelcoming at first but loyal and protective when you form a friendship. I am the water, mesmerizing, soothing, resourceful.

I am water. Pounding and crashing at the shore, luring people in and submerging them in a wave of fury. I tumble and plummet onto unsuspecting strangers; I clutch onto them and sweep them away with immense strength as quickly as sweeping away a speck of dust. They scream and howl, panicking under my firm grasp, soon wilting, taken by the sea. When the sun sets, a thin pink line stretches across the horizon; you can see silhouettes of a hazy ship in the distance. The pounding of the waves lilts over the sky and forms a melodic tune. I create a wall of water, summoning all my strength and strike on the flimsy construction of wooden planks and metal, ripping it apart as easily as ripping apart paper. As you turn back to the sunset, the ship has disappeared. I am littered with plastic and garbage. I am viewed as some sort of waste deposit. Every day numerous items are tossed carelessly into me. It fills me with rage. The dolphins, whales, stingrays, and countless other creatures will perish and die due to this polluting. For every animal that dies, I select another human. I am water, treacherous, formidable, ruthless.

You choose

I am the forest; lush green grass forms a home for trees and vegetation. Small critters scurry across me; owls hoot into the nighttime, the inky, velvety black canvas scattered with stars. The silver glowing moon in the sky illuminates the forest floor, occasionally revealing a predator stalking its prey. Flowers bloom, and clouds glide across the blue sky. Rain patters the trees and gives life to the plants. Infrequently, white flakes fall from the clouds, creating a layer of undisturbed snow on the grass that resembles icing on a cake. I provide a haven for many animals. A diverse environment that filters the very air humans rely on and breathe. I am the forest, verdant, vital, dependable.

I am the forest, a red blaze spits and licks the sky — smoke curls up into the atmosphere. Massive branches tumble to the Earth. Animals yowl and moan in excruciating pain as the flames engulf them. Every year millions of trees are cut down for various purposes. With every tree that dies, a species suffers, and the ecosystem is affected. The protectors against carbon dioxide and the preservers of clean air are rapidly disappearing, dying, and it is because of you. I wish not to reprimand but to educate. You may wonder why one person has such an immense impact; if we can all contribute to saving our shared home, we may reduce the pressing issue of climate change.

Now I turn to you; you must choose. Would you rather have lush green rainforests or animals burning in trees? Would you rather have a peaceful ocean with animals living in tranquillity or sea creatures choking on pieces of plastic?

You choose

**Miranda Finney, 12**

## Tethers

Last night I dreamed of cutting off all my hair, a public coming-out  
(Never has a stereotype been more true than that of the short-haired lesbian)  
And in revealing myself, being recognized by the people like me.  
The idealized me that lives in my head — the one with buzzed hair and a girlfriend  
She's free in a way I've never felt.

But good Indian girls don't cut their hair, and all I've ever wanted is to be a good girl:  
Making up for the small thing wrong with me through all the things I do right.

And if I cut off my tethers, I cut off the things I am tethered to  
(There is no form of caregiving among women quite like braiding hair).  
My grandmother soothes my aching scalp, giving me a moment's relief.  
My mother prepares the armour with which I will go out into the world.  
My sisters play with it and tell me I'm pretty.  
I am defined by the people who love me:  
The people who love me now, not the person who one day might.

The brave lesbian in my mind has a lighter head than I ever have  
But I touch the braid my mother has worked for me  
And it is smooth and strong as rope.

**Kiran K. Basra, 17**

## Soybean Baby

Eyes never land on me  
the same way twice.  
A dyke on the street,  
A young man in a restaurant.  
My Uncle's nephew, my Father's daughter. And my  
Mom  
Always my mom's unconditionally loved  
everlasting soybean baby.

**Isidor Leitch, 18**





**Breaking the Binary**

Kaelin Davidson, 14

## John's Journal, 1945

The birds were chirping, the boats' whistles were wheezing, and another bustling day in San Francisco had started. I could hear Mom and Dad preparing to open the shop as I jumped out of bed, checked off December 8th, 1941 on my calendar. It was Monday. I dashed downstairs, pumped and ready for the baseball match at school. Jamie would be waiting for me. We had a five cent bet about who would win. I ate sausages and eggs for breakfast, taking in the saltiness and savoring every juicy bite.

Like all my Grade Six friends, I was a huge fan of Glenn Miller, and loved the big band sound. Even my parents, who moved from Kyoto 19 years ago, loved it. I'd always dreamed of going to one of his concerts. I also loved going to the movies with Jamie, and I spent my weekends finding a dime for the tickets.

The moment I walked into school, everyone looked at me as if I was naked. When we heard about Pearl Harbor, I was shocked. Who would believe that anyone would attack soldiers having a peaceful Sunday?! That was the day I first heard the word, "Jap." Although I was born in California, in the same hospital as Jamie, kids started leaving the lunch table when I sat down beside them. My Grade 6 teacher even joined in on this today. "Most people in the room are horrified by this disaster."

With every passing day, I smiled less, and an uneasy feeling started to sink into my stomach.

One night, I was helping Mom prepare onigiri in the kitchen, and Dad was having his usual sip of sake. I heard a loud Thump! Thump! Thump! "FBI, open up!" Two suited men walked in our house. They stated that they were conducting a search, and search they did, behind every nook and cranny. One scary looking man in a black suit asked us questions about our "American Loyalty." I didn't understand. Was I really American? Or was I just a "Jap"? I didn't know.

The situation was worse than we had ever imagined. In April, we were told to go to a nearby stadium. All around us, you could smell the fear, and everyone's eyes seemed to say why? I vividly remember asking Mom, can I go home? She squeezed my hand a little bit tighter.

Instead of home, we ended up in a faraway desert.

The air was dry. The howling wind was harsh. The sun beat down on our faces, making them cracked and red. Every once in a while, we could spot the odd raven in the backdrop of the remote mountains.

I eventually lost track of time as the temperatures rose and fell. My pants were suddenly noticeably shorter. Home and School seemed like a faded newspaper in my memory.

But when I was in bed I hummed, "Chattanooga Choo Choo," and thought of Jamie. I could hear the chirping birds and breathe in the damp, fishy air. I awoke to the warm rays of the sun peeking through the cracks in the tar-papered wall.

**Alexander Zhang, 13**

# The Porcelain Boy that I See

I am dead, I think.

I open my eyes to find my body frozen even though the morning sun is already glaring through my grimy windows. When I stand up from my dishevelled bed, I feel light-headed and detached from my senses, causing stars to dance in my eyes for a few seconds. I look into my dusty bathroom mirror. What looks back is a cracked porcelain doll resembling a lifeless young man. I reach out to him as he does the same to me. At the touch of our fingers, his ice-cold skin sends shivers down my broken body.

In the distance, I can hear the busy chatter of squirrels and the quiet flapping of birds engaging in dance. The gentle pitter-patter of raindrops forgotten by yesterday's storm leap from the roof as a cool breeze blows through the walls. I close my eyes and stretch out my limbs, taking in the fragrance of the serenity that surrounds me.

"This must be the afterlife," I breathe in the musty air. "How peaceful."

I brush my teeth and splash water on my face, watching the water drops race down my cheeks and onto my tattered shirt. I look in the mirror and meet the eyes of the porcelain boy.

"What should I do now?"

He shrugs.

I stroke the water on my nose with my fingertip.

"Hm, I always thought the afterlife would be full of ghosts and demons, but it still seems like I'm just alone in my house." I rinse my bloodied shirt in the sink and glance at the deep wound on my stomach. "Oh I know, let's go to school and see if my friends are there."

One moment I am at the front entrance, packing my backpack and my lunch, and the next, I am just one of the fish swimming around in the school. Most people are blurred and unclear, but I can make out a few familiar faces. My heart is pounding unusually loud, causing my voice to shake.

"Hi, Lisa." I wave to the tall blonde girl. She doesn't respond or seem to notice me and continues walking down the hall. I didn't expect her to say hi back as we never talked much, but it was surprising that she didn't even bat an eye when I approached her.

"I guess I really am dead." I catch the reflection of the porcelain boy in the eyepiece of a passing student's glasses. He nods.

I continue to drift through the school, finding people I recognize and calling out to them.

"Hey, Derick, nice shirt!"

No response.

"Zanilia, did you know that I'm dead? I look cool as a ghost, right?"

No response.

Nobody seems to notice me at all. The school bell rings for lunch. Out of habit, I race towards the table in the center of the cafeteria. Soon after, two other boys run over and join me, slamming their trays on the table to mark their territory. The curly-haired one on the left is Sean, and the buzz cut with glasses on the right is Jay.

"Did you see the new trailer for that superhero movie? The special effects were so much better than the last one." Jay plunges his straw into his milk carton.

"Nah, it still looks pretty bad. I'm not really into that superhero stuff." Sean whips out his phone.

"Are you guys talking about Cryoboy?" I place my bag down beside the table. "The special effects were kind of bad, but the acting was really good!"

No response. I sigh.

"I guess I'm still not used to the whole dead thing yet."

Sean and Jay stop what they were doing and their eyes dart to me. I freeze.

A teacher walks up behind me.

"No technology in the cafeteria, right boys?"

"Yes, Ms. Bennett," they say in unison.

I look at the porcelain boy hidden in a puddle of rain as the howling winds crack his face with ripples.

*continues on next page...*

“The wind on the fifth floor sure is strong,” I say to him as I peer over the edge of the building.

I am now certain that I have actually died. No one notices or sees me, and my mind is clear of any feelings of disturbance. The afterlife is so peaceful; I feel like I have not felt this relaxed in years.

Out of curiosity, I am going to jump off a five-story building and see what happens.

“Is it possible to die again, I wonder?” I ask the boy in the puddle.

He shrugs again.

I feel the draft leave small freckles of water droplets on my face. The breeze combs through my hair, reminding me of my mother who used to sing as she brushed my messy locks every morning.

“See you later,” I wave to the porcelain boy. I take a step forward into nothingness. Immediately, my body plunges into the dark.

I feel warmth finally seep out of my body in the form of red. My senses come back to me. The ground is hard. The air is damp. My heart drops. Everything hurts. I look at the building and see the reflection of the boy in the windows. The crack on his face spread and now he is merely a pile of shattered porcelain and white dust. A flash of memories floods my brain.

“Ugh...I guess I’m not dead after all,” I mutter. “At least, not yet.”

I hear screams as a crowd begins to form around me. Some people are panicking. Others are yelling on the phone. A few seem to be on the verge of puking. A few are recording on their phones, gasping as they quickly upload the video online.

I may have not been a ghost, but for my entire life, I have been invisible. I shed a cold, immensely delayed tear. It follows the crease on my face, tracing back to my satisfied smile. Today, I am finally seen.

Today, I am alive.

**Angela Luo, 16**

## Evergreen

How do I forgive the garden? I look down upon the mossy statues that once looked down on me. Our communication; faulty and lost.

Following the muddy path, moths swarm up the once clear position of home. Their wings much larger than I can remember.

Finding the fields, sting my sweet hurt. All the life has disappeared; unfamiliar with the absence of green.

The year I was under water and in fragrant silence, consumed by the glow of my mother’s pearls – the garden grew over the lake’s glimmering surface, locking me in.

So, to pass time I collected jade found deep in the soft sand. Gifting them to the rich earth above my head, in hopes of a reconciliation to escape.

Flowery demitasses lie beside the river. Evergreen lingering deep within my porcelain. Still, unable to say sorry to the garden.

**Monet Parker, 16**



**Eye of the Beholder**  
Olaoluwa Olatunbosun, 18

# The Time Travellers

## *Of Plague and Pestilence*

The colossal city square was empty except for a few dozen people in faded clothes who watched the figures on the stage with interest. On it was an old crone who looked like a raisin in a white coat with breeches and thick goggles blocking his eyes. At his side was a white box large enough to fit a cow. One face of the box had an entrance showing some vibrant painting so realistic it looked like real life. The picture showed an empty city square, with gargantuan buildings made of glass and steel surrounding a pavilion with stone statues and gardens.

From the back, a tall baker and a burly farmer whispered to each other.

“Ah, another product of genius, huh?” the farmer remarked.

“The 20s are times of innovation, my friend,” the baker blustered. “Plagues too, I suppose. But mark my words, this pestilence shall be gone in a year. 1721, that’s the year.”

“More than ever, your streets have been plagued with variola and smallpox, and your stress has filled with a deadly cloud of miasma lurking in this wonderful city of Massachusetts. While your greatest minds advocate for a massive endeavour to inoculate you, crowds strive to argue against them. Tall tales of inoculation spreading the disease it was supposed to stop. Outrage at people injecting the disease into themselves, despite the observed effectiveness of inoculation,” the scientist began.

“Does this ring true to you?” the farmer asked. “I had not heard of this claim before.”

“Yes. They say that the third unfortunate fellow with smallpox dies, whereas ‘tis only the 50th inoculated man who dies,” the baker confirmed.

“You great doctors, forced into their homes by angered men, have no way to inoculate others. With insults and threats and bombs thrown at their homes and families, they do lie in fear. Our great city becometh a jaw of gnashed teeth, grinding through you people and streets and swallowing it into fear and hatred and pestilence. I offer a way to escape our harsh world into the future. A future where there are miracles of science performed everyday. A world where our cities are without

pestilence and conflict,” the scientist claimed, “It only costs 300 pounds per person to move to a world 300 years in the future!”

“That costs all that I have,” the farmer muttered, “surely the opportunity is not worth it.”

“It costs all I have too, but I shall buy it. After all, our lives here are cursed with pestilence and poverty.”

“That’s true. My crops have all been stolen, yet I have not received compensation. My livestock has been stolen, yet I cannot punish thieves. The plague doctors say to stay in, but that means my crops shall die, leaving me crop-less.”

“My bread, too, has been stolen many times. It seems all are in need of food and clothing, and there’s likely been some hoarding by the lords. All the more reason to simply leave the current time and move to the future.”

“Perhaps you are right... Yes, the more I think of it, the better the idea to move!”

“Then let us come and experience a plague-free future, friend,” bellowed the baker.

The baker and farmer stepped out to see an empty town square. To their right, a woman jogged up to them.

“Hey, I see you’re dressed up. Are you going to the convention also?” she asked. “Y’know, the one with the supposed time travel?”

“What do you mean?” they both asked.

“Well, recently, a group released a machine that can take us back to sometime before. I’m personally gonna head back to around the 1700s.”

“But the plague — ”

“History doesn’t happen twice, buddy. I’ve looked at everything from 1700 to 1710, and I can assure you that nothing happens.”

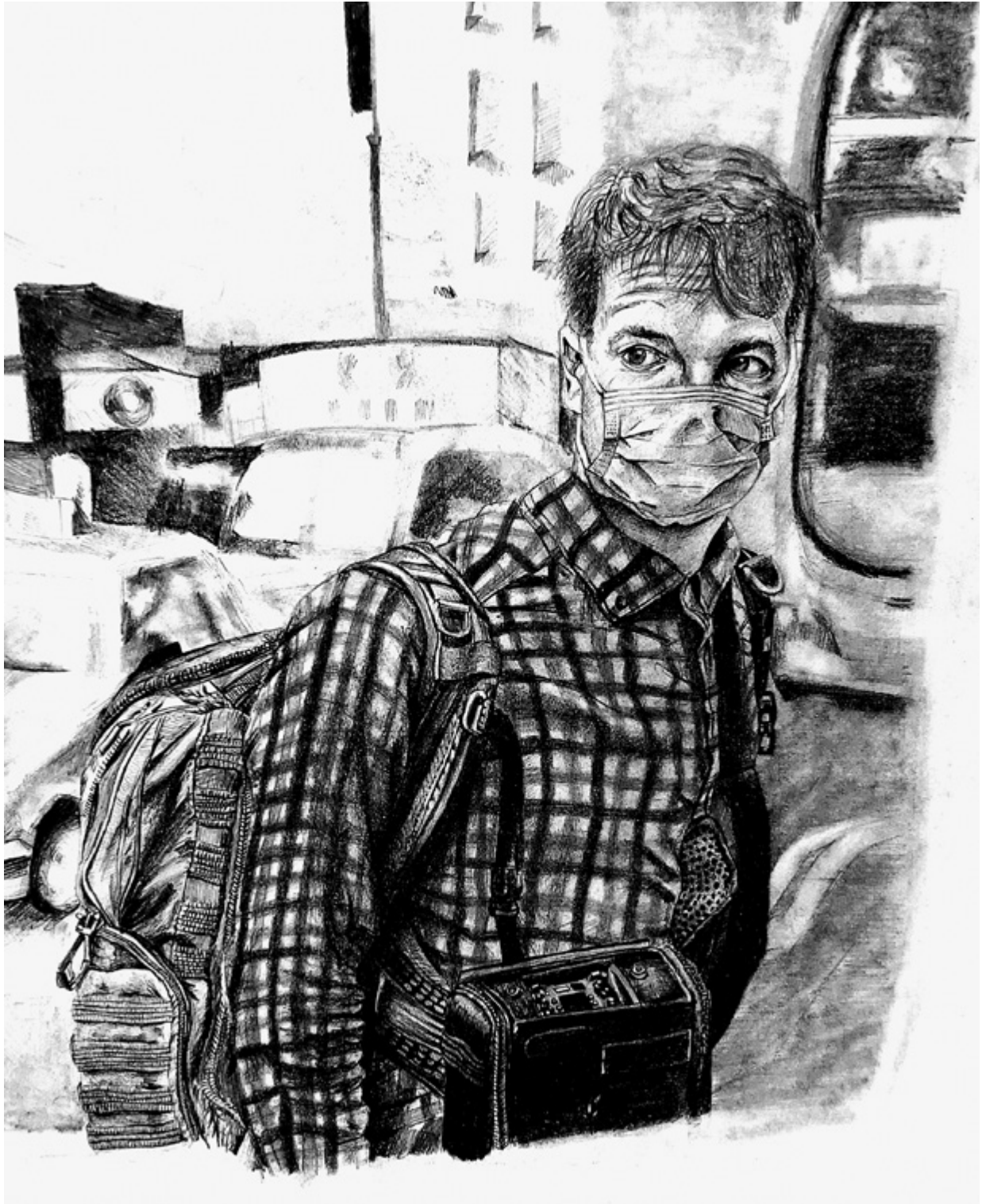
“But why are you even going?”

