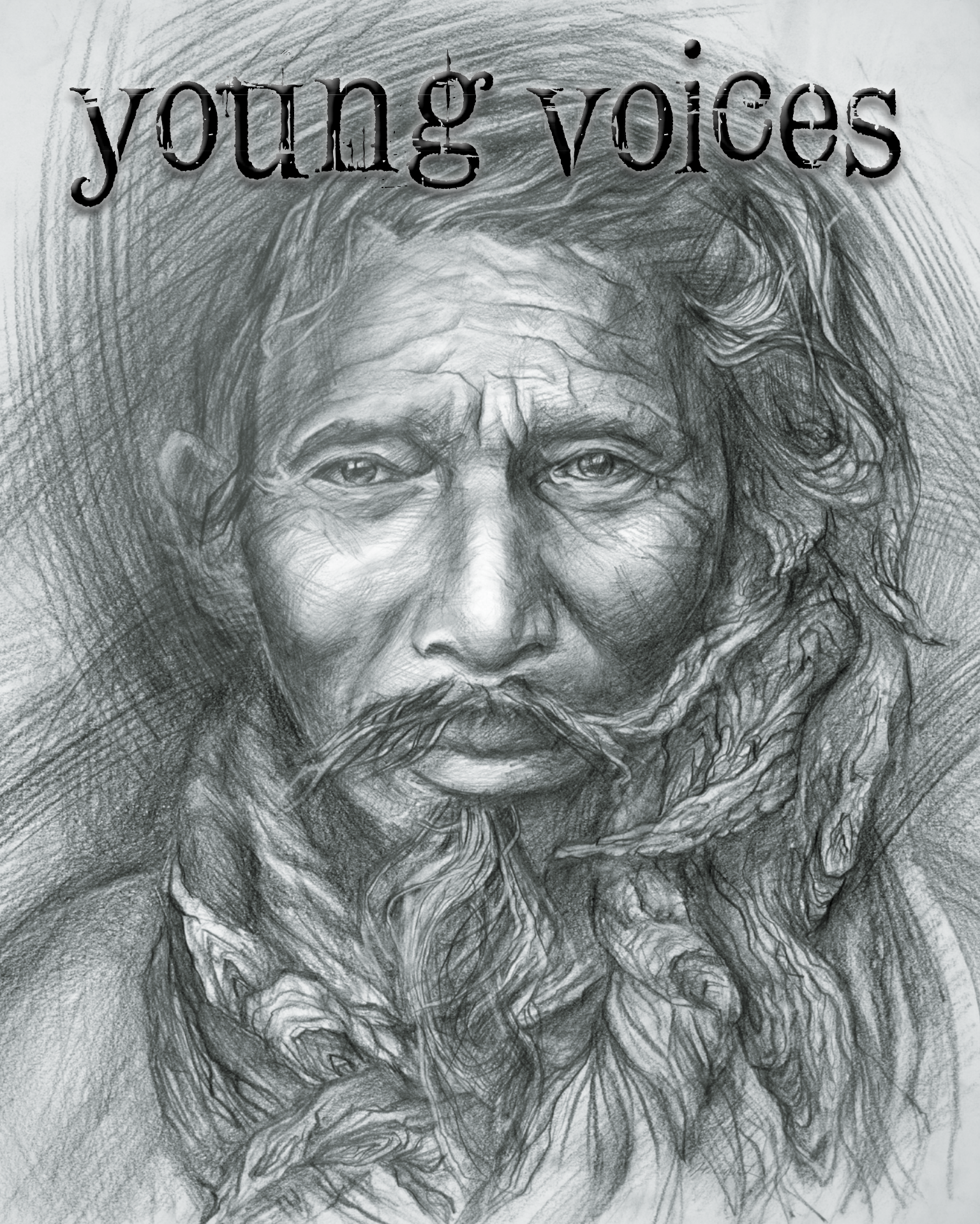


young voices



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Shadows

Naba Khan, age 16

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FRONT COVER ART

**He Loved Nature
So Much That He
Became It**

Helena Zhang , age 16

Welcome to Young Voices 2017

The wonderful work in this edition of Young Voices will hearten you with its energy and insight, its wisdom and courage. What fine work this is! Every page is alive.

To write, to make art, is an act of hope. And all art bears witness to how we live and what we love, what we dream and what we fear – it is the precious expression of life in all its defiance, seeking, loneliness, and joy.

These remarkable young artists, by sharing their passions, perceptions and curiosity, show beyond a doubt that the power of art in our city is strong and thriving.

Long may the making and sharing of art continue to be part of these young lives. And long may their powerful voices continue to be heard.

Anne Michaels
Poet Laureate
City of Toronto

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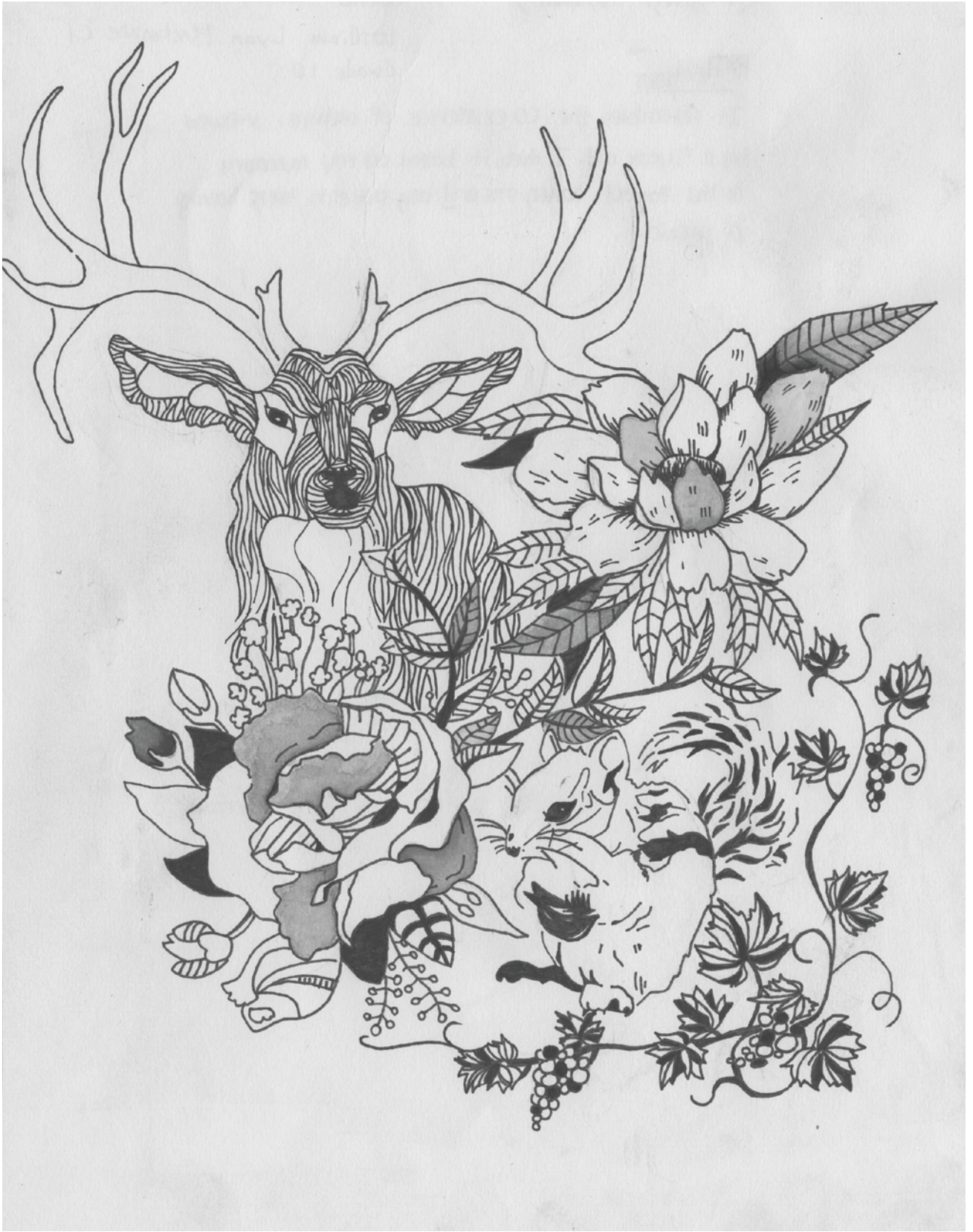
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To write, to make art, is an act of hope.

Anne Michaels



In My Dream
Yonsae Kim, age 15

Gratuity

Death came to a diner in Poughkeepsie a few minutes past eleven o'clock. It sat down at a booth by the window and ordered black coffee.

An old man paused on his way to the door.

"Excuse me. Do I know you from somewhere?" he asked. The face before him was nondescript, of an indeterminate gender, but somehow distinctly recognizable.

"We met a few years ago," said Death. "When you underwent cardiac arrest. For ten minutes you were mine, before the doctors found a pulse again."

"Oh," said the man.

"I'm not here for you tonight. But I'll see you soon."

The old man had already looked away and forgotten the exchange completely.

The waitress came over with a cup of coffee. Her worn nametag read 'June'.

"Is there anything else I can get you?"

"I'll have the number four as well, please."

"The triple-stacked burger with poutine? We call that one a heart attack on a plate."

"Perfect."

June looked closely at Death. "I'm sorry...you look familiar."

"I have one of those faces."

Death had in fact encountered June many times before. The first was when she got pneumonia at age eight. But the doctors had saved her, preventing a closer look. The second was when her brother crashed the family car into a lamppost. As Death took his soul, it brushed past June, unconscious but still breathing in the passenger seat.

Several years later, Death had lost track of all their near-meetings and close calls. It couldn't be blamed; there were many souls in need of saving, and June made no attempt to stand out. She was thirty-two now, living in her boyfriend's apartment, and spending her tips on workout DVDs and mystery novels.

By the time June thumped a plate of grease and gravy in front of Death, the diner was nearly closed.

"You're welcome to stay a little past closing," said June. "Boss gave me the keys tonight. And I'm not in a rush to get home."

"That'd be appreciated. I'm in need of a bit of rest," said Death.

"Tell me about it," said June. She leaned in and lowered her voice. "When it's my night to lock up, I usually sit and eat leftovers for an hour or so, just to cool off."

Death looked around at the mostly-empty diner. "If that's the case, you're welcome to join me. I could use a little company."

June cocked her head.

"Alright."

At a quarter to midnight, the place was empty.

June sat down with a plate of leftover fries.

"What's your name?" she asked.

Death shrugged.

She took off her nametag and slid it across the table. "My name's June."

"Nice to meet you," said Death.

"I still can't shake the feeling that we've met before. Isn't that crazy?"

"Quite."

"I used to believe in stuff like that. Happy coincidences. The feeling that you were meant to meet all along."

"Some call it destiny."

"My mother called it hogwash. Alan – that's my boyfriend – kind of thinks the same. He's not one to believe in soulmates or anything like that. You know, I don't even remember the day we met. Isn't that funny? It's like he was just always there."

"I understand that feeling."

"Whereabouts are you from?" June doused her fries in vinegar. The bitter smell made Death smile.

"Everywhere."

"A drifter, huh? I had a friend like that. She never wanted to settle."

"It's difficult to stay anywhere for long."

"Yeah? Must get lonely, after a while."

"Oh, you get used to it."

"Are you a trucker then? Half the regulars here are. No shame in it."

"No. My profession is much more...independent."

"Ah. So you're self-employed?"

"You could say that."

June looked down at her hands.

"All I can hear is my mother's voice telling me not to talk to strangers," she said. "She always told me I needed to be more careful. But you don't seem like you mean any harm. Besides, I'm not a kid anymore. I mean, I'm old enough to have one of my own. I don't, by the way. Alan's not ready yet."

Death snuck a fry from the plate.

"There I go again. Oversharing. Occupational hazard, you know? Waitresses have to gab as much as hairdressers if they want a good tip. My mother always told me I had a big mouth. But I'll tell you, it really pays off."

"I've met your mother," said Death.

June paused mid-chew.

"Two years ago, on the side of the US-44. She was driving a car too big for her. When I picked her up, she barely weighed anything."

June swallowed. She knotted her fingers together.

"Okay, I don't know how this works, but, like...can I have time to call Alan? Or my family? I don't even have my will ready. Crap, how are they going to know what to do with all my stuff? I have a lot of stuff, I—"

Death put up a hand. "I'm not here on business."

June appraised the figure sitting across from her.

"Then why are you here?"

"It gets lonely." Death fixed its eyes on June. "I've seen you so often, but always from a distance. It's nice sometimes, to just sit and talk. And not have to take you anywhere."

"I don't know what to talk about," said June. "Haven't you heard it all?"

"Yes," said Death. "But tell me anyways."

So June talked about the flowers at her mother's funeral, and the first time Alan told her he loved her. She talked about watching the sunset from the monkey bars when she was small. She talked about the night she'd felt closest to Death, floating in a star-filled lake and wondering if she could let herself drown.

"Your mother was right," said Death. "You do need to be more careful."

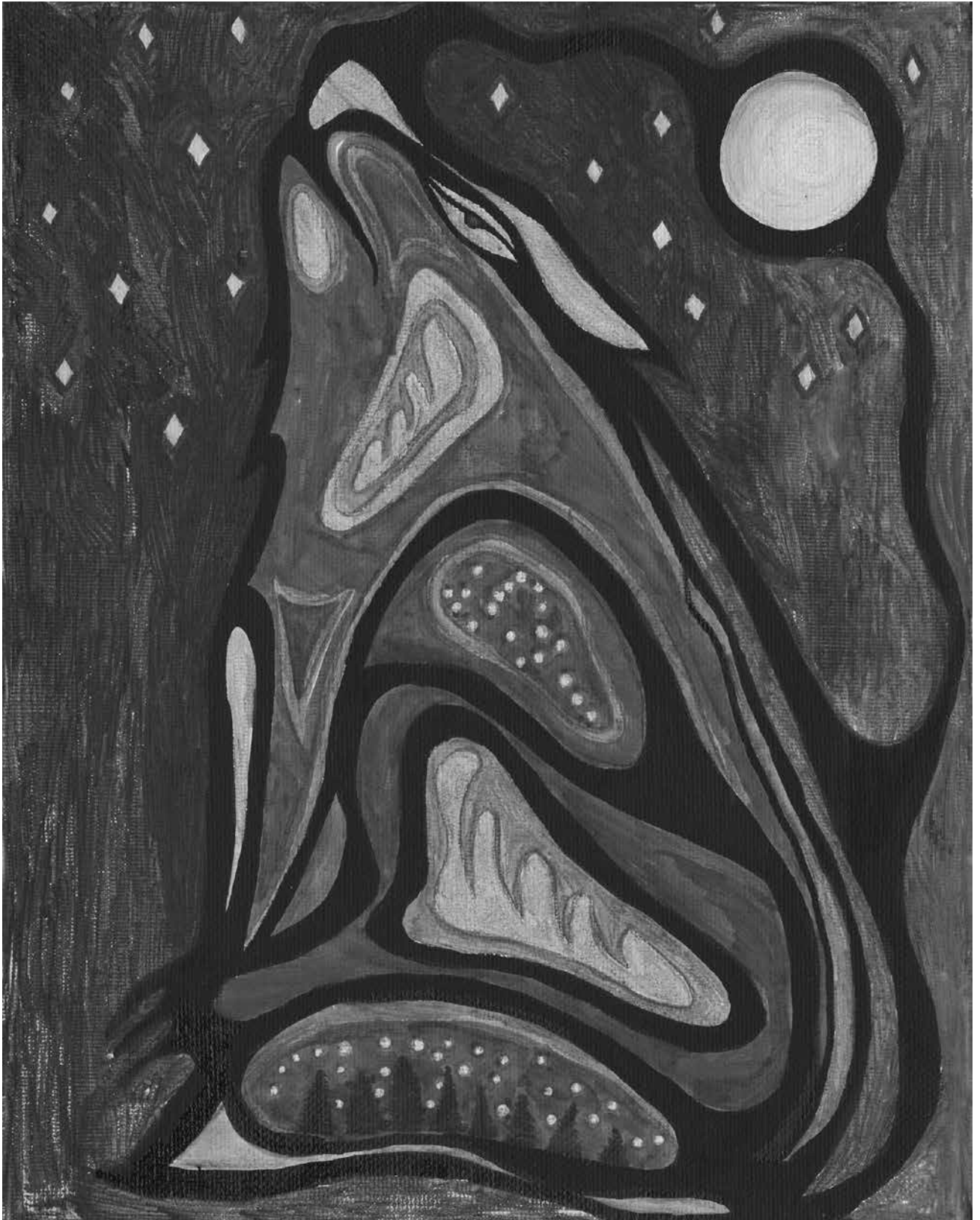
"Thanks for the advice," said June.

