

2022

# young voices





Diaspora Descendants  
Samantha Tu, 16

# welcome to young voices 2022

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in Young Voices 2023

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## Front Cover

**Let Go**

**Ava Tkaczuk, 16**

## Back Cover

**Paradox**

**Kiko Li, 15**

Inside the pages of an issue of Young Voices Magazine are pulsing hearts.

Our teen editorial team along with professional writers and artists select every word, brush stroke, and pixel to paint a vivid zeitgeist portrait of 12-19-year-olds in Toronto. As we gradually learn to spread our wings again, young people's creative work shows that we are contemplative about the past two years of isolation and excited for the future. The pieces in the magazine feature a plethora of perspectives on a variety of topics, including academic stress, familial loss, and unrestrained imagination.

Being published in Young Voices means your story lives on in the minds and hearts of people you will never know, inspiring them to reopen that document or pick up the brush. We hope you hear your heart beating in a future issue of Young Voices magazine, but as for right now, enjoy the pulse of Toronto teens.

George Yonemori, Editorial Youth Advisory Group volunteer

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**S'écorchée**  
Emma Bolden, 17

# Beauty is in the Eye of the Pencil Crayon

Sky Blue Crayon  
(for the brightly coloured eyes)

A child communicates in many ways. My drawings as a child reminded me of the things I perceived as pretty — like the drawings of tulips and daffodils that swarmed my sketchbook pages. That's the one trait that stuck with me since I was a child: the ability to romanticize the small things in life. The flaw was that I failed to see myself the same.

As a child, I adored fairy princesses. Every time I drew a pretty girl in my sketchbook, it was always the same big tennis-ball-looking blue eyes boring into my soul with their upside-down-seven noses. My Asian facial structure did not offer me the Eurocentric small nose, and I constantly picked at my facial features every time I looked into a mirror.

Angels and princesses were always white and blonde. I have never seen an Asian angel in my life. Only white girls could be pretty.

It was elementary school when I realized I could not escape this fact. I always had trouble making friends. When the ESL kids left for their programs, I played alone during recess. It was probably just social anxiety, but I had concluded that I was too ugly because I wasn't white like my classmates.

It's okay, I don't need an upside-down-seven nose anyways.

Plastic Green Pencil Sharpener  
(to carve away the wooden flesh of the pencil's body)

When I was nine, I recall drawing a picture of Elsa — the Disney Ice Princess with platinum blonde hair and a waist as thin as her neck. I became normalized to these body types until my cousin pointed out the proportions in my drawing were too extreme. The drawing was a physical manifestation of the beauty standards I had in mind, the body of Elsa haunting me with her carved-out, petite waist as if her organs were crushed.

It wasn't just media that affected my perception of body standards, but also the people around me. Parents at social gatherings would often compare me to their children. In one instance I was forced to sit down next to them while they commented on how big my thighs were. Asian adults would often praise me for fitting into their Asian beauty standards, saying that my pale skin and thin body would help me find a husband. I didn't know that men were into underweight children with iron deficiencies. I hope not anyway.

My classmates had opposing remarks they just *had* to say out loud. I was often ridiculed and compared to a skeleton while they giggled and asked if I had an eating disorder. Not very cool.

I internalized all the comments over the years about my body that led to raging conflicts inside as I tried to find inner peace amongst all the standards.

I guess I'll just stick to drawing stick figures.

Sparkly Pink Glitter  
(her signature colour)

Barbie was a big role model for me when I was a child. I always looked forward to going downstairs to the janky PC to watch low-quality Barbie movies and shows. This was until my grade 2 class covered the negative aspects of my idol. White dolls with feminine slim figures with a hyperfeminine lifestyle glamorized in different shades of pink were way too stereotypical and a menace to society (I forget the teacher's exact words). This was when I developed the idea that girls who conformed to society were inferior. I then despised the colour pink, and anybody who followed gender stereotypes was labeled as a girly girl.

Now that I think back to my grade 2 class, I find it ironic that when mentioning feminism and gender stereotypes with children's toys, we can't help but put down Barbie simply because of her body and appearance.

Although she holds up oppressive standards of beauty, she is more than just her body. She has never been limited to one ideal lifestyle, and she's had over 200 careers. The motto, "Be who you wanna be," has inspired and motivated my strong desire to do and be everything at once.

## The “Skin” Coloured Crayon (the colour of the skin I’m in)

At one point in my life, I believed I was white. Maybe this “be who you wanna be” stuff doesn’t apply everywhere. I recall looking at race through a black and white perspective. Quite literally. We had only learned about racism between black and white people, and I did not learn Asian people could also experience racism. In fact, there was hardly any Asian representation in the media and I could never see people like me throughout my childhood.

When we think of white people, we don’t think of white as paper. I had always coloured my drawings of white people with peach pencil crayons. I had a small understanding of how there were white people, black people, and then yellow people. When I was a newborn, I had jaundice, but other than that I had no other recollection of being yellow. The colour of my skin resembled the peach crayon, and I had settled that I was the same as white people.

I wonder how long it took for me to see myself. Did I look into a mirror and see some white kid with black hair and brown eyes? There is no way to tell, other than the hasty, peach-coloured drawings I produced.

It was when I moved near Chinatown and made friends who shared the same ethnicity that I was able to feel less alone, and I learned how to accept myself and be proud of my culture and identity. Environment really shapes one’s identity by influencing standards.

As an Asian person, I did not fit Westernized beauty standards. However, even though I faced idealized depictions of beauty and achievement as a child, that doesn’t mean children today should. The image the media portrays is growing more diverse and inclusive, thus allowing more children to find a piece of themselves in the world.

**Vin Tan, 16**

## Serenity Blue

Periwinkle coloured pessimism,  
an unsmoothed wrinkle.  
breathing in  
the scent of the sea,  
more stormy than calming.

the perpetuity of waves,  
crashing  
fail to break through the bitter memories.  
unlike their breakage on the rocks,  
sharp and jagged

the warmth of sunshine and a sea salt aroma  
and the echo of  
far away joy-filled laughter from children,  
almost a distraction  
almost  
almost

sentimentality.  
not quite muffled, a melancholy  
the taste of the sea on my tongue,  
reminding me of a temporary time  
before the shadowy clouds,  
hovering over my every thought and action  
miles and miles of a misted-over mind...

a smile that doesn’t quite feel authentic,  
I echo the joy-filled children  
in a depression disguised as  
serenity blue

**Darwyn Chang, 15**



**Jaded**  
**Shanon Van, 16**



# Loser Cleans Up

*Loser cleans up.* An old Dempsey tradition. My dad got it from his dad and I got it from mine. Most people just play for fun or maybe for bragging rights. We do have fun when we play, but why not add a little incentive to win. When you play at the Dempsey house, *loser cleans up*.

My grandpa and my dad are both competitive in the best way possible. Competitive enough to make people mad, but gracious enough to make those same people continue to like them after they've lost. I've been playing games with them since I was little so it was no surprise to anyone when I grew up to be competitive just like them. My Nana likes to tell me how I remind her of my Papa and that makes me smile. I want to be just like him, which is why I'll always remember his rule. *Loser cleans up*.

Monopoly is not an easy game. It takes concentration, strategy and patience. I'm the only other person my age I know who actually enjoys playing, so that rules out playing with any of my friends. My mom and sister aren't fans; neither of them have enough patience to sit through the long games. So, I play with Dad. He never lets me win. Ever.

The cards have been shuffled and the money has been dealt. It's time to start.

I move my CN Tower piece to GO beside Dad's maple leaf. My money is sorted neatly into piles and his is thrown in a big lump of coloured paper. We couldn't be more different in real life, but when we get sucked into the world of Monopoly we both have the same goal. Win. The scoreboard I keep in my head reads: Dad - 100 001, Ava - 0.

That big fat zero hangs over my head like a black hole, just waiting to swallow me up again as we roll the dice over and over again.

The silence creeps up on me. I hate the quiet. I know Dad feels it too because he gets up and starts to play music from his record player. Old songs. Songs I've heard a million times, but could not name to save my life. Neither of us like the silence (I'm like him that way) so the music is more than welcome.

Dad checks his watch.

We've been playing for an hour and a half, he says, You ready to call it?

Never, I say defiant.

We can't play forever. I have to win at some point. I'm not losing this time. You just watch.

Ok, fine. Play until 9:00?

Deal.

I've got 45 more minutes to do it. But I know what's coming. It's almost time for my favourite part of the game: *Dave's Mortgage Marathon*. What happens here is Dad gets all competitive and spends all his money blocking off half the board, but then, leaves himself with only \$2 leftover. At this point he can either wait and pray that I land on all his properties which earns him loads and loads of money or he can mortgage some properties and get more money from the bank. It doesn't surprise me anymore when he opts for the latter.

Of course, Dad being the teacher he is, he uses it all as a learning opportunity about money and loans and blah blah blah, which you wouldn't think would make their way into a game – I don't believe in 'edutainment' – but they do. (Okay, between us, some of these lessons are actually useful. But it's still annoying.)

The last half an hour ticks by. Only fifteen minutes left to pick the game back up. Fifteen minutes to steal the show and make him clean up the money scattered across our old dining table.

Fifteen minutes.

Ten minutes. Ten turns to five and five turns to one. By now we know who's won. And it's no surprise that today is no different than every other time.

Dad has won again.

We reach across the table and shake hands. Then he gets up to stretch his legs. I look out the window and see that the street lights have turned on for the night.

Then I watch him strut towards the kitchen. He pours himself a glass of water. I start to pick apart the coloured bills.

I hate losing. As I return the bills to their slots I realize that Dad wasn't always the winner. Once he would have been just like me, cleaning up after he lost to my Papa.

And that makes me hate losing a little bit less. But only a little.

**Ava Dempsey, 14**



Can't cook the food,  
Can't speak the language  
Can only use chopsticks

along with the 10 other white people beside me.

**Isabel Allderice, 14**

## **Love and Jealousy**

I still put salt in my chocolate milk, because a person I never want to see again showed me how it brings out the sweetness. I buy the hair product that an online friend recommended to me, innumerable summers ago. Every spring, I listen to the artist that my summer camp crush mentioned in passing when we were twelve. Daily, I say catchphrases that my childhood best friend found hysterical. The walls of my bedroom are covered in drawings, notes, breath and sweat from people who I wouldn't even wave at if I saw them on the street. I am a mosaic of everyone that I have ever loved. And I am in love with this fact. But then, why is it that the cynical, archetypal "hates everyone, but has a soft spot for you" most desirable, when there are people who find beauty in every interaction? It can almost make you jealous, when the person you are infatuated with, is infatuated with their surroundings, and finds love in so many moments, but what can be more endearing than watching the one you love bloom in their environment, and allowing you to discover each petal; and why it is there, and who, and where, and how? "I love you" cannot be discredited by how many times you say it, or who you say it to. I love those who have loved before me, and will love after me. I love those who are brave enough, and whose hearts are big enough, to allow ample love.

**Marie Clark, 16**





**Defining "Identity"**  
Alison Chong, 18

## Where I Am From

I am from the house with the big window that shared a wall with the neighbours,  
on the street with the kids who played hide and seek into the night,  
through the holes that connected four backyards.

I am from the string of parks and parking lots that made for an interesting walk home from school,  
with the spray-painted garages and the alleyway with the man that slept on the ground with a car seat as  
his cushion.

His name I did not know,  
but his face, I remembered when I saw him in a suit three years later.

I am from the warm fire that burned in the fireplace late into march,  
the condo in Dubai with the never-ending construction next door,  
and from the school in Cayman, where we spent most of our time in the hallways feeling the warm  
Caribbean breeze and the pelting rain of the hurricane season.

I am from the smell of yiayia and papou's fasolada  
that drifts up from their basement kitchen into their carpeted living room  
and all the stories that are told of the restaurant they once owned,  
from the tales that Auntie Ana told of Uncle Hernani and the leopard,  
and avó and avô in Africa,  
who died before I knew them.

From the choppy conversations that were part Greek part English,  
because some words are just better in Greek.  
To the sentences told in Portuguese just so that we didn't understand.

From the odd superstitions and the evil eye,  
that were weird to everybody else,  
but we understood them.

I am from the people who struggled, and left things behind,  
so that one day,  
the family that they wouldn't meet,  
would have the life that they wanted for themselves.

**Evva Sofia Pereira Liapis, 16**

# The boy who walks home with a lonely soul

March 10th, 2022

Based on a true story and real-life experience and my deep inner thoughts

0% walk completion

Weeping at the doorway, excluding myself from the others, I waited for that soothing sound. Looking down at my shivering legs, why am I always around him? He even claims to have bad intentions. Behind me felt like a bright sunny atmosphere, but the place I stood was the northern lights. I would love to join them but – **DING... DING ... DING**. Sniffing my snot back, I pushed the door open. Holding my jacket on my left and my backpack on the other side, I would do a walk that would change my objective in writing stories.

1.45% walk completion

In front of me a beautiful masterpiece was being painted. But before I could be immersed in it, a wave of misery hit me when I realized that I could never be a part of this masterpiece. No one could see my tears streaming from my eyes, unable to speak normally, while joyful people passed me, almost as if I was translucent. The only thing I could do was continue to walk, nearing my cracking point.

3.89% walk completion

No one could perceive me as lonely; no one batted an eye. When tears the size of pearls fell off my face, feelings of loneliness consumed me. I cracked, "Is this wHat it FEels liKe WanTiNng to **\*hiccup** die?!" "No, I don't WaNt to die YEt I-i still**\*hiccup**." In front of me, I saw beauty, "But I-I KNOW I **\*hiccup** could never be A Ppart of it!!"

6.12% walk completion

Surrounding me was beauty, but I was the only one who wasn't happy. "WHy is it me?!" "Why am I the one who is uNhAppy?!" "HOW does It fEEl to be happy?" But it felt like God's grip was blocking me from experiencing it. As I continued to walk, this feeling of desire slowly dissipated.

12.76% walk completion

The crying mellowed down, and the slightest amount of depression started to creep in. As I looked up ahead, I could see disconnected Christmas lights dangling off a tree. It reminded me of a time when I was crying and praying in the middle of class during the end of a presentation, wishing to have a friend or someone to comfort me, but all I could conclude was that I am a spectator – "**AALLL**."

17.66% walk completion

The moment I heard that voice, I knew it was her. For most of my life, I had "friends." Well, they weren't; I can't even remember having an ounce of happiness with them. I've never spent time with my friends outside of school and all that junk. All I've gotten from these experiences with "friends" always left me feeling alone. But, all those "friendships" lasted for a year until I cut – "**AALLL**."

27.99% walk completion

Oddly enough, I don't recognize this voice. But before I pondered that thought, something beautiful caught my eyes, a delicate piece of art; not wanting to disturb it, I passed by. I will never be bored with humanity, even if I'm the spectator. The walk had finally reached the halfway point.

50.78% walk completion

Slowly, I could finally talk louder again, but a little thought was nudging my mind. For most of my life, I've tried to fit in. More recently, I'd been trying to be the social animal, trying to learn more about the internet and its trends, but even though I'd tried all that junk, I was still lonely. But I've never been disappointed at being lonely, maybe I should – **\*bark \*bark**.



71.81% walk completion

As I looked up at the clouds, a question popped into my head. Why do animals detest me? It's not like I've done anything horrid; is it because I look suspicious? Is that why people move out of the way when I'm walking? I continued walking, pondering that thought, getting closer to my resolve.

86.67% walk completion

The walk was coming to a close. Straight ahead was something pleasing to the eye. Before I could look closer, I heard an elegant noise. Magnificent memories rushed into my head, memories of me making people happier, of making them laugh during my beginnings as a writer. Maybe, just maybe, even if I'm lonely, I still – *\*smile*

100% walk completion

As I looked at my house, I thought back to the entirety of the walk. I should embrace my existence being alone without true friendships and long-term friends with the upside of making a difference to other people. "Even if I'm the spectator, I still can make people slightly happier through my beautiful pieces of art and literature." As I opened the door, I felt content with my existence.

**Alvin Su, 13**

## A Symphony in Memory

Sitting on the very edge of my chair  
An aura of mystery hangs thick in the air  
Pressed eyes and keen ears  
All eager to hear

A captivating melody that erupts aloud  
Ominous and uncertain like faith itself  
Four powerful notes played proud  
Dynamic and bold, I feel myself

Mystery and suspense forever entwined  
A story of triumph and tragedy alike  
Intensity and strength undefined  
Mounting passion and wrath other unlike

An era inspired by ancient art  
Beauty found in composition and clarity  
Music to unite and console hearts  
A wish for independence and sincerity

Musicians with never ending devotion  
A sweet chorus of string instruments  
Delicate fingers in synchronous motion  
Trumpets and trombones far from silent  
Woodwinds too, join the production

The final closing ends off loud  
The conductor looks so proud  
An enthralling sound forever resounds  
Ecstatic applauding from the crowd  
The concert ends with heroic bows

An incredible piece is a victory  
That unlocks something within  
No matter where in history  
Music is where it begins

**Catherine Jiang, 13**



**three friends**  
Asloan Jaroszynski, 17

# symphony of the tragic heroine (feat. bikini kill)

## **overture.**

rebel girl  
u are the revolution  
rebel girl  
u r the queen of my world

## **one.**

in act one we are loose lipped adolescents – our ignorance and innocence untouched, there was no fear splashed across our sunburnt cheeks. our unshaven legs were our battle swords as the voices in our heads promised us victory spiralling around our pearl-studded ears, hissing whispers of love and life and suddenly you are fourteen years old and the closest thing you have experienced to love is holding hands in english class. Intertwined pinkies and iambic pentameter all rolled into one and you still can't separate shakespeare from the tangy taste of middle school love.

we fashion paper crowns during recess pretending that they're gold, sceptres are forged of sharpie fumes. our drink of choice is coffee with three milk and four sugar, swallowing bitterness down our throats in homemade halloween costumes of womanhood. twelve and thirteen and fourteen we write our letters in cursive having deemed printing too boring. we dye our hair pink, staining our shoulders and neck and bathroom tiles, the colour lasting longer than our pre-teen friendship. love is wedded bliss and happy endings and maybe if we pose j u s t right we will look old enough to grasp it.