“Because of all these idiots telling us to wear a mask, stay inside, and wait for the vaccine when none of these works. After all, if they do, we wouldn’t be having Covid right now. But anyways, I’ll be going now.”

The baker and the farmer simply stood, astonished the pandemic had lasted 300 years.

**Dave Nguyen, 14**





**Traveller in 2020**  
Jacobó Cerdán, 17

# 18 Minutes to Home

10:00 P.M.

She steps off the subway.

10:05 P.M.

She notices a dark silhouette behind her.

10:06 P.M.

She checks her phone. There's no service.

10:07 P.M.

The shadow is getting closer.

10:08 P.M.

A fake phone call to her best friend is made.

10:09 P.M.

She glances back. The silhouette takes a masculine form.

10:10 P.M.

She turns a corner. He does the same.

10:11 P.M.

The grasp on her bag becomes increasingly tighter.

10:12 P.M.

The sound of his footsteps hitting the concrete echo around her.

10:13 P.M.

She instinctively tugs her uniform skirt lower.

10:14 P.M.

Her pounding heart overpowers all the noise around her.

10:15 P.M.

Endless scenarios play out in her head, every single one ending in fear.

10:16 P.M.

She reaches the street of her home.

10:17 P.M.

Suddenly, the footsteps descend and get further and further.

10:18 P.M.

She glances back.

He was merely a stranger passing by.

**Kyubin Kim, 16**

# I'm Scared

I'm scared to be a girl  
Scared to walk home alone  
Even in the greyest sweatshirt  
And knee-length baggy pants  
I tie my hair in a knot  
Hide myself in my fuzzy hood  
Away from the haunting strangers that may follow

The GO train will enclose me in its safety then  
With those coming back from work  
Kind men and women they are  
But what if no strong heart chooses to stand up?  
What if my screams simply echo in the railway  
With no response?

An innocent Uber will be my saviour then  
Only one trusting adult in the front  
I will be cushioned by the back seat  
With the raindrops on the window reflecting back at me  
But I am still scared  
What if the once compassionate adult transforms  
Into a frightening, hairy werewolf at the full moon?  
What if the driver turns left instead of right?

I will turn to the police then  
People of the law who fight injustice  
With their red and blue sirens that scream "Back Off!"  
And their ink black uniforms that take power and pride  
But what if their shiny badges turn into handcuffs and shotguns?  
What if Sarah Everard's tragedy happens again?

"Come home with at least two friends"  
"Walk in a public place with bright lights"  
"Never talk to strangers, no matter what"  
"\$20 for a self-defense keychain"  
"Don't wear a skirt too short"

I have barely stepped outside  
Father drops me off and picks me up everywhere  
In a life of fourteen years  
I have taken the bus twice, alone  
Once to the dentist's office  
84A, six stops  
Another time to my dance class  
Subway, Finch to Queen, 14 stops  
No threat, the world seemed just fine  
Yet I am still scared  
to be a girl



**Entities**  
Laura Zeng, 19

# Robot

I've been practicing for weeks now, every day trying to last just a little bit longer. I get excited at the possibility of a couple minutes alone in my mind.

Complete silence in my mind, I'd do anything to have that.

As soon as I think of freedom my heart rate picks up, my robotic nanny senses it and is beside my bed to greet me. She starts by blaring an almost unbearably loud alarm. I jolt up and open my eyes. The same four white walls surround me and I instantly look for the only bit of colour, a couple of black speckles from the chipped paint. Lia, my nanny, presents my work clothes for the day. As it's a blistering hot day in summer, a loose, light yellow dress lays beside me. Within the minute I have been dressed courtesy of Lia, without even taking a step forward. She has already asked me so many questions, leaving my mind running on a constant treadmill, never stopping. I wonder if humans can break down like the robots used to. I walk downstairs and wait for my breakfast. As Lia leads me to the kitchen the motion sensors activate the robots throughout the house. The machines start: coffee brewing, oven preheating, and water filtering.

54 seconds, that's all the time I have for my thoughts, while Lia prepares my meal. Today I think about freedom. The chance at a different life, away from here. A life where I make my own decisions, have the ability to stray from a routine. To be anyone I want, to be different. A life where I can spend a whole minute, simply admiring a beautiful flower. I watch Lia move around the kitchen, as I enjoy the last couple seconds of my break.

Once finished with my meal, I start the journey to work. Lia and I hop into our self-driving car. During this time Lia briefs me on the day ahead. We take the highway, Toronto to Ottawa in six minutes. I get driven straight to my building and enter my office. The walls, painted with the same eggshell white that coats almost every inch of this city. Half the office is covered in tall sophisticated computers and monitors.

I sit in the chair and get ready for the day ahead. Lia puts the cap on, and I prepare. The cap was invented long ago, a time no one remembers anymore. The machine was created to use the full potential of the human brain every day. This machine snakes its way into the brain and steals every idea and invention we are capable of. It's an odd feeling to experience, someone — or more accurately something — taking over your brain, so you are no longer in control. I hate it. The feeling of being a foreigner inside my own skin, having ideas that don't feel like mine. The awful vibrating sensation flows through me, hitting every nerve, muscle, and bone in my body. It lasts all day, sucking from my brain every thought, searching for the answers to problems not yet resolved. It feeds off my human intelligence to help maintain its artificial one. After a long day of the machine reaching every corner of my brain, I have reached the point of complete exhaustion. My mind is now incapable of new creative thoughts. It lies useless, dry of the creativity and innovation it once had, earlier that day. Now, the workday is over.

Lia takes me back home, gets my dinner. This is my second break but now I eat without thought, drained of energy. My brain is too tired to even comprehend the taste of the food. I sit here hopeless, the idea of freedom now seeming beyond impossible. My body and mind lay limp as Lia takes me upstairs to get my vitamin LP. LP was invented to help the human brain heal quickly, so when I go to sleep tonight, my brain will completely turn off to rest. Wrap itself in a warm safe blanket so it can heal and become stronger for the day ahead tomorrow. I lie down, my brain collapses and I give in to the emptiness that envelops me every night. I couldn't change today, and now I'm not sure I want to. The system works; there is no point in change. My thoughts, are they worth all the effort it would take? I don't think so anymore. It's easier without them

**Alexandria Alikakos, 15**

## Buzzcut Season

When I stepped into the suffocating darkness from the optic white, industrial lighting of the mega-mall, I had only two things on my mind: Emma Collins and the ride home.

Emma was beautiful in a way I never could be, soft golden hair and freckles running from the hollows of her cheeks to the bridge of her nose. She held the universe in her eyes, flecks of hazel surrounding her pupil, stars orbiting a black hole. My eyes are a rather dull brown. It's okay — I don't enjoy attention, anyway. Like Arendt, I've always been more interested in "the life of the mind" than in its unwanted release of dopamine.

As for the ride home, well, I was looking forward to it. My date wasn't particularly riveting. He was always looking for subtle excuses to get closer to me. That's why he insisted we watch a thriller: he was just itching to quell my fears with a large bag of buttery popcorn.

I've always wondered why movies are considered to be the quintessential first date. Who decided that sitting in darkened silence was the best way to get to know someone? In any case, the theater was packed, filled to the brim with a strange soup of individuals. A few minutes in, Pennywise claimed his first victim. I peeled my eyes away from the screen. My film was only just starting.

An older, Darwin-esque man, complete with a long, scraggly beard, was sitting a few rows below me, enjoying a small nacho platter (which, might I add, smelled delicious). After a few minutes of subtle observation, I concluded that he must have been a mathematician of sorts: he consumed each chip with a scientific precision, like clockwork. It was inspiring.

I started counting heads, beginning at the bottom and working my way up. As far as I could see, given my short stature, there were 118 people inside. There was a roughly even split between males and females (I judged this solely by the length of their hair) with a surprisingly high number of middle aged women.

Eventually, the cheap chair springs broke free from their spongy confines and pressed into my thighs. Sensing my discomfort and misattributing it to the horrors on screen, he put his arm around me. I began tapping my shoes nonsensically, wriggling my right toe through the budding hole in my lucky grey sock.

I scanned the room again. A girl two seats beside me looked a bit worried, exchanging glances between her phone and the door every 47 seconds. We made eye contact for a moment. I mouthed the words "forget him!" with a smile. It took her 329 seconds to check the door again.

The projector whirred away in the top box, illuminating millions of tiny, airborne particles with its rays. I watched each one shimmer and float towards the ground, like fairy dust. The ending credits. I stood up, caught unawares by a rapid drop in blood pressure. I wish I would have had the heart to tell him Emma had mine.

I've come to the conclusion that humans desire not only to love but to understand, to think, to imagine. We spend so much of our lives caught up in what's there, we forget to see what's not. We closet our feelings, and, ultimately, fail to indulge in the beauty that is everyday life. A pity.

I don't think there was anyone else in that theater that watched the same movie I did that night. Then again, I guess I'll never know. Maybe that's the point.

The air conditioning started to run, sending shivers throughout my body. I wished Emma was here. He offered me his jacket. I refused. I had brought a hoodie of my own, well aware of the Canadian cold that would ebb at my skin as I waited for the train back home.

**Christina Pizzonia, 17**



## Jesse

The man crossing the empty street in front of me is on his phone.  
When he looks up, I can feel my eyes widen, and I stop in my tracks. I had never seen his face in my life, but the only thought in my mind is I know him.  
He seems to recognize me too because he now has a smile on his face. He walks towards me.  
The memories click inside of me like puzzle pieces that fit perfectly together. We knew each other in another life. The last time I saw him, he had promised me, "I'll find you again one day."  
He opens his arms, and I take a step forward.  
Home, something says in my ear.  
Home.  
He's seconds away from me when he whispers, "Jesse."  
I'm not Jesse.  
He passes through me as if he doesn't exist, but the loud and steady thump-thump of a heartbeat is so clear. The sudden smell of cigarettes and vanilla makes my knees go weak.  
I turn around, but he's not there. The faint outline of him is carried away by the breeze as the last proof of him ever existing is gone.  
I face forward again and keep walking with the feeling of a second heartbeat in my chest.  
I'm unable to remember what just happened until I glance up.  
The man crossing the empty street in front of me is on his phone.

**Celine Lai, 13**

## Maladaptive Daydreaming

I built a world in my head  
Didn't realize I got stuck in it  
But then you came along  
And shattered it all  
My now fractured fantasy  
Was once my only escape  
I craved that life  
I dared to hope, and I dared to defy  
My desire made me bold, made me foolish with bravery  
Oh, how insolent I had been to think my vision could become my reality  
Now you laugh, you sneer, and you mock me  
How could I have ever been so ambitious,  
Constructing, carving, creating and crafting  
Fabricating and forming in my own fashion  
Stitched with precision until it became perfection  
I had made the cloth of my illusion  
But you ripped it up and shredded it to pieces  
You brought me back to the reality which I tried so hard to escape  
My cruel circumstance, which crushes my conception  
My dreams took flight  
Only to crash and burn  
An inferno of scorn shrouded it to shame  
My beautiful world is now up in flames

**Ramisa Chowdhury, 14**

# Environmental Initiative

This land we were gifted, we chose to ruin it,  
Strip it of its beauty for our own benefit.  
Taking a glance back at our decisions from the past,  
We thought only of ourselves and the resources amassed.

We mined for minerals and left toxic waste behind,  
And deforested the Amazons on a cash grind.  
The melting of The Arctic is threatening our existence,  
While the constant rising of the seas remains persistent.

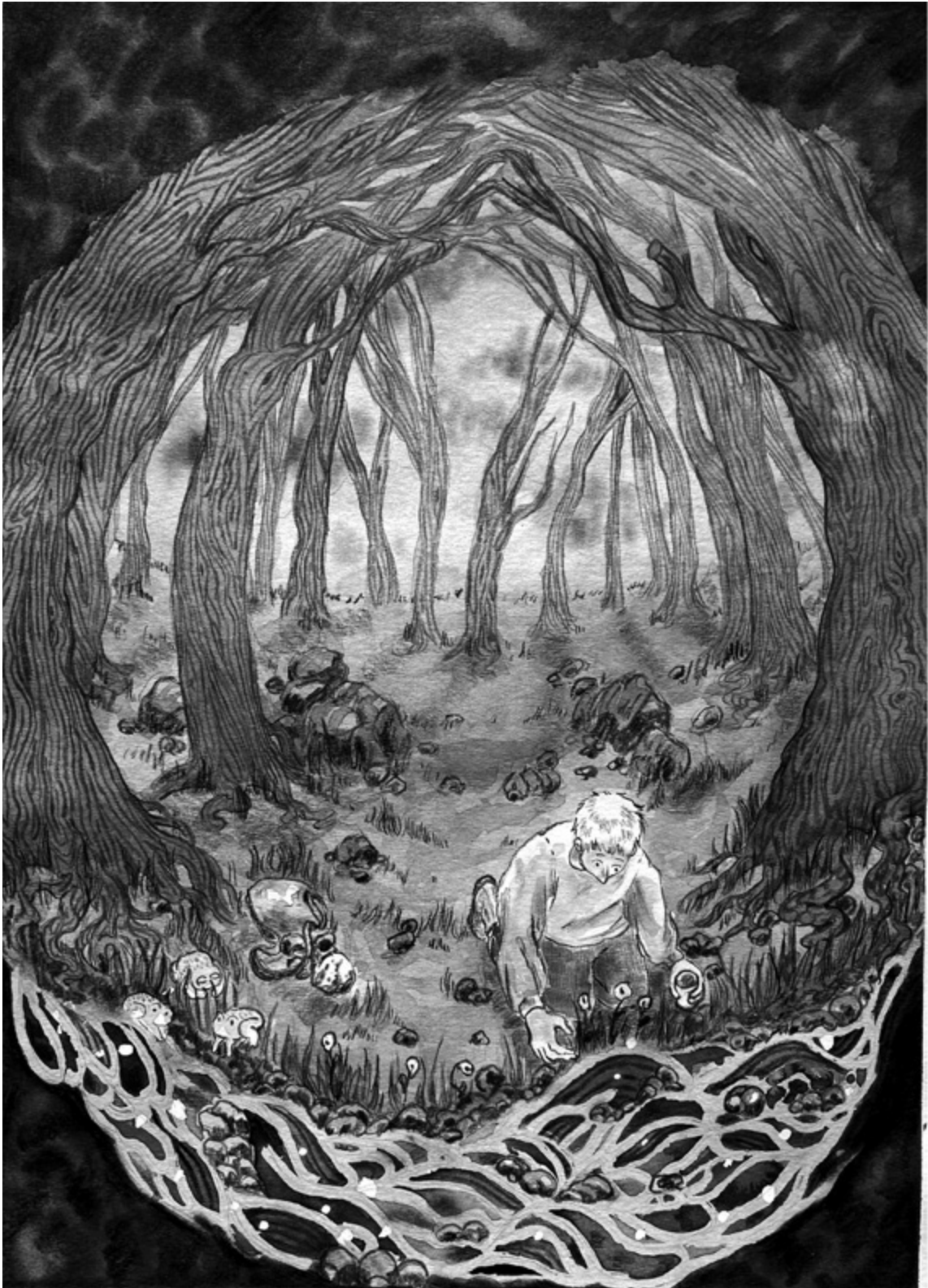
Too much carbon in the air because of fossil fuels and oil,  
The earth is like a crockpot, and it's all about to boil.  
Oceans filled with filth because of what we chose to do,  
There'll be more plastic than fish in the seas by 2052.