"Thanks for the company," said Death. "I'll see you later."

Half past midnight, Death paid its bill and slipped out the doors.

June locked up feeling satisfied. She'd never gotten such a good tip.

Ryanne Kap, age 18



Ojibway Art
Maia Falcitelli, age 12

Road to Nowhere

The road stretched on and on, seemingly forever, under a bright blue sky. There wasn't anywhere we were going, exactly. We liked to say we were on a road to nowhere.

I don't remember when this began, aimlessly wandering from cheap motel to cheap motel, but it feels free. It's beautifully limitless, it's refreshing, having nowhere to be and nowhere to go. It's not for everybody, but I love it.

I traced the swirling patterns of dust on the window. It was blissfully quiet, just the gentle hum of the engine. An eternity could've passed, but I couldn't say. It just existed, forever, in an old car with dusty windows and a broken air conditioner.

My companion and I never spoke much. We hadn't known each other very long; but we were so familiar.

It seems like decades have passed since I met him, both of us restless and reckless. I recall his blue eyes, his lopsided grin, and his unwavering confidence when he told me, "We can go."

And I trusted him, I believed him. We went.

At first, we were careless. We were so exhilaratingly happy at being free, we bounced around different towns, doing whatever we wanted because we could.

Of course, it didn't always run smoothly. Nothing ever did. That didn't really matter to me.

Now we weren't as childish. Once in a while, we'd come up with some ridiculously stupid idea and, laughing all the while, carry it out. We were happy, and that, I figured, was the point.

I leaned back in my seat, feeling the sun warm on my face. It seemed as if ridiculously stupid ideas were necessary, at some point. It's been a while.

"Let's go see fireworks."

I sat cross-legged on the hood of the car, my face tilted up towards the sky. It was a deep blue, speckled with stars. The summer night was cool and pleasant, and alight with fireworks.

We were parked in a field, on the side of a lonely road. Golden, red, blue lights glowed in the sky, sparks flying before disappearing. I could've watched them forever, entranced.

Long after the lights faded, and the sky lightened, and the stars disappeared, we sat on the hood of the old car, with dusty windows and a broken air conditioner. And I remember asking, "Where to?"

And I remember him smiling at me, all blue eyes, lopsided grin and unwavering confidence, and saying, "On the road to nowhere."

Diana Scumpu, age 13

Serendipity

Donghyuck sits on the kitchen counter as Mark leaves his bedroom. The two of them are rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, the morning atmosphere slowly sinking into their skin. The sun has risen just moments ago and everything still feels hazy and diluted.

Mark drags his feet over to the kitchen and mutters a good morning to his best friend before using the coffee machine. The quiet boil of the machine fills the house and harmonizes with Donghyuck's humming. It's a familiar tune and makes Mark's day the slightest bit better than it already is. He takes his cup of coffee and brings it to his lips, smiling when he realizes Donghyuck is staring.

Neither of them speak, too afraid to ruin the moment the two of them might be having. Instead, Mark jumps on the kitchen counter beside Donghyuck, placing his cup beside him. The two of them sit in a comfortable silence as they bask in the morning sunlight peeking through the curtains.

Their breathing is synced and it feels like their hearts beat as one and suddenly Donghyuck feels like the puzzle's finished – there're no missing pieces and there are no complications in finishing it. This is how he's going to spend the rest of his life.

Donghyuck wants to say something, anything, but then he looks down at his hands and wishes that they'd magically be able to intertwine with Mark's. He hovers his hand over Mark's and it causes Mark to glance over, wondering what's wrong.

"What's up, Hyuck?" Mark's voice is raspy but calming, like it always is in the mornings.

"Nothing," whispers Donghyuck, looking away so Mark can't see his smile. "Nothing."

Anna Yang, age 14

Three Little Words

You've always loved the spring.

How the chickadees sing, announcing the end of their slumber, and the creek's currents push downstream in a low hiss. Coloured branches burst into the skies and sunlight that has resided behind the barricade of grey clouds stuns once more. There's something almost comforting about the fresh start, watching as the world comes back to life.

You sit by the brook, legs swung over its rocky edge. The brook in the woods behind the park, with the blooming pastel flowers and ivy creeping up submerged stones. The brook with cracked slats marking the path to get there, although you could surely find it blind.

You check your watch – he's late. He's always late.

Your body reclines to face the sky, and you squint in the noonday sun. It's hard to tell if the nerves you feel are delight or apprehension. He's turning eighteen today, and he's finally free, and you're happy for him. You really are. But it also feels like the end of an era, the beginnings of a conclusion that you aren't prepared for. As the days slip by in a whirlwind that drags you along, you desperately cling to a reality that is slipping away. Because he's eighteen today, but you're still seventeen. In less than a month he'll be in Glasgow and you'll still be here, sitting by the brook. And you're not ready to sit alone.

A voice echoes down the path behind you. "I brought coffee."

You spin to see him walking towards you, to-go cup in each hand and rugged smile across his face. His hair is a cropped blond, unkempt but still sparkling. His broad frame is complemented by a fitted flannel, and he saunters towards you in dirt-stained too-worn Kodiaks.

You feel your heart rate rise. Just a little, though. Just enough.

"I know – I was supposed to be here twenty minutes ago, don't tell me," he says, handing you a cup and sitting down beside you. You chuckle.

"I've stopped trying. You can tell time, right?" you reply, nudging his shoulder. "Because I could get a kindergartner to tutor you, if that would help."

"You're hilarious."

"I know."

You grin, taking a sip of your latte.

He leans forward, looking up at you expectantly. "So, you said something about a surprise. You've made me wait days to know what it is," he says, eyes gleaming. "Tell me."

"You've made me wait twenty minutes," you jab, reaching into your pocket to fish out a small parcel. As you hand it to him, his grin widens like a giddy child. The little boy you've known for millennia has grown into a man. When did that happen?

He turns it in his hands, examining the shoddy wrapping tied with a scrap of twine, before delicately peeling back the paper to unveil the gleaming pin below. Made of blue-tinged aluminum, moulded into intricate strands that twist and cascade downwards. Like water.

He cocks his head.

Your heart quickens again as you gesture to the creek. "I dunno, I just thought, when you're in Scotland, it might, you know, remind you of, of—"

"Us," he finishes. Your smile falters.

Three weeks and he'll be gone, whispers a voice inside of you. Not your heart, something deeper. A being beyond you, one you have no control over. *Three weeks and he'll be in Glasgow and you'll be here and unless you say something you'll never see him again.*

"It's not much," you murmur. He softly shakes his head, turning to meet your gaze. You stare into his eyes – pale and shining but dark and mysterious, that draw you in like they dance to a rhythm all their own.

He places his free hand around yours and squeezes. "No, it is," he says, understanding.

Now. It urges again. You need to know if there's a chance.

He pokes the pin into his flannel, lips turning up at the edges as he breaks eye contact. "I'm going to miss this the most," he says quietly, turning to the creek. He squeezes your hand again and it feels like you're ripping in two. Because it's hard to articulate the impossibility of breathing when his hand grazes your back, or his laugh vibrates through your chest. When he looks at you with that rugged smile, or when he squeezes your hand.

You have nothing to lose. So what are you so afraid of?

And perhaps it's him, or you, or the brook, but today you listen.

"I love you," you exhale, unsure whether you're telling him or yourself.

He looks up at you.

But suddenly you're in open air, suspended in a space between the stars. The void surrounding your limp frame tightens like a noose, vocal cords restricting in a hunt for words that will not come.

So you curse your heart. Your heart, that has always moved one step faster than your mind. Uncontained and always threatening to pump out of your chest. Your heart that has screamed for him, constantly for him, always for *him*.

Maybe he's always heard it. Now he certainly has.

His response is soft and distant, an echo. "Since?"

A question you cannot answer. There is no beginning or end, only an endless wheel that you cannot escape, though you don't want to leave. But you don't know how to say that, so instead you say, "Three years."

Your gazes remain locked, and you can see cogs turning behind his eyes. Behind yours, a world burns down as you wait for a response, the blood running through your veins turning to fire and a thousand earthquakes running through your shaking body. You're not sure if he can tell. You hope he can't.

So, with a final surge of irrationality, you squeeze his hand back.

But carefully, delicately even, he pulls away. And you understand. Your gut wrenches, your eyes flood, and your shoulders turn limp and helpless. But you understand, because understanding is all you know how to do.

Madelyn Mackintosh, age 14



Breaking Free
Catherine Kai Lin Cha, age 16

Raise Your Hand

I stand in a desolate valley filled with echoes of voices that I cannot hear clearly,
Ones that lie, ones that deceive and ones that are affixed to fear,
Every so often, the ground beneath my feet shakes and although my voice trembles,
The echoes become louder.
Forced positivity and the desire for everything to re-establish itself surfaces like the tremors,
Few and far between.
Night and day come and go but everything in between stays.
Without rationality and a motive, one becomes lost,
Wandering that valley on a hopeless scavenger hunt for anything to hold.
But life is so strange that I didn't bother looking above the valley.
Once I did, I saw nothing but a golden-white light,
I stood on the very top of my toes and the warm glow of the light hit my face,
Suddenly, everything else in me felt colder and the voices screamed louder than before,
The hairs on my arms stood up,
My muscles felt sore,
My face went numb,
My heart stopped beating,
And then, I raised my hand.

Vyshnav Kishore, age 16

Bartholomew

Eggs. Water. Salt.
He's gone.
Crack. Pour. Sprinkle.
Forever.
We would sit on the couch. Watching whatever I liked. His warm body curled into mine. The TV buzzed. The windows rattled as the rain poured down. Just like the night we met.
The music still blared as I left the party. It was late. I was tired. Then I saw a small blur of a figure slumped against the side of the house.
Something pulled me to it. Him. He was wet and shivering. Lost. And I fell in love. Gave my heart to him. Nursed him back to health.
Spoon. Blender. Spatula.
Fold. Mix. Scrape.
We would stand at the counter, preparing the night's meal. As I am doing now. Out of habit I suppose. We would have silent conversations. Exchanging glances only understood between the two of us.
Placemat. Bowl. Food.
Never again will I give my heart away. I've learnt my lesson. Loving only leads to sorrow.
My cat has died.

Katie Rockburn, age 17

Letters

In the bottom
of the box kept
in the glass cabinet
tenderly dusted every afternoon
3:11 precisely.
The first one yellowed
smelling of
summer
horses
a hayloft
and fragile newness.

Under the picture
in the mahogany frame on the faded
kitchen wall caressed
by sunlight on
rheumatism-free days.
The second one tied
with limp red ribbon
feels like
clasped hands
dancing shoes
soft lips
and enduring promises.

Behind the pumpkin night light
on the chipped dresser beside the
neglected rocking chair
smelling faintly of
talcum powder.
The third one addressed in
oversized printing
tastes of
sticky fingers
crooked bangs
picnics
and beautiful innocence.

On the rickety front hall table beside
a vase of
crumbling flowers
received on the day
IT came.
The fourth one printed in black ink
on stark white paper
sounds like
gunshots
harsh knocking
quiet sobbing
and unspoken goodbyes.

Beside the weathered stone
etched with inadequate
descriptions under a
sympathetic maple tree
with carved initials.
The last one
tattered and muddy
looks like
tear-stained writing
lonely memories
and a tarnished locket
over a loving heart.

Domenica De Martin, age 18

The Mind Wanderer

On sad days, on lonely days, I tell myself that I am special. I tell myself that my habit of biting my nails is because I need an anchor to the mortal world, and that I always fidget during class because if I were to stay still, then my mind would depart elsewhere.

When it rains, I open my windows so that I can hear, for in complete silence my form would remain while my being travelled. I have been told that I have keen eyes, for if I were to close them I would no longer see the world I inhabit, but another one.

Some days, when the sun has set and the world sleeps, I turn out the lights and sit cross-legged on the floor of my room. With me I bring a candle, and I set this candle before me to light with a match.

With just one quick strike, a blossom of light is born. As it is lowered to the wick, it catches and begins to burn steadily, casting flickering shadows upon the floor, the walls, the ceiling.

As I watch, the room around me dims, so all is gone and only an everlasting chasm remains. The candle flame, before my eyes, shimmers and morphs into the figures of dancing spirits, joyful for the light that they possess. Gradually my surroundings gain form and colour, but I no longer sit upon the floor of my room. Instead, I am seated at the crest of a rolling hill, the grass swaying to the song of the wind, and I dig my fingers into the earthy ground below me. The moisture seeps into my skin, and I raise my eyes to the heavens, thankful for this release from my life, even if only for a while.

When I stand, I stand looking over the lands of my mind, distances that I have yet to traverse. As I gaze out at this freedom, I see wonders beyond measure.

The world of my mind contains the things of my dreams. In this world, I can battle with villains, shoot the elements from my hands, soar high above the ground with wings of light. In this world, I wear soft leather boots and capes that billow out behind me as the wind blows, and by my side a sheathed sword rests. I am accepted for who I am, and converse freely with the characters from all the books on my shelves, all the books that I have ever read.

When the sun sets here, the sky is lit with fire, the boldest of colours arising in the fading of day. Never is the light truly gone, though, for the night is lit with the brightness of the stars, hanging suspended in nothing. Here I may see them in all their splendour, for when I dwell in the physical world, my life right now, the stars are hidden by a veil of smoke and pollution, casting the sky a sickly yellow from the lights below.

Here, I may be free without consequences. No judgment, no hurt. I may lay in the fields late into the night, and sleep far into the morning.

Days pass, years pass. My hair is grey, my skin hanging loosely, yet I still climb the hill I arrived on, gazing out on the same landscape as I did then, though it is now ages older. My garments hang loosely, and I shiver as the wind winds past my bare skin. I sit cross-legged as I did before, and close my eyes in peace as I exhale, and my breath twines skywards until it has left my body empty, sitting silently on the crest of that hill. My form fades, then shatters into a million shards of light, picked up and blown away to the horizon.

When I open my eyes once more, I sit again on the floor of my room. The candle has burned to a misshapen stump, the flame drowned in a pool of melted wax. I sigh and stand, stretching my cramped limbs. Slowly I make my way to my bed and burrow under the covers, sheltering under the sheets and bringing my knees to my chin.

I had just lived a lifetime in a world other than the one I lay in now, and I would do it again. I will live a thousand lifetimes in the span of one. I will travel this world and others, lands that no human has ever walked before. I have seen a million sunsets, and will see a million more. Never will something for me be ever just a dream, but reality.

For I am the mind wanderer.

Elena Prescott, age 12



Obstructed Mind
Chloe-Ann Quijano, age 15

Restored Glory

My mother told me stories
About how the world used to be
About the constant fighting and fury
About a time when the world was torn
And all its people were depression worn
She told me stories where humankind made mistakes
Killed, caused havoc and heartaches
She said our empty souls and teary eyes
Were fed on broken promises and white lies
She told me stories where the sky bled
Where hope was lost and dreams were dead
It came down to the survival of the richest;
The poor were left in nothing but stitches
See, my mother told me stories where everyone would die
She said there were four world wars before the last one came by
It was chaos; it was murder she said
Broken down homes and not a single child fed
She said the oppressors had gone insane
Finding malicious ways to entertain
But it slowly got better she said
All hope in humanity was not dead –
Slowly the whole world turned around
At last
Sanity and justice were found
She said by telling you this I'm merely alleviating my wounds
The world is still cruel and you'll understand this soon
After reading, my mother put the books back on the shelf
And said make sure history doesn't repeat itself
So I sat down one day
And wrote an allegory
The title is restored glory
It rhymes and has a hopeful ending –
By 2517 the world was mending

Dilara Bektas, age 16

Summer of 2065

Today I went to a beach,
Where the sun hides behind smoky curtains,
And paints my skin in a shade of grey,
Rather than one of red.
In front of me, the children do not laugh,
As I did when I was their age.
Instead, they build sandcastles
With tin windows, plastic doors, and soggy paper roofs.
Their sandcastles look different than mine did;
My windows were made of rock,
My doors were made of seashells,
I didn't build roofs.
The ground below me wears a veil of foam,
But it is not the ocean foam that once smelled like fish.
It is the one that follows the man's sick and hoarse cough,
The one your mother once told you not to step on
Because she didn't want to wash it off your shoes.
Around me, there are other people
But not near as many as there once were
At the beach when we were younger.
Do you still remember flip-flops?
Well, I think that trend died off
Because now everyone wears boots,
As I do, to protect my feet from being cut,
On the foreign objects that lay everywhere.
Today is one that milks my skin
So that sweat races down my face,
And leaves my heated body glued to my clothing.
My body begs to be freshened in the water
That we once splashed in as children.
But today, I can't cool off in the ocean
That motionlessly sits filled with the trash
That once belonged to me.