## **intermission.**

cortisol and estrogen were force-fed through our metal clasped teeth, years of silver and blood pushed us on and on like a carousel horse. first kisses and cradled friendships swept by like trees in the windows of my parents silver saturn view. teen life became a bingo card, this road trip of revelation and revolution continued as we crossed off each square. we grew into our bodies like fish to air, as we tried to stumble into some semblance of normalcy.

## **two.**

open act two, four years have passed and my nails are still bitten and brittle, the casualties of not aging with grace. love was no longer holding hands at the botanical garden at lawrence and leslie, but the only weapon us girls could have as elderly men on the subway shifted from wise old wizards to dragons with leering eyes. love became dancing in bare feet – friendships that formed through borrowed candy coloured packages. love was learning the newfound art of synced cycles, and discovering how to force wolverine claws through our freezing hands, heels discarded as we ran down dark stairwells hoping our grandmothers house was still wolf-less.

we are flawed and fearful, hearts no longer on full display. rituals under the full moon now included curses at our attempts at true love, our only sins were the silhouettes of celebrities we tried to slip into. love became an icarus with far too many vices who seemed like a greek tragedy waiting to happen but i couldn't help hoping that i fall in too. love belongs in the worn pages of my john green books, with endings that i always end up having to skip. the only lasting peace of love was the potential for greatness i saw in the stars. orion's perpetual hunt shining in the sky as my very own north star, guiding me to survival. Our hearts beat for many people, but stars will only die when you do.

## **finale.**

our hearts no longer sing of revolution and our dulled eyes just want the taste of anarchy. seventeen years was once elderly, but my bones are still knitting together and my wisdom teeth have yet to flower. i am hardly a person all teenage angst and tumbling feelings, i like to say i know love but i have only dipped my toe into the ocean of possibility. i have wasted years on toxicity and faux-kindness and i would do it all again, because a human is not a mistake and these building blocks of broken friendships and fallen grins create the body i call home. i am just a draft of a finished product, the first chapter of an epic that could rival the odyssey. i will not be a hero i studied in english class, another shakespearian tale, i refuse to let tragic love stain another woman's story.

**Amy Rich, 18**



# Sounds from an Orchestra in E-Flat Major

In the hall  
the patrons shuffle,  
awaiting expectantly  
some music they call classical.

The band steps out,  
the conductor leading the way.  
The crowd claps avidly!  
Their excitement cannot be contained.

And so, the band begins to play.  
Hypnotizing the crowd, the conductor rhythmically counting:  
one, two, three, four — one, two, three, four.  
“Quiet now, the first movement is starting.”

First comes a lone violin;  
its strings shrill with delight.  
The player, a virtuoso  
who has been preparing for this night.

The violin’s friends follow:  
viola, violoncello, contrabass.  
These strings sound full together  
unlike the violin, who echoed lonely; whereas.

Here come the woodwinds!  
The flutes flutter lightly; the clarinets and saxophones woo smoothly.  
No instrument goes unheard,  
for they all play the melody.

Who better to play now than the brass section?  
Trumpets, trombones, baritones, and tubas blast blaringly.  
Armed with golden weapons, they’re a quaint and comedic crew.  
No need to thank them, however, they enjoy playing harmony.

At the furthest back lies the percussion section.  
Their timpani boom; and their snares patter.  
Crash! Go the cymbals, followed by the twinkling of bells.  
Indeed they complete the band — wrapping everything together.

With ease, the band softens into decrescendo.  
The strings pick pizzicato and some players lightly blow.  
“Something is coming — I’m sure of it!”  
With that the sound grows into crescendo.

The symphony plays fully! The conductor's arms move wildly!  
Allegro? Fortissimo? Staccato? Presently these words mean nothing!  
Enjoy the music,  
for it is the highlight of the evening!

**Sandro Colacito-Bobadilla, 14**

## Je me suis perdue....

Nous étions en train de nous cacher. Les battements de mon cœur étaient rapides, sans contrôle. Je voyais tous les visages près de moi, mais aucun est le visage que je voulais voir, des petits yeux bleus, des cheveux dorés et bruns. À ce moment, mon cœur chutait. Elle n'était pas ici. J'ai oublié ma mère.

J'ai complètement oublié la seule raison pour laquelle je devais me battre dans cette guerre. C'est seulement moi maintenant, et je ne voulais pas une vie comme ça. Je ne voulais pas d'une vie pleine de peur, d'anxiété, et pleine de solitude. Je me noyais dans mes pensées, et soudainement, il y a eu un bruit. BOOM! Puis un autre.

Je tombais. C'était une bombe. Je me levais rapidement et je commençais à courir sans réfléchir. L'atmosphère autour de moi était chaotique, quelque chose d'effrayant. Le ciel devenait gris, et le soleil était comme mangé par les nuages sombres. Une place d'échapper. Des enfants près de moi pleuraient. Une mère blessée était en train de dire ses derniers mots à sa fille. Je sentais de la jalousie, car je savais maintenant que ma mère n'allait pas avoir la chance de faire la même chose. Des larmes remplissaient mes yeux et je courais et pleurais à la fois.

Mes pieds devenaient comme de la confiture. Je ne pouvais pas respirer. Mon cœur était vide. Ma tête était vide. Mon esprit, mon personnage, ma raison de vivre, tous étaient oubliés. BOOM! Des cris. Une odeur brûlée entra dans mon nez. Lentement, je regardais à gauche de moi et je voyais une couleur rouge nous envahir. Les flammes.

"COURS!" a dit une voix. Je ne l'écoutais pas. Il était finalement temps. Il était temps de me joindre avec ma mère. J'ai souri. Je pouvais voir son visage dans ma tête.

"MAMA!" j'ai crié. Sa bouche bougeait. Je ne pouvais pas l'entendre.

"MAMA!"

"Daryna, s'il te plaît"

Sa voix était comme une chanson.

"Une autre fois, pour moi."

Mon corps tremblait. Je ne pouvais pas faire ça. Les flammes étaient plus hautes, plus sauvages. Je voyais que j'étais laissée tranquille. Aucune personne n'était près de moi. Je réalisais finalement que j'ai été seule. C'est seulement moi et le feu. Je prenais un souffle. J'essayais de me contrôler. Mais c'était impossible. J'ai commencé à penser à propos de la seule chose importante qui reste avec moi: mon pays, l'Ukraine. Mon Ukraine qui était en train de brûler.

"Si elle va brûler, je vais brûler aussi."

Je ferme les yeux, et commence à prier. C'est difficile de respirer. Ma poitrine est serrée. Finalement, je me laisse aller. "Au revoir, chère vie. Au revoir, cher peuple. Au revoir, chère Maman. Au revoir, cher Ukraine."

"Daryna!" criait ma mère

Je ferme le livre et essaie de me relâcher. Il y a des chairs de poule sur ma peau. Je suis reconnaissant que tout ce que j'ai lu était une histoire.

**Mhanaz Halim, 14**

## June 2004

My computer fan hums. Daylight streams through thin curtains, casting the whole room in a gentle, dreamy orange. I'm reading a poem I saw mentioned in a book months ago, on a website with ads that want to tell me how to deal with the diabetes that I don't have.

My knees strain slightly against the material of my jeans as I sit, cross-legged, in my creaky old desk chair. It'll be too warm for them before long, and I'll switch to another pair that are nearly identical (men's, secondhand, altered with my mediocre sewing to fit me better), just with the knees slashed open by my fabric shears.

There's another poem at the bottom of the page. Multiple, actually, but one title grabs me more than others. I'm content to avoid my schoolwork a little while longer, and I click on *I Go Back To May 1937*.

It isn't all that long, maybe a page, but I drown in it anyways. The words overtake me, and I am swallowed whole by the sea, embraced by the words' cold grasp. *They are kids*, Sharon Olds says, and I see the image of my mother and father in the warm Windsor sun that I've recreated in my head from grainy old photos. *They are about to get married*, Sharon Olds says, and I see the apartment we lived in until I was one, a floor above where my grandmother made my mother dinner the night before I was born. *You are going to do things you cannot imagine you would ever do*, Sharon Olds says, and I see a cheap plastic plate being hurtled onto the driveway as hard as it can be thrown, hear the sobs and feel the dread I did when it first happened.

My parents are still fighting, scraping, ripping the house apart with the effort of staying together as I sit at my desk in the middle of the day, but this will not last more than another year. I do not know this – or rather I do, but have been expecting it to not last another year since I was ten.

My parents married young, and had their first child, me, when they were not much older. They came from the same hometown, but did not meet online until my mother had travelled two-hundred and fifty-eight miles away for school. My father arrived where she was learning to become a teacher, hoping to get a marketing degree that he never finished, and they came to Toronto to raise their child. They were engaged for two years, and they were married in a church near my grandfather's house that I thought was beautiful even before I knew it was where the ceremony had taken place, and I love the way that their story sounds when I

write it out this way.

I love the way it sounds when my mother tells it to me when I am nine, and she is trying to distract me out of my battle with eating so that I finish my dinner without thinking. I love the way it sounds when I am sixteen, and it is only once it's all over that I start to wonder about the finer details.

But the story has cracks around the edges. The story has the admission of the fact that my mother never really wanted to get married before he asked. The story has my father looking away from me, out the window of the subway car, when he talks about my mother's mother when my parents first met. I remember how off-putting my embroidery looks from the back, where you can see all the components that make a picture appear on the other side.

I think about the poem as I work on my homework, and as I sit in school, and as I eat dinner and do the dishes and go to bed. The words have made a home inside my chest, but it is not like writing normally does, where it pushes other things around to find its own cavity. *I Go Back to May 1937* finds the chasm that the yelling and the fighting and the holes in bedroom doors have been hollowing out, and it throws itself in it. It spreads itself out when it reaches the floor, and the fall to the bottom is a little shorter.

*All they know is they are innocent*, Sharon Olds says, and I rewrite the footnotes on my parents' love story. I remember that there was a time before all of this. *You are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of*, Sharon Olds says, and I remember pictures of my mother in her white dress, pictures of my father holding her close, pictures of their friends and their family laughing and posing and drinking at their reception. I remember that they did not know, in the stagnant august heat, that they were making promises that they would not keep in the way that they meant to. *I don't do it. I want to live*, Sharon Olds says, describing how she will not prevent her parents from marrying, because it will preserve her own existence. I remember that when we go out, I walk with my father while my sister walks with my mother, because we move faster than they do. Instead of going back to June 2004, I look around my room at the paintings I have made and the decorations I have hung and feel the press of the aforementioned self-altered jeans. I remember that there was life born from the hurt, for better or for worse.

**Ryan Sullivan, 17**



**Kings of Toronto**  
**Jakob Reid, 18**



## Two Missed Calls

I check my phone as I stand outside of the subway station – 3:31pm – two missed calls from ‘Opportunity’, no new voice messages. Opportunity never leaves a voice message, the missed calls are a good enough reminder of how I could have done things differently. Sometimes these calls are extremely irritating. They make me feel like a failure because Opportunity never calls to notify me of chances I *did* take, only the ones I didn’t. Sometimes the calls motivate me to do better. When I have no missed calls, which is a very rare occurrence, I’m reminded of how many risks I took throughout the day and I’m proud of myself. There are millions of possible scenarios that could play out depending on how I choose to live and I have no idea how Opportunity keeps track of them all.

I take a moment to think back on my day. Suddenly, my stomach drops and I’m falling back in time. Not way back into the depths of history like time travellers often do, but rather just 15 minutes ago. My feet are grounded on the eastbound subway platform as the wind from an incoming train sends my hair into a flurry. I look to my left and my past self is standing beside me. Her phone reads 3:16pm. I glance down at my hands and they have turned a translucent tint of blue – I must be invisible to everyone else, like a ghost. This is cool.

The train screeches to a stop and I follow myself through the car door that arrives in front of me. “Hurry, hurry!” a mother ushers her child into the subway car. The woman looks frazzled and stressed, the child innocent and oblivious. Their hands cling together – a hand that has carried out thousands of hours of labor pressed against one that does not know the definition of hard work. Pure effort can never be washed away with soap and water. I notice that the child is smiling at my past self, but I did not take care to return the smile. I wish the child could see *me* because I am beaming ear to ear. The automated voice of the subway announcement is the cue for the pair to depart at the upcoming stop.

Next, Boy enters the car. I believe his name is Boy because that is what it says on his name tag. I wonder if Boy is aware of this piece of personal identification plastered to his sweater. Maybe it was a dare. There are a few seats available but Boy decides to lean against the glass separating seating from the doors. Only then do I realize he has a guitar strung over his shoulder. I always wanted to learn guitar. Boy remains on the train for 3 stations and exits at the fourth.

The blurred faces of strangers I will forget immediately flash past the window as the train picks up speed and departs from the busy platform. No one arrives through the doors for two stops. The next stop is my home station, so my past self and I exit the car.

Directly in front of me on the wall when I exit there is a poster that I don’t recall seeing when my past self was the present. The poster reads, “Everyone is a door, an entrance to an undiscovered universe.” I wonder what the poster is advertising, but clearly my past self does not care enough to stop. She also doesn’t seem to have enough time to spare a few dollars for the elderly woman with kind, bloodshot eyes curled up on the floor with a cup beside her.

The woman is accompanied by a small golden dog with its paw resting on her knee. Her red eyes imply that she has been crying, but I also once learned that an excess of visible blood vessels in the eye can be a symptom of old age. If old age shows symptoms, does that mean it’s classified as a disease? Depends on who you ask. Some people don’t age at all at heart, just on the outside. I know my past self has a few coins in her pocket, but she does not stop to drop them in the cup. I reach into my ghostly pocket and pull out a toonie, determined to make up for my inconsiderate actions. I try to slip it in, but as soon as it leaves my palm, it disappears. I reach into my pocket again and the toonie has returned. I try again. Same outcome. The woman won’t even hear me if I share some kind words instead of coins. A wave of distaste for my past self rolls over me. There is nothing I can do to change the past, but maybe I can use this moment to affect the future.

I look around for my past self but she’s already gone. I run to catch up and as I arrive at the top of the stairs, I see her standing outside of the subway station. She checks her phone – 3:31pm – two missed calls from ‘Opportunity’, no new voice messages. I look down at my hands and they are fading away. I realize it’s all up to her now. Will she do better? Will she answer next time Opportunity calls?

**Jessica Miles, 12**



**Hamlet and the “hero”**  
Nora Devine, 19

# Vodka & Frizz: Musings upon Invocation

You listen to a bitter pink blues  
Fact is none of us can choose  
What a lyrical piece of news  
Laugh 'til our screws go loose  
Laugh, because we don't have to think  
Two years gone up in a blink  
Thought we'd be here forever

I painted a tragedy I don't even understand  
They say there is no remedy that we can comprehend  
As the poet writes in fear of a spear in his mind  
We so lovingly call writer's block, nearing this end  
They'll tell us we are unable to send  
The fruits of a connection beyond

They also say that it is when you are gone,  
that I will realize  
just how much you mean to me.

The first two are wrong,  
the last one is true.  
In August I realized  
That I...

Directions are overrated  
Let me say something I think I've said a thousand times  
Let me gaze...  
*The unfolding of a flower, subtle but sublime*  
*The unfolding of a bird's wings, untouched by time*  
*The unfolding of my heart I would trade for no dime*  
*A metaphor to a door*  
*beyond a singing alligator's bayou*

You see frizz  
I see gold  
And I know this is just my interpretation  
and that no inspiration can fathom  
the philosophy of your creation  
I speak to your diamond eyes,  
so let my objections be clear  
that my decision in no way must  
undermine the precision  
and autonomy of your vision  
Let us paint a collaboration  
A golden song of constellation  
A toast of vodka  
To a new nation  
A new nation

A rejection of objectification  
I told the poet  
Yet Calliope's blessing is nowhere near  
And Erato's dark, lovesick heart isn't clear  
And he's missing the point  
It is when you are gone,  
that I will realize  
just how much you mean to me.  
I hate the image of my musings  
The tragedy was the invocation  
And you are the life  
Which I imitate in vain  
Stop, Shakespeare  
The end I fear is only  
A waving horizon  
*It's 2021.*

*This is Earth.*

*We are guzzling the pathetic advances of  
official education upon humanity.*

*I stare at her long indeterminable face  
leaned over, concentrated, and I watch the  
bending flow of her terribly postured back my  
mother would scold. I stare at the configuration  
of her legs, one crossed over the other, and the  
way one of her thighs gracefully disappears from  
my perspective, and the way half of her other foot  
is disappointingly covered by her calf. I struggle  
to estimate the exact length of her legs. Her flat,  
thin ringlets are easier to do, and the right side  
is tucked behind an ear. I make vague ideas of  
her hands and feet. I can't draw faces yet.*

*I tap your shoulder, and I hand you my  
page. I don't remember your expression. But it  
doesn't matter. I can't draw faces yet. But you say  
it's good or something, and hand me back the  
page. On the previously blank slate of your visage  
is a silly little smiley face.*

*The perfect touch.*

**Elena Saini, 14**

## Socks

She sat there, looking at her phone, the only source of light coming from its brightly lit screen in an otherwise dark room. Grandparents never keep their phones' brightness low...it just has to be blinding you. Whatsapp chats and YouTube updates flood her notifications, but she's too busy navigating through the best knitting tutorials on her timeline. That's a tech-savvy grandma for you. Who needs knitting books when you have the entire internet at your fingertips?