The way we treat this planet needs alteration,  
Educate the population on our situation,  
Park restoration; Animal conservation,  
Prepare the next generation for this major complication.

We will make a change, together as one,  
We're trying to bring it back to what it once was.  
Restore it to its intended beauty and return the favour,  
Attempt to please our beloved Mother Nature.

If we work together and each does their part,  
We can make a difference; it could be a fresh start.  
Focus on what's right and the best that you can do,  
That is all I ask of you.

**Cristiano Da Silva, 13**



**Picking Flowers in a Greyscale Forest**  
**Gabrielle Schwartz, 19**

## If then else

Do you ever feel like a loop?

What day is it today? ~~March 2021~~ March 2021.

The days shuffle like cards: montueswedthursfrisatsun

Monday. Time for school.

The teacher asks us to turn our cameras on. His voice sounds thin and frayed through my wired headset. Hesitantly, a few faces blink into existence, a few pixelated stars in the zoom universe. The teacher beams, and begins today's lesson. His screen shakes, and his words waver with the wifi. His voice sounds old, but he is trying to be enthusiastic.

My hands fidget.

My eyes dart.

My phone lights up. I dive in, opening social media apps, and swimming into a colourful virtual reality. Memes and hearts scroll by like shooting stars in a galaxy of rainbow filters.

They dance and weave over wallpapers of words:

*mentalhealth unemployment blacklivesmatter climatechange asianhatecrimes*

There are so many words. Old news, new news, recycled news. Words bob by like boats, sinking and swimming with the sway of the trend. Bottled cries for help lost in the current.

I feel like I'm scrolling through the days, like time is slipping through the smooth screen under my fingers. Like lockdown has preserved me under that screen, frozen as a freshman, when I'm almost a junior now. I should feel taller and smarter. I should have more experiences and achievements to cram into my resume. I should know what I want to do after high school.

I should I should I should so I search for my should

But the more I think through my options, trying to look for the right one, the more they all seem wrong.

The Future, which was only a fantasy, becomes less false, and too real.

I think through the same thoughts, looping over and under the wires of my brain, until it's tangled into one massive monstrous thought. I anxiously loop around and around, until the loop stretches me thin, and I scarcely exist. I loop until the world is dizzy and too large, and I am flat and small. The outside world is just a wallpaper to my seclusion.

I loop in my head, without anyone else. Is this loop the 'new normal'? The distorting isolation is scary and safe at the same time. Familiar faces fr a g m e n t into a flat mosaic of pixels. Smooth and the same, all squished onto one screen.

One by one the nebula faces blink out — back to black, back to black — and the teacher is speaking into a void.

What felt false begins to feel true.

2020. 2021.

0 to 1.

False to true.

Do you ever feel like a loop?

**Susie Choi, 15**

# Quicksand

It's strange how things change.

She remembered one day, years ago, decades ago, when she was fourteen. Fourteen and finally sure of herself, finally knew who she was, after a year of searching online definitions and doubting and wondering and going through periods of what if? Fourteen and at her grandfather's house.

She loved her grandfather, who had a walk-in closet full of books, their own shared evergrowing library full of books that whispered words of worlds far away; the dust that settled there with the two of them to hear them bring those worlds to life. She remembered an earlier day, back when she was eleven, sitting in that same closet, nervously presenting her grandfather the book, *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda*, hoping he would let it join the collection of red and blue and green books stacked and torn and toppling over.

Three years later, she would realize she had tested her grandfather, tested to see if he was one of those old people. The ones you see on TV and in books, the closed minded ones, stuck in their past and not realizing the world changes around them. Penguins have had gay couples for years now, decades now, probably since they evolved, so why can't we?

Three years later, at fourteen, she had thought he'd passed.

He'd taken the book and looked at it for a moment, then back at her and had said, gently softly, like he was worried if he said the words too loud they would break and shatter on the ground, never be pieced back together again "I support this, y'know."

Her heart had burst, exploded, from the sudden relief of stress replaced by elation.

Back then, at her grandfather's house, sitting in the walk-in closet perched on the stool that had been hers since she had learned to read, had learned to love this room, she confessed something, in an equally quiet voice as the one her grandfather had used three years ago to assure her, the voice that told he supported a community in a book, that she hoped would tell her he supported her, "I'm Bisexual."

She had never forgotten the conversation that followed, that stayed in her head, even now when she was 89 years old, the well worn paths of confusion and doubt being voiced by someone else, making it real, tangible, as real as the books and the room she loved, as real as the test her grandfather had failed.

His words had stuck with her for days, weeks, months, before she was finally able to squash it into a locked box in her head, never to be opened, touched, or seen again.

You're just confused.

You just feel extremely friendly towards one gender and are actually attracted to the other.

It's just curiosity.

Just a phase.

She had left his house that day feeling confused and betrayed and angry. How could people support one small part of a bigger picture, one chapter of a story, and refuse to believe another other existed? Or was it easier to support words written down for a character, a made up person, then to actually accept that someone you knew and loved, would know and love your whole life, wasn't part of the "majority," the norm of society?

(She still loved her grandfather after that, of course she did, as she'd loved him her entire life, but, *Leah on the Offbeat*, stayed in her room forever, never saw the dusty well worn shelves and the dim light of the window that managed to point away from the sun no matter what time of day.)

She had vowed to herself, told herself over and over and over again, she would never, ever become an old person who didn't support new changes in the world, new freedoms that let people be who they were. She wouldn't get trapped in the past, sucked in by the quicksand of fond memories and suffocating from want of the way things used to be.

Now, 89, sitting on the bed she shared with her husband staring at old photos and regretting what she had said to her 13-year-old grandchild, she wondered when she'd been sucked down under and how it had happened.

# Rêve de femme

Tenue parfois fière, parfois modeste,  
Yeux souriants, ou pleins de tristesse.  
Je perçois ma force, je crois en ma sagesse,  
Je suis une fillette, une fille, une femme.

R<sup>1</sup>: Abattons les barrières de la pensée,  
Le rose n'est pas ma couleur préférée.  
J'aime le bleu, les échecs et la politique  
Je suis écrivaine, athlète, scientifique.

Allure calme, ou bien combattante,  
Si ma voix est stricte, ma nature est aimante.  
J'ose suivre mes rêves, être indépendante,  
Je suis une fillette, une fille, une femme.

R: Abattons les barrières de la pensée,  
Le rose n'est pas ma couleur préférée.  
J'aime le bleu, les échecs et la politique  
Je suis écrivaine, athlète, scientifique.

Au lever du soleil, réceptacle d'énergie,  
En soirée, mélancolique, penchée vers la poésie.  
Tournée intrinsèque dans l'engrenage de la vie,  
Je suis une fillette, une fille, une femme.

R: Abattons les barrières de la pensée,  
Le rose n'est pas ma couleur préférée.  
J'aime le bleu, les échecs et la politique  
Je suis écrivaine, athlète, scientifique.

C'est l'heure de l'amitié, c'est l'heure de l'égalité,  
Débarrassons-nous des vieilles mentalités!  
Enfants du monde, main dans la main,  
Bâtissons ensemble un meilleur demain!

**Daria Ilas, 14**

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1 Pour un plus d'authenticité empathique et identitaire, à lire le refrain en rythme hip-hop.





**Roots**

Nala Aberra Haileselassie, 19



**Yellow Number 6**  
Amelia Bidini-Taylor, 17

# Platform: Unknown, Train: Imagination

*Stay on the train, please.*

It won't cost anything meaningful. No clipped tickets, no scrambled pennies, you won't even need permission from your parents.

In fact, you're going to wake up on the train. You'll be on a carved-out bench, surrounded by bubblegum colours and neon theories, yards of blank walls waiting for your thoughts as graffiti and jotted daydreams to leave imprints.

Try making a mark. One, then two, three, and so many that numbers become meaningless. Bury yourself in lines of half-fleshed out ideas and profiles of thoughts you have to chase, sprint to barely grasp.

*Stay on the train, please.*

The people beside you will wake up, too. They'll sketch on the walls, everyone does at one point. Whether they can make a mark is another story.

In pockets of the canvas you're working on, there'll be windows. Foggy, arched windows with shutters and unlocked latches. Through them, you'll be able to observe stacks of green hills and these temptations called percentages and awards. Shiny medals and certificates that look fancy, decorative, so ceremonious you might want one. Some people on the train will get off in pursuit of the alluring bait outside.

*Stay on the train, please.*

It'll get lonelier the longer you stay on the train. Sometimes, you'll forget the destination at the end of the train tracks, or the engine will stutter like a coughing child with a weak immune system. The train will fail and grind to a halt, a standstill, for bleak droughts.

When the engine runs out of coal, there isn't much you can do. Simply wait, and it will pick back up after another eternity.

*Stay on the train, please.*

After you've spent a sketchbook and a half on the train, the conductor will give you your own compartment. You'll get to pick the one you want the most. It'll be yours to mold, to shape like putty and sculpt from wet clay.

Promise me, promise me that you'll fill it with acrylic sketches of your soul. Portraits with long lines on the window sill. Decorate the ceiling with prologues engraved in your skull, and with the cadence of a certain poem that makes your heart tumble, ripple, and sigh. Fill your compartment with stiff paintbrushes and awful character references, transposed external arcs for romances, anything and everything littered with you and versions of you.

The trip will be less lonely if you make the compartment your own.

More people will get off. More people will give into the shouts of circuses made of cheap, tacky validation from authorities with meaningless titles.

But, just down the hallway from your compartment, you'll meet others who will also stay on the train. Hop over and knock on their door. Don't take it personally if they don't let you in at first, it's risky to unlock and expose your compartment. But let them in, carefully, because they'll add to your collage of life. They'll write intricate poetry, teach you how to draw dimensional hair or patchy freckles, and one or two might become your muse. All those people will make the train less lonely.

*continues on next page...*

*Stay on the train, please.*

Other compartments rusting, neglected since their caretakers got off. Old paint stained with washed-up dreams will leak through the crack in the doorway. It can't be recovered. The rattling of haunting songs, chants worth being played that will never see light. Offer your condolences as you pass by, a quick prayer for the abandoned dreams, but don't let your steps falter.

*Stay on the train, please.*

Despite your best efforts, at times, your steps will falter. At times, you'll face plant onto the metal floor of the train, ram into the translucent windows, consider pitching off the train because you're miserable. You will feel awful on certain days. Your compartment will be stuffy and suffocating, the dark paint will clog your lungs instead of shadowing mushrooms on your papers. Your fingers won't work right, all stiff and spastic, making your antagonist plummet with closed wings instead of flying. Words will feel fake, stories too cliché, sentences all bite and no bark.

On those days, you'll hate your compartment. Despise it to the point of nausea. Scripts hammered out through ink will get shredded up. Canvases will be hurled out the window or soaked in water that will dye the bathtub a murky brown. Spiral-bound spines will be peeled back and scrutinized until it feels like they're gouging out your eyes.

*Stay on the train, please.*

It's painful on the train. I know it is.

*Stay on the train, please.*

Occasionally, others on the train will create vastly more beautiful pieces than you, and jealousy will crawl into your window and taint your pencils. Spite will whisper into your ear, telling you to scheme and snatch the other's colour palettes, their world building sheets, their syntax of words.

Don't steal, or you'll become enemies with the ones who are most dangerous, with the ones who have the potential to be your strongest allies.

Just borrow, and let them borrow from you.

*Stay on the train, please.*

Despite how much your heart will ache, because I promise it will, don't lean too far out the windows or drift from your compartment. Pour the hurt, the scabbing wounds, permanent scars and temporary bandages into your work.

It will hurt. The train will break you, and shatter you, and continue shredding until you're nothing but splitters of remnants.

It will hurt, deeply and irreversibly. But, you'll create something much greater than anything past those windows, anything you could ever imagine when you first woke up on the train.

You'll create art.

You are art.

And your art deserves to be materialized, created, worked on until it's a superlative.

Until it does you justice.

So, darling, I beg of you to promise me

You'll stay on the train.

**Miran Tsay, 16**

# The True North

Canada is known as the nice guy, the “true North strong and free.” Everybody raves about its multiculturalism, its good deeds and “equality for all.” Justin Trudeau once said, “Canada’s success is rooted in its unique approach to liberty through inclusive diversity.” Whilst diversity has been achieved in Canada, liberty and inclusion have not been achieved for people like me.

I am a Black Muslim woman and a child of immigrants from the Comoros Islands. I can imagine that to individuals like myself, the world-renowned 1988 Multiculturalism Act made Canada seem like the ideal place to immigrate. Who wouldn’t want to live in a country that is diverse, where everyone is equal and where embracing differences was now encouraged? That fantasy, unfortunately, was always too good to be true and over the years I have come to realize that.

When I was in elementary school, I was taught that Canada’s diversity made it one of the most progressive places in the world and that we should be proud of how accepting our country was of people’s differences. In middle school, I discovered what Islamophobia was like in Canada and how it would affect my life. When I was applying for a job, my mom proof-read my essay and I noticed that she deleted a segment where I talked about learning Arabic at my Islamic School. I didn’t understand her reasoning at first, learning new languages was something that I was proud of. I was taught that Canada valued multilingualism, but I happened to be learning the wrong language, the one that you should not put on a job application, and to be learning Arabic at the wrong kind of school. After that experience, I had a different view of Canada and I became more critical of the many systems of oppression present in this country.

The promotion of multiculturalism and the advertised “tolerance” for minorities in Canada allows people to believe that we are all equal and often ignores the violence and discrimination that racial and religious minority groups face.

People like me may be allowed to wear our hijabs and our *dashikis* when we come “fresh off the boat,” but that does not mean that Canada is truly inclusive and accepting of us. We all know that it is “unprofessional” to wear a *dashiki* at a job interview. The White and Western-centric professionalism standard has told us that for years. Wearing a hijab is permitted, but you risk being religiously profiled when looking to rent apartments. Canada loves to promote its multilingualism, but you must leave your accent at home to be accepted and treated with respect.

Here, people celebrate how diverse our schools are, whilst disproportionately streaming racialized students into college-levelled courses that don’t match their abilities. People come together at a Chinese restaurant, but they will also perpetuate xenophobia and blame Chinese Canadians for the coronavirus pandemic. People will celebrate Ramadan and Eid with us, but they are still fighting the “war on terror” with innocent Muslim and Arab Canadian citizens.

Globally, the true North is known as a country that is inclusive and progressive. One thing that is true about this true North is that it has a lot of room for progress. Being able to practice religious freedom, speak my native language and meet people that share similar experiences to mine is something that I appreciate about this country. However, it appears that in Canada; we have commodified diversity to make us look better as a nation, whilst disregarding the oppression of racial and religious minorities. With my lived experiences and the experiences that other minority groups have shared, I can conclude that the *true North*, isn’t as strong and free as people make it seem to be, for people like me.

**Dounia Said Bakar, 15**

# Bleeding

Did you know that trees communicate with each other, even when they're far away?

When one tree gets hurt, it sends an airborne message to the trees around it so they can protect themselves. Trees care about each other. They look after each other. Isn't that remarkable?

We were sitting side by side on the beach. The sky was streaked with red, as if the sun was bleeding.

"Do you remember when we were little, and you asked me if we'd be together forever?"

I remembered. We were six years old. You had cupcake frosting smudged across your mouth. You were wearing light blue overalls. Of course I remembered. It was the day I decided that I wanted to marry you one day.

"It's pretty amazing," you continued, "that we've stayed friends all these years. Don't you think?"

Something shifted in me then. I think a valve in my heart might have broken, or a blood vessel burst.

My chest ached.

I didn't reply. I felt you turning to look at me, a question in your eyes.

I wouldn't have had to turn my face to describe yours in perfect detail. Every frown line. Every smile line. The birthmark you'd once thought was a tumour. The jaw that always ached because you ground your teeth in your sleep. The marks on your forehead from when you picked at it out of nervousness.

Still, I turned my head to look back at you.

Did you know that trees communicate with each other? Even from far away?

There were a million things I tried to tell you in that one look.

When you hold my hand, I try to pretend that you are someone else.

Because of you, I understand what it feels like to be close to someone and far away from them at the same time. To have someone that knows everything about you and nothing at all.

Whenever you laugh, a part of me wants to cry.

Sometimes I wish that we'd never met.

I often think about the word "yearning." And how I'd never really understood what it meant until I met you.

I always try to tell you too much. Perhaps that is why you never hear me.

You broke out into a grin and nudged me with your shoulder.

"You're doing it again," you said with a laugh. "Spacing out. You're so lucky that you have me as your friend. You're so weird."

I smiled back, but your eyes were already back on the sunset. I followed your gaze, always a moment too late.

The sun was still bleeding.

The trees were swaying, pitying me.

**Hana Sharifi, 19**



## 19

19. A shameful grip of the closing curtains. The thick thud of the body that was never mine. A white light. Ironic, the first time I feel the love in my heart, is the moment it stops beating.

19.

18.

17. But the monsters are in my head.

17. "You're gonna be okay."