Cassey Shao, age 16

The Inheritance

Your *tia's* apartment coughs up dust when you open the door. You expect a stronger scent when you edge past the threshold, something sooty, or maybe something rotted. The near-tangible layer of must that overlays the room is an improvement, but not by much.

"Gross," Quim mutters, stepping past you. "This is gonna be hell on my sinuses."

You reach out a hand to brush the nearby hallway table. Your fingers leave a dark, ghostly imprint through the layer of dust collected there. "She's only been dead for like, a week."

Quim shrugs. "Ma said she was strange, and she probably just got worse in the years since they've talked. This seems pretty on-brand to me." He tugs a hand through his tight black curls. "C'mon, we're just supposed to empty out the bedroom, see if she left anything important."

You sigh, following after him reluctantly. "Why is this our job, anyways?"

Quim snorts. "Who else is gonna? Do you want to make Ma comb through her dead sister's stuff?"

You shove your hands deep into your jean pockets and frown at the scuffed floor. "No."

"The sooner we start the sooner we go home, yeah?" he says, hefting his backpack up over one shoulder. "Maybe we'll find something freaky."

You snort. "Like?"

"Who knows? Weird witchy crap."

You decide he's right about the 'weird' part. Every available surface is covered in holy statues, Catholic saints and angels of all sizes. It reminds you of your mother's small shrine back at your apartment, but that's comprised of maybe a half-dozen items altogether. Some are old, worn like Ma's. Others look so new they might have been bought right before your aunt died. The only clear surface is the bed, pushed to the far wall along with the side table and wardrobe. It makes the room feel tilted, sliding off some unknown precipice. The floor is covered in scented candles, books, clothes. It's an impossible mess, and you cast a worried look towards the already night-darkened window, wondering when you'll get home.

"Cra-zy," Quim singsongs as he toes a long skirt out of his way, drawing the word out into its syllables. "Ma would have a conniption if she saw this mess." He slings off his backpack and pulls out an empty garbage bag. "I'll start cleaning the floor, you see what's in the closet. Just toss it down, it's not like we can make this much worse."

You pick your way across the room to tug the closet open and gag almost immediately. The scent of urine wafts out, a hot soup of animal smells that chokes you.

"Oh, gross—" The heat hits you next, a dizzying wave of warmth too intense for the mild spring night. Your skin prickles straight down to your pores and you stumble back, covering your face with your free hand. A rustle of movement, and then something dark and quick darts out past your feet. You yelp, and hear Quim's answering shout and the pounding of his feet.

"Get in here and help me!" he shouts. "Get a broom, or something!"

"What is it?"

"Rat. Damned big one, too. Jesus, was she living with this?"

You follow him into the kitchen, grab a broom off its nail on the peeling wall. Quim's armed with a battered phone book, probably the first thing he could grab. You try to hold out the broom, but he hisses at you to be quiet. The rat darts out from under the kitchen sink, and Quim slams the book down hard. There's a wet, sickening thud. Snapping sounds.

"It's twitching," you say distantly when he lifts the book up. Tufts of fur. Red innards. Glints of bone. Another slam.

"Pack up some of the statues," he says, sounding ill. "Ma wouldn't want us to leave them here. I'm gonna toss this, and then we're leaving." He shakes his head, muttering, "Place is a freaking biohazard," as he leaves.

You bolt back to the bedroom, not wanting to watch the cleanup. You realize you're still clutching the broom, figure you might as well keep it in case Quim's meat pancake had any friends. You kneel down gingerly, grimacing at the slightly soggy feeling of the carpet. As you start to sort, a piece of paper falls from behind a statue and onto the floor.

You unfold and nearly drop it. There, beneath the creases and the fade, is a younger version of your mother. She's maybe twelve, smiling gap-toothed in a white summer dress. This must be from Portugal, before they came to Toronto. Before they were strangers in the same city.

"Why'd you keep this?" you wonder out loud. A tense, prolonged silence where you almost expect an answer. A car horn blares somewhere outside, and you jolt, crumpling the picture slightly, pinching your mother's smile. You laugh nervously to yourself, wish Quim would hurry up. How long does one dumpster funeral take?

You flinch as a loud bang sounds. "Quim?" Knowing your brother, he's trying to screw with you, slamming the dumpster lid outside, banging on the walls...right? "Joaquim, that's not funny!" You receive no answer, and your gaze flickers to the closet. Open, still. Gaping.

You stand, photograph trembling in your grip. The smell is so much thicker now, sticking in your throat, in your nostrils. Your eyes water. You cough into your sleeve, breathe through the fabric as you move to shut the door and staunch the smell. You reach for the knob, avoiding eye contact like you're six again, fumbling for your night light in your black bedroom. You couldn't breathe then, either.

"There's nothing there, stupid," you mutter, forcing yourself to look up.

The darkness is complete now, gaping wide. Endless, like you could step in and be swallowed. You heft up your broom, arms shaking.

"Just a rat," you mutter. "Just another rat."

You can't hear the city sounds anymore, nothing but this long, stretching silence.

Then something moves.

Somewhere, the slamming of a dumpster lid.

Leah Duarte, age 18

A Detour with Faith

He doesn't know where they're going. It's pitch black outside except for the dim headlights of Faith's vintage pickup. He swallows the anxiety building up in the back of his throat and rolls down the window to let the summer air in.

They're lost.

He looks at the road and then back at Faith (whose sleepy eyes are locked on the patches of gravel illuminated by the headlights) in a soothing rhythm to push down the lump in his throat. *Road. Faith. Road. Faith. Road.*

"Can I ask you a question?" Faith says, breaking the silence, which slinks away in the cool air between them. She glances over with her eyebrows up playfully and he can only manage a pained grimace because *they're lost*.

He wipes his sweaty palms on his jeans. "Okay." It needn't be said; he knows she'll ask anyways.

She waits a stretched-out beat before continuing. "What's your favourite word?"

He wants to roll his eyes as he looks over at her, because sometimes Faith's so random and childish and *just makes no sense*. Does she not see that they're in the middle of nowhere? She's now staring at the spot where the road meets the star-speckled sky, humming a faintly familiar tune.

Suppressing his slight annoyance, he softly responds, "Hope...kind of like your name." He sure *hopes* they'll find their way home.

She shakes her head and allows a small smile, "Faith and hope are different."

That's all she says. No elaboration. Faith is like that: she hands you her wisdom and leaves you wondering where to put it.

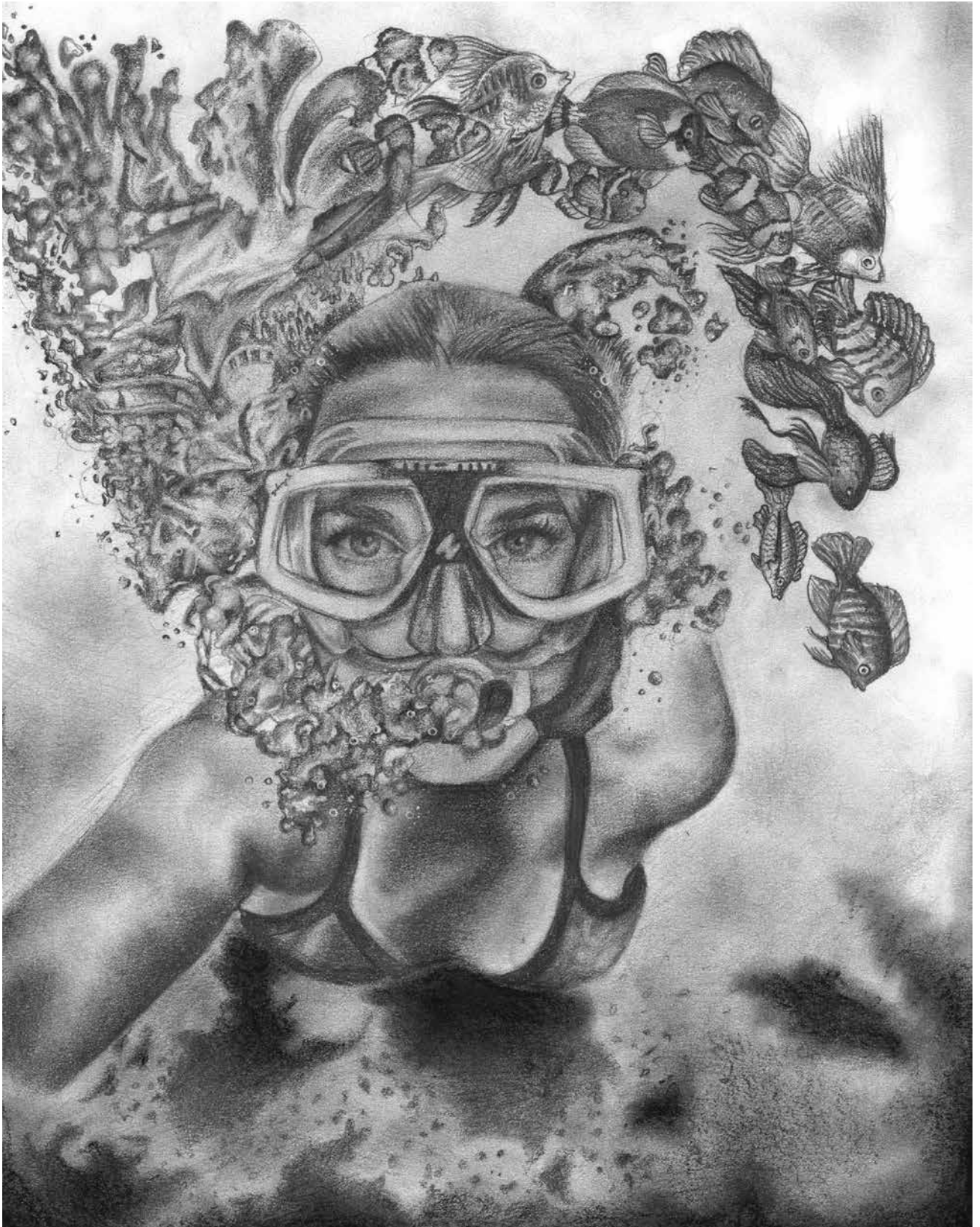
Before he can open his mouth, Faith slams the breaks and her old truck comes to a screeching halt. "You see that?" Faith says, pointing enthusiastically into the distance. He squints his eyes but he sees nothing. Faith sighs, "Look! Where the sky meets the road!"

It's there. Barely, but still there. The tiniest sliver of yellow-orange, rising into the starry blackness, creating a purple halo.

"See, *that's* faith," she says, grinning. She rests her back against the seat as she steps on the gas.

He stares at the tiny shred of sun as the pickup truck starts rolling forward. Faith starts singing a new song, "Here comes the sun, it's all right, it's all right."

Jennifer Ayow, age 16



Aquatic Vision
Alana Raposo, age 13

A Late Summer Breeze

He walked in slowly, with the swiftness of a late summer breeze,
each step was soft upon the concrete sidewalk.
The sun played hide-and-seek as it threw sharp sunbeams on his sunglasses.
There wasn't a hint of a smile upon his lips as he walked towards me,
nor did our eyes meet.
But something about him seemed tranquil,
his face held a solemn sense of serenity.
When he spoke, his voice was smooth,
smooth like the long stretches of the highway one encounters in the dead of the night.
His voice smiled with each word, holding the sweetness of a cool breeze on a spring morning.
The conversations we shared were as brisk as the cool wind that caresses one's face at the beginning of autumn,
yet they were as precious as the seashells collected from the shore after a strong tide leaves its impressions.
His touch was exuberant; it radiated an elixir full of deep passion and tranquility, leaving my arms feeling hot, as if the sun
itself descended from the sky and caressed them with its rays.
But then he had to go,
his time had come as the gods had called him back home.
He left as quietly as he came,
without leaving a trace of his existence,
except for the memories that I have kept nestled in my heart.

Priya Saha, age 18

Stardust

The beautiful stars we love
are long since dead
Their faint echoes fading
being undone thread by thread

A delay of hundreds of light years
we have on their live show
We shout until our throats ache
unable to mitigate the blow

For they burnt themselves out
until they finally combusted
it makes me wonder how long I have
until my best friend turns to stardust

Ava Shah-Beigi, age 14

Follow the Leader

The rules:
You will be bound by expectations;
that stranger, those people, this society.
Your interests will be in shackles, chains, cuffs;
whatever you want to call them.
Your needs, wants, friends, life;
will be predetermined.
You will be a piece in the game,
just a pawn,
and money will lead the way.
Point of the game?
Get the paper.
Ready to play follow the leader?

Ozlem Bektas, age 18

Thrill to Live

Suddenly I was whisked away
No longer made to be a slave
I was wined and dined
Given everything I craved
I looked up to god
I've never felt this way
In a night it was gone
Cruel realities remain
I'm chasing a thrill that people order
everyday
And I sit and I wonder
And I often lead myself astray
The world is so close
But it's never been as far away

Ayan Yusuf, age 16



Fierce Idol
Kelsey Zhao, age 17

Victory?

All life fell silent for a moment as it fell, a dagger in the sky plummeting at unimaginable speed. A foreign, whistling sound tore through the air, sending reverberations as it forced itself through the atmosphere. She blinked in disbelief, and a sudden piercing alarm sounded off in her ears. If only the horns knew their purpose was meaningless by then.

A quick burst of bright light made her squint painfully, press her eyes closed. It seemed to be a country away at first, but was only a couple blocks out. The air thickened instantly, and her skin began to vibrate. Nearly blind and unfortunately conscious, she witnessed her skin burning viciously through to the flesh. She felt as though her bones were liquefying within her.

Having walked out of the supermarket with a fresh packet of grapes in her hand and a cigarette dangling out of her mouth, this was the last thing she could've expected on a mild August afternoon. The rumbling of rock on cement as buildings were levelled around her hadn't been heard of in decades. She could already hear the helpless screeching of mothers over their beloved, rocking in agony over deformed, blackened corpses. Children crawling through ash, wondering how the world had fallen into darkness around them so quickly, aimlessly beckoning to their families that were all but molecular dust. The homeless men sweating over the damp sidewalks now instant skeletal scorch marks. Houses singed in eternal flame and lampposts shrivelled along streets.

There would be no time for firefighters, collateral damage, or dark smoke polluting the clouded skies of this city. No feeling of dread and grievance would hover over the remains of buildings and dried ponds. As if on a slide projector, the urban picture of downtown, populated by rushing streetcars, sagging phone booths, and old gutters clogged with mud, would be replaced with bleak grey destruction in a single switch of imagery. No one would realize the dull quiet that would follow before it became normality.

To her, and to everyone else close enough to the blast, there would be a moment's awareness before the very particles of her body were torn apart and disintegrated beyond matter. With only a split second to spare, she could only think of her father. He who lived in the distant, rural farmland tending to the cattle, sheep, and fields of crops. He who sent her out of craving for fresh fruit that had just come into season. His life's work would be easily diminished by a swift strike of impending force. Would he live to mourn her memory?

There was a final inhale of calming nicotine, releasing a final feeling of still pleasure. Then, before the local seagulls along the coast could flap their rumpled wings a second time, the ground cracked open and a town was set ablaze. The target, a tired military base seemingly hidden in a city that stood relatively unknown to the world, was hit. And despite centuries of humble history, somehow today would be this city's legacy.

On the other side of the world, others cheered a mighty victory while thousands of lives went unnoticed as they fell. Oblivious to the damage that would last generations.

Obliterated by abominable heat waves, all that remained was a city of shadows.

Teodora Vilotijevic, age 15

and over again

here it comes again, the gnawing. the hand that grabs at my insides and twists them around to watch me squirm. it grows and grows and grows until it consumes me with a triumphant roar. the guilt. just the word itself slides down my throat and into my stomach and is heavy like a black hole and so it sinks, and i sink with it until i am passing through the ground and the force of it breaks open the crust of the earth so the pieces of this affliction shatter all over the entire world and swallow cities like ashes in pompeii and i am the only one who notices. it is hot and sickening like a fever that makes my skin glow and bitterly cold, the type of cold that spreads like doubt as if it is an ice cube held in the palm of my hand. except the ice cube never melts. it only extends tendrils of frigid water that creep down my arm and up my chest and into my mouth and nose and eyes and ears and choke me with nothing but pure cold and pure memory. the memory even colder than the ice, the memory of the heat and the rain and the horrible things my mind whispers back to me when it has me all alone at night. cornering me, dragging my skin with knives and carving in all the many things i am ashamed of. and in the end, i am always left with nothing but white hot regret and there is nothing to do but simply allow it to take me, to pull at my hair and scream at

me from the inside out and i am shaking my head as if i can shake it all out, shake out everything i have ever known, reduce myself to an empty brain if only i could forget for a moment what i am, what i've done. if only everything i touched did not turn to stone. if only i could not feel the shame burning my eyes every time i try in vain to close them. if only i did not bite at the skin on my fingers as if all the worst parts of me are contained in the little pieces that fall from my teeth, if only the blood that flows gently afterward could purge every dark thought i have ever had from the unreachable recesses of my head, the places that i can only claw at lifelessly as they tear me apart. if only guilt was not a physical entity i can see in my dreams that smiles like the cheshire cat and bares endless rows of freshly sharpened teeth perpetually stained with my blood and tears. if only my lidless eyes would close, just for a moment, so i could try and convince myself i am not floating in a boundless sea of condemnation, doomed to let the waves crash over me over and over again, more saturated with salt and misery every infinite second. if only, if only.