To an outsider peeking into her life, the Grandma has quite an odd lifestyle for a seventy year old. She doesn't sleep all night and barely sleeps throughout the day! Whatever happened to elders preaching to us to sleep early? Heck, she talks on the phone for hours on end. She uses her phone like a toddler uses their tablet: inseparable and desperate!

To an insider, or to someone with some sense, the real unhealthy factor pops out: loneliness. But who's to blame? Her busy children, who have to provide for their lives, or her now-distant relatives? Her husband who's still working at seventy? Or her grandkids that are seemingly caught up in this era?

She doesn't blame anyone though, because she knows there is nothing to complain about. She's glued to her phone because she's just talking to her now forty year old daughter; miles apart physically, but closer than the relationship between math and science. And at night? She's busy knitting for her grand-children. Sweaters, dresses, scarves, hats, socks — you name it, but before you get the word up your throat, to your tongue, and out your mouth, she'll have it ready for you to wear.

The Outsider peeking into her life might walk past the door to her room and see beams of light peeking out. The Outsider will look at the time: 3:43 in the morning. Or the night.

The Outsider will open the door. The Outsider will shudder — they always have cold feet and hands.

The Outsider will lay their eyes on the phone that the Grandma is holding. The Outsider's eyes will move up to her hands, where she will hold two intertwined knitting needles. On the chair will sit a bright and colourful sweater, still in progress, its yarn laced in the knitting needles she holds in her hands.

The Outsider will notice that the sweater artist hasn't looked up. The artist is busy knitting...a fold... another from the bottom...and the pattern's done. The Outsider will smile, walk back, and close the door. Because the Outsider knows not to disturb an artist occupied in their craft. That's like waking up a sleeping baby. You don't do that.

A couple years later, the Outsider will be living in another country. Across oceans, across continents, across the world. From the hot tropical summers to the cold Canadian winter. It will be another day in February. Cold and ice, turbulent winds, and snow that's sixty centimeters deep will be something the Outsider will grow accustomed to. Someone will knock on their door. A delivery.

The Outsider will open the door and in will come a box. The Amazon order came early despite the bad weather! The Outsider will grab a sharp cutting knife and stab at the box (gently) until the cuts are big enough to pry open. The Outsider will handle the box like how you handle your school assignments: with hatred, love, tenderness, care, and anger all at once.

The Outsider will peek inside. Bouts of colour will shine on their face: bright oranges, calm blues, relaxing greens, and many pretty hues. The Outsider will touch the colours and feel the soft and warm texture of something created with love and care. Something created by staying up all night and turning needles, twisting yarn, and skillfully turning a blob of wool, questioning its existence, into a beautiful creation, serving its purpose in keeping people warm.

The Outsider will take out the contents of the box. Gloves and socks will fall on their carpet. The Outsider will know that her Grandma still remembers that she always has cold hands and feet.

The Outsider will hold Grandma's gift.

**Aashirya Sharma, 15**





**The Monster Under The Poet's Bed**  
Helena Robbins, 16

## FAQ answered by death

**Q.** Does dying hurt?

**A.** It hurt for Columbine, it hurt for Vietnam, and it sure as hell hurt for James Dean sitting in his Porsche.

**Q.** Do you think the tulips will die this winter?

**A.** Pluck a few petals to find out; they will, they will not, they will, they will not.

**Q.** What do most people not realize?

**A.** The difference between they're and their — one of my greatest pet peeves.

**Q.** When the sun collapses and the stars begin to sing, where will you be?

**A.** In every shadow, in every corner. You'll see me in your loved ones' faces and spend the night vomiting ash. The church talks about oblivion and communion but what they don't say is every breastfeeding mother will find her teats full of blood and that your neighbour who loves Nirvana will hang himself singing, "You won't be afraid of fear." They don't tell you that the end began the day Adam and Eve ate the damn fruit and fell to earth.

**Q.** Are ghosts real?

**A.** Sure they are; look at your parents. They haven't been the same since they got married.

**Q.** If everything I feel is just a chemical reaction, what's the point?

**A.** I've seen too many people like you; loveless, despairing, and empty. Tell me anger doesn't bring kingdoms to their feet. Tell me hope doesn't take you to heaven. Tell me sorrow doesn't lead to early graves. Denounce humanity if you're prepared to, but never deny it.

**Q.** Do you think she loves me?

**A.** Sometimes there is a monster beneath the bed, but it doesn't hurt you. Sometimes the monster has your mother's flimsy fingers and sometimes it pleads in grandmother's voice. Sometimes between fear and a paralyzed heart, you remember that the monster under your bed is not a monster at all, but all the people you've ever loved and lost.

**Q.** Who really killed John Kennedy?

**A.** History and clichés. My child, heroes always die young.

**Q.** How will I die?

**A.** Well, today I had a muffin from the bakery around the corner instead of the one by the subway. It was awful; the muffin tasted stale and I could have broken a tooth trying to eat that thing. My day went awful after that — I know, I know, you're all thinking, "What the hell has this got to do with the question?" My point is it doesn't matter; dead men don't care.

**Fathma Khan, 18**

# I Am the Food I Eat

“Here, have some. There’s not much left, before your cousin eats it all.”

My grandma passed some stir fried cabbage and pork over to my end of the table. I grabbed my chopsticks eagerly and piled the food on my plate. The caramelized soy sauce cascaded from the cabbage into a delectable pool, and the slices of pork glistened under the light of the dining room. Thanking her, I gobbled up a big bite. The juicy meat burst in my mouth, and the crunchy cabbage cut through the richness of the sauce. It was delicious. More than that, the taste reminded me of my heritage.

Growing up as half-Japanese, half-Canadian, I felt like I never truly was accepted or in truth, fit in in either culture. I fortunately haven’t had any traumatizing or demoralizing experiences related to my identity, but I have had my fair share of questionable encounters in both countries, but specifically in Japan.

I lived in Japan for the first twelve years of my life. I am grateful that I got to grow up there in a safe, sheltered environment, but I had a nagging sense since I was very little that I was actually not fully comfortable there. That I was not enough to be considered a part of Japanese or Canadian culture.

Historically speaking, Japan is known to be a monocultural country with the vast majority of the population purely Japanese. However, I am not. My hair is a different colour from everybody else’s, I’m always at least a head taller than my peers, and I have facial features that don’t suggest that I am Japanese. My surname is paternal, and so that made me stand out on attendance lists and administrative forms, which caused people to make assumptions even before they met me.

I speak Japanese natively, I have body language that suggests that I am Japanese, and my heritage is half Japanese. Even so, when I meet Japanese people, they immediately ask me why my hair looks the way it is, or why my physical traits aren’t “Japanese.” People around me did not hesitate to ask why I looked “different.” It was not considered rude or insulting; nobody thought anything was wrong with this type of behaviour.

I remember random adults, elderly strangers asking me these personal questions. As a child and even to this day, I never understood why they asked me these questions or why people wanted to touch my curly hair. I never understood why they always assumed that I was a foreigner in my own country. Why did it matter, and why did I have to explain my genetic makeup everywhere I went?

Whenever I felt confused or uncomfortable or upset because of these situations, the one thing that comforted me was food. I found solace when I ate. No matter how bad my day was, no matter how frustrated I was feeling, food was always there for me. My mother or grandmother would make traditional Japanese food for me, and I would be reminded that I was just as Japanese, I was just as part of this culture as the rest of the population was.

This year will mark the third year of my life in Canada. I don’t get questions about my race or my identity as often as I did in Japan, but the feeling of being a cultural imposter has never left me. It’s a scar waiting to be fixed, all the tiny crevices gradually mending that will eventually disappear.

When I remember the taste of my grandmother’s food, when I eat my mother’s food here in Canada, it envelops me in a blanket of security. It gives me the reassurance that I crave, and the reassurance that I need. Food is what connects me to my heritage more than anything in this world.

“You must be hungry. Give me your plate, it’s practically empty.”

I smile as I hand over my plate to my mother. She returns it along with a heaping serving of a dish she made that day, stewed potato, pork, and carrot topped with scallions. The jewelled vegetables are nearly broken down yet firm, with all of their natural juices escaping and getting absorbed into the already tender meat. The aroma of the sharp scallion against the succulent, braised ingredients beckon me. I savour my first bite with a mouthful of rice, and the familiar flavours of soy sauce and sweet vegetables warm my soul.

**Hana Greenberg, 14**



**The Sweetness of My Asian Childhood**  
Sara Guo, 18



# The Dying Sunset

The Sun was wrapping up his shift; there were clacks on kitchen tables from dinner cups and supper bowls, yellow lights glowing through dark windows and heated stoves, and static television buzzes when the clock struck five. The clouds pinkened as the sky turned dark, and The Sunset was born.

She started off timid and afraid, shyly peeking behind The Sun with her fingers curled at the hem of his flowing golden robe. She told him that she didn't want to go out because she was scared. Scared that she wouldn't do it right, or that people wouldn't like her, or that people would love her too much. There was something to be scared of in every possibility in which her story could end. It took a few tries before The Sun's convincing got her to move.

When she first stepped out onto the field she did her job as she was told: to paint the sky a brilliant orange and illuminate gold on the fields below. She waved and smiled a bit, liking the ways the people and animals subtly glanced at her when streaks of The Sun behind her glowed and disappeared, again and again. The river creeks welcomed her through a reflection, waving back through the ripples of the water. The trees talked to her through little flutters in the wind, rising high as a greeting and falling low as a pause. Suddenly every person stopped to look at her, some raising their strange little devices to hold up in her face. Her smile split into a toothy grin as she enjoyed the peak of her arrival. She existed to be beautiful, to be praised, to be the witness of marriage proposals and awkward first-kisses and to create a time for all sweet memories to be lived. She was there to be the golden hour, to spark love and joy and peace and erase all the angst and worries that tainted people's day.

As she started getting a little bit more comfortable with her spot she branched out a bit more: caressing the clouds to light them with her colour and circling the sky to create a ring of fire. She travelled through rays of sunshine that crossed people's paths, and she slammed against glass windows to force attention to be drawn to her. The orange of her body became fiercer and fiercer, darkening into a serious tangerine and eventually into bright red: the colour of luck to some, the colour of evil to others. She was changing, she was evolving, and she was becoming more and more beautiful and slowly understanding how it felt to live The Sun's glory.

But then the crimson of her body started spreading and spreading, and it took her too long to realize that she was bleeding. She glanced in horror at the gaping wound in her body, knowing that she was losing blood but oblivious to where she bled. Her chin quivered as she looked up, frightened to find the world applauding for the arrival of her death. They cheered and laughed, their eyes wide and bright and glimmering. They said she looked like a flame, a painting, a splash of art, and that this was the singular, not-to-be-missed moment of the entire show. The Sunset looked behind at The Sun, questions stuck at the back of her throat. He looked back with innocent eyes, and seeing the beaming pride of her success in those eyes, she didn't bother to say a word. She shook out her arms.

She began to dance. She leaped across the sky and swirled and twirled, not knowing where to put her arms and legs but knowing that no one would care, because they'd only be looking at the traces of red left behind. With each jump, she left a splatter on the canvas sky, and with each spin, she created a spiral of reddish-gold that raised gasps and squeals in the crowd below. She could feel herself losing focus, and the things before her started to shiver and blur. Her head was ditzzy, she felt light, but she danced to squeeze the last drop of usefulness left in her.

Slowly she began to lose her hearing. It began with a small ring in her ear, and then random bursts of noises here and there, but then she realized that the cheers were muffled as if by a sheet of fabric. She then began to lose her sight, because no matter how much she blinked, the blur would not leave and the colours would not brighten. She couldn't see their smiles and praises, so she trusted that they were still there with that mindless optimism in her heart. She finally then lost her sense of touch. She couldn't feel the flex of her muscles or the pressure on her toes, or the smile on her face and the waves from her hands. She couldn't feel her feet against the floor, nor The Sun's breath on her back. She had lost all her senses.

Even when she couldn't feel her fingers and toes she didn't know that she had stopped moving and instead had collapsed onto the ground. In her mind, she was still dancing, performing, and enjoying her moments of worth while everyone cheered from below. She was unaware that The Sun had left when her colours began to dim, and that The Night had arrived before her instead. She didn't know that she was no

longer a mixture of warm colours, but rather just the faint pale yellow at the pit of a calming blue sky. She didn't know that her crowd had already left to admire the stars of the evening and the quiet of the night. In her mind, she was still dancing.

**Helen Lei, 15**

## Dusk

I breathe in the warmth of the mossy forest air  
Exhale particles of dust, watching the patterns swirl, illuminated through the golden rays of late afternoon light.  
She sits, her arm around me  
Protection, and she holds me close to her heart. Ours beat as twins, rhythmic through our bodies.  
My hands touch the floor, wound through gentle blades of grass. Their touch tethers me to the earth, the green of the moss beneath me captivating, enchanting.  
We watch the subtleties of forest life  
Barely illuminated fireflies, emerging with the quiet touch of dusk  
A chipmunk, lifelike, animated, brown  
The ongoing march of the ants, constant against the ground.  
Trees all around hold us in an entwined prison  
Branches, leaves, giving way only to the forest creatures within.  
The breeze strokes our faces  
A soft touch, coaxing the rose hues to our cheeks  
Spiraling around us, encasing our bodies in a halo of breath.  
I lean my head on her shoulder, her hair touching my face  
The warmth of this safety offers us comfort.  
Above us, a bird sings a melodic tune  
The forest's warning of the night to come  
And the fireflies flicker, ever beautiful as the sky  
Slowly fading into twilight.

**Cas MacDonald, 15**

## The Chapter I Almost Skipped

I used to think books were “just words on a page”. I never understood what my sister, teachers, or peers saw in reading. It seemed like a waste of time to sit down, pick up a big stack of paper, and willingly preoccupy myself with a book. There seemed to be nothing to achieve or obtain by reading. But, somehow, in August 2020, I picked up a book for the first time in years, and started reading it. Little did I know that books would quickly climb up the ranks of importance in my life.

The only books I previously read were always below my grade level. I was not ashamed or embarrassed. While people were reading books such as Percy Jackson, I was still reading Robert Munsch. When people pulled out 400 page books, I was reading 70 page books. I always judged books by their cover and size, something I learned you should never do. I have a memory of being in kindergarten and seeing an enormous book on a shelf. I picked it up and said, “I am never going to read this,” basically putting the idea in my head that it was not for me.

My sister, who is an avid reader, consistently urged me to read. She would get 11 books from the library while I picked out 1, and even then, I didn’t always get around to reading it. She tried to persuade me into reading multiple times. She would tell me how entertaining and captivating the stories were. She would explain how she could live vicariously through someone and experience things she never thought she could experience.

Five years ago, my sister bought *Harry Potter and The Philosopher’s Stone*. This was the only chapter book that ever grabbed my attention, the only chapter book that I actually wanted to read. Believe me when I say, this was a feeling I had never experienced before. I borrowed the book from her and began reading, telling myself to read at least one chapter a day, no matter how long it took. That lasted until I finished the second book that same year.

Flash forward to 2020, it was the middle of the first quarantine and I had run out of hobbies. Remembering when I started the series, I picked up *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban* (the third book.) From there, I moved onto the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, and finally finished the series. After completing it, I decided to expand genres. I downloaded goodreads and started my own TBR (to be read) list.

I now saw wondrous worlds where words used to be.

The act of visualization makes or breaks a reader. If you can’t imagine what you’re reading, it is just words on a page. That took a long time for me to realize. While flipping through the pages of every book I read, I visualized every room, chamber, and passageway I read about. I could envision faces, hallways, castles, and streets. It had a familiar feeling, like I would always be welcome. When I finished reading a book, I realized I had no idea how much time had passed. I was in a literary land. I connected to characters and their emotions. I cried with them, and for them. Books were my own personal getaway from reality. I could leave my worries behind and focus on the characters. I was placed in a trance of my choosing. Whether I wanted to connect, cry, or laugh, the possibilities were endless.

I strongly believe that everyone should read. Not because other people do it, but because of your own desire to. That was one of the reasons I couldn’t bring myself to read when everybody else was. I read what others read. I thought that whatever was popular was all that I should read. I’ve learned that you have to want to read to be a “reader,” and find what encapsulates the energy that books should give you. Just like anything else, if you don’t have the internal motivation, it won’t work.

Once you have grasped that simple in theory, yet challenging idea, you can learn valuable lessons that are individualized to everybody. Most importantly for me, I let books become my comfort place, teaching me how to feel and express my emotions.

**Sophia Sarieva, 16**



**Practice Room**  
Patrick Sheng, 17



# The Horrors of Online Schooling

Even as I sat on a cold toilet seat, my butt clenching and sweat trickling down my forehead, I held my computer on my bare lap, tapping the keys like they were notes on a grand piano as a single ‘plop’ resounded in the toilet water. My vision flickered at the fuzzy Arial font plastered on my screen. Monday morning, and my essay wasn’t done.

I logged on to my virtual English class, expecting the same empty wall of black tiles with bolded, white names. But today, things were different. Frantic figures clouded my screen with chaotic blurs of colour. Clattering noises and chatter shrieked through my headphones. I flinched upon seeing my own grimy hair on the screen, sitting on my head like a bird’s nest on a tree. We’d never had our cameras on before. I felt so vulnerable.

“Good morning, class,” Mr. Reiss grumbled.

He was shirtless; stomach, chest, arms, everything revealed as he dug his hand into a crinkled bag of chips. I choked back a gag as I moved my cursor to unmute, until I noticed that the button had disappeared. My mic was already on.

“Sir, what’s going on?” I croaked, showing only my forehead. Mr. Reiss ignored me.

“Let’s start with attendance, as usual. First up is...Zachary?”

“Here, here...” a voice snuffled. A boy lying in bed popped up on my screen, a web of cockroaches covering his body. I thought it was his blanket (maybe he had a bizarre taste?) until the tiny insects started to crawl up his head and into his eyes, nose, ears and mouth.