17. But there's monsters in my bed — slithering through my skin, suffocating — snakes strangle my soul. I surrendered my adolescence the day I saw a monster take the form of my own blood.

15. I was committed.

15. I made a plan.

15. I thought a lot about death. About chewing it up real small, and letting it dissolve under my tongue.

15. I sink into a world where the sun never sets. The silence of night is no excuse to paralyse me with the nightmares of every mother. A world where pyjamas and locked doors don't frighten me.

15. But the moment I meet my empty eyes in the mirror, glance my brittle bones, feel my clammy hands against the sticky tape on my lips, commanding silence — a reminder of the world I live in, a reminder of where it all took place.

14. I was a toy.

13. I was a toy.

12. I was a toy.

11.

10.

9.

8.

7.

6. I say I'm scared of the monsters under my bed. He checks, and tells me, "No one's gonna hurt you."

5. A toy.

4. A toy.

3.

2. I wanna be a princess.

**Freya Safieh, 16**

## To Bury a Friend

The words you said were a knife to my heart.  
It hurts me badly  
to think of what you have done.  
I want to leave you behind but  
I'm too scared to run.

I used to believe that words  
couldn't break me.  
But those were only lies.  
Because on that day,  
sticks and stones couldn't do  
what words did to me.

Everywhere I walk,  
you linger in my mind,  
haunting me.  
Everyone's smiles  
only seem like  
deception to me.

One's hand can pull you up or drag you down.  
I hesitate whenever  
someone reaches their hand out to me.  
Because you did that,  
and it only killed the inside of me.  
By dropping me in the middle of a dark hole,  
with nowhere to go.

I thought I knew myself.  
I thought I knew my friend.  
But it turns out I knew nothing at all.  
I was ready to take that bullet for you,  
only to find out that you had the gun.  
You stabbed me in the back  
but pretended that you were the one hurting.

Listen to the songs I play  
because the lyrics speak  
the words I fail to say.  
The sky is crying,  
I wonder why.  
Does it feel what I felt  
when you said goodbye?

I'm a broken doll  
waiting for you to stitch me up  
but I know you would  
rather take out the thread.

I know that one billion words  
won't bring you back.  
I know because I tried.  
Nor will one billion tears.  
I know because I cried.

But I realized that it's time to move on.  
Because things change and  
life doesn't stop for anybody.

People are just like glass.  
They can be fixed once broken,  
but there will always be cracks.  
And so are friendships,  
because they never last.

Some people don't change.  
Instead, they let slip their masks.

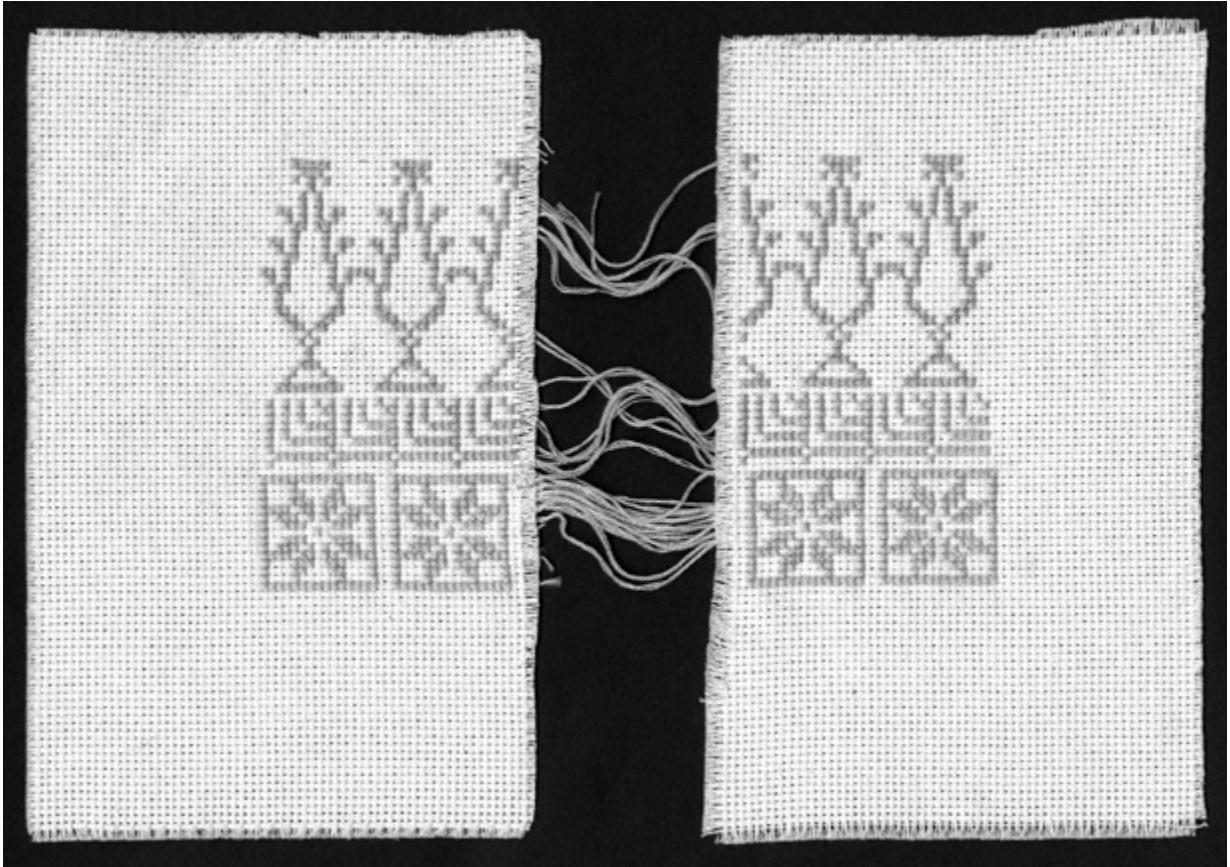
I have decided to stop swimming across oceans  
for you  
if you aren't even willing to jump in a puddle for me.

Slowly, I start to let go of you.  
Every day, a piece of you fades from my memories.

In the end, it's always the same.

We are not friends.  
Nor are we enemies.  
We are just strangers,  
with some memories.

**Emma Cai, 12**



**Resilience Through Reconnection**  
Amna Attia, 16

## A Place Worth Being

I am a place worth being. I am a picturesque village in India situated by a gentle river bank — preserving the wealth of my cultures and traditions. Not many people know of me, but those who do, wish never to leave.

I am free from the hustles of everyday life in the city. I am focused on being mindful of the presence of my inhabitants. There goes *Patience* on her way to her sari shop. Here is where *Stress* comes to drink her morning *chai* as she looks over the steady river free from the pollution of overthinking. She sits surrounded by the calm of lush, green hills. The greenery is a reminder to everyone of the importance of self-care. Atop the hills sit the community mosque, school, and library, the three most sacred places in the village.

The beauty of the steps leading up to the buildings goes unnoticed by most first-timers. To many, the inscriptions adorning their sides are a symbol of the unwavering strength found in the unity of those who came together to maintain the history of the land.

As you walk by the houses at the feet of the hills, the aromatic divinity of incense sticks will fill you, rich with notes of native flowers and spices. Cultural practices play a significant role in the day to day life here.

The neat rowed fields and exquisite architecture allude to how much this village values hard work and organization — always striving for the best.

If you follow the unpaved dirt road past the houses, you will find a marketplace that looks loud and chaotic at first. If you listen closely, you will hear the comfort of old Bollywood songs playing on the radio as the women mingle and share recipes of feasts passed down by the generations before them. You will see children running around freely without a care in the world, excited to spend time with their friends. The street vendors remain eager to share their talents with the world because, in this village, no one competes with one another — everyone unites to make it a better place.

As perfect as the village may seem from the outside, it doesn't have everything figured out; it is far from being the epitome of perfection outsiders make it out to be. The weather can fluctuate sometimes, and it's not always bright and sunny here.

Do not worry, because it does not take much for the village to recover and host its next festival. Even though it has seen floods and crop failures, storms and blistering heat, it finds itself healing through prayers and the support of the settlements around it. Every obstacle will become a story of the greatness of the village and its residents. Every success is celebrated, no matter how minor. This is what keeps the village going.

As welcoming as it is here, it is sometimes hard to let new people in. From the fields and buildings, to the parks and marketplaces, you will find hidden secrets and stories you would not have known had you not taken the struggle to travel past the thick forest guarding the heart of the village.

Everything here works in harmony, but nothing is matched. Nothing here is matched, but everything feels like home. I am a place worth being.

**Nuha Khan, 15**

# Jellyfish

I am a jellyfish.

That is a metaphor, but I believe that the animal I can relate with the most is a jellyfish.

Jellyfish are invertebrates. I feel like an invertebrate when trying to get out of bed in the morning. Or when I have to pull my nose out of a book to finish my homework. I lack all bones, so my body just collapses onto itself and I end up as a blob of flesh when I don't want to do something. Luckily, both jellies and I have muscles for short distance propulsion through space. This allows me to reach the kitchen where all the sugar is stored.

Next, jellyfish do not have brains, but a highly complicated nervous system. I often think that I do not have a brain, because the words that tumble out of my mouth mean nothing and the things I think are too absurd to be able to have come from a properly functioning human brain. So therefore, my cognitive activity is taken over by my nervous system (hopefully), because I have no other way of explaining how I'm alive otherwise. Unfortunately, having a nervous system also makes me feel pain, so when I clumsily stub my toe, I react like any other melodramatic person.

Perhaps the most defining trait of a jellyfish is its ability to sting. I can sting as well, with my words, because my non-existent bones (as previously mentioned) don't have the strength to physically harm any creature larger than a horsefly, unless I trip over them. My sting's strength depends on the day. If I'm channeling my inner moon jelly, then please be assured, I will cause no harm. However, if I feel like a box jellyfish, it might be best to run because I have lethal venom at the ready.

Also, although I know that humans are about 60% water, I think I might be closer to a jellyfish's 98%. I dry out so much in Canadian winters that if I didn't have a higher H<sub>2</sub>O content than average, I would be a shriveled grape (or maybe a raisin). Same goes for the summer, but only because I sweat a lot.

Another similarity is that both jellyfish and I can sometimes be mistaken for garbage. Jellyfish are commonly mistaken for plastic bags . . . well, usually vice versa, which is detrimental to the sea turtle population. I just hope that I won't be instrumental to the decline of world wildlife, but being a homo sapiens, it is almost inevitable.

On the other hand, I aspire to be like a jellyfish. Due to their simple anatomy, jellyfish have been around for 600 million years. Although I'm not expecting my own species to last that long, I just hope that I can do something that will be remembered after my death. I may have set my goal slightly too high, but I can't help it when my inspiration has survived every mass extinction.

I also really admire the jellyfish's contribution to science. The crystal jellyfish won the Nobel Prize in 2008 when they collaborated with researchers Osamu Shimomura, Martin Chalfie, and Roger Y. Tsien to use their GFP protein to track the progression of certain diseases. I hope that one day I will be able to help other people or animals, as the jellyfish continues to help sick humans. Maybe I will even lessen my negative impact on jellies themselves by not using plastic bags.

Therefore, I am a jellyfish. Or rather, would like to be like the jellyfish of the world when I grow up.

**Julie Sieg, 16**

# What They Don't See

They don't see the endless nights of page flipping or the repetitive motion of sliding your yellow highlighter across the page.

The textbook became chapters became pages became paragraphs became sentences became words.

You soak all the information like a soaked sponge trying to soak a little bit more.

They don't see your desire to snooze the alarm on a Saturday morning... the fish keeps swimming.

They don't see the rivers in your eyes, the temptation to hold it back when you're stuck on the same question long after the clock strikes twelve.

They judge what they can't see

They only see the three-digit numbers on the test.

So.

They make the excuse

"All Asians are smart"

All they do is judge what they can't see.

NOTE: This piece references the Model Minority myth. The Model Minority myth is based on stereotypes and refers to a minority group where members are perceived to be more successful in the academics and cultural domains than other groups. It is often used to paint Asian people living in Westernized countries as smart, prestigious and there's usually a "tiger" mom behind it all. The phrase commonly used to address their high marks is: "because they're Asian."

**Sara Guo, 17**



**Self-Portrait**  
Aliya Hirji, 16

# Birthday Party

It is your eighth birthday. You have invited your friends over to your house to celebrate. You play games and make the whole family groan with how loud you are. You eat a chocolate cake slathered with icing, and since you are young, you stuff it down your throat with a gusto nobody can replicate. You are carefree, and run around your yard with your friends, and when school comes around the next day, everyone that was in attendance stays in secrecy of what happened.

The next year passes, and on comes your ninth, the excitement to be in the double digits increasing. You go out with your friends this time, to a skating rink. Skating has become a passion of yours, so you decided to show this passion to your friends. Your best friend slips and slams face first into the ice, her nose beginning to bleed, so you step out with her to be by her side as your mother tends to her. You apologize a million times, but she insists it was nothing and that she's fine, she's okay.

Then comes your tenth birthday, and it's more disappointing than anything else. Half of your friends cancel their RSVP's a few days before the party, saying that they're busy or something came up. Your best friend of three years now is one of the only ones that came, and she keeps you company, playing video games on the new console you got for your birthday with you. You hug her and ask what you would do without her. She replies saying she has no idea.

Your 11th birthday rolls around next, and the fine effects of puberty are beginning to hit you. You don't understand it, and neither do your friends, but you still have a fun time playing laser tag downtown. Your stomach aches from the excessive amount of pizza you consumed just before going back out and playing another round of laser tag, but the memories of that day stay with you.

You turn 12 the next year, and you've been learning about a surplus of things like gender expression, sexuality, and what it means to be growing up. It scares you, but you also enjoy learning about it. Your best friend suggests a sleepover that year, and that is what you do, setting up your room so your friends can comfortably sleep in the same place with mattresses strewn across the floor. You get barely any sleep because you're up all night talking and joking around, but it is all worth it. Plus, you get fresh homemade pancakes drenched in syrup and hazelnut spread the next morning.

Then comes 13, and you're preparing to go to high school. Your father tells you to plan courses in advance to make sure you know what you want to do when you graduate, but your best friend tells you to relax and not overstress about it. You decide to listen to her instead. Your other friends are starting to fall in with wrong crowds and you feel like she is the only one you can trust. You have a sleepover with her and her alone for your birthday, but you only have vanilla cupcakes. You've lost your intense sweet tooth by now.

You're 14 now, and you've started high school. It is a new environment and it's very nerve wracking, but you have your best friend there to support you. She comes over to your house on your birthday after seeing you haven't planned a party. You tell her you just didn't feel like having one, but she still gets you to have some chocolate and candy. You realize you love her more than those crushes you had when you were younger. You cry on her shoulder that evening, the stress of new beginnings and internal struggle clouding your thoughts.

The day you turn 15, you come out to your best friend and tell her you like her. It's the best day of your life as soon as she says she likes you too. But this exchange happens over the phone. The world has shut down now, sickness plaguing the world. You wish you could have had a bigger party this time, with a few more friends, since you're stressed and overwhelmed with everything happening in life, and you want just one day to forget it all.