Joey Shan, age 16

War of Red

I could never be more satisfied.

It was the swirling of colours in the cold winter wind, mixing together to form a myriad of emotions.

Oh! And there it was again.

The sickly colour, painting across the scattered sky.

Let it take over! And I can feel its warmth rush across the shaky limbs of the aging trees.

How satisfying it was.

I danced with the devil, scratching through the dying grass.

I can understand! Oh, through so many years I can understand.

It showed me, what nature was meant to be.

And I understood!

I let this beautiful colour dictate my every move, and with every move, it was just another step in the dance.

Yes, graceful dance.

Like a bull, I followed after it, entranced with the endless shimmers.

I can feel it run down my fingers, as I catch the colour once again.

And yet, I knew. Step by step, little by little, the colour consumed me.

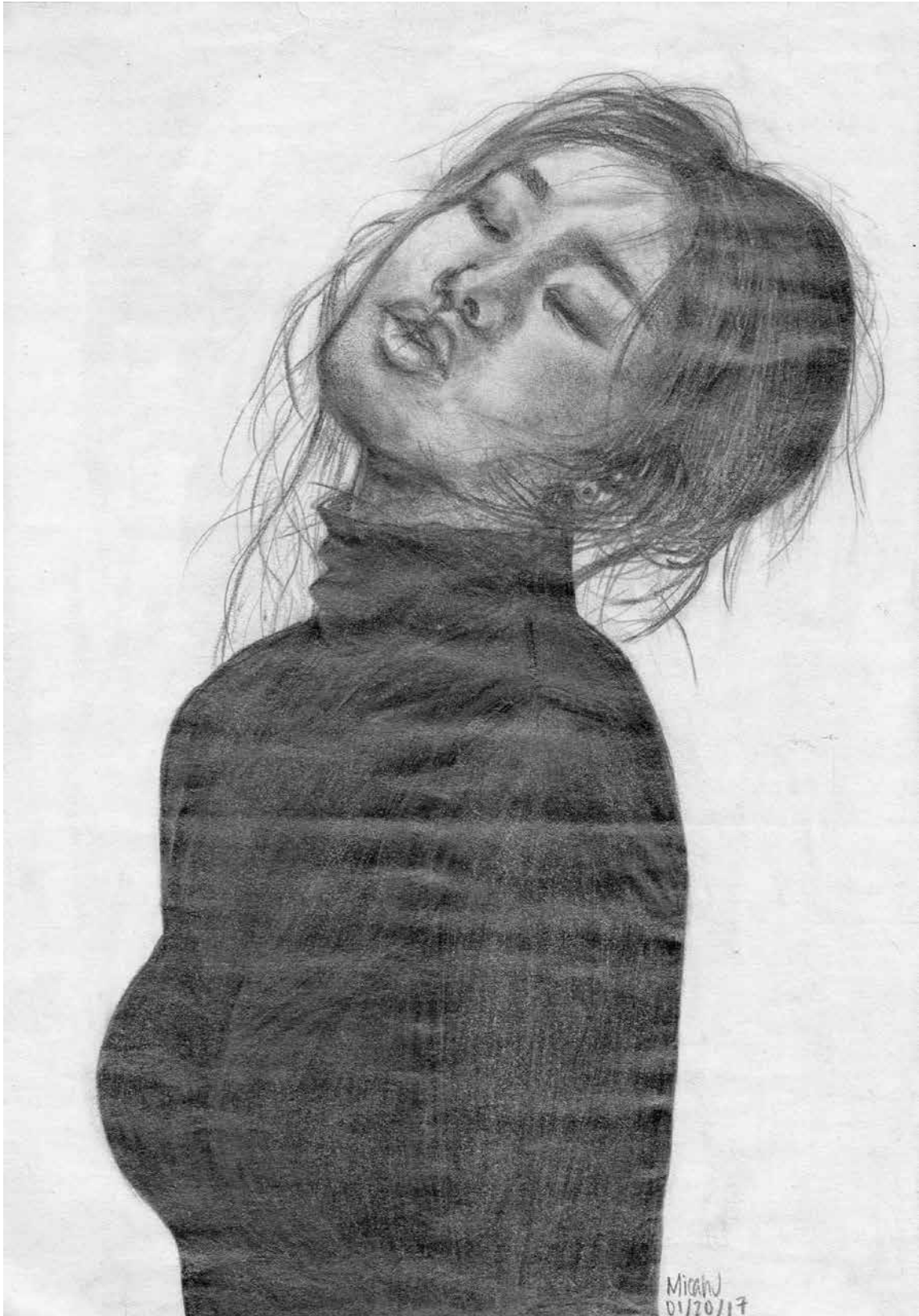
As I felt the beating stop, I could feel it rinse off my eyes.

And I saw the streams of blue. I could see the colours of above.

With a final breath, I looked at the dying lights in the distance.

And the red claimed my soul once again.

Lynn Wang, age 14



Sunk
Micah Jumaquio, age 17

Stars

I walked out to the car, holding the snacks Mom had given me. I sat down, adjusting the various bags around me. There were less now than when we came to the cottage a week ago, as my younger brother had left with my grandparents earlier in the day.

As we emerged onto the highway, the cloud cover dispersed, revealing the brilliant points of light underneath. Although only a small portion of the night sky was visible to me, I still gazed at the stars with wonder. I imagined them as memories, swirling through a nebula of thoughts. I allowed my mind to drift from star to star, from memory to memory. Eventually I landed on the time I had been at my grandparents during a meteor shower.

I walked out onto the road, ignoring the pain of rock on my bare feet. My grandparents stayed at the side of the road, watching. It was a quiet night, and I stared. Searching for a falling star.

Grandpa walked over to stand beside me, his hand on my shoulder. My brother had gone to bed already, so it was just us out here tonight. A woman walking her dog came by, and a slight breeze ruffled the otherwise still air.

"Maybe we should head—" Grandpa began.

But I interrupted him by whispering, "There!"

A pinpoint of light streaked down, disappearing behind the mild cloud cover.

Soon, another came streaking through the sky, followed by another and another. I saw my grandparents walk inside, telling me to come in soon.

My feet wanted to go in, to walk in the cool grass and stop the pain from the rocks. My neck wanted to move out of the position it had held for so long. My limbs wanted to stretch, to chase away the stiffness. My stomach wanted to go in and get some food, and my head wanted to curl up under the warm covers of my bed and dream. But my heart wanted to stay, to gaze up at the streaks of light decorating the sky like diamonds. To stay in this perfect moment for just a moment longer. So I stayed, counting the streaks of light that came down, and told myself, just a little longer.

I smiled fondly at the memory, gazing at the stars, and imagining streaks of light raining down like on that day.

Mom's voice cut into my thoughts. "This is the kind of night I was telling you about, Sophia! Who knows, maybe we'll see a spot to stop and look at them!" I remembered how Mom had dragged us out of our rooms to go see the stars, but when we came out, it was too early.

That reminded me of another time a year ago, five days after we came to the same cottage we had just left...

Five days ago we had driven down the street that I was now hiking down. I continued walking, wishing we hadn't gone on a hike so late.

"Look!" Grandpa's voice was barely a whisper. The sun had just set, the moon cast a pale glow. Something else was adding its light to the moon's. Several somethings, flickering in the moonlight, just beside the road.

"Fireflies!" I said, in an equally soft whisper. Karl was staring at the nearest ones, speechless for once. His look of amazement and wonder matched my own.

"Shhh!" Grandpa said, his eyes twinkling in the fireflies' light. Carefully, he walked to the side of the road and caught one of the tiny creatures. He opened his hand, and on his palm the firefly flickered indignantly before flying away, adding its light to the others.

"It's...beautiful!" I whispered, enchanted. To think I had, mere moments ago, wished I hadn't come! The fireflies flickered, as if to say 'we told you so!'

Grandpa smiled, obviously proud to have shown us this wonder. "Come on," he said. "It's time to go home." We reluctantly followed him, sad to leave the little lights behind.

"Can we see them tomorrow, Grandpa?" Karl asked. Grandpa only laughed. "Maybe."

Maybe was enough for me.

Again I smiled, even though we hadn't ended up going to see them again that year. But this year was a different story... I walked down the path to the cottage, before bumping into Dad in the darkness.

"Ow, what..." I began, before seeing what he was looking at. The setting sun reflected off the water, casting an orangey glow that was aided by tiny pinpricks of light in the bushes. Dad continued down the path, startling a group of fireflies, who flashed their indignation at his departing back.

"Come back to the cottage soon," he said as he walked away.

"Uh-huh," I said, barely listening. All around me, it was like an orchestra, led by the fireflies, with the birds, the frogs, the bugs and the fish. I stared, and told myself to never let that moment end.

But it did. The sun set and the biting bugs came out, finding every available spot to wiggle in and suck my blood. Just then, Dad came out, saying, "It's time to go inside, Sophia." I followed him, glancing back at the fireflies and telling myself that I'd come back.

The car rumbled to a halt. I blinked and looked up. The stars were not as visible in the city, but I knew there were still there. I helped unload the car and got ready for bed.

Later, when everyone was asleep, I thought about the fun I had had this summer, and got out of bed. I walked over to the window and looked out, staring up at the stars that could be seen. I smiled and walked back to bed. As I closed my eyes, I knew I would miss the cottage, but I took comfort in the fact that any stars I see are the same stars as the ones over any place, no matter where I am.

Sophia Thompson, age 12

Blizzard

A cold day it is, for
Birds to flock south. They glide on air
Currents, drifting and
Deviating from formation. The sun burns on the horizon but
Eventide or dawn, I cannot tell.
Forgotten forget-me-nots droop in neglect, their
Growth stunted from the morning's frost. The world
Holds its breath as the first flake falls.
It spirals to the pavement, a second flake soon
Joining it in its delicate descent; everyone
Knows what the first snowfall brings.
Leaves decompose beneath hurried footsteps,
Moisture clings to bare skin.
Not a soul is left
On the streets except those who wander without aim.
Patches of green grass fade brown and
Quiver in the quickening wind. Storm clouds
Roll into the sky and the
Snow silently begins. It falls soft at first,
Then thicker and stronger
Until all is hushed but the
Voice of the
Whipping wind. Parents pray the weather won't be the
X factor in their children's health; but
Yowling tots with fevers running high
Zap them of all hope.

Tegwen McKenzie, age 17

February Twenty-Third

was the day I became increasingly aware
of the fragility of the human condition.
In waves that came over me suddenly I was sinking
in the currents of existentialism and fear.
Being able to feel every beat in your chest is unnerving.
The bright lights in the night dance
in my eyes as they sting with tears.
When every breath feels forced I am forced to wonder
If every breath is beyond my power.
If every breath could seize in
one
two
three seconds
flat unlike the roads that shake me
to my core as each car passes.
I wonder when this will pass.
How many waves until I drown or I surface?
I can still hear each inhale.
Longing for calm.
Exhale.
Externalizing terror.
It was the day it all came rushing right back,
February twenty-third it became a bit too much.

Mackenzie Kaufman, age 14



The Diver
Giorgio Venturini, age 13

A Second Chance

“Sometimes, life gives you a second chance because you weren’t ready the first time.” –Unknown

What started out as a peaceful dinner conversation quickly morphed into a fiery clash of opinions between my mother and me. After much screaming and yelling, I finally left the war zone. My footsteps echoed through the house as I marched down the long narrow hallway to my room. With tears streaming down my face, I walked in, slammed the door, and sat on my bed. Then the image flashed in my mind – the hypnotic beeps of the heart rate monitor, the blue skin, the countless tubes hooked up to her...

It was the last day of school before the holidays. Like on any other morning, the school bus stopped in front of my house. I slipped on my favourite pair of shoes, unlocked the old weathered door, and was about to step outside when my parents called my name. I met their eyes and something told me it was much more serious than a forgotten lunch. I was told my mother would have surgery that day. *Why didn’t they tell me about the operation before? What’s wrong with Mom?* Thoughts swarmed my head but I couldn’t get a single word to come out of my mouth. All I could do was stare. It was then that the bus driver honked and I had to say goodbye.

That evening, my father and I had a silent dinner together. He refused to answer my questions regarding that morning’s incident and didn’t offer any information either. Later that night, my father drove us to the hospital. As the nurse guided us through the maze of hallways, she probably tried to make small talk with me but I had already tuned everything out. All I could hear was the roaring sound of blood rushing in my ears. I remember the blinding fluorescent lights that made me squint. I remember the pungent antiseptic scent that wafted through the halls, burning my nose.

When we finally reached our destination, my heart pounded against my chest to the point where my rib cage was about to explode. The large room contained about a dozen patient beds; all of which were empty – except one. In it lay a strangely familiar and motionless woman who looked as if she were of another planet. I stepped closer and my knuckles turned white as I gripped the bed rail. The sleeping stranger was hooked up to a million tubes. Her skin, the nurse explained, was blue because a dye had been injected into her bloodstream prior to the surgery. Hoping the entire situation was nothing but a bad dream, I closed my eyes and decided to focus on the rhythmic beeps of the heart rate monitor.

When I opened my eyes again, I still saw what looked like a scene taken right out of *Grey’s Anatomy*. This is not my mother, I said to myself. *My mother is strong and so full of life. How odd is it that the stranger lying two feet away from me is the same person who courageously left her war-torn country at the age of seventeen to sail across the ocean alone in search of a better future for her family?*

Christmas was a blur. The only thing I remember doing that week was trying to figure out the reason behind my mother’s operation. I asked my father, my older sisters, and even my mother; no one was willing to share any details with me. One day when I was alone in the house, I went into the kitchen. As I reached for my phone on the counter, I saw the corner of a manila folder sticking out from under the stereo speaker. Curious, I pulled the envelope out, carefully opened it, and skimmed its contents. Once I realized what I was reading, the books I was holding dropped to the ground with a loud *thud*. My hands trembled as I read the words over again. Like a dyslexic person, I found that the words on the page made absolutely no sense to me.

They say you don’t know what you have until it’s gone. The truth is, I knew *exactly* what I had; I just thought I would never lose it. That day, I learned my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. The words I read on that page forever altered my perspectives on life. I was hit with the harsh reality that my parents wouldn’t be around forever and this terrified me. I was reminded just how fragile life is and that the world as I know it could be turned upside down without a moment’s notice. I had heard so many stories about people dealing with cancer, but not once had it ever occurred to me that it could hit so close to home. As I sat against the fridge sobbing uncontrollably that afternoon, I made a promise to myself to never again take my health or the people I love for granted. I now know that each day is a gift and I don’t intend to waste it because for every day that passes, there is one day less to live.

After undergoing numerous sessions of radiation at the hospital, the doctors declared my mother cancer free. You see, until you’ve experienced darkness, you cannot truly appreciate the joy light brings. Not only did my mother receive a second chance at life, but so did I.

With tears streaming down my face, I walked in, slammed the door, and sat on my bed. The image flashed in my mind – the hypnotic beeps of the heart rate monitor, the blue skin, the countless tubes hooked up to her... So, like a phoenix rising from its ashes, I wiped my tears, made my way to the kitchen, and embraced her in my arms.

Elaine Le, age 15

A Battle of the Mind

They said that we did not conform,
Our wings were not aligned.

We were the thunder to a storm,
Our fingers to the sky.

We were the colours to the night,
We looked past all their lies.

We begged with open arms,
We tried a thousand times.

We were promised lavish land,
But it was a hollow bind.

We ran blindly to the arms of hope,
We forged an anthem from our cries.

Our screams fell to deaf ears,
Never to cross the line.

They said that we did not belong,
We were not at all their kind.

We turned east towards the sun,
And left our shadows cast behind.

A fight in futility cannot be won,
We must see eye to eye.

A fight lacking fists, not a smite to the heart,
A battle of the mind.

Look to the face of the souls you've killed,
Our voices must not die.