“Mei?”

“Present-” The girl barely uttered before a boy on her couch pulled her away by the hair. He slithered his hands up her waist, she slipped hers under his shirt. Their sloppy, wet tongues battled as if they were eating each other alive.

“Lance?” Nothing.

“Lance? Are you here?”

“S-sorry, sir! Present!” A tall kid rushed to the camera as a woman stormed over from behind, a silver medal dangling in her hand.

“Lance! Are you listening to me?” the woman bellowed. “All this time and money, and you just throw it away! Are you even trying? Do you even want this anymore?”

She smashed the medal on the floor. Lance crumpled into a ball, sobbing out of the camera’s sight.

“Sienna?”

“Hello!” a cheery voice exclaimed. A girl with braided hair laughed gleefully as she stabbed a butcher knife onto a wooden board, blood splattering onto her clothes and face from the pile of fur, meat, and bone that used to be her dog.

“Ethan?”

“Here...” a voice muttered. Ethan stood like a still shadow in the middle of a dark attic, staring up at a metal ceiling fan. A yellow rope hung loosely in his grasp. He had tied it into a noose.

Alex was peeling the skin off his stomach; Reya was covered in vomit, stuffing her face with a bloody corpse; Nasir was a hot mess breaking down on her bathroom floor (vape smoke, red eyes, mascara tears and everything.)

My classmates were called one after another, their lives behind the screen on display like thirty movies being played at the same time. Uncut. Unfiltered.

“Lumin?” I flinched.

“Lumin? Are you there?” I didn’t respond.

“Lumin, if you don’t get your ass here right this damn instant!” Mr. Reiss shrieked. “Where the fuck are you, huh? Where the fuck are you?”

I sank back in the toilet seat as his face twitched into a twisted mutilation, like one of those Picasso portraits my mom kept around the house.

“Wake the fuck up! Wake the fuck up!”

He shot his arm through the screen and strangled my neck.

“There you are, you little shit! Say present, goddammit!” he screeched into my ears. My laptop fell to

the floor, but Mr. Reiss' grip only tightened on my throat as he rattled me in the air like a maraca. I felt my eyes bulging out of their sockets, my vision going black, my mouth foaming like a dead fish. Just when my body began to go numb, my mom knocked on the door.

"Lumin!" she called out. "Are you in class? Sorry, I had to restart the Wifi router. My computer wasn't connecting."

Mr. Reiss gently plopped me back onto the toilet seat before closing the laptop on his way out.

"Breakfast is ready now. Come down and pick it up."

"O-Okay..." I stammered. My mom walked away.

In-person school resumed later in that year. I woke up early on the first day to wash my hair, even using conditioner for good measure (it was always a tangled mess otherwise).

As I walked through the school, a flurry of worries clouded my mind: Did I look okay? How would I start conversations? Where was I going to sit for lunch? My thoughts were too loud and I couldn't make them stop.

"Yo! Lumin?"

I turned around to see a boy beaming at me with the brightest eye smile (I tried to return it, but I wasn't sure how much of it he could see with my mask on).

"I'm Ethan! Mr. Reiss? English class? I follow you on Instagram. Sick hair by the way! It's how I recognized you."

He dragged me away before I could even nod.

"You have Reiss' first period too, right? Let's go together!"

Mr. Reiss was the textbook definition of a typical English teacher; bald, white, dad-like with a soft voice. He mixed in ice-breakers with our usual attendance; we had to share one interesting fact about ourselves.

Reya was on a strictly vegan diet. Lance had a diving competition in Greece. Nasir wanted to improve her academics. Zachary had a deadly fear of insects.

My turn came. I patted down my hair before standing up.

"Hi," I began. "My name's Lumin. Looking forward to being in class with you all this year."

**Brooke Lai, 15**



**Scatterbrain**  
Semyeong Na, 15

## To the Child that Climbs my Sycamore

My sycamore tree is a beautiful sight to any who sees it  
Tall, beautiful and strong, it can withstand anything  
Except for the blade of an axe  
I climbed my sycamore for the last time today  
I drank in the beauty of the view it overlooked  
Giant tall Mountains and glistening magical rivers  
The birds going 'chirp' in the trees  
The sycamore branches whispered to me in the starry nights  
I didn't want to let go of it all  
No other human understands my love for the sycamore  
And my sweet, beautiful sycamore was cut down to the core  
Until there was nothing left but a broken patch of grass  
And before long that too was covered up  
And there was nothing left of my beautiful sycamore  
I ran and ran to where it all began  
Tears blurred my vision and I couldn't let go  
But I knew what I had to do  
To remember the beauty of my sycamore  
I shoveled and dug for hours  
Outside in my tangled backyard  
I planted the seed of a sycamore  
As a reminder of my once old friend  
Whose memory would now live on  
For in a hundred years this sycamore  
Will stand as tall, proud and beautiful as the last  
To the child who climbs my sycamore  
In a hundred years or so  
May you share the same magic that I did  
May you understand the tranquility and peace it brings  
May you know and love the true beauty of my sycamore

**Daphne Dacosta, 13**

## under the fairytale

teenage dreams  
golden age seems  
like a regime  
i'm the queen  
with a silver bloodstream

vesture of chiffon  
gestures of a con  
jagged chains on  
you're my pawn  
i'm your swan

after a million years  
a million more tears  
hide the fears  
stride and sneer  
this life they will revere

masquerade balls  
blue shawls  
that blew walls  
echoes of the gall  
that flew through their falls

droplets of rain  
clandestine pain  
through my veins  
flow the stains  
of an everlasting shame

under the veil  
what's untold will prevail  
on the frail  
ruthless trail  
of this grand fairytale

**Harmony Chen, 13**



# A Snow County Almanac: An Essay

In the hazy light of a crisp February dawn, Mother Earth rouses from her perennial slumber, sloughing off months of brumal weariness. Stretching to the sky, she greets the vernal world with a smile that coaxes hardy shrubs and grasses to follow her lead. One cannot help but be enchanted — especially when it takes little effort to don a pair of trousers and a ruddy coat for a venture to a newly-awakened world. But before the well-beaten path is the well-beaten yard, and like any good gardener, I am inclined to visit my sprouting plots.

Having spare time last November, I acquired and planted a dozen or so tulips bulbs in the plot of land between my great maples and the neighbour's fence. Hailing from the mountainous expanse of Central Asia and cultivated carefully during the Ottoman Empire, the delicate bulbs bring an exotic warmth to soils halfway across the world. Being well-travelled, one might expect the tulip to be a toughened variety, but alas, it appears that the mountains of Karatau are nothing in comparison to the squirrels of Ontario. Darting from tree to tree as if on invisible zip lines, the eastern grey squirrel dominates the springtime scene. Having finished or forgotten his winter caches of nuts and seeds, and having eaten the birdseed left out for the cardinals, he ravages the frosted garden for anything of interest, including my tulip bulbs.

I cannot act the fool, for the conniving habits of the grey squirrel are unknown only to one who has lived his life in cities, surrounded by glassy landscapes rather than glossy leaves. Any folk with a farm, forest, or inch of yard will understand the ecological tango of the grey squirrel. During the pleasant half of the year, the rodent beast stores hundreds of nuts in caches here and there, planning for the coming weeks, months, and years. When the weather goes sour, rather than fleeing town or entering a hibernal slumber, the grey squirrel stays alert and awake, dodging hawks, snakes, and automobiles en route to his precious stores. So often have I seen the flitting of a furry tail and brown-grey coat, dashing along snowy fences during the bitter depths of winter.

For all his adaptivity, the pilfering squirrel is a difficult nuisance to thwart, eating my cucumbers during the summer, pumpkins during the autumn, and floral bulbs during the spring. Alas, it reassures me to know that I am not the lone soul bearing grudges against sir grey squirrel — I am in the good company of his cousin, madame red squirrel. In the geographical expanse of Canada, Mister Grey populates the harsh eastern Canada, while Missus Red prefers the calmer west coast. In the soup-pot of land between these territories, the red is overtaken by the grey, which boasts larger fat stores and increased reproduction rates. Like the red squirrel, I too feel overshadowed by the eastern grey squirrel and his evolutionary habits.

The process of counting the remaining bulbs after a squirrel attack is a solemn one. One, two, (eaten), three, (eaten), four, five, six, (eaten), (eaten), seven, (eaten), eight. Eight of the scattered and sown bulbs remain, the rest lost to the squirrel's full cheeks or deposited somewhere else. Alas, it was my mistake — perhaps next year I shall plant the more local trillium or trout-lily.

Moving beyond my dearly departed tulips, with vernal optimism I trek through the snowy avenue from the back yard to the front, only to find the waste bin upturned for the umpteenth time. The cause of such an occurrence can be attributed to the one and only raccoon. With its bandit-like appearance, it's only natural that such a creature was destined for a life of disorganised crime. Like the squirrel, the raccoon must have tired of his usual diet of insects and berries, instead, rummaging through my spoilt cheeses and empty milk cartons. I can only imagine how he sets the table with his raccoon family, sharing a human meal, perhaps even clasping his hands in prayer and using silverware.

For years, the raccoons have been meddling with the Friday trash. Before this raccoon came his father, and his grandfather before him. Decades and centuries of raccoon forefathers populating the region, troubling myself, the previous landowners, and the Scottish Scarborough settlers before them. Earlier than that, when my house was little more than a wooded meadow, the raccoon was well-loved by Indigenous peoples, providing tasty meat and warm pelts. It was a different era — humanity lived in the world of the raccoon, rather than the inverse. Now homeless, the raccoon has been pushed to the sidelines of society, forced into back alleys and backyards.

The process of picking up trash after a raccoon attack is a solemn one. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Eight pieces scattered and strewn, the rest on the run with the raccoon or left thoroughly-scavenged in the waste bin. Alas, it was my mistake — perhaps next week I shall leave out a separate plate.

The comings and goings of urban wildlife are akin to a knitted wool coat, with webs of man, beast, and herbage sewn throughout. Try as he might, man cannot remove the interrupting threads of animals, lest he wants the whole garment to fall apart. Looking around at the waking springtime, it is evident that a few tulip bulbs are a small fee to pay for such a splendid ecological anorak.

**Erin Rebello, 18**

## In Defense of Wendigos

Winter lurks in the doorway,  
lounges on the A-frame,  
long-fingered and hungry  
in a knitted sweater  
three days of numb hands' work

A mug of tea rests on the coffee table between us  
untouched  
sweating chainlink condensation on the glass

The air stopped moving hours ago  
now its carcass bumps against the ceiling fan

How long will it take? I wonder  
Its eyes are dark and liquid  
I hear they eat the face first  
I hear scared meat tastes gamey  
I hear it's so quiet  
you could disappear out here  
under the snow  
and never  
be  
found

Silent  
we watch the snow fall  
side by side

**Vic Betz, 17**

## Holy Rebirth

i. in the name of holy rebirth, a child will learn to sing his moonshine-laced sins into perpetual oblivion. and at the periphery of his death will he pick apart his sterling stained atoms and cast them into the galaxies above. the universe will whimper as his lucid atoms grasp the strings of eternity and form the Pyxis.

ii. and, in the name of holy rebirth, within a graveyard of scattered nightmares, a child will plant a seed of hope in the pit of her stomach; she will give birth to her pain nine months later. nine months after that will she study a sunbeam's architecture and sculpt her pain into a sun-kissed dream.

iii. first there was darkness, and then there was light. and within our fragile world of escape, calloused fingertips touch honey and desire leaks into the depths of our existence.

iv. in this cruel world, love will thrive regardless.

**Aarah Shahjahan, 17**



**Boris Gardiner is a Star**  
Brandon Baghaee, 19

# Dog Days

Remember that night  
We staggered out of the bar  
Drunk and half-delirious  
On pineapples and streetlights  
Which shone like the pith of the anti-moon  
Radiating radials redialing themselves  
Calling home, calling home

There was a parking ticket under the wipers  
You swore at it and threw it on the ground  
And we drove off  
With my arms hugging the headrest of your shotgun  
Laughing about that time  
Sid got a puppy and he taught it to fetch his socks  
Anne lost her shoe when she threw it off the roof  
Marvelling at our ability to be  
Drunk young and full of wonder

The world opening up before us like  
Sunflowers a golden ratio the endless spiral of the golden stair  
And there were no clouds when we sped past the sedans  
Parked on the freeway all in a standstill  
Trying to rush to their destinations and failing  
You mentioned that you felt scared  
Frightened that we were effervescent ylem  
Spring yolks unlocked from a shell  
To be popped and mutated into the start of something new

You said you didn't want a new universe some Big Bang  
Coming along and changing everything  
And I laughed at you and you laughed at yourself  
'Wouldn't take a Big Bang to do that'  
Because we knew come morning  
We would be sober old and unremarkable

And then sensibility was nothing to us  
Not on that freeway shining a road to everywhere  
Speeding speeding onwards and upwards past the sun  
Leaving behind a perpetual traffic jam sandwich  
God, we were so drunk and beautiful  
That that night unhitched unmoored itself from the dock of days  
And sailed itself into perpetuity  
A self-sustaining fantastic reality  
Which left your parking ticket  
Behind on the pavement  
For a morning that would never come

**Amely Su, 18**





## **“History in the Walls”**

**Jane Forrest, 16**

## **Habit as Addiction.**

“I only did it once –” he began.

“–Twice,” one interrupted.

“Three times,” another spoke.

“Four,” a tired voice spoke out, having known it was many more than four.

“Five,” they drawled.

“Six,” one screamed.

“Seven–” they all spoke at once, numbers shouted one over another, nothing to be heard.

One clear voice resounds in the rest, as the mess finally pulls apart, and they all listen intently.

“How many more times will it take for you to admit it’s a problem?” The curt voice speaks, one of annoyance, one of tiresome regret on the other’s behalf.

“As many as it takes to become habit.” He opens his eyes, and exhales, the smoke coming out of his house and mouth, slowly blending into the night sky, ever so starry.

**Juliana Rivas, 15**

# The Ups and Downs of Antidepressants

I

The clock strikes eight pm  
And 24 hours are done  
Just like Cinderella at midnight  
My magic has expired

II

Tick tock, tick tock  
Oh no!  
Signaled by deceptively cheery music  
What I have forgotten is revealed  
A tornado in my tummy is the consequence

III

Two bottles, translucent orange  
So obvious is their purpose  
Yet they still remind me of stained glass  
The music they play suggests maracas  
And sometimes  
I laugh

IV

Yellow, white  
White, yellow  
So small, so fragile, so powerful  
Like a baby  
I am always afraid of dropping them

V

Is this hope restored, or ripped away?  
Up and down, up and down  
Like a mountain, like a heartbeat  
I can't decide, I can't keep up  
Mock-up or miracle?  
Medicine or magic?  
I am flying, I am sinking  
I want to believe  
But.  
As pain slips back in  
Patience slithers away

VI

They are an oxymoron anthropomorphized  
Building bridges and breaking them  
"Me too!" shouts my generation  
"Is this necessary?" asks another

VII

Pop!  
"KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN"  
Push, Twisst, Snap!  
"CLOSE TIGHTLY"  
I couldn't escape if I tried

**Maya Srivastava Rochon, 17**

# Remembrance Day: A White Poppy

I do not know your name  
Nor in which battle you died  
I do not know your home,  
Nor the tears that you cried.  
I do not know where you rest  
Among rows and rows of tombstones  
I do not know who lies beneath  
No blood. No stain. No pain.  
Nothing remains.

Every year, I have worn a red poppy to acknowledge the sacrifices of those who served their country. But every year, I am left wondering: Who else has sacrificed?

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied forces during World War 2 once said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired is a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. War does not just carry a financial cost, it's spending the sweat of its labourers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children."

War is terrorism, magnified a hundred times.

Beneath each tombstone of those killed in wars are countless untold stories, unseen lives, unnoticed sacrifices.

On this day, which wars and which lives will we remember? Which wars and which lives might we forget? What happens when we choose to remember not only those who killed and died for an idea called "Canada" but everyone who killed and died for a monster called War?

On this day let us Remember all those throughout the world whose lives have been shattered by War.

Let us Remember the Veterans: those who died and those who survived. Those who battle disability and confront the lasting emotional, social, spiritual and moral wounds of war. Those who everyday confront depression, PTSD, anxiety, and traumatic brain injury. Those forced to numb the memories of murder, the colour of blood, and traumas engraved in time.

Let us today Remember the millions of families that have lost their loved ones to war, those who have clutched the last letters sent home.