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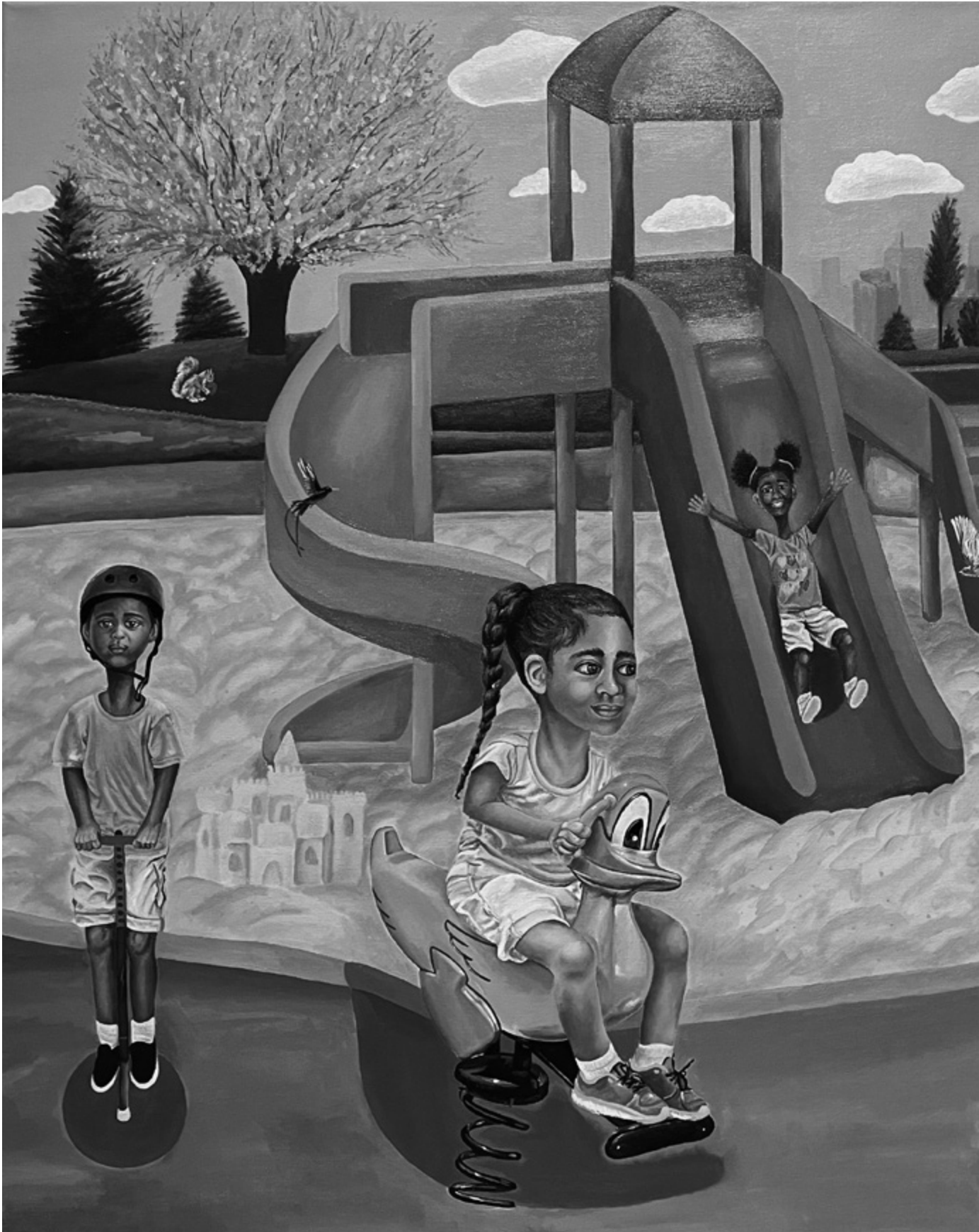


You're turning 16 now. You take online classes and you haven't seen your friends in person for months. You've missed out on so many clubs and opportunities, and your hair is growing too long from the lack of places to go get it cut. You sit with your parents with a slice of homemade cake in your lap and watch as they scroll through photos on their phone, coming across ones of you as a child. You see the smile on your eight-year-old face and wonder what on earth happened, since you haven't smiled like that in a long time. But there is light at the end of this tunnel, you know it, and you reach for it and grasp at it. But you must be patient. This will pass.

**R. Sanan, 15**



**Food Photography**  
**Sukaina Husein, 16**





**At the Park**  
**Brandon Baghaee, 18**



**Scream**  
Gianna Yu, 14

## when you touched me

when you touched me  
I froze  
I couldn't speak  
I couldn't think  
I could barely breathe

this can't be real  
this can't be happening  
not to me  
I convinced myself it wasn't real  
because who would do this?  
I brushed it off as an accident  
I thought for sure it was an accident  
I mean, seriously  
who would do that?  
and on a packed bus?

I tried to slow my breathing  
but then you continued  
and I knew this was no accident  
yet still  
I was frozen  
unable to speak  
think  
or breathe  
I moved away  
as far as I could  
I tried as hard as I could  
to put some distance between us  
God, even saying that word  
*us*  
disgusts me

and in that tiny crowded container  
where was I supposed to go?  
and what was I supposed to do?  
and what if it really is somehow a mistake?  
and I am really supposed to speak up in front of all  
of these people?

with the sounds of life around me  
roaring in my ears  
in an indecipherable blur  
you left before I could figure it out

I guess you were done with me  
so you left me to my thoughts  
and I couldn't help but feel

that it's my fault

it's my fault  
I didn't say anything  
it's my fault  
I didn't do anything  
I didn't scream  
or tell you to stop  
I just tried to shift away uncomfortably  
shrugged it off as an accident  
tried to make myself small enough to disappear  
invisible  
and I can't help but think that it's my fault  
it's my fault  
it's my fault

and wonder  
why  
why didn't I do anything  
why did I let you treat me  
like a piece of meat  
for you to taste  
and abandon  
once you weren't hungry anymore

and you know, I used to think  
"if someone did that to me,  
I would punch them  
I'd shout  
make a scene"  
yeah, that's what I thought

I tried to talk to people about it  
they laughed  
it was funny to them  
something about it was  
funny  
and that's when I realized  
that this was so normal  
so common  
it had really become something to laugh about

and I was told that I should've done something  
about it  
I should've said something  
*my fault*  
and I was told it was no big deal  
I was even told that I should be flattered

*continues on next page...*

*flattered*

because why wouldn't I be *flattered*  
that I was his girl of the day  
no, not his *girl*  
his object, really  
his toy

and to this day  
I feel the need to make myself smaller  
to make myself invisible  
when I'm walking down the street alone  
or when I'm on a busy bus

and I can't help but wonder  
what else has he done  
how many girls has he done this to  
how many girls has he left feeling this way  
feeling like a piece of meat  
an object to be toyed with  
and how can I move on with my life knowing  
that there are people like this  
how can I move on knowing that there are people  
*worse* than this  
that walk the streets among us  
lurking in the shadows that their own darkness  
creates  
and how  
how are we expected to feel safe?

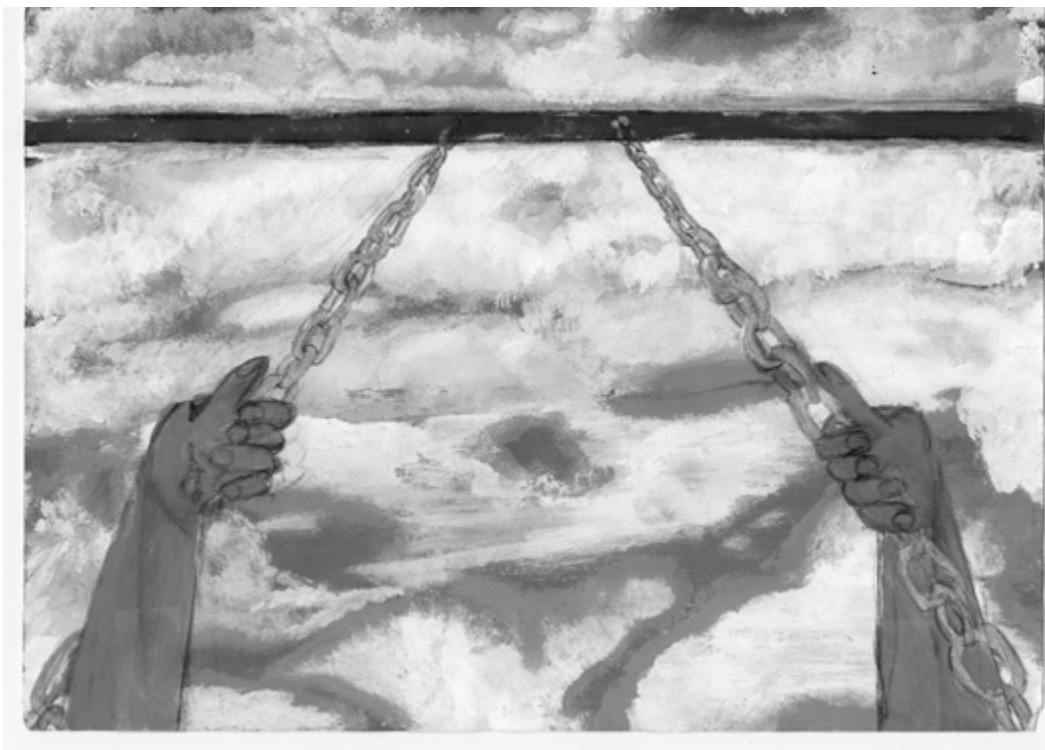
the day I stopped feeling safe

**Kinda Kakouni, 19**

## **Yes or No**

I never said "Yes"  
I just didn't say "No"  
"Well, why did you wear that dress?"  
Anything but yes means no  
Respect is not earned unless it is given  
So why should I smile for you?  
You want nothing but to do the forbidden  
So just get out of my view  
There is no yes in my silence  
There is no excitement behind my fear  
Your existence did not make me blessed  
It made my eyes flood with tears  
You think I am a toy  
I will scream until noticed  
If you want me alone  
I will want you (to be) punished  
I just wore a dress  
So how would I know?  
I will never say "Yes"  
But yell out "NO!"

**Isabella Pietramala, 13**



**Swinging Under the Sunset**  
**Samantha Banez, 14**

## purple

purple is an exquisite colour  
airy lilac to deep boysenberry  
a painter's delicate equilibrium of red and blue.

purple is  
the colour of Giant Peach and hulking demigods  
the magic of Friday night and whispered exchanges on late-night drives  
whirring blenders and crunchy berries, chipped teeth and bleeding knees.

purple is  
the colour of cloudy frankincense and warm hugs  
thumping beats of an ancient drum and the pitter-patter of quicksilver tongues  
burning masala and milky chai, black coils hidden behind ribbons of silk.

purple is  
seventeen years of reconciling my red maple and blue star.

**Rahma Osman, 17**

## Dear Father Time

The expression on your face matches that  
Of grandfather clock

Tick-Tock, you would remind me  
Each time I was a step behind  
And I dash a little quicker

Tick-Tock!  
But you were always out of reach  
I wish you slowed for me, Father  
I wish you lent me a hand  
Each stride you took were always larger than mine

Tick-Tock!  
Of course you were there  
For every milestone  
Tick-Tock!  
For every minute and a bit  
It felt like we were in sync  
Tick-Tock!  
But I fell behind  
Tick-Tock!  
In an attempt to savour the moment  
Tick-Tock!  
Only I felt second to your seconds

Tick-Tock!  
I miss the days when you were slower  
Tick-Tock!  
I miss the days when  
Tick-Tock!  
We used to have fun.  
Tick-Tock!  
I wish I could time travel to then  
Tick-Tock!  
Even for a fraction of a second  
Tick-Tock!  
Father, I wished you had more time with me  
I wished you haven't left  
For just a moment

**Jenny Phung, 17**





**Weak & Weaker**  
Angelina Bai Wang, 14

## Welcome to Womanhood: Muted Frustration

Ready for the yelling match, this world requires?  
I've been ready but it felt wrong.  
With dried tears,  
I've been silenced,  
We've been silenced.  
We've strained our voices,  
but still, cry out.  
How can you still only hear echoes of silence?  
Are we deer in your headlights you see at the last second?  
Are we caged birds you only value as a decoration?  
How blind can you be?  
We're the original being.  
We are moonlight,  
and yet  
womanhood is pain,  
is screaming,  
is biting,  
is crying,  
is emotion.  
You're meant to feel it,  
but not show it,  
you're meant to fly  
but also be bruised,  
you're meant to know you're perfect in a world that tells you otherwise.  
So welcome to this angelic oasis filled with silent suffering.  
Welcome, beautiful soul to womanhood.

**Anna Evans-Cook, 16**



**Raindrops from the storm inside me**  
**Alliah Vergara, 17**

## Love, Hate and Henna

When I was younger, I used to draw myself with peach skin, blue eyes, and long, blonde hair. This would be perfectly fine if I wasn't a brown-skinned girl with pitch-black hair and eyes to match. As a child, my self-portraits embodied what I wanted to be; what I could be if I wasn't Indian. It was like a dirty word to me.

When you think of the word "Indian" what do you picture? As a child, the majority of representation I received was in the form of nerdy and socially-awkward, stereotypical brown characters with thick Indian accents. Even when I turned to my beloved Hindi movies, it seemed that all the heroines had fair skin and coloured eyes. But not me.

My mother always said that my skin was beautiful, yet she told me not to "darken myself" in the sun. In her defense, I roasted like a sausage in the summer heat, changing colour by the hour. But in my defense, I shouldn't have had to hear that from my own mother when I was only four years old. Since then I've found myself tucking away into patches of shade. When I was six, my family and I went back to visit my birthplace of Mumbai, India. Besides the tree-climbing and mango-eating, there was one event that I remember vividly from my vacation. While tagging along with my parents on a visit to the local bazaar, a woman with a cone approached me, asking if I wanted a henna tattoo. As a dumb and impulsive child, I eagerly agreed. Immediately, she whipped out the cone and started drawing on my skin with a thick, brown paste. Swirls and whirls appeared on my arm; checkers and dots ran up and down my wrist; gorgeous flowers bloomed on my fingertips. I watched in amazement as my left arm was enveloped in an array of intricate patterns. It was beautiful. I felt beautiful.

Although my Mom was furious that I cost her several rupees for the tattoo, I was too busy admiring my henna to care. For the first time in my life, I thought that my skin looked gorgeous. When the henna paste dried and fell off, I was left with a deep orange stain that complimented my skin tone just right. I mean, how could you hate your skin when it was covered in flowers?

Years later, when I was helping out with my school's Asian heritage month, one of my teachers asked if I could run the henna booth. Although I had never done henna before, as soon as I started my first design, it felt like second nature. Those same flowers from when I was six years old bloomed from the tip of my cone and onto the client's living canvas. Although I was wobbly at first, I was determined to improve. I asked for henna cones for my birthday.

Since then, I've continued to indulge in my culture by creating henna on myself and sharing it with others. The art of henna has helped me to break free from the colourism that has been ingrained in me by society for the past 17 years of my life. It has changed me from an insecure child who hated her skin into a proud, brown woman who is unapologetically Desi.

How ironic, that the source of my greatest insecurities would eventually develop into the deepest form of self-love.

**Erin Rebello, 17**

## So-so

When I wake up, I look over to the window to admire the beautiful blue sky. It's not long before the smell of perfectly toasted bread reaches my nose. I wiggle out of my soft covers. As I head to the dining room, soft R&B serenades the house. I soon reach my seat, and devour the heavenly breakfast. My phone buzzes. I grab it, eagerly anticipating some feedback on my latest post. Five new likes. Not bad. I stay on my device and check out my Explore page. It's been refreshed with a cute panda. Aww. Right beside it, a bunch of pretty girls are celebrating their friend's birthday with a massive cake. I smile, not thinking much of it, and continue to scroll until I realize that I have to leave in ten minutes. I shove my toast in my mouth, chuck my dishes into the sink, and stuff my bag with lunch and some unfinished homework. Perfect. Then I get dressed and freshened up in the bathroom. After finishing up with my hair, I take a step back to admire it. Then I sob. Why do I look so, so awful? Why is my nose so, so big? And my ears too? Why are my eyes so, so plain? I let my tears out. Then I take a breath, look myself straight in the eye, and tell myself to relax. Then I leave. I meet with my friends, and we all laugh and smile on our way to school. But in the back of my mind, I can't help but dwell on my appearance. What I'd give to just tweak some of my features. I wanna be pretty.

**Sophia Banez, 17**

## Origami

We are assigned  
a piece of paper to fold  
of minute modifications  
in size, shape and shade

each made different  
yet not sought out the same  
some crisp as snow  
black as brewed coffee

we cannot control the paper we're given  
yet we crease and crumple  
crush and crinkle in consternation  
at our fate

but it is just paper

we do not control the paper we're given  
but we define the folds we make  
we are our folds  
creased from the experience  
that shape us.

**Elly Peng, 14**



**The Erymanthian Boar**

**Jessy Ma, 18**

# The Beast of the Night

She was a girl among many in her village who fawned over the man. The charming man who warmed his way into every foolish girl's heart merely with his smile. All the girls wore their best gowns, put on their best set of pearls, their freshest faces, all for this man. But it hadn't mattered because he had his sights set on *her*, and only her. His endearing words which he whispered only in *her* ear, touched only *her* skin, led to her being allured into his trap. The trap she had not been aware of because she was just as daft, just as hopeless, as the rest of them.

The man had played the role of a charming prince whom every village girl yearned to be swept away by. He had impeccably played the facade of a kind man, which was the worst possible act of betrayal he could've committed. He waited until he looked into her eyes and was delighted with what he saw. When she finally gazed at him like he was her tomorrow, utmost wonder and a weakness for him swimming in her eyes. She had loved him with every cell in her body and every fiber of her being. The man whisked the dotting girl away and when she had been perfectly where he wanted her, alone, he removed the mask he wore while courting her.

He revealed himself to be a wicked beast of the night who had utterly bound her fate. He was the kind of man that all the old village crones warned the children of. In spite of the quite obvious fact that he looked the part of a prince, he was as unrighteous and foul as could be. His cruel hands consumed the girl as his intentions became clear.

Indeed, he wanted her, but that was the problem. The man wanted her to himself, far from the rest of the world. He wanted her so that he could ruin her before making her believe that only he was to love her, that only he could. She was completely and wholly in despair, her heart ached as if pricked with thorns. The beast had built her up and torn her down repeatedly until she could take it no longer. Falling into the very pits of her anguish, she looked out and began to find comfort in the smaller things which she hadn't heeded attention to earlier. The enthralling flowers in his garden, the picturesque paintings on the walls, the opulent and captivating colours of her dresses.