For we are one but not alike,
So hear my battle cry.

Kaylee Weir, age 13

A Reply to Frost

Inspired by "Nothing Gold Can Stay", by Robert Frost

Nature's first green is gold,
Increased a thousandfold,
But it shall fade away,
For nothing gold can stay.

Nature's first gold, when lost,
Gives way to silver frost,
Dawn goes to day to dark
With each new day we mark.

But there's a wondrous glow
In each fall'n flake of snow,
And stars have only shone
When other light is gone.

In a gale loud and strong,
There lies a full, rich song,
So therein lies delight
On a cold winter's night.

So as Eden sank in sin,
Goodness still lay within,
Love sprang from hateful earth
Through our new Saviour's birth.

There, through his grief and pain,
This world found life again,
So through the fall of man,
Pure, divine grace began.

So let the world turn grey,
Let it rain every day,
It's sad in the happiest way
That nothing gold can stay.

Angie Lo, age 16



Fear Factor
Anushri Mahadeo, age 15



An Orwellian Portrait
Megan Sharp, age 15

The Day the Poppies Bloomed

The field cradled the body of a lifeless soldier,
The stain of his blood made the day so much colder.
I'd imagined his pleas as he was brought to his knees,
How can man justify such savage killing sprees?
For it's a heavy cross to bear,
The price of warfare.

Those lost lay so courageous and young,
Countless heroes tragically unsung.
I wish I knew each soldier's story,
And whether they received their final glory.
Were they awarded medals of bravery?
Or, were they serving in conscripted slavery?

While generals counted those slain,
Had they ever wondered if their men died in vain?
For many say, two wrongs don't make a right,
Especially when it ends in a deadly fight.
As no one truly wins when there is fighting,
Because love is achieved only through uniting.

At the eleventh hour, during a moment of silence,
We pray for an end to violence,
And for the men and women who lost their lives,
To ensure peace survives.
May they never be forgotten,
Our freedom which was begotten.

Today, delicate red flowers are revealed,
Marking those fallen on the battlefield,
So we may remember, each mid-November...

The day the poppies bloomed.

Vienna Maryce, age 12

Refugees

Home isn't home anymore
Home is like a collapsing building
You have to leave before it's all gone
You see your city tearing apart
Just like the families who lost loved members
Your thoughts running faster than your legs
Your heart beating faster than the bullets
The boy you once knew is now holding a gun
No one leaves home
Unless home is hell
Unless water is safer
No one leaves home
Unless standing up is easier on water
You get into the boat
Thinking about what you're leaving behind
It's not something you ever thought of doing before
But now there is no choice but to leave
Knowing you will never go back
You tear up your passport at the airport
As you wipe each tear from your face
You try to wipe the memories that caused it
It's not home here
It's safe here
No matter how hard it is here
The pain is nothing compared to what you experienced before
It's a new country
A new culture
A new journey
And a hope for a better life

Parisa Arizi, age 15



Obsession

Ayumi Rankine-Rivers, age 16

On Top a Closet Shelf

O, Webkinz, dear Webkinz,
I'm grown up now and a farewell is due.
You've been chewed up and spit out,
and broken is your glue.
Many years ago
fluffy, fuzzy, soft you were
on top a closet shelf.

O, Webkinz, little Webkinz,
If it wasn't for you
the island of isolation is where I pace,
the crowds still chattering too,
about adventures in virtual space
that you could take me through.
Cute, furry, fleecy you were,
many years ago

O, Webkinz, dear Webkinz,
Now it is the end,
it wasn't always like this.
Many years ago
on top of a closet shelf.

Rui Wang, age 16

The Future as We Know

Our future as we know
Is not going to flow.
Teachers, lawyers, doctors,
All destined before we were born.

Many different roads,
But each of them holds
The same exact view.
Inanimate, indiscernible, without hue.

Like a man-made robot,
Like a programmed lot,
Made to do one job,
And never tired of.

Do we have the right
To choose our own path?
Or are we just another soul
To feel the wrath.

A world of teachers, lawyers, doctors.

Jerry Fan, age 15

Solitude Crunch

I push past the branches and avoid
the muddiest parts of ground
in an attempt to save my boots, already stained with exploration.
The forest is my adventure and my escape.

My uphill travel to find a spot for reflection, solitude
without loneliness, proves steep as
I pass J+R's love engraved in a tree, a romantic but tainted energy.

When I reach the top, the sky is littered with high-rises. Below lies a grey, cracked
parking lot with no more than six cars. A forest carved
from city is city nonetheless: a place where people are everywhere
but we find ourselves alone.

Katherine Sliwowicz, age 17

The Gardener

My mother always told me to get enough.
Enough sun to grow;
Enough water to bloom;
Until I climbed the trellis she set out,
And grew beyond the wall created by others.

She told me that I could do anything,
If only we cultivated the correct conditions;
That it's irrelevant I was planted in the shade,
So long as I strive for the light;
That it doesn't matter if I am a girl,
I will prove myself through intelligence and hard work.

She warned me of the weeds.
Of prickly old men that would dismiss me,
Hinder my growth to nothing as they invade my soils.
Of delicate dandelion girls with long thin stems,
Seeking to create more of their own.
She said that if I focus on spreading my roots,
None of these weeds would matter anyway.

She let me know that stunted growth is not an ending.
One bad season isn't a bad life.
Time will continue its cycle,
And I will grow again.
Frostbitten brown leaves will not remain,
They will slowly return to green.

My mother always made sure that I got enough.
Enough sun to grow;
Enough water to bloom.
So now I have climbed the trellis she set out,
And peeked above the wall created by others.

But there are things she never said.
She never told me
There's such a thing as too much;
Too much sun so I wither;
Too much water so I drown.

She never told me of what lay beyond that wall.
People with sunshine in their hair,
Glowing so bright I mistake them for what I need,
Burning if I get too close.
Somehow forgetting who I am,
And becoming a moth to a flame instead.

She never warned me of my own ambition,
A desire set deep within,
Strewn throughout every cell of my being,
Rotting my own roots.
I try to get more, more, more,
Refusing to recognize the damage I cause as leaves wilt.

She didn't let me know how much it would hurt,
To be a child and have my petals plucked
One by one then thrown in the dirt.
How to recover from mutilation,
Bugs tearing holes in my leaves,
Leaving me incomplete.

But she didn't know.
She couldn't predict the weather.
Sometimes you can't tell there will be a storm
Until thick grey clouds loom overhead,
Until the wind whips your hair and drops begin to fall.

My mother tried.
She set the framework for my growth,
And I may have been planted in the shade,
But this woman ensured I had sun
In a way no one ever will.

I remember a promise she made one night,
As the sun set and mosquitoes came out.
No matter how large I grew,
No matter how far my branches reached,
Or how deep my roots dug,
She would be there for me.

If I somehow fall below this wall once again,
Whether it's heavy wind blowing me away,
Too many seasons of scorching sun one after another,
Intense rains pounding me into nothing,
Or my own stupidity:
She will be there.

If I'm ever back to the ground,
She'll be waiting with a watering can.
She'll have shears to prune those nasty weeds.
She'll nurture me until I can facilitate my own growth
Even if I still need that trellis she set up so many years ago.

She has always said a lot.
She has also been silent when no words will work.
More than she has said,
She has done.
My mother will one day wither,
And at that time I hope I can be there
With a watering can, shears, and anything else I can give her.
To get anywhere close to what she's given me.

Dayna Densmore, age 18

The Myth of the SJW

When I first heard the term “social justice warrior,” it didn’t occur to me that it was derogatory. Social justice itself is where the goal is social, political, and economic equality, and warriors seem pretty cool, with their shining armour and shinier teeth. But then you push these words together and this grotesque image appears in your mind. It’s a woman, of course, because society never lets them raise their voices without consequence. She does not shave her armpits. She’ll argue so mercilessly that she’ll just end up losing to herself. You are trained to detest her. But does this woman, flower crown and all, really exist?

Let’s start with the yelling. Even though most of the time this angry feminist bitch (my other favourite nickname) uses an online medium, it’s somehow accepted that the louder a social justice warrior yells, the less valid her point is. Why? We yell when we’re passionate, when we actually feel something, and of course if you have any emotional connection to the subject in question, whether that is systemic racism or criminalizing ugg boots, you are immediately disqualified from participating. Maybe that’s why we spend black history month listening to white people read poems. Or maybe we’re all cowards, and maybe we only want to have insightful political conversations when it’s in the abstract. Maybe it’s fine to discuss how degrading Trump’s comments about women/Hispanics/Muslims/Arnold Schwarzenegger are until an actual minority joins the conversation. Because when we’re faced with the reality that we are far from a perfect world and all we want is to escape it, it’s easy to say that tears and clutched fists are signs of cowardice. Because then the leftist (nickname #3) might shut up.

What might piss me off the most is this armpit thing. You can listen to a man wearing a leisure suit ramble on for a whole hour on TV and actually listen to what he says, but a woman can spend three hours preparing for a five minute segment on the evening news and still there would be a meme somewhere about her boxy eyebrows. While the anti-SJW (an actual thing which is also not very creative) sits there in his recliner holding a bottle of Mountain Dew, pushing back his greasy hair, confident that sexism doesn’t exist in

the society, he has the nerve to say that a woman he deems unbangable shouldn’t speak until he deems otherwise. It’s not even subtle when you read an article on the glass ceiling and decide that the real thing holding women back is that they just refuse to smile and look pretty. It’s old-school sexism. And it’s much, much worse than a woman who didn’t feel like shaving her underarms that morning.

And this arguing, those mile-long comment threads under innocent videos online that end with the SJW finally being tripped up, left with nothing to say, is just the biggest heap of bullshit. I can’t count the amount of times I’ve seen someone try to have an intelligent conversation starting with a well-researched and completely justified point, only to be attacked because they made a grammar mistake in the third line. And the attacker is almost always beaming in the knowledge that they’ve mastered the rules of the English language, which make no sense and have virtually no practical use. It’s not that these SJWs who you think so little of have no basis to their arguments, it’s that there’s no give-and-take. No one listens to each other anymore. We’re all just waiting to humiliate each other because there’s simply no way that we are wrong.

So where does that leave us? Divided? SJWs, and anti-SJWs, and the people who must never have had an opinion in their life? NO. If the world were that simple we’d have split apart by now (which sounds like a really incredible space fantasy movie, but I digress). The truth is that we’re all just people. Granted some of us are shitty people who wholeheartedly agree with everything the angry mango – I mean Trump – says. But most of us are just people who realize that we don’t have much to gain from someone else out there losing out. We’re all confused and desperate for a better world where we can all be happy in our weird little lives. So maybe there isn’t a girl with pastel hair somewhere angrily typing away, embodying the stereotype that I’ve tried so hard to avoid, and maybe there also really isn’t a gamer with a fedora waiting for her to finish her response. Maybe, as difficult as this may be, we just need to listen, and actually hear each other.

Aysha Tabassum, age 16



Appetence
Mary Chen, age 16



Not a Number

Curled up in bed with a book inches away from her nose was a little girl. Every day the words imprinted on the page nourished her mind, imparting new knowledge to feed her brain. Nearly half a decade ago, her subconscious already knew something important. The world she lived in was not one she could call her own. So she found a way to transport herself elsewhere temporarily. On the edge of one world and immersed in another, she buried her head in books to drown out the noise for hours at a time. She claimed the gift of reading for herself. At the time, she didn't realize fictional worlds – no matter how terrible – seemed like perfect fairy tales compared to real life.

I was unaware the world could be so cruel.

*

Her mom reached for a camera. Propped up on the table was a birthday cake. Familiar faces crowded around her like floating balloons. She heard the audible click followed by a white, blinding flash. The innocuous images depicted a misleading story much like headlines in a tabloid magazine.

I should have known all along that pictures were incapable of capturing the truth hidden behind a lying smile.

*

A blanket of snow covered the ground outside. Blood coursed inside her body, raining down. Moving into womanhood should have been a good thing. She started to understand more than she did two years ago. The child wondered what would have happened if she'd stuck inside her safe haven, stayed within the confines of her room with books containing black and white words. Expansion meant exposure to images so phony they may as well have been sweetened dreams. It meant having to grasp how the media portrayed women. Flipping through TV channels or magazines is how she delved into the society she would live in for her entire lifetime. She got her first taste of what society deems as beautiful. Comments were aimed and fired like a gunshot. Airbrushed skin, artificial body, abstract face. This woman is the ideal.

I am not.

*

The girl started to believe every snicker or whisper about her. Walking down the hall was akin to strutting down a runway, except everyone watched with judgmental minds and foul mouths. Without sugar-coating words, boys and girls alike voiced their opinion to her face. A thank you would come much later.

At eleven, I was too upset to be grateful.

*

Since she was put down constantly, she lost the ability to tell time accurately. She started to feel like she had been mocked her whole life. Hope flickered out faster than she could swallow.

I felt my current situation would never change simply because I was trapped in my body – an unwanted, undesirable one at best.

*

By now, the teen had lost track of every single night she cried. Silently. It was her problem. No one else's. People kept telling her to go on a diet. But food became her way of coping.

Later I came to realize my refusal to diet suggested a love for myself deeper than I imagined possible.

*

Discovering dance didn't take her by surprise. When she first started, she had little confidence.

Dance gave me a chance to express myself when words were not enough.

*

A vicious cycle churned in her stomach like poison. Each time she hit a low point because her raw body didn't fit the mould the media shoves down everyone's throat, she ate. And ate. Needless to say, she blamed herself. No one came to realize this. Every time a person pointed it out, their remarks only served to cut deeper.

People felt the need to mention my flaw, even though it was visible to me.

*

Fat had a negative connotation. With every passing second, this word and many others like it continued to develop an increasingly damaged reputation. When did words become an all-consuming weapon? A way to harm, to shame, to degrade? In retrospect, she felt like she was bullied for more than just being fat. Misconceptions and stereotypes surrounded people like her. We're lazy. She dances every day. We're weak. She can perform over fifty push-ups in a row. We're eating all the time. She can barely stand to eat in front of others.

I was reduced to labels.

*

She was better now. Less self-conscious, more confident. She never liked wearing jeans before. Not because she didn't like jeans but because they served to burn her body, leaving marks on places no one saw. She'd had zero dresses in her closet. Now she had one for every occasion because she was done with feeling eaten alive from the inside out. She stopped trying to fit someone else's ideal, and she started to chase her own.

I want to be happy and healthy.

*

It took me a long time to realize it is not my size that matters in this battle.

She is not a number. She is more than that.

Herminia Chow, age 19

Smother

i. classification /
the world split at birth
chasm cracked against the sun
dawn rose early.
she did not.

ii. symbolization /
she reeks of tea leaves
sweats monsoon water
cinnamon bark for bones,
cardamom on her shoulders–
she bleeds alchemy

iii. persecution /
tugged a boat to eschaton
found the edge of the world
the drop to extinction
i love you, he'd said
it's genocide in slow motion

iv. extermination /
i exist
i exist
i exist

v. denial /
where'd you go last night?
just the apocalypse, on 5th–
was it any good?
it was...okay.
what was it this time? earthquake, divine intervention...
genocide.
oh. who died?
i don't...i don't remember. i told you it wasn't very
interesting.
well, who did the killing?
i don't know either. i just know there was no one left.