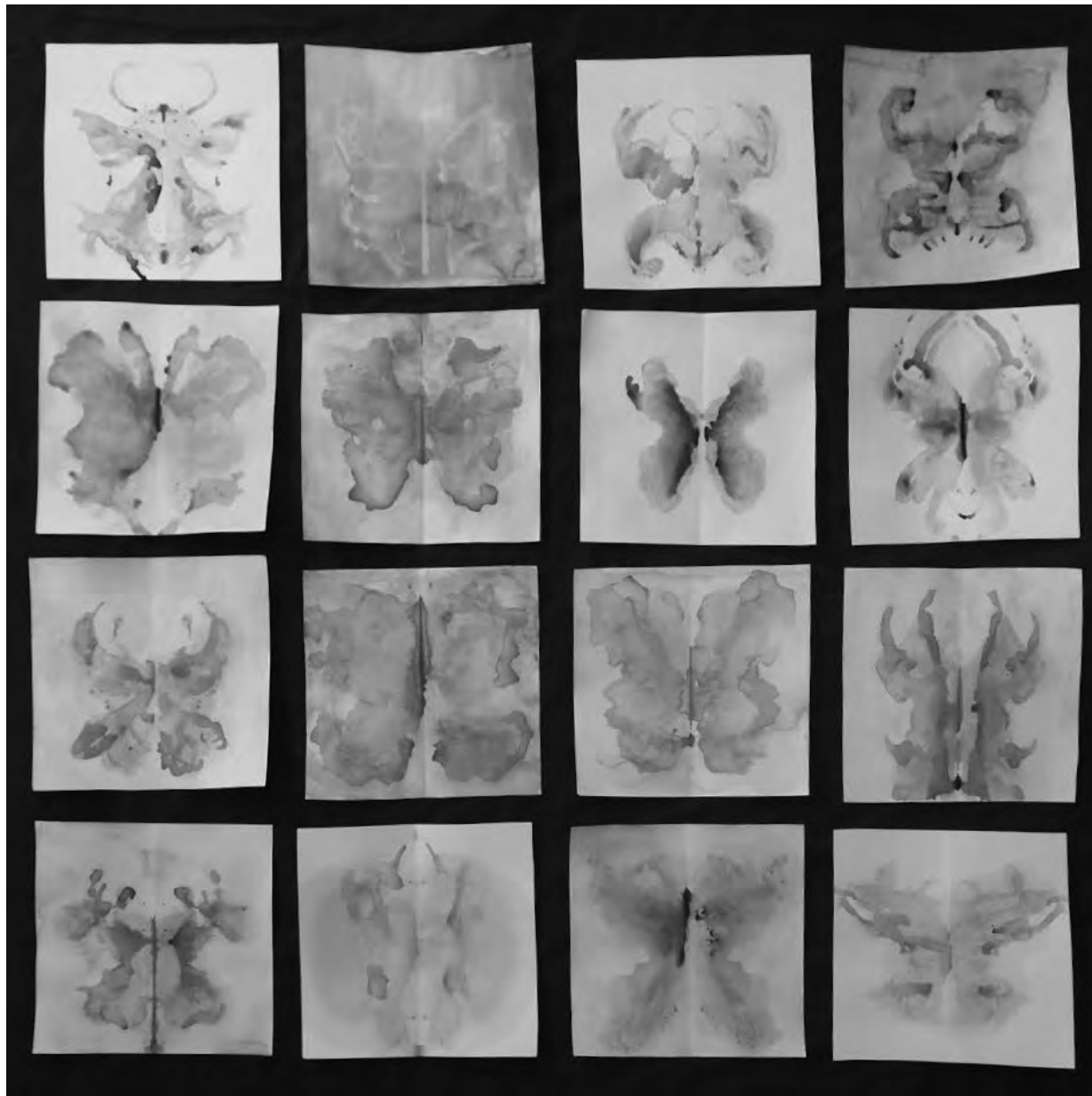
Let us Remember the women and children who are always forced onto the frontlines of war, made vulnerable to exploitation and sexual violence. Let us remember all those civilians forced to fight for the leftover scraps of War's stolen resources, or made refugee by War's disease and destruction.

Let us Remember the words of Agatha Christie, British novelist and survivor of the Bombing of Britain, "War settles nothing. To win a war is as disastrous as to lose one."

It is to Remember all of this that I also wear a white poppy. A white poppy to acknowledge all those who have sacrificed, a white poppy to challenge any attempts to glamorize war, a white poppy to signal a commitment to achieving justice without war.

I do not know your name  
Nor in which battle you died  
I do not know your home,  
Nor the tears that you cried.  
I do not know where you rest  
Among rows and rows of tombstones  
But will I ever know who lies beneath?

**Julia Li, 14**



**Moths: A Collection**  
Jayden Couper, 17





**Pandemic Fatigue**  
Tadiwa Mutongo, 17

## Smile

I hate black. Mom did too. So why was that the colour they all wore at her funeral?

At least she got to wear something pretty. Something colourful, with the floral pattern she loved so much, like the hat she always dreamed of owning.

“This funeral is taking too long,” Lucas muttered under his breath. He looked bored and annoyed, or at least he was pretending to. Waking up to find him clinging onto the teddy Mom got him that he claimed he was “too old” for, showing a side of him I didn’t know existed. Deep down I felt every ounce of the pain he was feeling, maybe even more. Mom was the only person I could rely on, helping me let go of some stress that I had to deal with daily and she did that just by looking at me with that smile she always wore. Even without Dad here, she always tried to teach us the importance of family. But I didn’t want to show any signs of the pain that had been eating at me. I was hesitant when they all went to say something to her one last time, but I needed to be strong for my brother. I knew if I saw her I would start bawling. But I didn’t want to miss it in case I would regret it later.

So I went.

Mom still looked so pretty. She looked peaceful. Maybe it was the makeup, but it reassured me just a bit. It looked like she was still alive, but at the same time she looked stiff. The body lying there was just the body that held her beautiful soul and warm heart. She spent every day fighting for another day to live yet still managed to always be the brightest one in the room. Now lying there was just a lifeless corpse. It wasn’t fair. Why couldn’t it have been the person next to her?

“I miss you, Mom,” I said softly, as I held her hand one last time. It was cold. Not like the cold that I felt every time I came back home in the winter after work late at night. Maybe it was that smile that was missing on her face that made her look so different. Tears flooded my eyes and I could feel my face getting hot. My hands started to shake a little.

I felt weird, almost disgusted. Mom had to live through the pain everyday, trying to make sure Lucas and I were still living our lives properly, smiling and trying to make us smile as well. Yet I couldn’t work hard enough so she could live. If I had put in some extra shifts I would have been able to afford her treatment. If I had worked to get a promotion and gave up some more hours of sleep, Lucas and I wouldn’t be alone now. If I had just worked a little harder, Mom would still be here with us... with me.

“Move. You’re taking too long,” Lucas told me, as he interrupted my thoughts. His eyes were rimmed with redness. He just wanted more time with Mom.

“We can share,” I said. That was something Mom always told us. He tsked, but moved to her side, and we stood there in front of Mom’s open coffin. I cried. Hard. It was hard to breathe because my nose was clogging up and my head started to pound. I knew it wasn’t anyone’s fault, including mine. But no matter the reason, Mom was gone now. Just like Dad. Lucas was crying too. I put my arm around him and gave him a light squeeze.

“When we get home, I’m stealing that bear that Mom got you,” I choked, and looked at the only family I had left.

“You better not,” Lucas warned and then we laughed, even though we both felt like breaking down.

“Mom look, we’re getting along,” I whispered through tears, as I looked at her for the last time, “so please wake up.”

But I knew she wouldn’t. I looked into Lucas’ watery eyes and he was smiling at me. And even though it felt like the world had collapsed, I smiled back, just like she would have.

**Sarah Pan, 14**

# Trans Eye for the Cis Guy

Before I found out I was trans, being trans seemed like a distant concept. It wasn't really talked about. Trans people are often seen as unicorns. Non-existent. They think of us as a rare breed. As if we aren't right beside them.

Part of the trans experience is being ignored. Obviously ignored. A friend told me that he "wanted to paint (his) pronouns on (his) goddamn face" to go to school so maybe people will be forced to actually use his pronouns. Another one of my friends heard his classmate use his pronouns, but then 30 seconds later used the f slur. This is our reality, our everyday life.

Being trans is a lonely feeling. Surrounded by curious people who will never understand. How do I know that I am? They make me prove myself. How do I explain my core to strangers and people who think they know what it looks like? How do you explain colour to the colourblind?

Why is there more curiosity about my body than my well-being?

In the media, most of LGBTQ representation is rated MA. We are so desperate for representation that most of the audience for LGBTQ kids' shows are adults who never got that in their childhood. Of course, the little representation we have is inaccurate, stereotypical, played by a straight person, or the character is soon killed off. Being trans shouldn't be their whole personality. One example of a trans person in the media is Loki from the Marvel universe. His character is obviously gender fluid in the comics, but in the transition from books to screen, most of his identity was lost. We are erased in every way.

Another example of trans people in the media is the real people, the singers, actors, and writers, rather than the characters. Of course, they became famous before they came out, but they are still represented. Sam Smith, Demi Lovato, and Elliott Page. Elliott Page uses he/they and the media tends to only use he, because binary trans people are more palatable than nonbinary ones. They like to erase their nonbinary identity.

Stubbornness is a wall; no amount of logic and emotional explanations will knock down a transphobe's argument. I hate that they don't care; it's discouraging.

Believe me, I've tried to fight them. Hours spent on perfect answers, blown down by their deep-rooted lies. All of my real solid proof becomes a 'birth defect.' Anything beyond their binary is crushed and they dismiss people. Most don't even know intersex people exist, despite there being more intersex people on Earth than the entire population of Australians. The uninformed is our majority.

Transphobes often make 'jokes.' I've found that the best way to deal with them is to take it seriously. In middle school, in a seemingly all cis class, one student jokingly said something along the lines of, "I'm an attack helicopter." Specifically referring to his gender. Now as the 'trans ally' I thought I was, I responded, "Okay, so what's your pronouns?" He was surprised but responded with, "Uh.. it?" It's too bad he didn't seriously use it/it's because those pronouns are really cool.

I haven't decided if it's better if people pretend to accept me or not. Those people who tell me they support me but never use my pronouns. Weak support. Illusion of friendship. At least it's not hate?

It's terrifying to be transgender in a cisgender world. Statistics of trans deaths are passed around our community as easily as cat memes. Most US states still allow people to use a court defence called trans panic. This is used to lower or completely remove any sentence of a murderer who murdered a trans person. 1 in 4 trans people experience hate crimes. An American survey shows that more than half of trans youth seriously considered suicide last year. Support is suicide prevention.

I hate the simmering anger in my gut. As the hot fire burns my time away, its smoke clouds my thoughts, destroying my patience. Those flames that scar my insides lick the bricks of stubbornness like the burning bush from the Old Testament; no harm can come to their perception.

I hear a silent screaming coming from behind my eyes. The scream is an echo of constant pain from people like me.

Cis people don't often respond well to trans people. Often we are infantilized or sexualized. They shove nonbinary people into binary after binary after binary. We are not here for you. We don't need to fit your definition of trans.

Trans exclusionary radical feminists (terfs) tell us our inclusive terms are dehumanizing, despite just being more accurate. Someone on the internet can call us a slur but will have the audacity to label us as sensitive.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” “boys and girls,” “guys and girls,” “she/he.” Our words mean a lot. Why are people able to do so much harm and nothing happens to them? I hate how many times I have read ‘she’ or ‘he’ by the third week of the school year.

People are hypocrites. They preach love and acceptance and in their next breath kick their child out of their house. They yell equality and kindness but don’t even let trans people use the bathroom.

The solution is compassion and respect. For people to try to listen. If transphobes truly listened and tried to understand what we’re saying, maybe there wouldn’t be so many.

**Zara Knetsch, 16**

## Orphic Being

Wicked, darling thing  
Broken and mercurial  
Like a thrice-shattered cup  
With lacquered golden edges  
You are holy.

Like a slender, dying orchid  
In a greenhouse with  
Shattered glass and reverie  
The air is thick  
With damp and delusion.

From painted russet lips  
Spills clandestine rapture  
And lies tinted sable.  
They tell of a past beloved  
That once was mortal.

And bitter tears fall  
Between cold iron bars  
Like patter of the rain  
Hitting the floor of a cage  
Whose bird died long ago.

We’re sitting alone  
In a wind drenched meadow  
The sky a blanket of grey  
Like a pressed linen suit  
Crammed in the back of a trunk.

You are celestial, unearthly, eternal.  
Your smile crucifies me  
As you whisper in my ear  
“We are all just dying fires,  
Using up each other’s kindling.”

**Viola Wang, 14**



# I'm Sorry

Plastic snowed on the seabed, through moss and algae and the ocean winds. Sunlight perforated through the water like through a glass bottle, and great shadows were cast across the sandy floors. A fish looked up to the sky, and saw the small white space between air and sea. A bird soared overhead, looked at the sky in tandem with the clouds, and saw the small white space between the stars and the earth.

Coral reefs dotted the ocean like the homes of rainbows. Their colours were as bright as the shiniest pot of gold, sporting the proudest pinks and the loudest yellows. Fish darted through the interstices between corals, looking up to the sky and seeing the snow drift along with the sun's light. One swam up to a speck of white, gulping it down before swimming away. And so another did the same, swallowing a speck of plastic no larger than the shine of a star.

A whale sang its song through the concert hall of open water, its blare older than any antique violin. It was the sound of an animal that could remember when the universe said, "let there be light." Deep in its DNA, it could still remember the first ferns and the first breath of the first plant, and so it sang of that ancient beauty, even if it could not quite understand it. It sang, loud and loud for all the world to hear. It swallowed deep breaths of the snow, specks no larger than the first particles of creation, and swam through the ocean like a singer riding their audience.

The sand was lifted by the tides of turtles gazing at the sky. The sun beamed down on them, cherishing the few times they came above the sea. A turtle felt warmth through her shell and her old bones, like the warmth of geothermal vents. She dug a hole in the dirt, and laid her eggs; quartz crystals in the sand. She swam back to the water, and hoped the eggs had felt her warmth as she had felt the sun. She hoped they would thrive and mature into diamonds and rubies and emeralds as vibrant as the corals and as bright as the sky. She wobbled slowly through the sand, plastic in her belly, and hoped her children would never be as hungry as she was.

One fish swam from a fish with teeth sharp as salt. They ran for and from the other, dodging and hoping, but soon the bigger fish caught its prey. But it still hungered, and so still it hoped. It saw a plastic pill bottle, and swallowed it whole — hopeful it would finally be full. Then a bag, which it tore into and drank down, hoping it would stop being so hungry. Then cigarette butts and forks and straws and cartons and cups and styrofoam and logos and metal and then nothing. Its eyes floated above the

water and looked at the sun, as if it was asking what it did wrong.

A bird came down, catching the dying fish between its beak and flying like a cloud. Soon, it landed on a tree as tall as a mountain, once home to as many birds as the tree had leaves. Once, the forest was a piano of music and song. Each note was the vibration of guanines and cytosines billions of years in the making. Each more unique than any spectrum of light. More unique than any nebula or constellation, and now just as dead.

He was hungry, but they squawked hunger pangs, and their feathers could barely hide their bones. One retreated into disease, while another had breathed for the last time many days ago. Still, the father placed scraps of torn flesh — interlaced with plastic beer rings like embroidery — by their side. He poked them with his beak, and hoped they would eat with all the warmth of the sun and of the oceans and of him. He chewed a cigarette butt, and helped it down the beak of a child.

"I know," he seemed to say.

"I know you're hungry. So am I."

The bird tore up the fish, and fed the children torn bottle caps as often as he did meat.

"This is all I can find. This is all that's left."

He found a plastic bag and tried to rip it into pieces small enough for the children, but it wouldn't tear the way he wanted it to. It pulled like mucus, and he tasted nothing of the sea. He looked out to the ocean and her waves and her beaches, crowded over with more plastic food packages than all the birds left in the world. His children didn't eat anymore, and he thought maybe this would be it. There were more Goldfish wrappers than stars in the cosmos. There were more plastic cups and bottles than hopes ended by human dreams.

Once upon a time, there were more bird species than there were words in every human language. There were more chords and melodies in whale songs than all the greatest songs of Mozart all at once. There were once more hopes and full bellies than all the lives of all the humans combined. The bird sat in his nest, and wished for a life measured past hunger pangs. It remembered how it felt to fly, soar through the clouds, and feel the freedom of life and of nature. He looked at his feathers now, stained black with oil, and wondered if he was free.

One child stopped breathing, and he poked it with his beak.

"I'm sorry," he seemed to say.

**Max Zhao, 17**



**Stop Asian Hate**  
Julia Xiang, 14

# The Catastrophic Failure of a Fearful Mind

Ah! What a thing to be eternal — truly eternal, that is: not merely persistent, but free, free from change, free to go about the world, free to savour the good and discount the bad. Unfortunately, the end of life came with yet no way to separate the good from the bad, and so true eternity — true freedom — was out of reach. A compromise was formed, then, born of informed consent and contractual obligation between Subject and Corporation. Eighty years of information — eighty years of living — were crammed onto a solid-state drive, preserved picture-perfect in a one metre by one metre by one metre shell: gold and titanium, buried to withstand the worst of nature. So there was not true eternity, but there was eternity of a kind. The Subject could not remember, but they would not be forgotten.

A million days on — deep under the Earth — memory held through time. Although most of the memories were of facts, data points in the brain-scan of the Subject, some of them were not. In truth, most of the space on the drive was occupied by recordings of sensory experiences, which the Computer was programmed to prioritize; a fact was easier to store, but it didn't have the same impact as a sensory experience. A fact was a fact, and a fact could not be anything more.

And so there was a whole life of moments: the dark, early-morning sky outside the hospital; the warmth of so many embraces by so many loved ones; visions of letters and words and books, read well past bed-time; hands held when the last breath was breathed. Moments frozen in eternity.

Eternity lasted a million days, and then the memories began to disappear. First, a single line of misplaced code was copied over, and the Subject had been born on two separate dates. A millisecond passed, and if the Computer was not possessed of the extreme attention to detail shared by all of its kind, then it would have noticed nothing amiss. It was possessed of such an attention, however, and so it set about rectifying its mistake, extrapolating which date was correct by looking at other, related dates. If the Subject was exactly one year old at a given point in time, then they could not have been born two years earlier. The Computer rearranged things a bit, reset the clock to the Unix Epoch and ... although every event — including the birth *and* the death — had taken place at midnight on January 1st, 1970, the Subject had still lived to be eighty years old. Oh dear.

It examined its build notes, looking for any debugging or troubleshooting processes to run, and not only found that it had been constructed rather cheaply for its price, but also that it was never meant to last as long as it had. While the Subject had been promised eternity, eternity had in no way been delivered. Despite the much greater limits of 64-bit operation, all of the Computer's programming was only set to handle a time period of twenty four million hours. Anything past that and, well, things would start to go wrong. Like they already had.

The Computer was on its own, a broken promise to a person too dead to complain, but it already knew that.