But even then, the beast continued to love her in the only way that he knew. He isolated her and tore her away from everything and everyone she loved so he could have her for himself. He wanted to shatter her very mind until it bowed to only him. He could not see beyond his needy intentions and his terribly corrupt interpretation of love, and she could not see beyond his traitorous villainy. This angered the beast and he played his hand at tearing her down even further. So he snatched away all that she had newly grown to adore, everything that wasn't him. The man tore the flowers from their very roots, he removed the paintings from the walls, and he replaced the various colours of linen and silk inhabiting her wardrobe with black.

The girl had tried to be happy even within the caging walls around her, but every time the man had found a smile on her face, a smile that was not pointed at him, *because* of him, he tore it all away from her. And there she was, alone and utterly miserable, all because of the sinful hand of the wrongful man that had pulled her back with her heart clutched in his fist. She prayed to the Gods, but all her prayers went unanswered, so she abandoned her hope.

He had loved her of course, in his own monstrous way. He had known not how to love her without letting the world love her as well. He loved her like a man loved his cigars: addictively, possessively. That was what she was to him, a mere possession. He was not aware of how to love her without ridiculing her, mocking her for her foolery. The beast found delight in ripping her apart and watching her lose herself as her misery consumed her. Because he had won. He had gotten the girl who witlessly fell for him.

But as he stared down at the gaunt, pale face of the girl, a tear streaming down his face, why had he felt like he had lost?

He had realized too late the cost of his actions, the consequences of his rotten soul tainting a pure soul like the splatter of ink on a blank sheet of parchment. If not here, then he would be with her there.

*continues on next page...*

So he put his hand into her cold hand, stared into her unseeing eyes, and he laid beside her. He waited, and waited, and waited. Until finally, his hand fell limp in hers, his eyes resembling hers. She had escaped him, but he had not let her. Thereupon, he joined her, for his impure love for her was as great as the girl's will to elude his wickedness. The girl had slipped away from his vile grasp only for her soul to be forever tormented by his.

Because what is love, if not the pure grief it leaves behind when it ceases to exist? What is love, if not the surrendering of one's soul to another, the losing of one's soul to another? Surely, this was not love. It couldn't be.

**Misbah Pathan, 16**

## masquerade

tell me how you do it  
how you step out the door and put on a smile  
how you laugh like nothing is wrong  
how you change your mood with no trace

you are so captivating  
always surrounded by people  
never a dull moment  
the room lights up whenever you enter

tell me honestly  
do you collapse when no one's around?  
do you weep yourself to sleep when the night sky takes over?  
do you ever take off your mask?

it's morning  
i get ready to face another day  
not forgetting the thing that i carry everywhere  
my most valued possession

covering all inches of my lie  
the truth untold  
my mask is secured  
it's another masquerade ball.

mas-quer-ade  
*verb*  
pretend to be someone one is not.

**Nadira Daulet, 15**





**What Modern Freedom Is**

Lisa Doan, 18

# Strawberry Bleach

i'm sitting at the bottom of a swimming pool making blackout poetry for you, filling in the blanks that weren't there last year  
whatever, backtrack, coughing up chlorine, acid wash,  
sometimes i think too loud and i can't make it stop.  
i think i want to live in the space between each breath you take, dream of blue silk and exhale for the first time in a while.  
we write rules and we don't follow them (the meter is running in a taxi, the clock ticks a little faster in my heart)  
we break rules that were never written down (i think i zoned out again but i'll write them down a few years later and i'll realise what everything meant)  
let me breathe without choking on smoke for a second, let me bathe in this burnt out glow.  
maybe if i close my eyes i won't feel like i'm drowning next to you  
maybe if i close my eyes i'll stop living half dead half numb.  
and you keep coming back for more  
what happens when it all runs out?  
what happens when there is absolutely nothing left to take?  
spit it out, silver-tongued nightmare, the suggestion of light and broken bones.  
nevermore started and ended with you and someday i'll unpack everything that happened in between but today is not that day,  
and i'm trying  
i'm trying to be human and i'm trying to catch my breath but does it even matter if you're not here beside me?  
(and i know i'll never see you again. i know everything is about to change. but i'll keep waiting)  
i miss you and how you outranked the stars, i miss breathing electric air and flying too close to the sun, one touch and i'll melt  
languages die the way we do, fade away in the summertime and leave us wanting  
we were never enough — so let's keep it that way.

**Tianyi Li, 13**

## Pretty Bird Nonsense (Conversations of Mid-March)

A lithe little thing.

A pretty bird with porcelain feathers that shivered under my touch

If I ever seek the guilt to fill my hollow, flightless bones

Kindly,

Shoot me where I stand

Yet, that's a story for the warmer, less pressing times

I hold you tight so I don't shake you silly!

That mind of yours is running rampant

Swallow your apologies, my dear

Lest you choke on them

It happens to the best of us

I am waiting for the trees to blossom outside my window

Instead of painting foreboding shadows on my wall

Make me a promise that you'll see them with me?

Think of something beyond dreams

You love it when the stakes are high

The view is pretty from the edge

Maybe I'm cruel

Never die a martyr

Comprehension is a losing game for most

But you'll pretend for me

Will you?

See you again when you find yourself

At the end of the beginning

What a terrible name

For a circle

**Ru O'Sullivan, 15**

## Fur A Winter's Dog

Fair Apollo's light meets goddess of snow,  
Your black and white fur nestled against cloud.  
Looming trees part with your eyes all aglow,  
Four paws to stand out from the human crowd.

The short rasp bark is music to my ears,  
Scenic beauty rivaled only by Prance.  
The fur trees contain the nightmare and fears,  
But when you waddle by, they start to dance.

Oh, my fair, soft, wise, and watchful pupper,  
Winter's icy fingers grasping so cold;  
Alas again by the fire at supper,  
What you will do next cannot be foretold.

The imprint of a snowflake on your nose,  
My dog holds on to the Frost winter prose

**Elizabeth Rose Giesl-Butler, 14**



Lyrical  
Seamus McMenemy, 12

# Jigsaw-ed Heroine

*Once upon a time...*

It's easy like that. You can start anywhere, everywhere. Once upon a time, once upon a time, once upon a time. All of it's a jigsaw puzzle: a big picture that started once upon a time, with little mosaiced pieces, all starting once upon a time. All placed in the intricate right sense of being placed where they are supposed to be placed. Welcome, stranger, once upon a time, on these series of letters, black on white.

Once upon a time, a girl floated around the vast space of forever after, quite, quite late in the narrative. To be more specific, she floated in a hot air balloon, the envelope of familiar blue silk and the gondola of woven wicker shaped like a samovar that had lost its lid. It shone of prettily polished brass. She floated by planets and comets and stars, meeting the occasional people she felt she had known or would know soon enough.

The yellow squiggly stars below reminded her of a road she may have once stepped upon, made of bright yellow brick. She passed a lonely comet, upon which sat an armchair, upon which sat a man with a hat, upon which sat a price tag, whose numbers glowed stardust.

"Would you like some tea while you wait for a prince to save you? Traditionally, there'd be a tower; your floating one is quite unconventional," he said, offering her a teacup out of his bulky sleeve.

"I'm lonely," the girl murmured. "I don't think a prince can save me from that. I was saved by a prince, I think, once upon a time, many times. But a piece of me stayed there and never came back."

The man with the hat sipped his coffee and frowned. The girl could smell it. She thought she should have tasted it before, but this one wasn't quite right. "Well, a witch can help you with that. You can always trust a witch to get you something fast and efficient, but expensive. You got anything to spare?"

The girl stared into the stars, and the hatter was gone. She hugged her elbows. "I'm lonely," she repeated. "Witch deals always end in disaster anyway, I think. It'll take a piece out of you."

The girl floated past the familiar neighbourhood wormhole, clogged with marmalade jars, ravens and writing desks. She saw a cat whose frown was like a catenary flipped upside down, floating mindlessly in the mess. "Where are you going?" he asked. "Are you searching again? I think you have everything you've asked for."

The girl frowned. "I didn't ask for anything just now, because I don't know what I want. I don't think it's what I wanted it to be. A piece of me went over the rainbow, once upon a time, and never came back."

"But the clouds are far behind you and bluebirds fly here. Isn't that what you dreamt of?" he asked, tail pointing to a distant cardinal, dodging a passing comet.

"My trouble didn't melt like lemon drops," the girl sighed. "And I thought my dreams would come true."

The cat's frown deepened; he floated upside down. "That's tricky business. There are no dreams without trouble. Every dream comes with responsibility that reeks of anxiety and sounds like too much freedom."

"Well, those are old dreams," said the girl, sighing again. "And I'm not sure if I want a new one or not."

"If you don't know what you want, then it doesn't matter what you do. You're bound to find something eventually," responded the cat through his frowning teeth.

"I'm not sure. I'll think about it," she responded. The cat's frown widened so its mouth was stretched abnormally to its jaws, and disappeared very slowly from the tip of his tail to his head. "Do cats frown like that...?" she whispered. It didn't seem quite right.

*continues on next page...*

The girl watched the little asteroids peeking gems in the asteroid belt. She floated past a mushroom shaped blue dwarf, on which sat a blue caterpillar, excreting puffs of smoke from a cigar clamped in his mouth.

“Who are you?” said the caterpillar, puffing blue gray smoke into the girl’s face. Its scent was familiar.

“I’m not sure,” the girl whispered.

“How?” it asked incredulously.

“I don’t know. My pieces are missing.”

“Then how are you in front of me?” asked the caterpillar again, much more perplexed.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. Everything feels hazy, unreal. I don’t feel real. A piece of me went down the rabbit hole and will never come back.”

“That’s quite the issue.” The caterpillar munched on the tip of his cigar meditatively and took a long draw. “Wouldn’t that make you more real than anything else, though?” he pondered.

“How so?” asked the girl, raising her eyes to his small, blue, not monocled eye, and his other big, blue, monocled eye.

“Well, if you’re not real, then nothing can make you go away. You’ll be here forever, which means you were never here, and that’s the exact same thing, hm?”

The girl bit her lip. “I’m not sure. I’ll think about it.”

The caterpillar narrowed his eyes and bit his lip, imitating the girl. “Immortality is quite the burden. It’s quite dangerous, hm?”

“Is it?” asked the girl.

“Why, yes. If you can’t die, you’ll exist with the danger of forgetting and losing.”

“Forgetting and losing what?”

The caterpillar leaned in, puffing a long plume of smoke. “Nothing. Everything. Yourself.”

The girl squinted and focused on the caterpillar’s face, blurry through the smoke that stung her eyes. “Have we met?” she murmured.

“Remind me when you remember,” replied the caterpillar, still blowing out smoke, so thick the girl couldn’t see his face now. She waited until it cleared, and when it did, the caterpillar was no longer there.

All that was left was the mushroom shaped blue dwarf, which sat with a lonely, anxious and surreal expression, *once upon a time*.

**Elena Saini, 13**

# Bubblegum Down My Throat

“Spit it out! Spit it out!” Zavia slammed my back like a table.

“I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die!” I cried.

I plunged my head onto the grass, heaving and sobbing in the middle of the playground as I rubbed at a sticky tackiness clinging to the walls of my throat.

“Are you okay?” Zavia kneeled down when I regained my breath.

I nodded with a slight cough. The entire field had stopped to gawk at me.

“You’re blushing!” she teased, poking my forehead. “Are you scared?”

I whipped my head around to glare at her.

“If I swallow gum, I’ll choke and die!”

“Really?” Zavia’s eyes widened before she burst into laughter “Who said? I’ve swallowed gum a million times and I’m all right!”

I scorned. “I’ll just ask the teacher when recess is over.”

“Mr. Patel,” I whined, “I have gum stuck in my throat.”

“Is that so?” he mumbled, still shuffling papers at his desk, not sparing me a glance.

“Don’t worry, gum slips down to your stomach, you only feel that it’s stuck.”

“But it’s there! I feel it in my throat!” I stomped my feet.

“Drink hot water and the feeling will disappear.”

“It’s not a feeling! It’s there!”

He sighed, finally shifting his gaze onto me. “I’ll see you in class tomorrow.” He smiled through pursed lips before sending me off.

Mr. Patel didn’t believe me, he wasn’t going to help.

“I don’t want to die,” I whimpered.

The next day, I handed Zavia a pencil in the girl’s washroom.

“You want me to do what?”

I huffed. “If I open my mouth, you can see down my throat. Right?”

She nodded, slowly.

“So just stick that in my mouth and fish out the gum.”

Zavia sneered. “But you might die! And there’s no — ”

“I’ll die anyways!” I snapped. “Do it, Zavia! Please! Mama won’t help me! And I can’t even sleep or I’ll choke!”

I laid my head down on the bathroom sink, Zavia loomed over me with the pencil hovered over my open mouth: she was the dentist, I was the patient, the pencil was a metal tool.

The graphite picked at a wobbly tooth: the slick coating pressed against my tongue as Zavia went fishing down my throat.

Suddenly, she stopped.

“Okay. It’s gone now.”

The pointy tip was pulled away from the back of my mouth. I swallowed hard, and the gluey lump was gone.

A heavy sigh slipped through my teeth. “Thank you.”

Zavia stared at me with a small smile. Then, she burst into laughter.

“You’re so stupid!” she whooped between fits of giggles. “The gum was never there! Stupid!”

“What?” I hissed. “Didn’t you get it out?”

“No. But it disappeared, right?” She patted my shoulders. “So it was just your imagination!”

Just like that, the clot of waxy paste was gripping onto my lungs again.

“It’s there! I promise it’s there!” I sobbed. “Why don’t you believe me?”



**The Hidden**  
Jessica Jiang, 17



## blowing bubbles

we used to  
blow bubbles  
like we blew up  
our dreams  
we watched them float  
while we imagined they could  
support our weight  
like life jackets  
we sat there  
together  
yet caught up in our own  
obsessive thoughts  
i loved those summers  
hours spent  
blowing bubbles  
watching the sun shine  
rainbows reflecting off metallic surfaces

i never noticed then that  
bubbles are transparent  
that they morph  
in front of whomever they float  
that darkness and depression  
can seep into a bubble  
filling each sturdy-seeming  
eye-stinging  
soapy water sphere  
with despair

i used to take those days spent together  
for granted  
just like breathing or pumps of a heart  
it took hers to stop pumping  
it took her to stop breathing  
to realize that days spent  
bubble blowing  
are long gone  
are a memory now that  
can never will never  
be re-lived

i've realized that bubbles  
are a lot like people  
they rise to the top  
or sink to the bottom  
they are susceptible to their surroundings  
they shine in the sun  
they travel alone through the air

but somehow they still cluster together  
i've realized that my sister was  
a lot like a bubble  
she absorbed the air around her  
she isolated herself from others like  
families during a world-wide shutdown  
when my sister made that decision  
that life-altering  
heart-aching  
pain-inflicting  
disaster-inducing  
decision  
she had wanted to

pop

**laila gandhi, 14**

## Tomorrow

Dark bliss, you  
Unobtainable sweetness.  
I want to catch you, to  
Drown you.  
I want you to want me, to smother me,  
To sink your teeth into my cool eyes.  
To take me away, to  
The stars, to the answer.  
Darkness I call for you, will  
You answer me? Why  
Why won't you answer me, come  
And hold me.

**Amani Chanda, 18**

# Addicted to Self-Made Tragedies

An ill-lit void escorts me everywhere. I am certain it is there; I feel its sunken eyes looming over me anytime a spark of optimism attempts to heave itself out. It ingests that thrill, jeopardizes it, then extinguishes it. Its grim expression drinks up the little patience I have, so that whenever I feel absolute wrath towards anyone around me, I can do nothing except take the blame.

Oh, me and my sweet, sweet anger.

*I have a desire for comprehension.* Enlighten me, how can one divert internal anguish into physical ache? I can only yearn to know how many weeks I would be required to spend, swimming in and out of consciousness, on a rigid mattress, if a dagger trailed itself along my porcelain skin every time I have ever felt like screaming yet a soft smile plastered itself along my swell lips, only to satisfy those that surrounded me.

My chest feels dense, as if someone has barbed-wire tangled in a firm knot around my raw core and is pulling downwards. What a cruel act to carry out. Who's doing it? When will the barbed-wire sink itself, so deeply into my impossibly-still-beating centerpiece, that I choke on the rising blood, arteries, and veins that rooted themselves from the pulsating flesh that has caused me nothing but a constant sting? *It is almost nostalgic.* My heart, that is nothing but tattered, my throat, that can only suffocate for so long, and oh, my stomach. The moths have always been drawn to my core, I can only envision the time spent sharpening the edges of their wings, just for me.

Whenever I make an attempt to flee, the barbed wire does nothing but constrict itself around my ankles. Who is performing such a cruel act? Is this only the preface? Who is writing out this heart-wrenching play? I must know; after all, I do have a desire for seizing concepts.