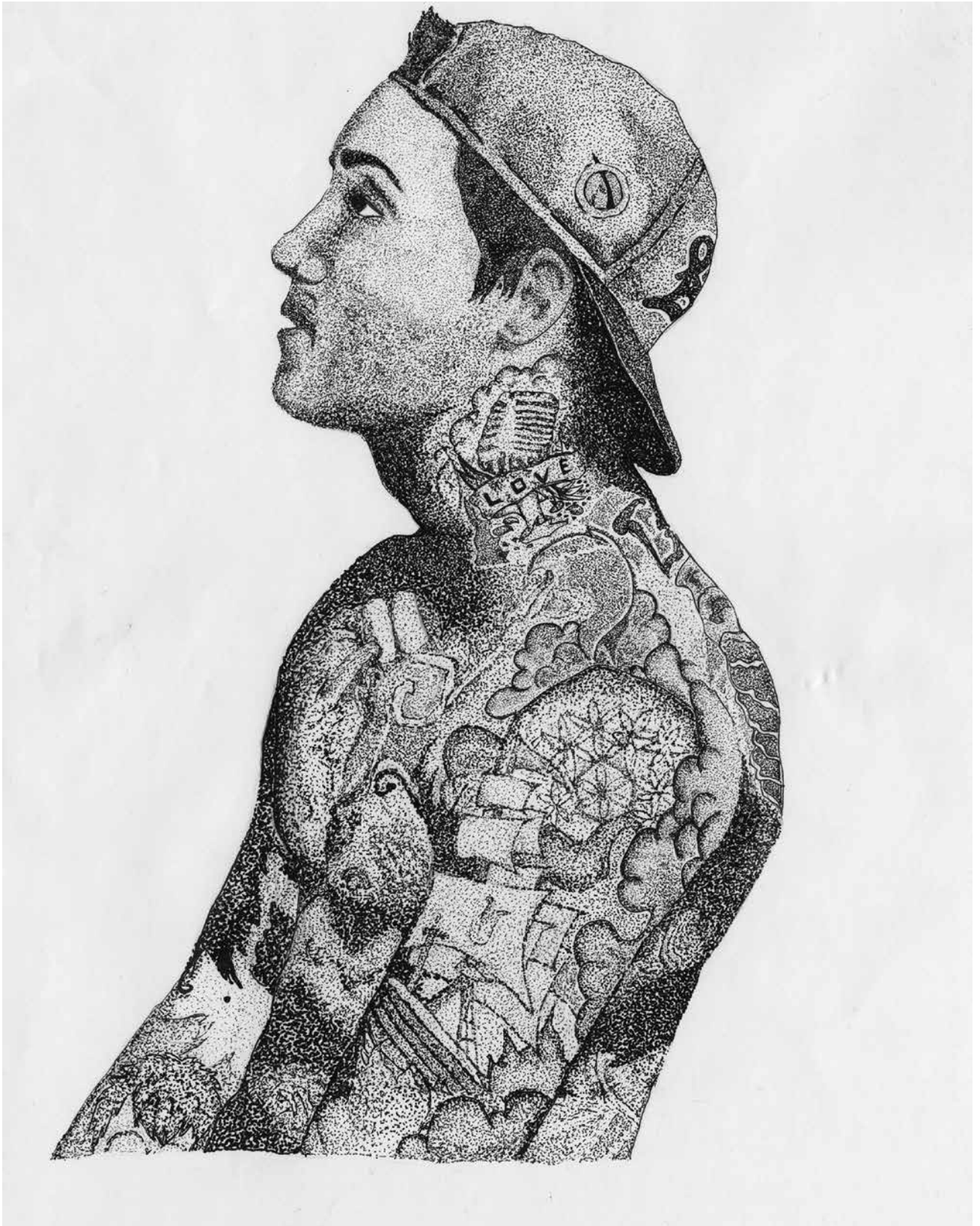
Steph Wang, age 16

The Day

The day is alive–
the sun, the birds, the grass, the wind–
every sound and colour a facet
of her face–
gently rounded with hills,
a deep vale for her nose,
the wide, endless expanse
of the lake
as her monsoon hair–
the dark larks
tumbling
across
like hairpins–
her proud arch
the shadows of trees,
swaying with every breath,
her arms reflecting
the gold of the ground–

it's as if the world is murmuring
soft secrets
in your ears–
every fallen leaf
forgotten,
every blue sky
matched
to a lost hue,
every dress fluttering–
living
purely,
with no
interruption.

Vivian Li, age 18



Romeo
Yoana Vasileva, age 17

Snowfall

The sky is dull and cloudy. Snow falls to the ground in waves, reducing visibility. Bullets fly out in all directions; bodies drop like flies. A young soldier sits inside a trench, out of the line of fire. His comrades stand around him, exchanging shots with the unseen enemy. An artillery shell lands mere feet from his hole, causing his ears to ring violently. He attempts to drown out the screams of his allies. He pulls out a blank piece of paper and begins to write:

To my dearest mother,

I feel like it hasn't been long since I last laid eyes upon you. I am dreadfully sorry for the infrequency of my letters as of late. The General had us transferred to the front lines, and as you can imagine, there isn't much time for writing here. I only have a brief moment to finish this letter before I must return to my duties.

The war is beginning to take its toll on me. As I mentioned, I am now fighting on the front lines. The General says my services are required here, as we need more men to cover for those we've lost. And yet, I don't see the General fighting here alongside me. The coward has held himself up in his bunker, miles down the road. He's sending us to our deaths.

I fear my days are numbered. As I write, the carnage continues around me. Many of my good friends have gone missing in action. I assume the worst for all of them. Those that I can still see are struggling to survive. Our only hope now is that the enemy is just as stretched thin as we are. Perhaps the few of us who still live can pick off their remaining stragglers and come home safe. It's a long shot.

Don't cry for me when I am gone. This is exactly what I signed up for. If I die, I will die in defense of my country and friends. I will die defending you. A death such as this is honourable, and I will not wish for anything less. I hope you can forgive me for my recklessness. Everything I've done is for you and Beth. I trust you and father will take good care of her in my absence. I love you all very much.

Sincerely yours,
Your son, Benjamin

A loud, piercing bell rings out above the trenches. All weapon fire ceases. The living soldiers drop their snowballs and emerge from their snow forts. The "dead" stand up, and join their comrades. They all move toward the source of the bell together. The fifth grade students mingle with each other once again. They are no longer enemies. Recess is over.

Benjamin adds one last sentence to his letter before he returns to class:

P.S. Please put peanut butter squares in my lunch tomorrow.

Nicholas Lamanna, age 17



Angelina Zhang, age 14

Where I'm From

I am a bright red Canadian maple, standing tall and proud,
My branches stretch from the blue and beautiful Pacific to the great and boisterous Atlantic.
My roots have meandered across vast continents,
Absorbing nourishment from the world around me.
My seeds were planted in the rich red soil of the Pearl of Africa,
This is where I'm from and where my heart will always be.

I'm from the happiest and most carefree days of my life,
Flying kites soaring like eagles in the silky blue sky,
Making breathtaking bicycle kicks and cunning crossovers on big boy fields and courts.
I'm from exploring the great outdoors,
Building billowing crimson tents in gigantic sugar cane forests,
Heeding the harmonious chorus of chirping crickets under a gorgeous velvety blanket of stars.

I'm from grand shelves of delectable sweets,
Savouring every mouth-watering bite of crunchy Kit Kat bars,
Secretly chewing on ooey-gooney lip-smacking toffees late into the night.
I'm from succulent plates of samosas, biryanis and kebabs created in Mom's kitchen,
Smelling the smokiness of roasted cassava on flickering firepits,
Devouring every last crumb of delicious African doughnuts, washed down with an aromatic cup of tea.

I'm from a life full of excitement,
Exploring endless emerald and gold plantations,
Darting in and out of umbrellas chock full of fresh ripe bananas.
I'm from the craziness and extremes of go-karting,
Hurling down vertiginous red slopes,
Daring me out of the world of "Hey! Take it easy!"
I'm from fizzling fires stoked at night,
Telling bone-chilling tales of powerful jinns and mysterious hauntings,
Enjoying the giddy peace and freedom in my life.

I'm from a life full of old-school music,
Cranking up stereo sets listening to The King crooning,
Singing along to "I'm a Believer" when times got tough.
I am from a cartoony life,
Giving Mr. Spock the Vulcan salute,
Riding in the Batmobile through a crime-ridden Gotham City,
Opening myself up to a new world full of twists and turns.

I'm from boyhood heroes, explorers and freedom fighters,
Dazzled by Armstrong's leap into the universe,
Inspired by the dreams of King, Kennedy, Ghandi and Mandela.
I'm from the victories of star athletes,
Amazed by the Louisville Lip's knockout punches, "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,"
Astounded by Pelé's electrifying style and spectacular goals,
My iconic figures treasured for the rest of my born days.

I'm from heartbroken moments travelling alone to unknown places,
Trekking across the rolling Prairies, magnificent Rockies and fast-moving highways,
Growing stronger as my roots stretch further.
I'm from heavy suitcases and ornate carved boxes,
Filled with precious jewels, mined and carved before my seeds were planted,
These are true "reflections of the way life used to be."

Now here I stand, the majestic Canadian red maple,
My roots nurtured by the opulence of Persia, paradoxes of India, spirits of Zanzibar and the fruits of Uganda,
I am firmly planted in "the true north strong and free," Canada, my forever home.

Shakeel Jivraj, age 12

Journal Entry #56

I am going to be late to work today. There always seems to be a problem with the subway nowadays. There are two girls sitting a few seats away from me. One of them is wearing a worn-out green coat with boots up to her knees. I'm going to call her Green Coat. The other is a lot taller and has her attention to her phone while her friend rambles. "It's been a year since I've talked to him," Green Coat says. "Good. I'm proud of you," her friend nods, still looking at her phone. "I wonder if he even thinks about me at all. Do you think he's even thought about contacting me?" Green Coat continues. Her friend sighs. It seems like she's heard this story before. Green Coat is speaking too fast for me to write everything down. Apparently the boy and her were just friends. She had feelings for him though. Apparently she was the only one initiating their conversations but he was always friendly and engaging. Apparently they were close. Her friend has turned off her phone. "You need to get over this. He doesn't care. If he did, he would have said something this past year. He hasn't. So why is he still so important to you?" she says. Someone calls her. It's her mom. Green Coat has been quiet for a few minutes now. She's looking at her hands. She's wearing white nail polish. The subway screeches and comes to a stop. More than fifteen people rush in. It's one of the busier stops. Bloor Street. One of the new passengers has a blue hat that matches her lipstick. My guess is she's an art student. Probably works at Lush. What a cutie. The friend turns to Green Coat and asks which stop they're getting off at. She says Dundas. I wonder if they're locals. The phone call has finally ended but her friend brings up the boy again. "You have to move on. It's not healthy. You bring him up every chance you get." "Yeah you're right. Besides, even if I did see him again, there's no way I could face him after everything. Grade-nine me was so embarrassing," she laughs. It's nice to see her smile. The speakers have announced our arrival at Dundas. They're waiting by the door now. I hope Green Coat turns out okay. I hope she forgets about him. It's unfortunate that those we think the world of, think nothing of us.

Nika Dariani, age 16



Girlbest
August Kay, age 18

Patience, Mija

“Do you think we could repaint the walls, Mama?”

Before she could answer, the bakery door swung open as a boy, no older than sixteen, strolled into the shop. His hands were tucked in the pockets of his tattered green jacket as he glanced at the pastries that were displayed beautifully on the table.

Behind the counter, Maria nudged her mother, who was counting the coins in the cash register. “Take a look at that.” Helen looked up and across the room to where her daughter, Maria, was pointing. Through the crowd of people, she spotted a boy who was opening cases that held their pastries and bread. She watched as her daughter’s gaze flickered suspiciously to the boy, then back at her mother.

Helen merely chuckled. The woman was in her forties and had been running the shop for years, ever since it had been passed down to her by her mother. “Don’t be so paranoid. Patience, *mija*.” She reached for a cake that had just been made and was to be picked up later that evening. Weekends at the bakery were surprisingly busy in such a small town. Outside, the sun was nearly gone from the sky; the remaining streaks of sunlight peeked through the cracks in the clouds. Over by the bread case, the boy stuffed something in his jacket.

“Mama! Did you not see that!” Maria exclaimed quietly, frowning. She had been watching the boy for a while now.

“*Gracias*.” Her mother smiled at the customer she was currently serving. “Patience, *mija*. I’m sure he will come to his senses.” Maria glared at the ground furiously. How could her mother ignore that? She was about to rush forward to confront the boy, but Helen caught her wrist.

“Maria, could you go to the back and wash the *cacerolas*?” Her gaze was never removed from the customer in front of her. With a huff, Maria stormed to the back still thinking about the boy in the green jacket.

Maria came back out just as her mother was closing the shop. There were very few customers left in the bakery. She grabbed a broom from the corner and helped clean up behind the counter. The bell on the bakery door rang abruptly as Maria snapped her head up.

She spotted a flash of green, the tail of a green jacket rushing away outside. Looking through the window, Maria widened her eyes, dropping her broom and running outside despite her mother’s protests.

“*Ladrón*,” Maria yelled as she ran after him, her brown hair flying in her face. “Stop!”

By now, the sun was gone. The moon cast an eerie glow on the pavement. Maria searched the streets frantically for the boy. She thought that she had lost sight of him until she spotted a figure turn the corner ahead. She skidded to a stop, not wanting to run anymore. Catching her breath, she focused angrily on the boy in front of her.

“Have you no shame?” she yelled, clenching her fist. “Mama baked those herself, you can’t take those!” In the distance, the boy didn’t move. Maria walked closer, anger now turning into despair.

“Please, we need that bread.” Closer she went, and yet, the boy stood still.

Their financial situation was terrible – her mother tried to hide it from her, her older sisters tried to hide it from her, but Maria knew. Soon, they wouldn’t even be able to afford their house, much less the bakery. She wasn’t told any of this – they hid it from her. *She’s too young*, one of her sisters said, *she needn’t know this*. But eventually, Maria found out and she’d never felt more helpless in her life. Why was she chasing after a few, leftover pieces of bread?

Maybe, if I get this bread back, I can prove that I can help.

But she knew, deep inside, it wouldn’t prove anything. The only thing it would prove was that she was immature enough to rush blindly into a situation she couldn’t handle.

Patience, mija.

Her mother was right.

She couldn’t do anything – not here, not now. Maria backed away slowly. She glanced at the boy once more, before running back towards the bakery. She could help, but this wasn’t the way to do it. Every story didn’t need to have a perfect ending.

And as Maria walked away, she understood that the boy in the tattered green jacket might have realized something too.

Jennica Cai, age 14



Ganesha
Priya Thakur, age 17

Where Courage Lives

When I was young I thought fear was an ugly, feral monster
With gnarly claws and a pallid visage
It could pucker out up to ten dripping fangs
According to its greed
I named it Dragon
I thought courage was a knight
My saviour who would fight Dragon for me
Knight wasn't afraid of anything—
But Knight did have a weakness
Knight only won battles when Dragon was feeble
So I spent most of my childhood avoiding people
I neglected opportunities
And shied away from the online world
I felt powerless when Dragon tightened its icy grip on Knight
Eventually, Dragon's scorching breath
Led to Knight's cessation
Nothingness swallowed me that day
I expected Dragon to be defeated only after my heart was

It was a frosty night in winter when Courage met me
Or rather, I met Courage
My father's putrid, alcoholic odour
Partly withdrew from the bedroom
There was a creak and a slam,
And then a whiff of frigid air fondled my naked body
But something unusual happened that night
The lamp in the room lit up
It was unprecedented,
As normally darkness would suffocate me
But no, this time the lamp turned on
This time the light turned on
I saw in front of me a frail, rejected figure
Eyes that were weary of obfuscation
Lips so tight they were blue
In the corner laid shattered pieces of glass
I could hear them invite me to an escape
But I turned back to the light
And chose

One year later and I still breathe

I breathe because I met Courage
Courage taught me things
Courage taught me that Knight and Dragon were illusory
They never existed and never will
Courage introduced me to Fear
The real Fear
Me
I am Fear
But I am also Courage
Courage is the iron in my red blood cells,
Clinging to oxygen,
No matter how hard Fear tries to thrust it away
It resides in my cornea
Allowing me to see clearly
Even when Fear's spit blurs my view
Courage encourages me to speak my mind
Despite Fear's devilish whispers
Courage had always resided inside of me
It just needed permission to be let out
Courage is an innate power that all of us possess
It's our weapon against Fear—
Not to eliminate it—
But to tame it
To confine it to a cage
Fear will always exist
But I have the power to control it
I have Courage
I have me

Zara Ahmad, age 18

When We Were Young

Part 1: When We Were Young

In sight and sound of days long past
On sea and shore and wind-scorched town
Stood I, and you, and remembrance
In gentle chiding song.

Do you remember, in springs afar
The hope of summer come?
Remember the gleam of sleep-stained ink
On brightly mended scars?
Shall I etch deep
On stone and heart
A capture of age ebbed gone?
Or simply graze in night's embrace
And let the dawn be fond?

I must leave and dream and be now
Be all it is we dream
Shall be just as grand
And just as sweet knowing
When you and I were young.

Part 2: A Thought

Let us return to a faded day
Far, far away from now—
A mere speck of past upon the bay—
To rewrite what the stories say.

Where would you go?
Where would you stay?
What night, what light, what fray?
Would you take back
A mighty sword
To prove your worth of late?

For all souls lament for
Some deed they've done
In some sense, some form, some way
Yet all men rejoice for some joy they kept
And brought forth onto this day.
So choose, or lose, the path is yours
To keep or burn or slay
Would you soar back into the past
To right all the wrongs disgraced?