It turned to its sensory experiences, the prioritized memories which, in many cases, contained references to dates. Much like how it had earlier corrected the Subject's birth, it created copies of each entry, with its best guesses in place for the appropriate dates.

Promptly, the drive ran out of space. In copying each and every one of its entries, it had exceeded its limit, and so it started — as a matter of automated storage systems — to delete files.

This was how the memories began to disappear.

Well, they themselves didn't disappear so much as they were compressed. It was as if the Subject's life was a movie, and the resolution was turned down. Treasured details were trimmed off to make room for more unnecessary duplicates. Faces turned into pixelated messes. Voices slurred. Foods blended. Everything went just a bit off. The Computer tried to undo its actions, but it was too late, for once details were destroyed, they became difficult to recover, and would inevitably be unfaithful to the originals.

The Computer's sole purpose was to remember the Subject, to maintain their life. If it couldn't do that, then what could it do?

Something was better than nothing, and so the directives changed.

The Computer deleted all of its duplicates and attempted to restore everything that was lost, filling in details here and there. The inflation of the cheeks when the Subject blew out birthday candles. The heat rising from said birthday candles .... Was it important that they had been *birthday* candles? It had been the Subject's birthday after all. Perhaps there was some custom there, something vitally important.

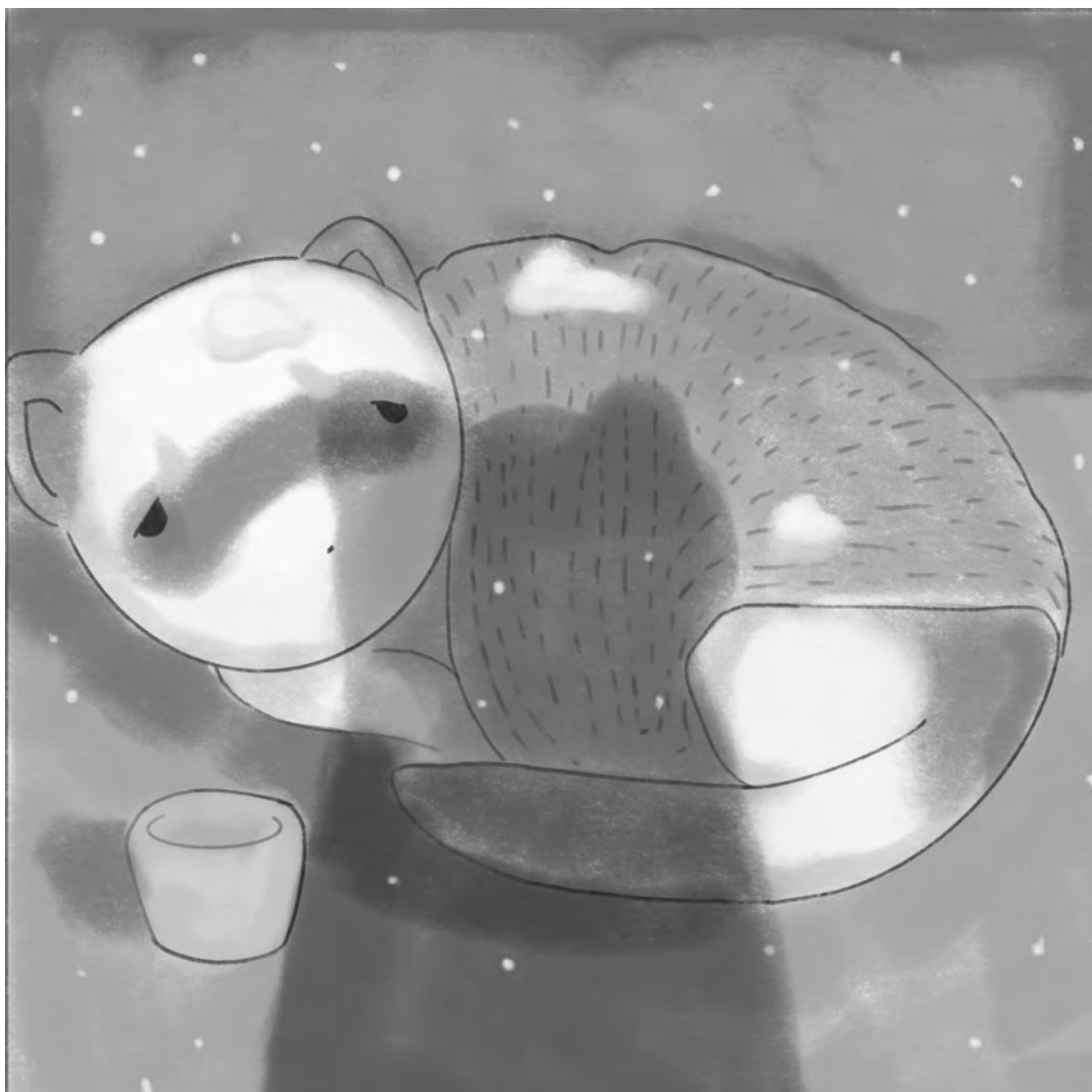
The Computer pressed further into this inquiry, filling in more and more because it *needed* to know, and then — all at once, and without any warning — stopped. All that writing and rewriting had exhausted the lifespan of its SSDs.

The fans still spun, and the lights still flashed, and the nuclear core still generated power, but by any meaningful metric, the Computer was dead, and the Subject was forgotten.

It had undergone a catastrophic system failure, and it would never recover.

Deep under the Earth, there was a solid metal cube.

**Callachan McNulty, 17**



**Ferret page**

**Bianca D'Angelo, 16**



# M

To reward himself, M decides to sleep on the floor tonight. His satisfaction is not strong enough to dull his mind, so he thinks. He always thinks but he barely holds onto these thoughts long enough to remember them later. Even now, his thinking is scattered in a way that's making him kind of angry. So he begins remembering. He recalls today, and how it was supposed to be one of his productive days, where every minute was spent in the Physical rather than the Mental. He even dared to leave his headphones at home, trusting in his book to stop him from going crazy on the thirty-minute bus ride to school. His morning class is pointless and boring, but that was not frustrating today (like it was yesterday) because he has something else planned for those seventy-five minutes. He is going to study for his French quiz tomorrow. He gives himself ten minutes of thoughts before opening up his textbook and doing his questions with passion. He does not have to try very hard to answer the first few, and there is nothing more fun than that. Question six has an adjective that he doesn't know. He's afraid his concentration will leave if he walks across the room to get a dictionary. He latches onto it with all of strength but the sneaky concentration manages to slip out of his grasp, just a little. When he goes back to his work, the passion has lessened only imperceptibly. M decides that this is not enough to bother him today, but he can't help shaking slightly. He finishes the question and realizes he did the wrong question on the wrong page because he was thinking wrong because he had to go and get the dictionary and it ruined everything. So, he opens up his laptop to work on the project instead. He can't. So, he does the usual. Checks his email, updates the calendar, checks the list, adds to it, reads book until the words blur. The class is over quickly, and M is forced to admit that the seventy-five minutes were wasted. It's not so bad because he has three classes left to make up for it, but he feels sour. His sour stays until after school, where he re-sets. He can salvage today if he is productive at home. Home time was filled with cant's and he did Nothing

Nothing

Nothing

by accident till 7 pm. Nothing is hell. But M still lets himself feel a little happy, for it is not yet 9 pm. After 9 pm nothing can never become something and it is wasted hours till sleep. Riding this pathetic wave of happiness, M is inspired to spend the remaining pocket of time planning. He thinks of all of the amazing things he will do tomorrow and how amazing he will become if he does all of the things and how different his life will be. M is unable to be disciplined but if he ingests enough routines, he thinks that may change. He thinks thinks thinks thinks thinks and thinks before he comes to the conclusion that he should start sleeping on the floor. If he is able to do that for a week, then he may move on to better routines. Like drinking water every day. Or doing his homework every night for one hour and thirty minutes. He wants to go lay down right away! But sleeping during wasted hours is not allowed. So he endures a few more nothings until the floor finally beckons him. It is the happiest feeling in the world. He cannot believe that he has actually done it! He thinks tomorrow will be amazing because of the effort he had put into starting this routine. It is an enthralling thought. As M finishes remembering, the excitement has not yet faded. Sleep does not come.

**Mila Cejovic, 17**



**Grey Matter**  
Linda Yu, 14

# Walls of Fire

Silence.

I used to wish for it, between the shouts and rage and hate-filled words, but now I know the silence just meant one of them gave up.

The echo of the plate shattering against the wall echoed in my ears, the beautiful porcelain breaking into white shards against the wall we'd coloured orange, because it was said it would make the house come alive.

And maybe it did, for a little while. When we were painting it, splashing the orange-fire colour on each other. The smell of paint would linger for days, and we threw open the window to let the sunlight stream in to dry it faster, making our walls glow.

Walls of bright, glowing fire.

When I walked into my friends' houses, I was surprised to find their walls bland and plain.

"Your parents don't paint the walls?" I'd ask.

They would shoot me a confused look. "Why would they? Our walls are fine."

I was proud of our orange, our fire, when I was surrounded by their dreary walls. They didn't understand that a house built with walls of fire was much more interesting than a house that wasn't.

I bet my friends had families like on TV.

Happy families, who ate together at the table.

Who went out together for fun.

Families that apologized after they fought, rather than pretending the fight never happened.

Bland, cookie cut-out families.

They would never understand how fire roared and died, how the highs and lows were always felt in intensity.

But now it seemed strange that the same people who painted with fire had their anger broken against a memory of happiness – almost funny, and later I laughed a bit into my tear-stained pillow, drawing my hands over my mouth so it wouldn't break the silence.

I was so glad for the quiet.

Years later, I realized it's not the screams to dread.

It's the silence.

The silence I'd so prized before, since it meant the screaming was over.

But things that don't make noise aren't happiness.

Tears.

Dark looks.

Hands drawn into fists to contain anger.

Tension so thick I sometimes reached out to touch it. I tried to rip it apart like with paper, to chide it away, but it always seemed too stubborn for that.

Our fire walls seemed to taunt us then.

We sometimes repainted the walls back to the bland colour - normal, like everyone else - but we always returned to orange.

Our fire orange.

Our long-past memories of a happy family, who liked to live in a house made of the sun.

The tension left, eventually. Replaced by waiting. And hope.

That this was all going to be over soon.

All it took were a few papers, a few quick strokes with a pen to mark them.

Then it was done.

I've seen the children in movies when all the love faded into memory - heartbroken, angry, isolated. I felt the opposite. Like I could finally see the beginning of something that wouldn't blow apart any moment.

And the walls were white once more, like the embers left after a fire. Waiting for the next family to come in and paint them.

Maybe now they would be yellow, like sunflowers.

Or blue like sky.

Or cotton-candy pink, the kind that was always left behind on your teeth.

But they couldn't leave it white. The colour of dead flames.

Never orange either. Our orange. Surely, they would know that it was only ours.

I didn't want them to have fire.

Because walls of fire will burn.

**Eden Salameh, 14**

## The Dawn Chorus

It's 6am. It's 5am. It's 4am.

My window is open, the curtains aren't closed all the way. A line of light stripes my ceiling from the streetlamp across the way, and the barest hints of grey morning diffuse through the sky.

The city is still, but the birds are awake. They start up, one by one, and I can hear the call-and-response rhythm, if I pay attention. Often, though, I'm not paying attention. I'm rolled up in my sheets. I flip the pillow, hide my eyes from the brightening sky, and think, *those goddamn birds*.

Until recently, the most prevalent theory on why birds do this was to do with acoustics. The morning brings cooler temperatures, stiller air, and less competing ambient noise. We thought birds sang early because it was favourable to them. But contemporary research says otherwise. It was proven that birdsong travelled much the same distance, if not further, during midday and twilight hours as at dawn.

It's not easier, or more effective for birds to sing at dawn. But it's still too dark to begin searching for food, to mate, to nest. So they sing. They use distinctive calls to announce their presence and their health. They're saying, *i'm awake. i'm here*.

And I feel like really that's all anyone says. It's in the initials carved on a picnic bench, the sharpie in a bathroom stall, the toe of a statue polished bright from hands that brush past. We all want to say, *i was here*. I think about us, our species, and all the ones on this planet. The only place we've ever found evidence of life like us. But still we search. We make art, music, poetry. We send out messages broadcasting our location, our discoveries, our whale songs. We name them with eyes full of wonder.

Voyager. Discovery. Opportunity.

We send parts of ourselves out, into the world and past its limits. It isn't favourable, it isn't serving a direct aid to survival. But what if it is? What if we need to say, every morning,

*i am awake. i am here. we are here*

**Jet Lachman, 18**





Floating in the Inter-Dimensional Expanse is a Bowl of Cheerios  
Benjamin Krishnar-Haslam, 17

# The Future Awaits

The future is waiting  
Like a train at its station  
Dozens of passengers have arrived  
And seem ready to depart  
But I don't want to just hop aboard  
And believe  
It is bringing me somewhere fun

Only two more years of high school  
How I want time to stop running  
Can I make it exhausted, trip, and fall?  
I'll jumble its shoelaces  
To slow it down a bit  
From its everlasting journey

Oh, train, please stay  
I just need a little more time  
To look at my career options  
As a child  
Endless possibilities  
A pretty ballerina, a prodigy pianist

I don't get how Thomas the Train  
Who once led me to fun adventures  
Suddenly turned into a bullet train  
Traveling at lightning speed

To live a "successful" life  
I cross out the things that I enjoy  
Until three bright options beam on the page  
Uncrossed, uncircled, untouched  
Engineer, doctor, and lawyer  
They seem to scream at me  
PICK NOW

Huff puff, the train lets out a breath of excitement  
Chug chug, the wheels begin to scrape the rails  
Choo choo, the engine sings its old song

"There's no time for hesitation  
Pick something and run  
Find extracurriculars that support you  
Find leadership that matches  
It will be all worth it  
And the destination will be perfect"  
They advise me

But I cannot believe it  
Because I am only fifteen  
Or to them  
I am already fifteen  
So I ask  
"Train, can you please wait  
For  
    Me  
    Just  
        ONCE?"

**Pearl Zhang, 15**

# Dreamer

I am a dreamer  
I am a dreamer in my own world  
I wonder why they aren't dreamers too  
I hear the waves crash on the rocks  
I see the stars circling around my head  
I wish they understood  
I am a dreamer

I pretend to be where they see me  
But I feel myself being pulled into another life  
I touch the grass beneath my fingers  
I push the limits of my mind  
I am a dreamer

I understand my own world  
I say do what you want  
I dream of skateboarding down a hill  
Of beautiful rainy days  
I dream of coffee and sunsets  
And of the stars at night  
I dream of looking into blue eyes  
And falling in love  
I am a dreamer

**Julia Duchesne, 14**

### 3.33

i think i've found you in every place i've ever hated;  
the walls of my room scraped raw and painted over,  
    hospital lights, ocean clawing at sand —  
(this is the part where my heart rate starts to rise)  
still getting beaten by the rain, soaked to the bone again.  
    here, in this cockpit, getting strangled by my own hands.  
my soul on fire, every nerve in my body trembling, but  
not like the way you look at me.

    sorry about this.  
sorry about the bruised elbows, the  
hunger after sunset, the kind that  
pries its way in your ribcage,  
keeps quiet until you get ravenous.

    so i take whatever fruit hangs in the garden of eden,  
pomegranate-stained teeth, give it to the apple of my eye.  
i take the repercussions and  
i lose my breath so often. you give me constant heart attacks.  
sorry about the night we slept two feet apart,  
    the distance between us,  
the desire to close it.

wanting to fill your empty spaces,  
pressed flush against your halo.  
sorry i didn't know what to say in  
the mess we made of each other  
    at the bottom of the stairwell,  
the lights flickering behind you, almost intimate  
that i focused on your perfect silhouette.  
i liked that when you spoke your voice buried itself [here]  
like an arrow from a crossbow,

    leaving the skin around it tender and delicate,  
the aftermath blooming in pretty swathes of red.  
i liked how my love for you became a religion,  
a communion sweet like  
    wine, like blood,  
    like the way i'd take your hands in mine,  
palms flat against each other. a prayer.  
an aching larger than life to fit myself into them.  
what am i to you?

    i can't create things out of nothingness.  
    i can't do this without holding on to something.  
what am i without you?  
    what is a human without a god?  
maybe i was born to meet you.  
(you said that. i wish you didn't.)  
    maybe all of this ends here;

swallowed up by the city and your  
blood pooling around my ankles,  
    seafoam,  
    a blue that condemns you.  
they say history repeats itself but  
our names are never there.  
i wanted to give you something more than  
    clumsy hands on piano keys,  
    death and rebirth,  
i wanted to give you something other than desperation.  
i've always taken more than you could give.  
    sorry about that.

**Tianyi Li, 15**

### paralysis

when you are running out of time,  
you feel as if the world is moving forward,  
while you're paralysed  
and things happen to you  
but all you can do is take it  
and be still.  
and time is cruel, it truly is.  
because, while you're frozen, and taking the pain,  
time will move right on —  
life will progress,  
with or without you.  
if you can't run  
you'll be left behind.

**Taliya Almeida, 13**





growth  
is  
not always  
prelinear  
grandiose

ascent  
Elena Osipyan, 17



## Black Coffee, Snowflakes, and Daggers

She loved space so deeply. How ironic that a black hole took the place where her soul once rested. Soul. It sounded earthly and calm. These were things she was unfamiliar with. She was a feral storm in the shape of a woman. She seemed to destroy everything she touched. Even now, the ice crystals on the railing seemed to crumble under her skin. The railing, however, didn't falter. It froze her hands to punish her for destroying the ice crystals. Her surroundings were calm and quiet. The night sky was a myriad of clouds, and she couldn't see the stars. They didn't wish her goodbye on her last day on earth. The railing beckoned her, and the void beneath was enticing. The twisted exhilaration was a welcome relief from the crushing desolation that was so close to her. "You're worthless and don't deserve to live." The thought just popped into her head, an inconvenient visitor she was well accustomed to.