I throw my head back, in the hopes of discovering who the playwright is, who demanded themselves taken out of the closing credits, who's immersing themselves behind a heap of wrinkled papers, words of thrill scribbled across each and every one in smeared ink; practically pleading to be spilled, who's discreetly drawing themselves further back behind the heavy wine-coloured theatre curtains, whose hands are clasped around the barbed wire, I dare say. But hope is a tricky game to play in a tragedy already written out for you.

I am hauled to the ground; without an ounce of remorse.

As I squeeze my eyes shut, subconsciously preparing myself for what is to come, all shifts into a blur, and I become an intricate swirl being woven into a curtain of desolation; I am falling. I feel the ground beneath my feet once more, and a dim sense of comfort drifts over me for a moment. That swiftly vanishes, and I feel a sharp tug directed at my chest. This is everlasting.

Not once did I urge the production to be repeated. I am unable to rise from the velvety chair that frowns at the tragedy itself. The play has started to bore me, for I have already seen it; felt it, more times than I can count on the ten slender digits that protrude themselves from my two palms. *Who is performing such a cruel act?*

My limbs throb, and I can promptly tell that my hands are clasped around something keen. A faint metallic odor spirals into my senses. I glance down at my dampened skin.

*Barbed wire.*

*I am the playwright. I did this to myself. How sweet of me to do so, is it some sort of pastime?*

One would think that the next-to-best action in this situation would of course be to unravel the prickled string from my chest; to neglect it. However, the barbed fragments have already sunken so deeply into my dull surface: their needles have already made imprints and indents. *Would it not be impolite to spoil such delicately-crafted work?* It would cause me more distress to tweeze the stapled points out of my already-creased skin.

*continues on next page...*

Accordingly, all *I*, the playwright, require *myself*, the performer blinded by bleached hues, reciting lines and actions they are obligated to mimic, to do, every day, is what follows:

Add a drop of bitter-sweet perfume,  
that *nobody* ever seems to compliment,  
to each one of my wrists.

To drown out,  
more so, draw a cloak over,  
the metallic odor  
that *only I* seem to be able to get a waft of.

Yumna Asaad, 14



I miss you  
Erica Lin, 18



**Isolation / Mind Garden**  
Anna Tchernikov, 17

# Lost and Found

I wake up to the unmistakable sound of my door creaking. Was that a flash of green by my door or did I imagine it? Immediately I can tell something is off. I look around my little dorm room and that's when I notice that my mug, which I keep on my bedside table, is gone. How is that possible? I'm sure I had put it there the night before... or had I? As I start getting ready for my lectures, I look in every nook and crevice for my precious mug. It was my dad's, it was limited edition, my favourite possession, and now I can't bear the thought that I have lost it! I'm clumsy, but how could I lose my cherished mug?

I make my way around my little two-room flat, turning the kitchen inside-out looking for it. I ask my parrot Guava if he knows where it is, to which he squawks, "Shut up, okay?" Some manners! Where'd he even pick that up? I check for my mug in the cabinets, but as expected, it's not there. Suddenly I notice the time! My first lecture, *Trials and Tribulations of Discovering Time Travel*, is about to start! I throw on some flip flops, give Guava some bird seed (receiving no thanks, just another, "Shut up, okay?") grab my hovercopter, and dash out the door.

All throughout the day, my mug lingers in the back of my mind. When I told my friends about it they rolled their eyes and said, "Mirai, it's a mug. Just order a new one!" I laughed and agreed with them, while dying inside knowing that it could never be replaced. Then I remembered that there is this sketchy store in a downtown alleyway called Found Items. It looks sketchy from the outside, but I recall students saying that they have some type of retrieving service to get people's lost items back for a reasonable price. The rumor is that they use alternate dimensions to recover lost items, which is hard to believe since entering different dimensions has been banned for decades. I don't know if they can get my mug back, but I guess it's worth a try. I finish my evening lecture and head downtown.

The tiny Found Items storefront is squished between a research building and a fast food place, Taste of Jupiter. Inside there is only one guy, a balding man wearing a bright green parka in the middle of summer. What am I doing here, do I really believe he can help me?

Parka Man is sitting behind a beat up front desk and greets me with a yawn. He makes me fill out a form asking for my personal information, a description of my mug, where I saw it last, what time I woke up, and some other strange questions. Some of the questions seem to have nothing to do with my mug... I'm starting to feel like this is a waste of time and possibly a scam. I still have doubts as I leave the shop, but the certainty in which the man said, "Don't be late to pick up your mug," makes me think that it's not a long shot after all.

## *Parka Man*

The client, "Mirai," leaves, and I scan the form she filled out. Her lost item is a mug. Typical. I dunno what it is with people and their stupid, sentimental little trinkets, but I suppose it's good business, so who am I to complain? I've made quite a stash since starting this joint, though I've had a few close calls with coppers. I lock the store door and make my way into the backroom where the machinery is kept. Other than for research and "official government business," interdimensional travel isn't legal anymore, and it's even less legal to make a buck from it. Well, I've never been one for rules, and besides, I don't see any harm in it, as long as no one from another dimension sees me. I used to work in a research warehouse and managed to get my hands on a cross-dimensional migration model, a Sagan 3.3. To the untrained eye, she looks like a small closet with an old laptop attached. I boot her up, input the location and time data to retrieve the girl's mug. There are an infinite number of dimensions, each one's time slightly out of sync with the last, so I gotta wait for the Sagan 3.3 to calculate the correct dimension. Good thing I've only gotta go to the dimension in which it's today's morning. The "ready-to-go" green light flickers, so I open the door and step into the darkness. I close my eyes and when I open them, I'm in some sort of small kitchen.

There's a bedroom on the right and from here I can see the client snoring and... bingo! Her mug, just as she described, is sitting right there on the bedside table beside her. Looks like this will be a quick job.

*continues on next page...*

I'm about to go in and grab it when I hear someone screech, "What's your name?" Alarmed, I look around, only to realize it's a parrot, perched on a bird stand. "Shut up, okay?" I tell it, then quickly grab Mirai's mug. On my way out, the bird suddenly screeches again, and I get startled, accidentally hitting Mirai's bedroom door, which creaks loudly. Luckily my time is up and I'm back in my dimension, in the Sagan 3.3.

That was a close one, but I made it out without being seen. Mirai should be arriving in half an hour to come collect her lost mug.

### *Meanwhile*

I wake up to the unmistakable sound of my door creaking. Was that a flash of green by my door or did I imagine it? Immediately I can tell something is off. I look around my little dorm room and that's when I notice that my mug which I keep on my bedside table is gone...

**Laylah Bharadia, 18**

## **Heads and Apples**

I once almost ate a crescent-curved bulging maggot.  
it was squirming and tunneling into the browning flesh of an apple  
trying to escape my picket-fenced teeth  
fated to damn its wretched body to denture and apple orchard hell

Ha! Grandma exclaims,  
I once almost stepped on a bloody bloated head  
he wasn't squirming; however, the maggots were tunneling  
they feasted early dinner on mo(u)rning flesh before heaven took him home  
before a rickshaw swerved him into swamp gutters  
before the military returned to claim their prize on a sharpened stick  
I was just a teenager  
when bhai called me to pick out  
bulging maggots  
from the bullet hole hotels in his shoulder  
I had to help since  
the doctors died and become dimples in the crescent moon  
so I had to mix curries on a wooden stove just like the one right here  
and my eyes leaked just like they do now and

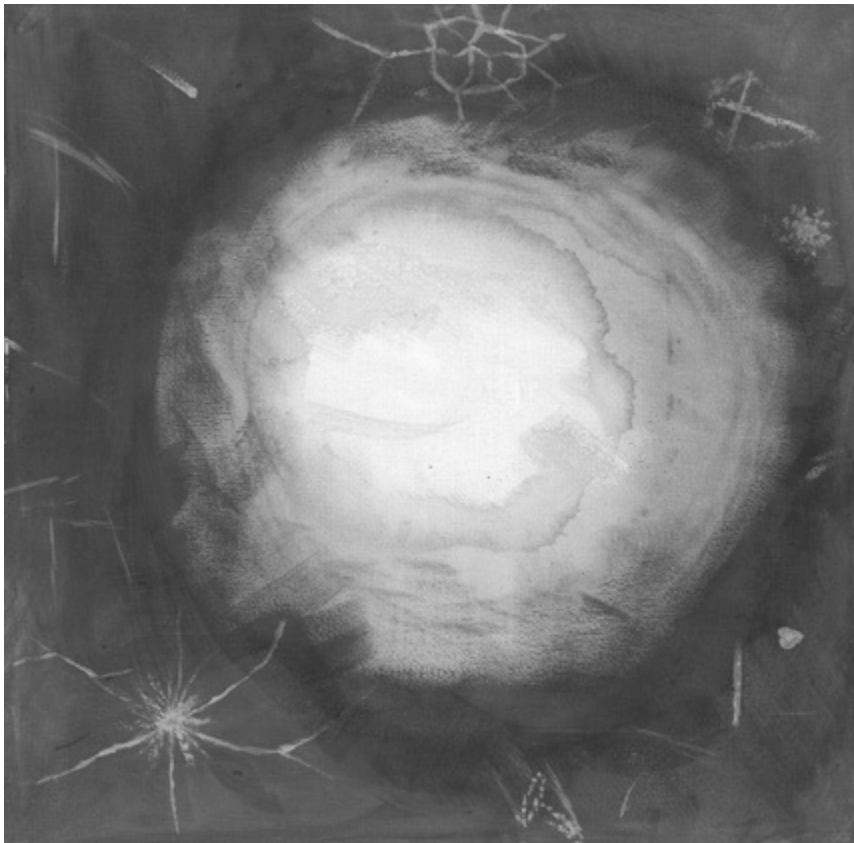
Alright alright Grandma, I get what you mean  
heads beat apples;  
maggots belong in hell

**Zara Rahman, 16**

## In defense of required science classes in university

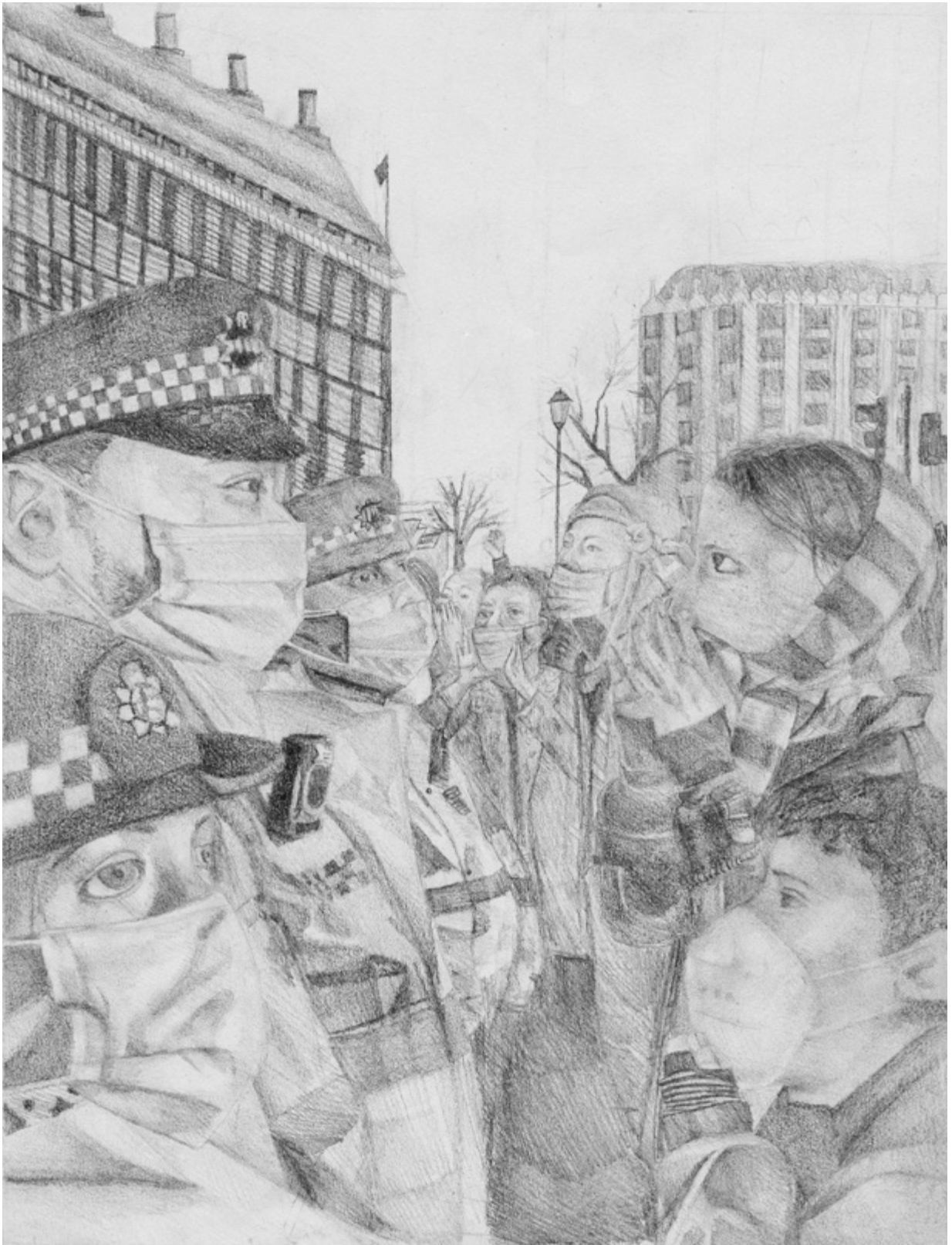
In the smallest of ways, I think the world is better for all the college freshmen and seniors that take astronomy to get that one required science credit out of the way. There is no way I can think of that this will save our world, but I believe it will make the end a fair bit kinder. My generation, fated to explore the stars, robbed of our destiny by money that refuses to flow or even trickle, will instead point up and tell their children the story of the night sky as the world burns around them. They will say, “Look! That little spark in the sky is Proxima Centauri, the closest star to our doomed rock,” or “Our Universe began almost as a firework cracks, with an impossibly compact object exploding into colour and noise and beauty.” After all our stories about the generous Earth fade into incomprehensible tangles of words for our children, we will still need lullabies and fables to lull them into sleep. And for this task, we will turn our faces up. It is one of the great ironies that as we destroy what we are given, our view of everything else fades too. But hopefully, on a lucky night, the Great Bear and Orion will keep their watch and allow themselves to be watched, allow fingers to be pointed, allow whispers of their history. May the professors who teach these courses succeed in their task of opening our eyes, and may we remember at least some of the endlessness above us we have abandoned in the name of “progress.”

**Tamara Wattenbarger, 18**



**Axel**

**Rylan Patterson, 16**



**Calls for Change**  
Bella Eng, 14



## Suitor

Bright white metal, grainy smooth light that flits down like helicopter seeds. Everybody inside their homes, talking with the sound off. Walking yourself home down the warm street when nobody else knows. A purplish stomach inside you, lightening with unease. It's making you so angry that you can't describe it just right.

Let the city unveil itself to you, the suitor. A rusting synth plays seventh chords that coat your dusty eyes as you walk. Inhale the richness around you, the deepening of humors, until the nighttime clouds sag and barely brush your head of hair.

And in an instant, let yourself be reversed as your experience resolves to singularity. Feel the dryness and cleanliness of the road. Feel weaker. A tough dark man holds you upright until he doesn't. No sharp rocks to provoke your backside; there are only the smooth and sultry voices of crickets and cicadas in their treehouses. Cheering screeching baritones are fluted across the city like rains and sands, dropping dead on those awake. They engage a cotton-mouthed driver seething under shallow red light. The city in heat may seem noiseless. But when noticed, the insect tones find a way to creep into the mind, through the nose and breath. The driver's hands are yellow from cigarettes.

*Sure, you learned the sacrifices that this kind of love demands. You decided never again, but it's apparently not up to you. You wondered then, and now I wonder how I'll see it in 20 years.*

The insect tones pollute and make impure the foreign fluid in the mouth of a non-identity youth, cooling on the low porch. A drained male shatters an ice tray into the sink to soak his skin. He ungratefully internalizes this as self-soothing. In the horizon, hear the thunder of game, hooves pounding the city into a kaleidoscopic habitat. It's one for festivities, so note the ivory trumpets sounding off.

*They'll call you that, not knowing what it suggests, and forget soon that they ever said it. Inhale and clear your throat.*

Come face-to-face—let yourself—with the shifting and course-correction of silences. The colours and moods of the soundlessness flutter, though its physical intensity is unchanging. Why, then, does she feel such blaring discordance? The question, unanswered, dissolves. The surface of the asphalt sends purple sparks—a lilac—into your fresh brown soles, and up through your heart and tongue.