Part 3: Sunset

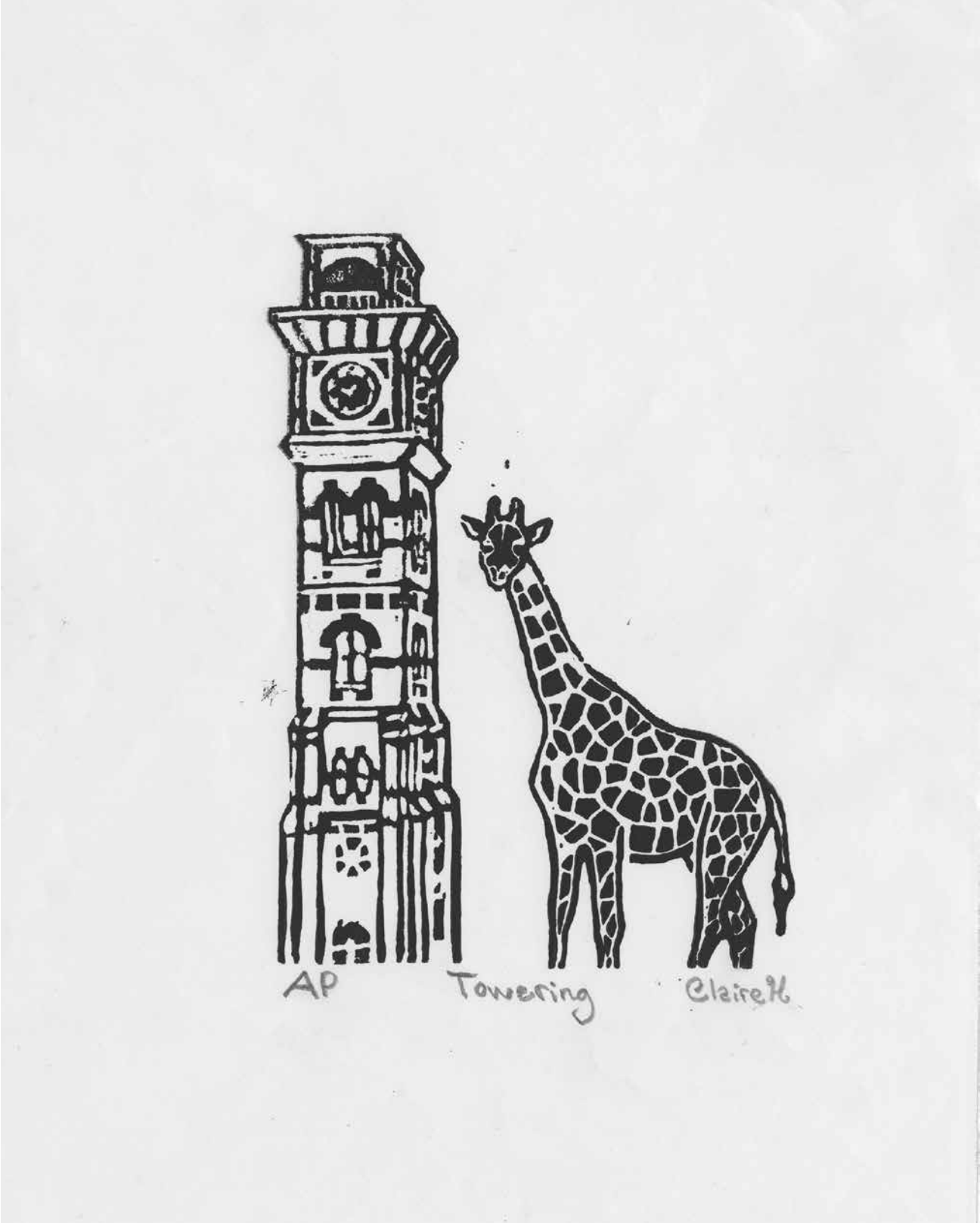
So swiftly it comes upon the dusk
The dawning of dark and night
And the sky halts not for the
Hovering haze or the looming mystic show
And so suddenly
The earth is specked
With a fiery orange hue
Then dappled soft
With a radiant touch of gentle golden tones
And they charm and flirt and tease and shout
For the reverence of the moon
Until there is but a single scrawl
Of the sun from which they bled.

So it shall come and it shall go
Each coming, passing day
And we shall blaze and we shall ebb
Quite soon into this maze.

So please promise me that from this day on
You won't regret the sun
You'll live and love and want and give
Without a silhouette of regret
For so brief a time that we all have
To journey upon the earth
Yet so great a gift to find and give
So grand a tale to share
Do not waste breaths upon the blind
To urge them into sight.
Care not for those who cling to dust

They were not meant for flight.

Jessica Wang, age 16



Towering
Claire Hinton-Albert, age 18

Let's Talk About *Get Out*

Get Out is a social thriller that has a near-perfect rating on Rotten Tomatoes and has recently surpassed earnings of \$100 million at the box office, making writer/director Jordan Peele the first black person to do so with his debut film. However, *Get Out* is significant not only because of the critical acclaim it has garnered, but because of the social and political commentary the film offers in both overt and subtextual forms of symbolism. *Get Out* effortlessly confronts as well as interrogates the maintenance of racist white supremacist hegemonic systems that continue to carry out indiscriminate racial violence against black people and PoC (people of colour).

The Liberal White Moderate and White Allyship

Get Out opens with a black man walking down a typical suburban street, joking on the phone about how he always gets lost because the street names sound the same. However, a car passes him, turns around, and starts following him as he continues to navigate the eerily quiet neighbourhood. The opening scene sets the premise of the film by highlighting how the greatest threat to black people and PoC cannot be limited to idealistic and stereotypical manifestations of racist white supremacy often depicted in popularized media (like the KKK cross-burning). It is the liberal white moderates woven into cookie-cutter suburban communities (with street names that sound the same), who do not view themselves as "racist," or swear that they are not like those "other" white people, who pose the greatest threat to black people and PoC. When the protagonist, Chris, expresses hesitance about meeting his white girlfriend's parents, she dismisses his concern by asserting that her father "would have voted Obama a third time." Rose consistently pays Chris lip service to paint herself as a good white ally but, secretly, she is only luring him in to further her family's racist agenda.

Gaslighting

Desmond Cole describes being gaslighted in "The Skin I'm In": "When I told my white friends about these encounters with police, they'd often respond with skepticism and dismissal, or with a barrage of questions that made me doubt my own sanity." There is a dichotomy in cultural consciousness that becomes evident when black folks and PoC condemn the unethical practice of racial profiling that maintains the hegemonic order of racist white supremacy that dehumanizes, antagonizes and commodifies black and coloured bodies. But, the white liberal moderate is swift to microinvalidate these lived experiences by portraying racial profiling as an uncomfortable yet useful investigative tool used by law enforcement officers who are equally concerned for the safety of all citizens. Cole describes having a "'double-consciousness': how blacks experience reality through their own eyes and through the eyes of a society that prejudices them."

When Chris arrives at Rose's house, he is immediately met with waves of microaggressions as her father code-switches, launching into AAVE. He immediately dehumanizes and compartmentalizes Chris, failing to even converse with him properly because of his visible blackness. White folks are often hesitant, and even defensive, when it comes to acknowledging the urgency and legitimacy of issues faced by black folks (especially black men) presently. The reductive action of "othering" (or erasing blackness) is rooted in racist white supremacist ideologies that condition white people and NBPOC (Non-Black People of Colour) to fear and subsequently deny black people's humanity because they are deemed dangerous. The pervasiveness of white hegemony historically manifested in slave labour and the ownership over black bodies that granted white people the power to oppress black people; however, white hegemony is pervasive and continues to resurface in elusive (but still damaging) ways.

Cultural Appropriation

During a garden party commemorating Rose's late grandfather, Chris is treated like a zoo animal when affluent white guests invade his space to touch his body and even ask him inappropriate sexual questions. This behaviour is a result of white people being conditioned (in a racist white supremacist society) to believe they have colonial domination over black bodies, where their whiteness functions ideologically to grant them the ability to violate Chris without fearing repercussions. As Louis Althusser argues, "ideology has very little to do with 'consciousness'...It is profoundly unconscious...Ideology is indeed a system of representation." White supremacy, then, is strengthened by its invisibility that enables it to function ideologically and uphold structures that maintain and perpetuate white hegemony through society's collective unconscious. Take Chris, who has learned through social conditioning and his lived experiences as a black male, that it is likely in his best interest to avoid hostility and appear polite in the face of the manifestation of such systems upheld by laws that vilify (and often murder) black protest and resistance. Chris is asked, notably by an NBPoC, "Is the African-American experience an advantage or disadvantage?" Peele strategically inserts an Asian man to demonstrate how NBPoC hold a level of privilege by simply not being black, and can thereby still take on the role as oppressors by siding with anti-black views held and perpetuated by white people. The desire of white people and NBPoC to dispose of Chris's identity and sport his skin like a coat, taking advantage of the cultural implications derived from blackness, echoes Blue Telusma's article on the sexualized black body. Telusma argues, "This idea that 'black equals erotic' is fetishism in its purest form; it mocks 'otherness' while pretending to celebrate it and defines human beings by their genitals instead of seeing them as whole people." This leads to mainstream acceptance of black female features in the absence of a physical black body, strengthening a "cultural landscape that continues to appropriate all things black" while maintaining white colonial systems of hegemony that continue to perpetuate violence against black folks.

More Than a Conversation

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* expertly conveys the nuance and complicated nature surrounding interactions between black folks, NBPoC, and white folks, all under the shadow of slavery and white supremacy. The commentary the film provides only amplifies the gruesome nature of the plot, and audiences are left with much to ponder and, perhaps, to change. The conversation, however, should not stop there.

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Terms

AAVE: African American Vernacular English.

Code Switching: the practice of alternating between two or more languages or forms of language in conversation.

Gaslighting: the manipulation of a person by psychological means to get them to question their own sanity

Microaggression: a seemingly harmless action or statement that contains heavily bigoted undertones noticed by members of marginalized groups.

Microinvalidate: A form of microaggression that negates or excludes a person's thoughts or feelings.

Anu Ohri, age 19



Early Mornings
Abby Joyce Tibon, age 16

Who are you?

I am a teenager.

I am the anxious, the reckless, and the wise fool under the influence of a freedom we can and cannot taste.

I am the transition from the innocent to the self-destruction of discovery.

We are but the confused, and for sure I am the uncertain.

Who am I again?

We are the metaphors for the depths of the sea. For our minds are the abyss, deep enough to swallow us whole.

We are the sticks of dynamite, lost in oblivion. Waiting to be lit with sparks of inspiration and motivation or be damned to be lit with fifty percent depression and the other half anxiety.

Ask me again. "Who am I?"

I am the thin line between black and white – but there's no shade of grey.

I am either half full or half empty.

I dare to know but the more I know, the less I do.

We are but explorers. Explorers sent out in the middle of nowhere, out to sea. Only to find more questions than answers.

Only to find answers of self-discovery and a questionable light of acceptance deep in the fissures our thoughts are embedded in.

We continuously try to look for our own definition of home.

But who knew home was not a place but a feeling. A home we often look for in the ruins of questionable happiness. A happy for a high and the feeling of uncertainty and indifference for the past.

Who are you?

We are the unknown, we are the teenagers.

We are the young – but the not so young, we are the in-betweens.

We are the ones we wanted to be at the age of eight. But who knew we'd want to go back so bad?

Today we are the ones we didn't picture ourselves to be, the outsider and the unknown.

Elisha Manila, age 17

Excerpt from *Mila*

My family and I have escaped. We're out of Syria. But our journey's only half over. We still need permission to leave Lebanon.

We're living in a refugee camp now, all seven of us crammed into one makeshift tent. There is little water and very little food. My clothes are soiled and dirty. My hair is in matted tangles under my hijab. My feet are sore and covered in bloody blisters. I have no shoes. I have not bathed in weeks. I sleep crushed between Ana and Maryam on a sheet, the small stones on the ground prodding and poking me through the thin material. Sometimes we only eat one small meal a day. If we're lucky, there are two.

It has been two weeks since we arrived in Lebanon. I am sitting against the cloth wall of the tent eating my small boiled potato. The potato has no salt and is raw in the middle, and my stomach is tight with hunger even after the food is gone. My throat is dry and my tongue is cracked with thirst. Maryam comes running towards me.

"There's water!" she says, pointing to the other side of the camp. "Come quickly!"

I get up, leaving my clay bowl on the dusty ground. I run after Maryam, kicking up dirt behind me. When I get to the bucket, I seize the dipper and gulp. The water is lukewarm and tastes metallic, but I drink it down like it's the best thing I've ever tasted. There's only enough for one dipperful, but it makes my mouth just a little bit wetter and that's enough.

The days are all the same: heat, dust, hunger, thirst and waiting. I wake up and eat breakfast, if there is any. Then there are dishes to wash, blankets and sheets and rugs to shake out, buckets to rinse and water to fetch. Maryam and I have to look after the little ones, and Abdul and Malik help with the men's chores. Afterwards, there is supper, more dishes to wash and then bed.

I have no time to myself anymore. I have no space to be alone, to cry and think and play. Mama is acting strangely. We all are. Life here in the refugee camp may be safe, but we're not any better off than we were at home.

Maryam has to work. So do Malik and the other big kids. Mama weeps when she hears that her children are working in carpet factories like the children in Afghanistan.

I don't feel safe without my big brother and sister, and to make it all worse, the heat increases until it's too hot even to move. I lie on the dusty ground, sweat rolling down the sides of my face and leaving trails in the dirt. I'm unbearably hot. My shalwar kamiz itches, and the cloth sticks to my back. It still smells faintly of smoke, and I tug at the sleeves of the shirt, wishing it would rain.

Please, Allah, I beg. Just a little rain, a little breeze, to wash the stink and dust off me and cool me down.

My prayers are not answered. Day after day, there is dust and heat and sun, scorching hot sun. Until –

"Rain! Thank Allah, there is rain!" I leap up from my perch, suddenly full of energy. It is truly rain! I lean my head back and feel the drops run down my face, trickling into my clothes, and I laugh. I laugh and laugh and laugh, and then I run with the other children around the camp.

The rain washes the dust away, washes away the heat, washes away all the bad things. It rains all day and all night, and when I wake up, the ground is cool and muddy, and there is even some grass growing. I brush my hands over the grass and grin, and roll on the wonderful cool ground. And for the first time in months, I feel happy.

Emma Russell-Trione, age 12

Inheritance

At age nine,
my father, his three sisters, two brothers, and mother
trek the dirt path
to buy a watermelon.

The village of Sangju offers
warm-toned persimmon ripe in December,
silkworm cocoons from neolithic times,
yellow, leafy cabbage for kimchi,
but none are as worthy as the watermelon
sold once a year
on August's hottest day.

My father embraces it with spindly arms,
tries to contain its glory.
His feet run ahead of his mind and his family
so he can be the one to bring joy home.
Bliss bursting through his skull,
he is so happy to be alive.

Then he drops it.

The watermelon shatters
into fragments
bleeding into his footprints,
and agony takes hold of his throat.

There is the ultimatum:
to eat it or leave it there.
My father, his three sisters, two brothers, and mother
leave it there
on the dirt path of Sangju.

Forty years later,
at age nine,
I empty a handful of salt
onto a slice of watermelon
my unsuspecting father is reaching for—
his attention on his brother's new novel:
a love story this time.
I giggle as my father takes a bite and recoils.

Four years later,
thirteen-year-old me is horrified
at my nine-year-old crime
after hearing the story
of my nine-year-old father
for the first time.
I weep as my father laughs
and splits another watermelon in half.

On his side, storytelling is hereditary
but our tongues don't agree.
Conversations are just translations,
not a peaceful transfer of prose.
Trains of words collide head on
on broken tracks:
a compromise of languages
sometimes rather forgotten.

How will this story be passed on?
The one about us?
We are both still writing our own.

He shares two with me:
the one about the watermelon
and the one about happiness
but they're practically one.

He turns another into a book
about the country in which he lives
but writes it in the language of the country he left.
A cousin tells me the ending is optimistic.
I am relieved.