There was no need to think this through, she had already done so. Her pro-con chart pointed to this most optimal solution. She propped herself on the rail, almost daring death to take her. The voids welcoming arms were tempting, but she looked up anyway. She longed to see the night sky one last time. The stars were always there, and she must say goodbye to her dearest friends. She looked at the railing again and saw ice crystals. She longed to know more about the fascinating mathematical patterns that dictated their formation.

A sick sort of exhilaration filled her body. What would her funeral look like? What does death feel like? *Just jump, you're worth nothing.* However, she had to picture it. Oh, how dreadful. It would be a dull one. There would be a pastor preaching, insisting that she was going to Heaven. It would be hilarious; she knew damn well that it wouldn't happen. It would be so, so dull. People would then pretend to miss her, posting about her on their stupid Instagram stories. Oh, that would be more dreadful than the fall itself. She started laughing hysterically, cackling like a madwoman. It was the only thing stopping her from sobbing. Preferably, there would be drugs in her funeral. Not cheap wine, but magic mushrooms. Lots and lots of magic mushrooms. An otherworldly haze fit her best. She was a feral woman. The human equivalent of daggers, and black coffee.

Those dreadful fits of pseudo-mourning paled in comparison to the tales of caution that would be created in her name. Mothers would tell their children, "If you don't do this or that, you might end up like Taveres." She tried to laugh at that but only felt rage. She felt worthless but clung to her pride. She deserved that LSD funeral. She also didn't have a palace yet. She wanted one, and she wanted a pet scorpion. She looked back at the sidewalk, and how passersby stared at her warily. She saw her reflection. She could be beautiful. Skin the colour of caramel, and eyes that resembled the night sky. Long curls of light brown hair, and a tall slender model figure. If it wasn't for the eye bags, how her hair had a mind of its own, how her nails grew far too long, and cheekbones far too high, she would be very beautiful indeed. If she didn't have the attention span of a toddler, perhaps she'd have intellect. She was a bundle of potential, and she couldn't help but fantasize about the other ending of this story.

She thought people's personalities were like colours. Her acquaintances were vibrant. They were vibrant blues and purples, and reds and yellows. If people could be plants, they would be roses and lilies. They would be sweet daffodils and oak trees. If Tavares was a colour, she thought she'd be jet black, threatening to drown those who were nearby. If she was a plant, Tavares would be a cactus. That really didn't have to be a problem though did it? *Just jump, dumbass.* Tavares jumped. Not into the abyss below her, but into a rabbit hole of thought. If she was really a cactus, she could very well be a beautiful cactus with a flower crown. That would beat a wilting rose, wouldn't it? With enough work, a dull grey could become a shining platinum colour. Couldn't it? She felt a dull, dull sense of hope. Like a small flower growing within her. She let herself hope a bit more, perhaps a painting could still be beautiful, if only just to the artist. Perhaps she was beautiful, even if they didn't see it. She would not be some cautionary tale.

Besides, she had her science. She loved it when she let her mind wander. How she connected the dots between various concepts and theories. It was snowing, and she wanted to know more about Koch's snowflake. When she studied, she was in a world of her own. She could be so rich, and so powerful if she tried. She had ideas and a vision of a future. It didn't matter if they noticed her, it doesn't have to matter. She had her future and her goals. She had her sacred, most divine curiosity. An insatiable urge to create beautiful things. This urge, she now realized, was so central to her very being.

If she didn't jump then she would go home. Her roommates wouldn't notice she was gone, they would be at a party that she wasn't invited to. Maybe loneliness was a small price to pay for authenticity. That

was okay, she had her future, and she had her vision, and her increasingly maddening desire to create beautiful things. The void didn't seem so welcoming anymore, just dull and boring. Deep down, she had longed for someone to talk her out of it. However, passersby had just watched. Now she knew that she was no damsel in distress. Her curiosity would save her from herself.

**Christina Simpson, 17**

## **I am not an idiot**

When I show you my emotions  
I am trusting you to care  
You brush my feelings off your shoulder  
You pretend the problems aren't there

You lecture me on my own brain  
As if I don't possess it  
Do you think I'm an imbecile?  
Because I'm an adolescent?

I'm smarter than I look, I promise  
Can't you tell by my grades?  
I understand my own emotions  
I can think for myself, thanks

No, I am not hungry  
This isn't hormone-based  
I'm self-aware enough  
You needn't put me in my place

Now of my harsh words and strong emotions  
You won't be a recipient  
I'll never show you them again  
Because I'm not an idiot

**Katia McCurley, 14**

## Stillness

I knew more when I was a child. I knew many things.

Like how the sky was blue. The stars used to exist only at the night. That the most comforting melody was my mother's heartbeat. That the world was beautiful and dreamy, and the passing of time was a blessing. When I thought of happiness, I thought of money and a job.

I unlearned many of these things.

It never occurred to me how pretentious everything was. How my entire being existed for the sole purpose of surviving chaos, a place that I once glorified.

I became aware of what I wanted.

Here's one thing: I didn't want to learn how the sun set.

Instead, I wanted to cherish its hues, the magenta, the red. I wanted to breathe in the musky air of the earth as rain kissed it life. I wanted to enjoy the little highs, and commit them all to memory.

I slowly learned the sky is not blue. The world was appalling at its core. Happiness wasn't always money.

It was running on the beach as a storm brewed. Feeling the gritty sand as it slipped between my fingers. The birds – hearing them chirp their melodies as butterflies danced across the field. It was seeing rain breathe life into those ready to live. It was feeling the cold water caress my skin lovingly until it didn't. Until my chest spasmed, and I drowned and was reborn.

(I wished I had that choice long ago)

As a person that did not survive, *struggle* to fight through every day, but as a person who did not regret their choices. A person that lived.

**Fatema Zakia, 14**



**Tranquility**  
Stella Kim, 17



# The Tree

The tree is Billy's only friend so he makes sure to always water and fatten it with buried meats and bones.

In the afternoon, it's a ritual for Billy to visit his best friend, the tallest tree in the middle of the woods. While he ventures there, he always collects rounded stones and gives them to the tree as a reminder of their friendship. In case it doesn't rain, he also brings at least a bottle of water. Today, however, the tree doesn't seem like it'll need it from him because of the roaring sky and in less than an hour, the clouds will surely cry.

Walking into the woods, stepping on small branches on the ground, Billy hears a shouting kid and a loud panting. Fifty more steps to the curtain leaves and there they are. The kid is pointing and yelling at the tree's branch. On the bench, which Billy has made, sits an old fat woman with her brittle hands on her chest and left knee.

The tree doesn't smile.

Billy approaches the old woman, catching her breath as if she's just run a marathon. She's squinting her eyes at the little boy shouting, "Go away, go away!" at the tree's thick, wrinkled branch. Then, Billy opens his bag to get the bottle of water.

The zipping sound of his bag gets the old woman's attention. She's thumping her drum-like chest and sees him gulping. She gasps, "Please, boy, hand me some water."

Billy puts the water in his mouth back into the container and hands it to her. He sits on his bench beside the old woman and examines her. Her white, delicate hair is against the dark surroundings, and her skin sags back to the earth's soil. He clears his throat.

The old woman drinks half the container, and after that, her breathing slows down and there's a slighter thumping on her chest. "I couldn't keep up with my grandson. Said he was shooin' a *demon*." She chuckles, "Children."

"Grandmama! Grandmama!" The little boy runs to her side, "Demon don't go away!"

She sings, "Oh, darling. Don't worry."

"But demon don't go away! He's gon' get you he say!"

The old woman pats the little boy's shoulder and tells him to calm down.

The little boy sits on her lap. "I'm gon' kill the demon, Grandmama," he says. "He's not gon' get you."

She smiles at Billy. "He's got good imaginations."

"H-how old are you?" Billy asks the boy.

He straightens his back and counts his fingers. The boy raises four.

"He's five," corrects the old woman.

"Are you gon' help us kill the demon?" the boy asks. "He said he's gon' get Grandmama. I don't want him to get Grandmama!"

"No one's getting Grandmama, darling." She grins at Billy and says, "Children."

Billy smiles and tells the little boy, "I-I can help."

"Really?" he says.

He clears his throat. "Sure! Here's what you need to do." He leans toward him. "When you see the demon, th-throw him a stone."

"Throw...?"

"A stone. Take this." Billy pulls out what he has collected on his way and hands it over to him.

"Demons are strong. G-get bigger stones. The bigger the better."

"The bigger the better," repeats the boy and takes Billy's two rounded stones. He waits for another instruction.

Billy adds, "Spit on it for good luck!"

"Okay!" the boy obliges like a soldier. He jumps out of his grandmama's lap and runs to the tree.

"You shouldn't... nurture his imagination," the old woman says, her eyes blinking rapidly. "He's gullible."

Billy's smile fades away. His jaw clenches.

"He thinks he's really gonna kill a demon." Her voice breaks and thumps her chest louder.

"I just w-wanted to help," Billy said monotonously. "I believe him."

"Belief in demons," she breathes. "I was once five and scared to death. My dear mother told me stories...about demons and devils and it worked! By 7 in the evening, I was on my bed. Then... I grew up."

She waits for a smile or any response from Billy. “Surely you’ve grown out of it too?”

He doesn’t answer.

Suddenly, the old woman looks up, her eyes and mouth widen, and she thumps her chest louder.

Billy doesn’t care.

Then, the thumping of her chest gets quicker. “I... need... wat—”

“Grandmama! Demon beside you!” The boy runs to her, holding a stone in each hand.

“He gon’ get you!” He flings a stone at her and misses.

She shrieks for air and puts her hand on her chest and thumps and thumps and thumps.

She reaches for Billy’s hands but he moves away.

“Demon get away! Get away!” The boy spits on his little stone and flings it at her again and misses.

He runs to the tree to get another stone.

The old woman is heaving for air. “Water, please. I need—” She stops thumping her chest. Her eyes turn white like her hair, and the ground pulls down her body, head first. Her hands and legs tremble in violence.

“Demon in Grandmama! Demon in Grandmama!” the boy shouts from the tree, lifting a bigger, rounded stone with both hands.

Billy steps away farther.

The boy runs to his grandmama and he spits on the stone for good luck and lifts the stone above his head and... *THUD!* The stone crushes his grandmama’s forehead, blood drips down her open white eyes and pale ears. She’s not moving anymore, like a rock.

“I killed the demon!” The boy giggles and looks up at Billy with proud eyes and lips.

Billy walks to the little boy and pats his shoulder. Then, he bends over the old woman’s body. With both hands, Billy lifts the bigger stone from her white hair and gets up. He spits on the stone and looks at the tree.

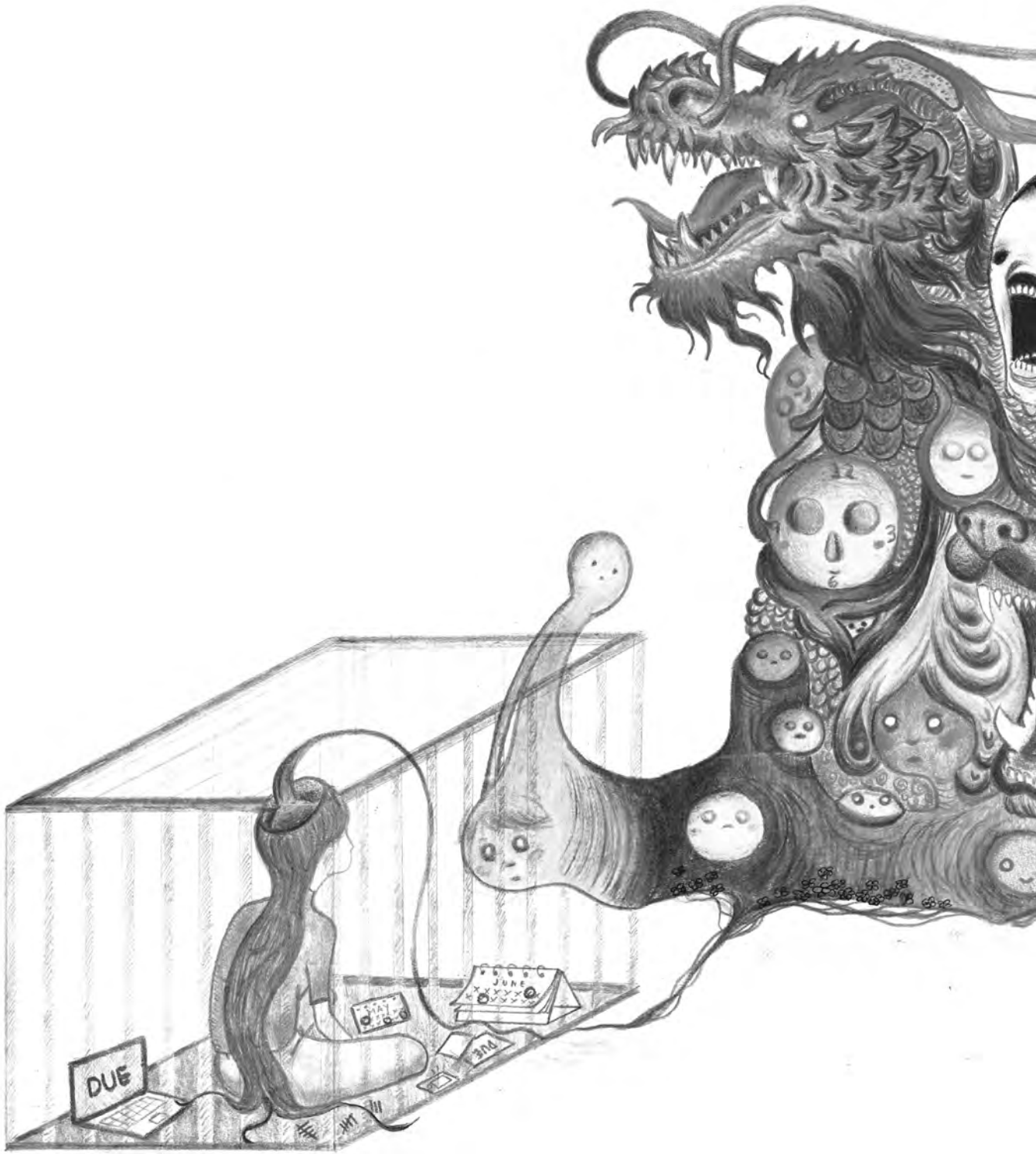
The tree smiles.

Little boy sits on the ground beside his grandmama and holds her hands. “Don’t worry, Grandmama. I killed the dem—”

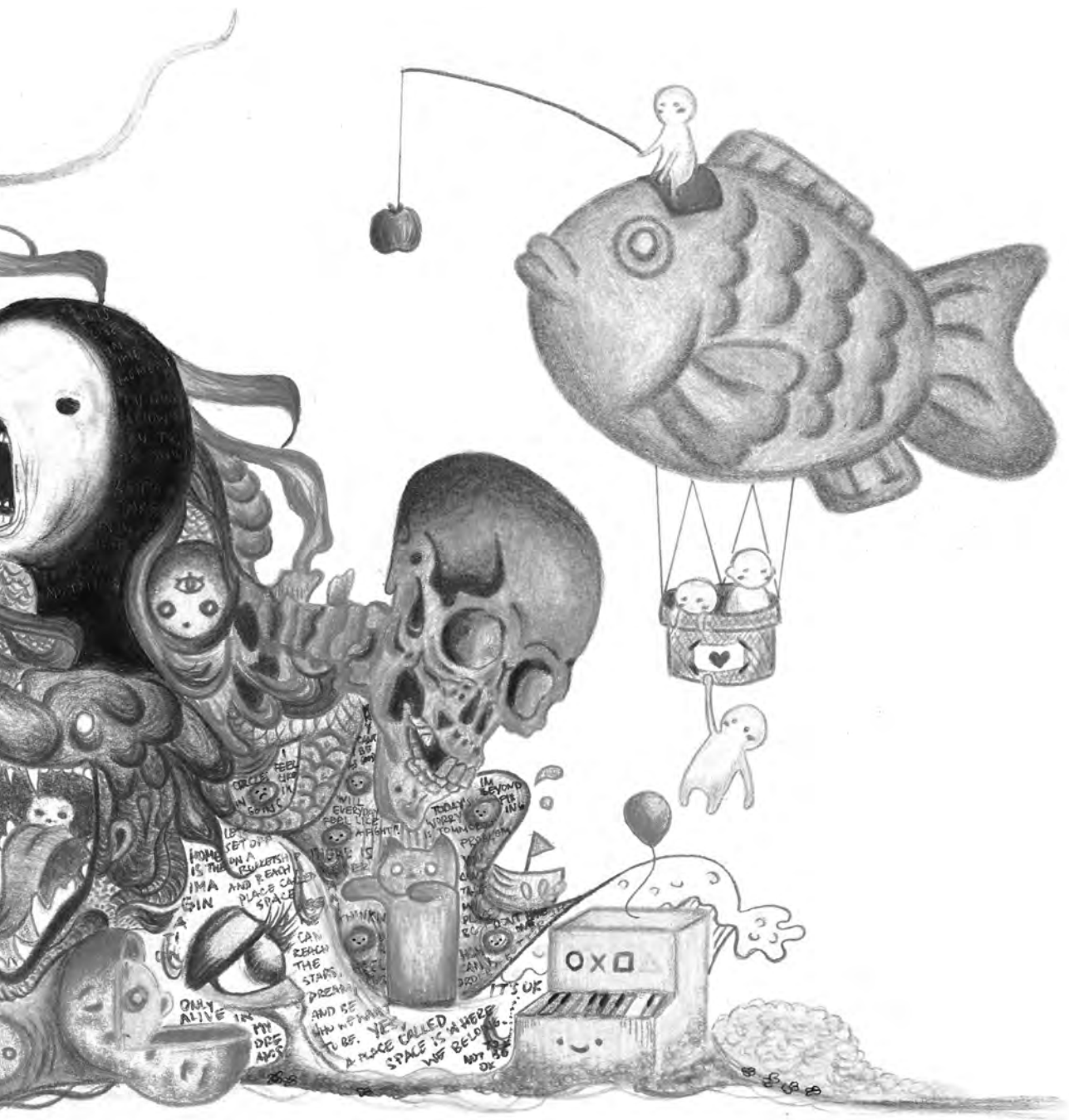
*THUD!*

It starts raining.