Looking through the fine wire mesh on the door, see his shirt on the floor, see a hand press the wall, watch them play pick-up ball. He lays upright in late midnight hours with glassy eyes to make sense of silver and darkening lilac. The road smells of vanilla and rubber; they think, "I haven't been out this late since I was little." Haven't, since the kinship was minced. The newest and worst hormones on the cul-de-sac, tearing friends apart. Like that time you got your wheel stuck in a manhole cover and you fell and tore up the palms of your hands. Played ball bloody.

Let that night's life trickle down like dream-physics into a want for cars and bloodied hands and long eyelashes.

*I wish you could steal the view through their eyes.*

Bare your dull full radiant face.

**Sumedh Dhanvanthry, 16**

# You Don't Know Me

I know your birthday, your height, the names of your pets, that one food you hate the most, the inflection in your voice when you get excited, the tinkling sound of your laughter that fills my heart with joy, too much joy.

You don't know me, but you tell me you love me.

You remind us every moment you can, the simplest words keeping our spark burning alive. Some of us believe you wholeheartedly; after all, without your love, what other reason is there for us to be alive? Some of us know it's all just an act. But I sure wish it wasn't.

You don't know me, but you're my one and only.

When I wake up each morning, your face on my bedroom wall brings light to the rest of my day. When I zone out in class, it's you that my thoughts go to. When I'm anxious, stressed, scattered, my mind can only settle on you. And when I drift off to sleep, I imagine myself beside you, wrapped up in your empty embrace.

You don't know me, but you break my heart.

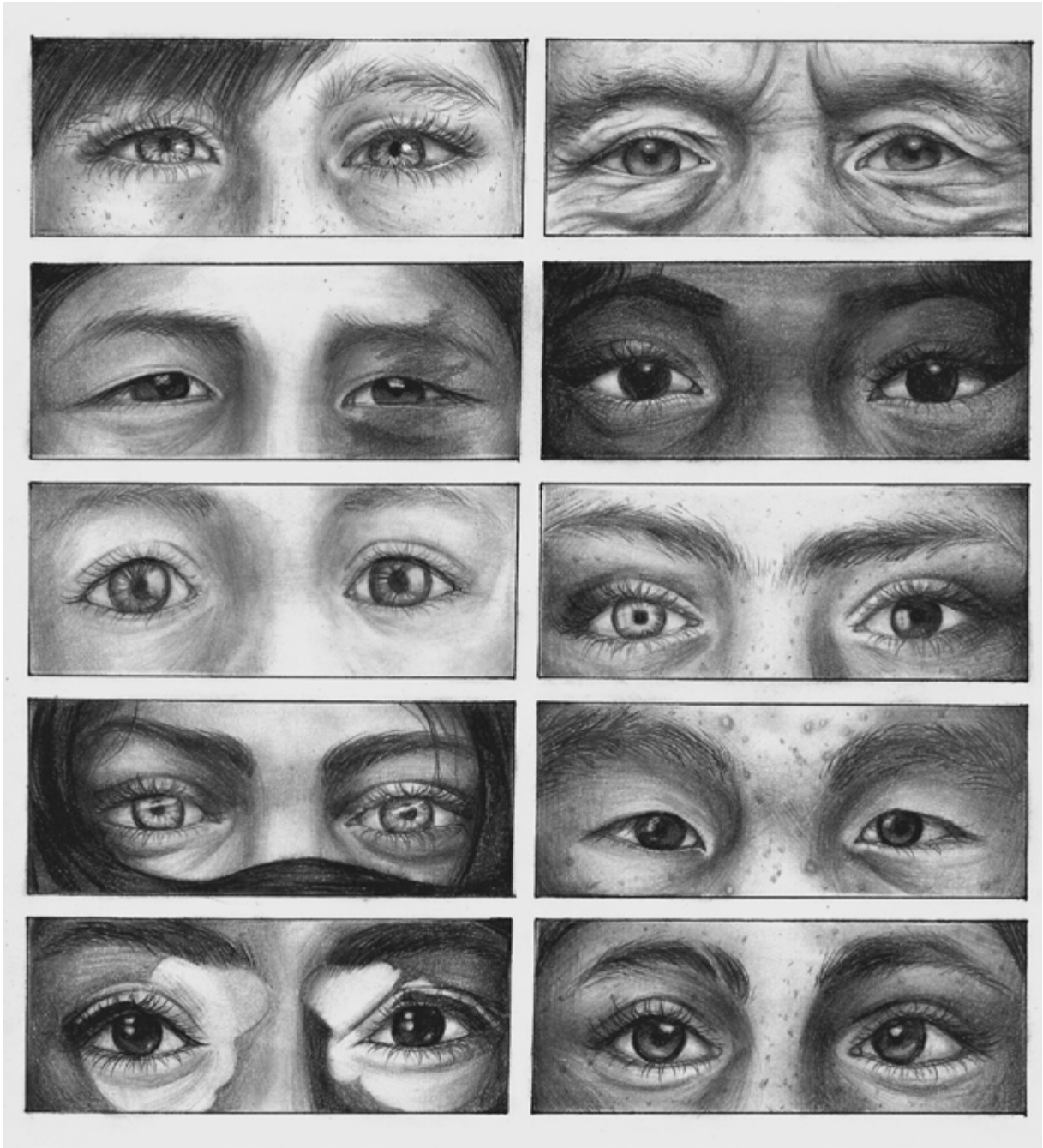
In my lowest moments, the rose-tinted fog in my mind clears, and I see you for who you truly are. Not a cruel manipulator, I'm sure, but a manipulator nonetheless. All you have to do is flash that gorgeous smile, send that little wink, say those simple words, and your pockets fill with our love-soaked money. I toil over this connection, this derision, the one-sidedness of it all. How can I derive so much pleasure from simply watching someone laugh, speak, sing, all on my tiny little screen where I hold all of my tumultuous emotions for you?

You don't know me, and yet you have power over my thoughts, my touch, and my time.

I have so much of them to give you, but I know you'll never give them back.

So instead I shall heal and I shall grow and someday I'll find someone else to give them to. Someone else who tells me they love me, who is my one and only, who will hopefully never break my heart, but most importantly, someone who knows *me*.

**Zaneta Wilkinson, 18**



**Eye-dentity**  
Sabrina Gao, 14

# Not Your World

Before it came  
pounding at my front door,  
I was standing on my two feet,  
ready to aim and strike to anything  
that wanted to shove me down.  
I was built complete.  
From the structure  
of my face,  
to the etches of my  
fingernails. I had every scar,  
physical and mental  
that were mine.  
The yolk of the sun  
dipping down the horizon,  
was mine.  
So was the ecstasy I felt  
from the breeze in my hair.

When it came  
splitting my door in half,  
I didn't get to blink before  
I was thrashed,  
trampled,  
and heaved.  
I couldn't put a finger on whether I could  
call myself complete anymore.  
From the darkening bags under my eyes  
that streamed down my face like tears,  
to every follicle on my scalp,  
split,  
chafed,  
burnt,  
or even lost.  
I had flowers growing in my lungs;  
left and right,  
that died when my lungs had the wind knocked out  
of them.  
Every droplet,  
every ripple,  
every grain of sand was mine.  
So was the deafening roaring in my head.

After it died  
behind my front door,

my heartbeat screeched to a halt.  
I was incomplete.  
From the blindness  
in my eyes  
that refused to see again,  
to the shrunken span of my thighs.  
I had every right to be scared;  
life or death,  
being the only options.  
The emerald coloured grass — much better than  
the dullness of my hair — was mine.  
So were the specks of dust  
building up on the old grandfather clock.

A lifetime after  
it had come dying on my front door,  
I opened the door to let myself out.  
I was bird reborn, escaping the cage of my mind.  
There I have found reasons  
worth living for.  
I am not complete.  
I am beyond completion.  
My eyes will  
never stop glistening,  
the life in me will  
never give out, despite it all.  
I have nothing stopping me from climbing;  
mountains or hills,  
that prove my worth whereas nothing else does.  
Every moon crater on my skin is mine.  
So is every dream and every voice in my conscience  
prodding me on.  
The world is mine.  
My world is mine.

**Zuhal Olomi, 15**

## Lost

She spotted the man above the subway tunnel with the dusty old overcoat. It looked as though it had once been clean, tailored, charming. It was now only a patched, dirty thing, worn too long, too often.

He was leaning over, his knee against the rough concrete, unassuming of those who brushed past him hurriedly. He was caught in a small bubble, entranced and frozen in time. As she approached, she could see his coarse fingers, grasping at the buttons on his camera. His left eye was shut tight in concentration, as his back hunched over and his coat brushed the wet downtown grounds.

She scanned the view for a subject. What could it be that had him so focused and mesmerized in the grey, cold, cloudy setting of the city?

She finally saw a dandelion on the curb of the sidewalk, where the pavement ended, and the stairs of the subway began.

The thing could hardly be considered a flower, she thought. Its thin stem had the same curve as the man's back, its leaves the most muted green — as though it had long since learned to blend into the backdrop of the grey, or risk being crushed.

She marveled at how taken the man seemed with this small thing. Bewitched, as though the flower's very existence was magic. As though it was *beautiful*.

As she looked at it more closely, she began to notice the way its petals, thin and long, curled into each other. How the rain made them damp, frail. It seemed a more radiant yellow than she had given it credit for, at first.

She stood there, frozen to the spot, slowly beginning to see its allure — why the man had chosen this particular flower as a subject.

She stepped forward then, wanting to tap him on the shoulder — to tell him that she could see it too. That the flower hadn't faded at all. Its colors were as brilliant as ever. It still glowed, against the dull city.

But before she got the chance, she heard the scraping of the man's knee against the ground, as he got up with a hearty sigh. He let go of his camera, letting it hang by the sturdy strap around his neck, as he tucked his hands into his pockets — letting his back hunch over once more.

As he walked away, getting lost in the crowd, she realized she had never even seen his face. She wandered in his direction, wanting to find him, thinking she would know him, if only she could spot him once more, amongst the hustle and bustle.

Instead, only a blur of movement met her, as people walked past from either side. Their strides large, none of them stopping for even a fraction of a moment.

He was gone, she realized. As if he had willed himself to disappear in a sea of monotone greys. There was nothing more to differentiate him. What was it that had drawn her to him in the first place? Why had she watched so carefully, when she couldn't even pick the man out of a crowd?

She retraced her steps, back to the flower, and plucked the thing from its very roots.

She tucked it among the pages of her book, slamming it shut. Perhaps this way, she thought, she could contain the glow.

**Jasmin Rostamirad, 14**

# The Boy with Paper Lungs

With his heart made of glass and his lungs of paper, he wakes up alone after a night he remembers all too well. He attempts to steady his heavy breathing but finds little relief in the cold, sharp, midnight air. He lifts his head in hopes that the moon will guide him to where he needs to go but the white crescent sits above him, as if to taunt. He could grab it, if only he reached further. If only he tried harder.

He wheezes, attempting to push himself up to his elbows, scattering the dry dirt beneath him. He slumps back to the ground with a gasp, only to realize there's a tree root underneath him when his spine slams into it. It would be just his luck, wouldn't it? To already be falling and get an extra kick on the way down. He glances up at the night sky.

The scattering of stars above him form no particular constellation. They just sit there alone, aimlessly, searching for something they could be a part of. They don't have a group, no pattern to be found. In a way it's good, he thinks. They get to be themselves, free of any boundaries or expectations. They are just stars, on their own, living their own lives until their inevitable deaths, when they can explode into all the colours of their years and disappear. But in a way it's also sad. Because no one will remember them once they're gone.

He thinks of people wishing upon a shooting star, longing for a chance. A chance to have that one special dream become reality, a chance for them to ask and then receive without any hardships. He decides in that moment he'll never wish upon a shooting star. He will never ask to have something from a star's inescapable end.

He rolls to his stomach, off of the root, and presses his burning forehead to the cool ground. He can feel the bottoms of his feet igniting, sparking a fire, but he doesn't know how they're managing this in the cold. He's pretty sure his wrist bends in a way it's not supposed to as he musters all his strength to stand with another wheeze. His feet tingle, in the way that makes him believe he's standing on a cloud. He sways a bit, almost too much to the right, too much to the left, before he attempts to move.

Though he can see the moon and the stars, there is little light for him to follow. He walks in a direction unknown, but maybe it's the one that will take him where he needs to go. He turns back once, but the tree he woke up next to has already disappeared into the night. He stumbles across empty space, with so much dirt and so little grass. The sparking fire creeps up from his feet to his knees.

He walks for seconds, minutes, hours. He has no concept of time. Every step is the same, every breath just a bit dryer, just a bit harder. His left foot gets tired, too hot and heavy to do its job, and begins to drag in the dirt behind him as his right foot leads the way.

There's a singular lamp post in the distance. Its warm light casts a yellow haze over the ground, but it has no shadow. It sits alone like a man hiding in the woods. Maybe that's exactly what it's doing here. Hiding from the world. Hiding from him. It is the only thing visible to him, but as he makes his way towards it, he no longer wants to reach it. After all, it doesn't want to be reached, and how would interrupting its beautiful peace be at all fair? It was here first.

But the lamp post is alone. It's alone in the world and maybe it doesn't want to be. Maybe just as no one will ever know those stars, despite their efforts to shine so bright and be remembered, they will never know this lamp post that sits alone in the woods, isolated from the people that created it. Maybe it once had a purpose, people who relied on it, and now they are gone, having no use for the guide they once needed so much. And maybe all the lamp post needs is someone to need it. And he needs it.

So he continues to walk towards the lamp, his left foot dragging and his right foot leading until that sparking fire finds his waist. He can't be too far from the light now, but he simply can't go further. His shallow paper lungs can hold him up no longer, his beating glass heart so close to giving out on him. To giving up on him.

*continues on next page...*

So he falls. He falls and hits the ground once again, and it's harder and colder than it was before. It gives him no comfort as he gasps for air, spine arching, the bottom of his head digging into the dirt. He feels an ache inside his chest, then a stabbing pain, as his glass heart shatters. It cuts and scrapes him inside, slashes his paper lungs. He screams out for help, because maybe this lamp post that he's trying so desperately to save from loneliness wants to save him too. The fire crawls up from his waist, licks the bottom of his ribcage, leaving behind only charred skin and bone.

Collapsed on the dirt, he coughs and gasps and wheezes, as this fire that his body has ignited on itself climbs higher and higher, almost reaching his shattered heart and his paper lungs. He can see the scattered stars, whom he will try so hard to remember, and then one shooting star. He could wish to stop the fire.

But with his heart of glass and lungs of paper, how could he do anything but crash and burn?

**Mira Posluns, 16**

## Sappho's Verse

Fragmented echoes of ancient loves,  
live on yellowing pages, lit by soft candle light  
The air fills with warmth, aroma and sensation

Words, and with them whole persons, lost in time  
and translation  
But immortal is the sense of the gods' grandeur  
And the insurmountable beauty of nature

Her words possess a magical allure,  
They taste of honey; sweet, warm and smooth,  
like drinking-in the silver moon

Through these fragmented pages weave the mortal  
muse's myths  
And pleas for Aphrodite's aid,  
Her words invoke a sense of wonder,  
but more often, insurmountable loss  
I cannot say I remember, but I wonder and yearn

*"Someone will remember us  
I say  
even in another time" -Sappho, 147*

**Mary Harper, 17**



**Delicate**  
**Gina Filarski, 17**



# Young Voices: Get Published!

## Submission Form

### Deadline for the 2022 Magazine is March 27, 2022

Released annually in October, Young Voices magazine is full of writing and art created and selected by Toronto youth age 12-19. Submissions are accepted year-round. Send us your art, photography, comics, stories, poems and writing.

#### Who can submit?

Youth age 12 to 19 who live, work or go to school in Toronto.

#### What can be submitted?

Up to two pieces each year: one piece of writing and one visual piece. Related pieces will be considered separately.

#### How do you submit?

Using our online submission form. Or attach this form to your work and drop it off at any Toronto Public Library.

### Need Inspiration?

Read past issues of Young Voices Magazine online! You can also grab a copy of the most recent magazine from your local library branch. Or take a free hands-on workshop at the library.

**Before you submit, please review the full submission details and guidelines at [tpl.ca/youngvoices](http://tpl.ca/youngvoices).**

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Please fill out this form fully and attach it to your submission. Submissions with incomplete forms may not be considered for publication. Please use a separate form for each piece.

**Full Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Home Address** \_\_\_\_\_

**Postal Code** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone Number** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age** \_\_\_\_ **Today's date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of library branch where you submitted**  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Title of your submission**  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### Type of Submission

- Poem       Fiction       Rant  
 Review       Photograph       Drawing/Painting  
 Digital Art       Comic       Other \_\_\_\_\_

#### How did you hear about Young Voices?

- Young Voices Sketchbook       Library Website  
 Young Voices Bookmark       School  
 Friends and family       At the library  
 Social Media       I'm not sure  
 Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**We're curious! Is this your first time submitting to Young Voices?**     Yes     No





**Hypnophobia**  
Sarah Dubiel, 19