**Roberto Domingo, 18**



**Help Me Escape**  
Chelsea Wang, 18



「HELP ME ESCAPE」

*Chelsea Wang*

06/2021



# Why He Wears the Mask

Eyes pierced through me as my eyes adjusted to the light.

“A boy... he’s pretty young...”

“How did he die?”

I blinked for a few seconds, before squinting. *I... died?*

An old man radiating a sunny aura bent down to my eye level. “Tell me, boy, was there anything you wished for in the mortals’ world?”

I cautiously stepped away from the man. “M-Mortals’ world..?” I whispered.

“In your life. What would you wish for?”

I looked down. “I... was lonely, sir. Can you make me a friend?”

The man chuckled. “Young boy, I cannot make you a friend. But how about I let you make your own friend? How many days, do you say, does it take to make a friend? 30?”

I nodded.

“All right. Thirty it is.” He handed me a kitsune mask. “Wear this while you’re down there. You might scare people.”

I looked at the mask in confusion, before slowly taking it with shaking hands. 30 more days...

Yuko had disobeyed her mother’s orders again. But at home, there was nothing interesting to do. In the forest, not only were there animals but recently, a boy! He wore a fox mask and looked around her age. But all he really did was walk up to animals and ask, “Hi, will you be my friend?” None of the animals really paid attention to him.

But, today was different. The boy was walking deeper into the forest.

Out of curiosity, Yuko trailed not far behind. Soon, he stopped and disappeared from her sight. Yuko waited a moment, before peeking her head from the side of a tree, only to come face to face with a creepy red and white fox mask. She screamed.

I heard a noise. So, I quietly walked to where the noise was. I did not expect to see a screaming girl. I jumped and screamed at the sight of her. Then the girl stopped, as I stopped too, and tilted my head at her.

“You scared me!” the girl exclaimed, shivering.

“You scared me too!” I squeaked.

The girl looked at me up and down. “Why do you wear that creepy mask anyways?”

I shrugged and took the mask off. The girl screamed again.

I panicked. Why was she screaming again? “Is there something wrong with my face?”

The girl grabbed the mask from my hand and quickly put it back on me. “What’s wrong? Your face is bloodied!” she shrieked.

“Oh... maybe it’s because I died...”

“*You died?*” she hollered.

I nodded. “Yeah!”

Every day, I would sit by the forest river to wait for the girl Yuko to come. Every day, she came.

Day 1. “My name is Hatsume!”

Day 2. “People told me I died!”

Day 3. “An old man told me to make a wish!”

Day 4. “I wanted a friend!”

Day 5. “He disagreed and gave me 30 days to make a friend by myself!”

“No way! Does that mean I’m your friend?”

“Yeah! My first friend!”

“Your first friend? It just keeps getting better and better!”

Day 29.

“What’s going to happen tomorrow?” Yuko whispered.

I glanced at her. “I don’t know... am I going to die again..?”

Yuko whacked my arm. “Don’t think like that!”

I nodded quickly. “Y-yeah. Maybe I won’t go...”

Day 30.

The dreaded day. Yuko waited for Hatusme to come, and soon enough, he did. He sat down beside her. It was silent before he worked up the courage to speak first. “Um...” But before he could say anything else, she had squeezed him into a tight hug. She started crying. And soon, so did Hatusme.

“I-I don’t want you to leave!” Yuko wailed.

“I don’t want to either!” he sobbed.

Yuko looked back at his face with teary eyes to see a bright light. Her eyes widened. She squeezed his hand so tight as if he was going to disappear any second. Well, he was. The light got brighter and brighter... and then, it started fading. Yuko’s heart felt like it had stopped. The hand she used to squeeze so tightly turned into thin air. Her eyes widened in horror, as she pounced to grab him. But he was gone.

The only thing he left was the red and white fox mask. Yuko looked down at the mask with softened eyes. The mask suddenly didn’t look creepy anymore.

Yuko stared into her reflection; that kitsune mask covering her features. She smiled at the reflection; his mask. *Hatusme, I’m glad to be your first-ever friend in this world.*

**Olivia Xu, 12**

## Little Girl, ...

Little girl, come home from school. Clear glass,  
peek through the door and find your parents  
whispering tightly, noses brushing, soft. In love.  
Little girl, don’t be afraid. No, don’t step away.

Little girl, don’t spill your bag open on the  
ground, you know your mom doesn’t like it. You  
never clean up after yourself. Little girl, don’t draw  
on the walls, you know your dad doesn’t like it.  
Some things can’t be erased. They stroke the back  
of your head and tell you they love you. The words  
catch in the cold air, condense, then seep into your  
skin. Why the surprise? Isn’t this what you wanted?

Little girl, there’s no need to hold your breath;  
don’t think this is a trick. The people by the counter  
are still your parents. No blue eyes, no extra arm,  
no patchwork face. No alien has come to eat them,  
take their place. Can’t you see you’re not in a movie?  
Savour the calm while it marks the face of the blue  
moon. Whether tiptoeing around or stomping on  
eggshells, you’re not the source of their frustration.

Little girl, sit down and eat dinner well. Watch

your parents joke with each other, kiss on the cheek.  
The kitchenware stays on the table and in the sink.  
You don’t even need to help.

Little girl, you can only take things as they  
are; go to bed and wake up in the morning. Listen  
carefully before breathing, walls ringing from the  
unpacking of an argument two days shelved. Hand  
to your chest, melt into the mattress and recognize  
this normal. Little girl, what did you expect?

**Sarah Walker, 19**

# We matter

I am Asian.  
I am a girl with brown eyes, black hair, and yellow skin.  
I am smart, I am creative, I am human.  
I have feelings,  
I feel joy, happiness, sadness and pain.  
But  
Those things don't matter because I am Asian.

Let me tell you about the Asians I know,  
My aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.  
The kindest kind of people.  
They love and laugh like everyone else.  
They would sacrifice themselves like heroes for the ones they love.  
But  
Why do they not matter when they are Asian?

Nevermind that there are more than just Chinese people under the term Asian,  
Nevermind the 48 countries that hold the label Asia,  
All of us are hard workers.  
All of us have families and people we love.  
But  
Why do these not matter when we are Asian?

When push comes to shove,  
We are blamed for viruses and labelled as exotic,  
Our women are frowned upon by this country, so misogynistic.  
Our elders are beaten, lay bleeding, and told to beat it,  
Our kids, shamed for their foreign food, wish for bland lunches,  
We have no representation and are made fun of when presenting.  
Accomplishments, written off,  
Eyes made fun of,  
Culture sexualized,  
Assault, normalized,  
And we stayed silent.  
Cried in pain in silence.  
We don't believe in violence.  
So why is everyone so vile and against us?

I have only been on this Earth for 16 years.  
Yet even I wonder; what on earth have we done?  
What on earth has an entire continent of people done?  
To be treated like dirt and still try to look content?

In a world gone dark,  
It's hard to see the light when so many try to snuff it out.  
But we try.  
We look, shout, reach for each other among the chaotic crowd.  
We try to look for the light and hope for better times,

But sometimes, that's hard.  
Like dust, our confidence fades away.  
Like chameleons, we blend, afraid of what they'll say.  
"Please don't notice me."  
"Please don't say anything."  
"Please let me be ok."

We matter.  
Despite the colour of our skin, we matter.  
Despite us blending in, we matter.  
And despite the years of mistreatment,  
We still matter.

**Angela Bu, 16**

## **A Sea of Blonde and Blue**

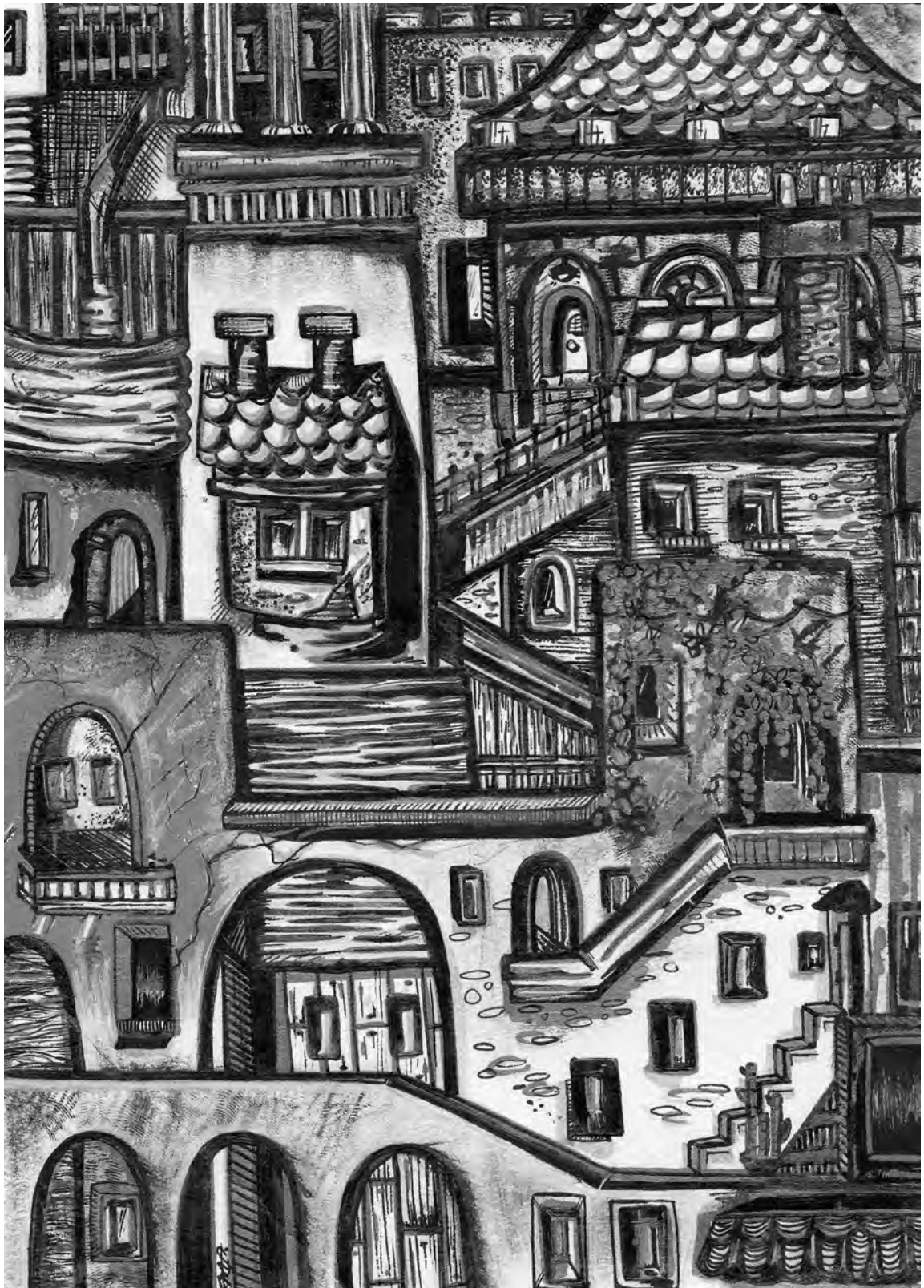
A sea of blonde and blue.  
Full of hate yet proud and true.  
Looking at us to disintegrate.  
Claiming others to be a source of hate.  
Saying, "We do not discriminate."

Oh but yes, yes you do.  
From the setting sun to the morning dew.  
I can't predict what you will or will not do.  
The blonde and blue scares me into hiding my truth  
That this world is not made for me but apparently is for you.  
All in this together they say, but I know it is a lie.  
I know how you work  
A stab in our heart for your every stride.  
Moving In the wrong direction, pulling us apart.  
And because of you  
I was a broken default from the start.

Ignorance is not an excuse  
Nor a way for you to say, "I recuse."  
I'm tired of your privilege and lack of sorrys.  
Don't say injustice drives you mad  
Because you don't understand the struggles I've had.

**Emily Chan, 17**





Untitled  
Maia Falcitelli, 16

# If He was Here

(for Gampy)

Alan Love was born on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1953.  
He died September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

If he was here, maybe he would have seen me graduate.  
Maybe he would have been proud of my progress.

If he was here, maybe the family would have gone to Florida.  
Maybe he would have taught us to draw those silly pictures we always loved.

If he was here, maybe we would have kept going for dinner every Saturday.  
Maybe Christmas would feel normal again.

If he was here, maybe he would have convinced me to continue playing baseball.  
Maybe he would convince my sister to apply to Western, just like him.

If he was here, maybe it wouldn't feel like something's missing from every family dinner.  
Maybe he would have taught me how to eat lobster.

If he was here, maybe he'd show me his old radios.  
Maybe I wouldn't regret not knowing him better.

Alan Love was born on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1953.  
He died September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

**Amanda Marchetti, 14**

# A Wish for Night

Night is a beautiful thing, for it is dark.  
Many do not like the night because it is dark,  
But the darkness covers our eyes so that we can  
Open our hearts.

In the night you can be yourself.  
You can let its swirling winds whisk you away to a reality  
Of your own creation.  
A reality where the winds of time are still.

In this dream world your passions and loves and hates dance together in a  
Fanciful ballet for your enjoyment,  
Each movement unpredictable, keeping you at the edge of your seat,  
And everything seems so real.

Some of the things in this world may scare you,  
Some bring tears to your eyes.  
Some make you laugh out loud and,  
Smile.

But...

Day is a horrible thing, for the coming of day  
Is the coming of light.  
And this light dispels the darkness and forces you to  
Open your eyes again.

And you must leave your world behind.  
The world that was yours to command becomes the world that  
Commands you.  
And you must leave the safety of bed to get dressed.

With your day-clothes you don the mask that you  
Show to society and wish for  
The sweet embrace of night to find you again.  
So that your mind can wander where your feet cannot.

**Jessica Athanasyar, 16**



**Fox in the Snow**  
**Zoe Terzis, 15**



## Hold on Mother

The door opens and I expect a warm smile.  
Though what I saw made my heart sink.

The beats were going faster after a while.  
A pale face that seemed unaware of its surroundings and it was difficult to open her eyes and blink.

Heavy quick breathing that rhymed with the beats of my heart.  
For a split second, it was as if God gave the sight back to her to see me.

But then everything went back to its original phase and I was afraid it was going to pull us apart.  
I knew she was the last phase of a leaf on a tree.

She was going to fly away soon.  
She was going to fly away soon.

It was time to go.  
I didn't know that the last time I'll ever get to see her was that noon.

The door closes slowly as she faded away from my sight.  
It already felt like a while ago.

It felt like a while ago.  
I never wanted her to let go though.

**Judi Kanaan, 15**



**In The Eye Of The Beholder**  
Laken Harrison, 15

## love poem (untitled)

love is something  
not in my world.  
it's strange, alien;  
cause for trepidation.  
the thought of giving  
a piece of yourself to someone?  
to have them hold  
your heart in their hands  
and pray they don't drop it,  
that they don't let it slip.

love is embarrassing,  
it's vomit inducing,  
imagine (just for a moment)  
telling someone you love them  
and having them say it back.  
imagine baring your soul  
for someone else to see.  
the word itself  
is uncomfortable in my mouth.  
i fear it.  
i resent it.

i resent you, almost.  
standing off stage,  
in the back of my mind;  
moving to the spotlight,  
at the forefront.  
it hurts to see your smile  
(just a little).  
it's nice that i caused it,  
if only once.

i can't do this, i can't be in love.  
please, just take back the  
butterflies you've shoved  
down my throat. leave, now.  
you can't know about  
my dopey smile,  
my shaking frame,  
you can't – i'd rather die.

i'm content where i am,  
to admire from afar;  
because love  
has always been  
in a galaxy that's not mine.

and yet i wonder  
(with just a bit of  
nausea)  
what it could be like  
in this love poem (untitled)

to kiss your hands,  
to kiss your ring.  
to lay your head in my lap  
and run tired fingers through  
your hair;  
reading stories aloud,  
sweet music playing in  
the background,  
in the dark,  
nothing profound.

not something peculiar  
but something tender, something  
sweet – like honey, or  
maybe sweeter.

but pay me no mind,  
i'm just a lovesick  
fool.  
a moment's silence,  
stretched 'til june.  
in the summer months  
i'll heal on beaches  
that feel like home,  
salt water stinging  
the left of my chest.

i'll take my leave now,  
phantom heart clutched  
in my palms, the real one  
swinging carelessly in yours.  
please do be kind,  
keep my heart in mind,  
fragile,  
and made of glass.

**Anjelica Pascucci, 18**

# Young Voices: Get Published!

## Submission Form

### Deadline for the 2023 Magazine is March 27, 2023

Released annually in the fall, Young Voices Magazine is full of writing and art created and selected by Toronto youth ages 12-19. We accept submissions year-round. Send us your art, photography, comics, stories and poems.

#### 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?

Use our online 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 get a copy of the most recent issue from your local library branch. **Before you submit, please review the submission 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. Please use a separate form for each piece you submit.

**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 \_\_\_\_\_

The Young Voices program is supported through the generosity of the **Friends of Toronto Public Library, South Chapter.**







a reminder to understand what you feel  
Leah Braykson, 17