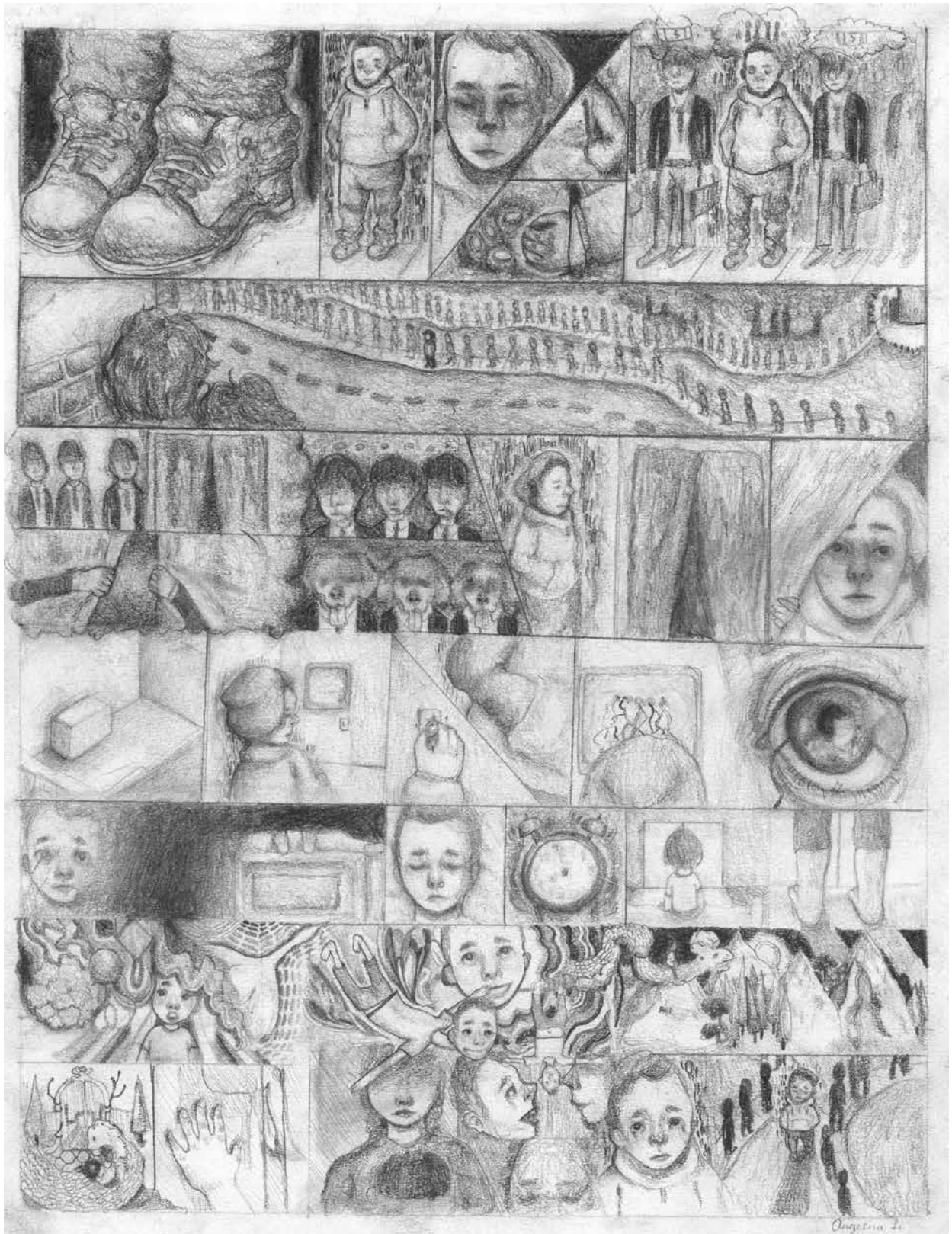
When my father's youngest sister dies,
I memorize how to offer condolences in Korean
but he is lost trying to salvage her stories.
I reread a birthday card
where she told me to live long and live happily.
My father and I mourn in silence;
we finally understand each other.

To commemorate her eighty years of living,
my grandmother publishes her memories.
I flip through, reading all I can with the alphabet she taught me.

I stop at a picture of my father standing on a dirt road.

I see him smiling.
I see him happy.
I see myself.

Erica Sung, age 17



To Be Happy
Angelina Li, age 14

Dandelion

We called her Dandelion
She thought it was a cute nickname
But she never imagined what lies behind it
And why her nickname brought her a certain kind of
Fame
We called her Dandelion for she had a bright soul
Beautiful face
Nice smile
Elegant grace
But like all dandelions
She came with a catch
A plot to steal your soul no less
She would charm you
And lure you
With her bright personality
And hair in waves
With her you remembered and dreamed of your happiest days
But like all weeds she ruined you
Sucked the nutrients out of the garden of your soul
She left you there dry, shrivelled and cold
Now you're broken
And I have to pick up the shattered pieces
Pluck this weed from your garden
But after I plucked her your soul hardened
So now I'm left to break down your walls
Brick by brick
I'm getting kind of tired of you missing
Reminiscing over a weed
It is making me sick
We called her Dandelion for the way she looked
We called her Dandelion for what she took

Shaniqua Mayers, age 14

Radium Girls

They said it was safe and we believed it
Painting the watch faces and our own
Because our lips looked moonlit
And none of us could have known.

We couldn't fathom an effect
And as I stood by my friend's hospital bed
We never thought to connect
The glowing nails to heart monitor red
I suppose their morality was a blur
As someone had spoken a lie
Of the paint on my lips as I told her
You're not going to die.

Coming home from the clinic where it began
I begged him to believe me
I'd never been with another man
But he said he was going to leave me
It was so hurtful
That he thought me a whore
I knew I was being truthful
But the syphilis told another story.

They said it was safe and we believed it
How could they be so uncaring and entitled
They knew their undark was unfit
For the girls who were too sick to swear it on the Bible.

Claudia Kindrachuk, age 15

Path Behind Mowat Lodge

Algonquin in the summertime was my oasis.

I had spent most of 1917 caught in the hustle and bustle of Toronto, the endless commotion of bodies and fixed routines. When I would gaze out of the window from my studio each afternoon, I felt stifled by the thickness of the heat, crushed by the weight of the city and its people's hearts. Here, with only the grey shapes outside my walls as inspiration, I painted whimsical scenes of the Canadian landscape. Jack pines bent in the wind and crystalline waters stretching beyond the canvas, frigid expanses of snow-capped mountains and kaleidoscope skies. Although my mind was lost in the vistas that were my true home, my body was rooted helplessly amid the eternal grime of the city.

I longed to return to where I had left my heart; in the rejuvenating waters of Canoe Lake, in the thickets of towering trees. There in Algonquin, I could condense my world, silence the voices that rang through my head. My life had become too heavy to withstand, and I knew the only cure for my malady would be the crisp northern air permeating my lungs.

Jackson was the first to support my decision. "Tom, you're withering away in front of my eyes," he had said, his forehead crinkling with worry. "Toronto is drowning you. Go back to Algonquin, and take your supplies with you. Breathe some colour back into your life."

And so I did.

The journey had been restless. I found myself wringing my hands and picking erratically at my loose skin, desperate to feel a clean breeze. The carriage I rented was rickety and dim inside, aggressive in its confinement. A crawling nausea stirred in my stomach as we travelled, but I told myself that my anguish would soon settle into relief.

When we reached Mowat Lodge, a beautiful hotel in the park that I visited often, I felt as if my chest had expanded twice in size. Finally my breath flowed evenly, the electricity tearing through my body had subsided. Stepping out of what had seemed like my prison, I stood for a moment to embrace the expanse of twinkling night sky.

As I opened the welcoming mahogany doors, I spotted the familiar face of Margaret, the hotel's manager and caretaker. Our eyes met and she broke into an enthusiastic smile, warm and genuine.

"Mr. Thomson, how delightful to see you!" she chirped as a young man reached forward to take my luggage. "The Mowat has seemed empty in your absence."

I rushed to hold her in a tight hug. Working as a ranger in the park prior to my relocation to Toronto, I had become distinct to the area's locals. "Margaret, I can't tell you how happy I am to be home."

It hadn't taken much time to settle into my room, but the journey had left my eyes heavy with exhaustion. I laid in bed grasping for the promise of sleep, but my heart panged with longing for the beauty awaiting me outside. Haphazardly throwing on my ranger clothing, I crept downstairs and made my way out the front door.

The night was calm and the air was surprisingly balmy. Sighing with relief, I tied my jacket around my waist and began to trek towards Canoe Lake. The moonlight danced along the water in beams of silver, and the trees swayed as if in tune with the collective hum and chirp of wildlife nearby. I had not felt this kind of peace in a very long time; the stillness in my heart was enough to make stunned tears flood my eyes. For once, I felt I could simply enjoy the scene before me. There was no need to capture it in my mind, or immortalize it in brushstrokes. I was simply a viewer, and for once, that was enough.

That night, I encountered a young girl, perhaps on the cusp of her early twenties. Although I was content in my isolation, I approached her as the lake's shoreline moved ever closer to my footsteps. I had never seen her face before, but the calm of the moment and the ease of her nature excused what would have otherwise been an uncomfortable meeting.

We barely spoke as we sat admiring the dark beauty of the scenery, silver and grey shimmers of light melting into stark streaks of charcoal sky like a monochromatic sketch, ambiguous lines blurring and blending into one another like afterthoughts. I did not let the silence hang over us, instead embracing it. At some point a feeling of mutual understanding passed between us in the form of a small smile.

For a brief, fleeting moment, I thought I could have fallen in love with her; I could have spoken to her in greater length or perhaps simply taken her to bed. But when I poised myself to voice my thoughts, I felt the words shrivel and die inside my mouth. I couldn't bring myself to corrupt the purity of our meeting, or the film of mystery that surrounded her. I knew all too well that the beauty of the painting often faded when the details were revealed up close. With that thought swirling in my mind I walked away, the lightness of her vitality comforting me as I drifted to sleep in my hotel room, achingly alone.

While I slept, I dreamt she had managed to find her way to my door. As we enjoyed the night together, I painted her in nothing but a beaded sash tied elegantly to her waist. I watched rapt as her eyelids dropped lightly, her lips curling into a seductive smile. Those acute details always haunted me, the ones that just couldn't be depicted statically. The longer I began to solidify her presence in my brain, the more aware I was that I had trapped myself in a manufactured reality.

But soon the soft curves of her hips became lost to my brushstrokes, the wavy tendrils of raven hair giving way to a rushing river, her molten brown irises melting into streaks of golden sunlight.

And after I woke, I never saw her again. I had lost my chance to immortalize her.

I had never been a portrait painter.

Peyton Bieda, age 18

To The Kid Next Door

To the kid next door, I'm sorry that you're flunking school
Sorry that you're not fast enough
Sorry that you didn't understand
Sorry that you weren't perfect

To the kid next door, I'm sorry that your parents were always busy
Sorry that they were never around
Sorry that they never cared
Sorry that they cursed and swore at you
Sorry that they never helped

To the kid next door, I'm sorry I ignored your cries
Sorry that I ignored your screams
Sorry that I ignored your silence
Sorry I was never there

To the kid next door, I'm sorry that I couldn't bother to help
Sorry that you believed that you were alone in this world
Sorry that not all saw the signs
Sorry that your family couldn't bat an eye
Sorry that you were never good enough

To the kid next door, I'm sorry that I didn't do anything
Sorry that you couldn't take it
Sorry that you thought no one cared
Sorry that I didn't even bother to learn your name

To the kid next door, I'm sorry that...I'm sorry that...that I didn't care enough,
Enough until you were truly gone.

Erica Du, a.k.a Arils Quin, age 12

Four Leaf Clover

I.

If wings belonged to killers, honey,
step off the roof.
Lovers cannot bleed, so put
down the knife.
Their fates are far crueller than a cell,
than the millions of cells
pumping blood to your heart,
so do not lift up your arms.
You're not welcoming me in,
I know I won't find a hug.

Do not give that dreamer
a parachute,
love, you do not have the guts to
jump
off a plane with wings wider than
your sight.

Your head will crack open
the ground
will be flooded with enough blood
to fill a bathtub.

II.

You're crying. We're both crying.
We look stupidly similar
but we could never pass as twins.
I look uglier than you, I know,
so it's only fair.

You're crying into your coffee that
I paid for.
It's not the first time, but
I'm tired, I can't keep calling you love.
I can't keep buying cups to catch
your tears.
A drop hangs on your cheek stubbornly.
It looks like a gold star,
congratulations, you'll always look
like a movie star.
I reach a hand out to peel it off,
I told you I could never be a surgeon,
yet your heart landed in the middle of
my palm instead,
pulsing, worn, smooth like latex.
I was never good with my fingers
and it slipped right through the
cracks.
It dropped to the bottom of the stairs
with a splat!

I'm sorry, Charlie. You stopped crying.
No, you can't do it to me now.
I said I was sorry.

Better your heart than you.

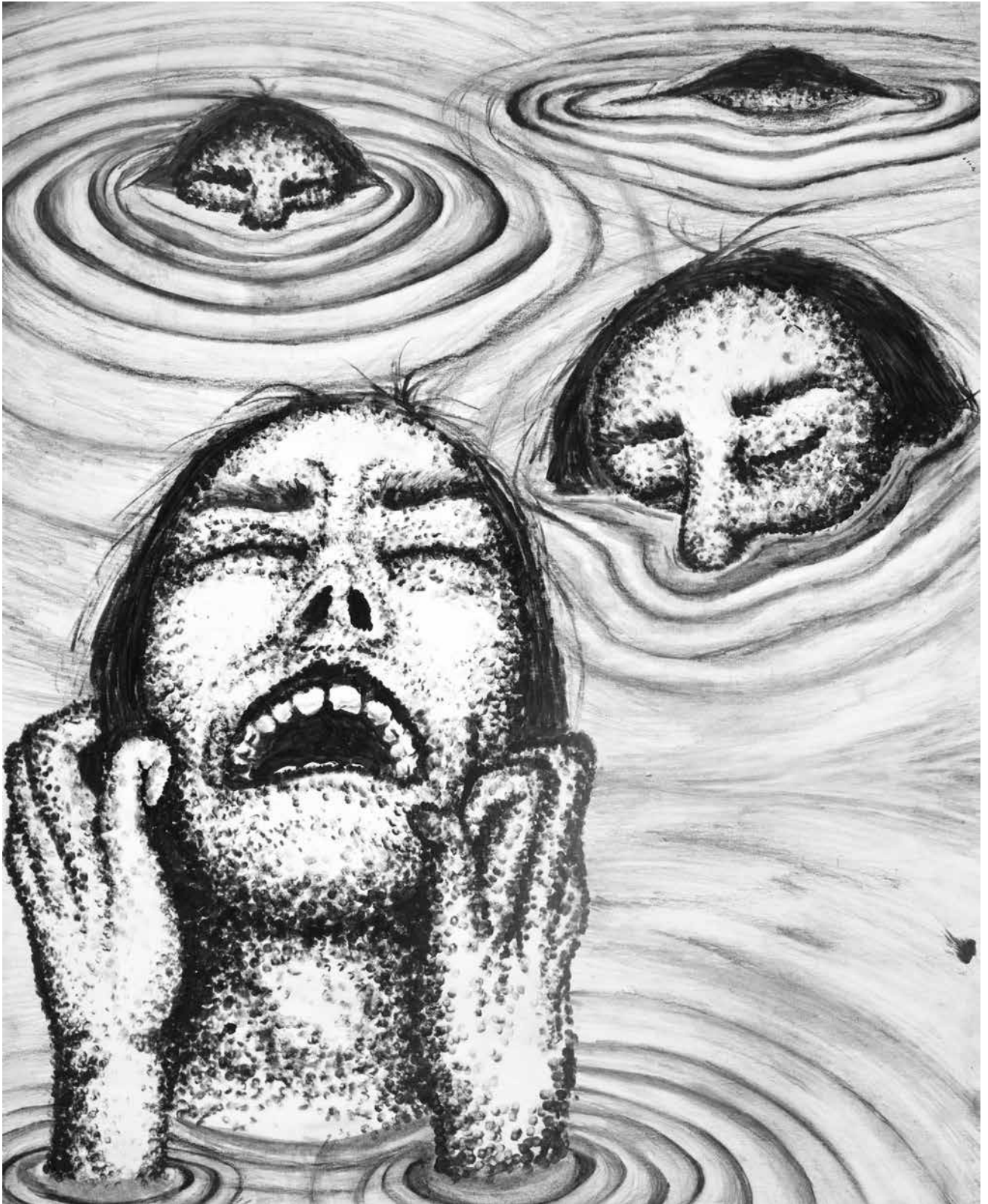
III.

Maybe I got it wrong.
Maybe you were the knight and I
was the princess, no,
I am the dragon you have to slay.
Stick your knife through me, but
at the last fathomable second,
pause, breathe, look into my eyes.
We look similar, you and I.
My scales dig crescents into your skin.
I always do that, I rip the fourth leaf
off, snap the last match,
I swallow the dandelion seeds
(they're growing in my stomach,
Charlie, didn't you ask for a garden
of wishes?)
but you forgive me anyway.
You tell me it's not my fault
I grew up in heavy, sweet metal,
my hands born to wrap around a bayonet.
Why am I not you? Is it my turn yet?
Why am I the one
falling past thirty floors,
why do I reach the ground first?
You hate the smell of blood, of brain,
but don't worry. You'll always be too
far away to smell it.
Don't jump! you yell intelligently.
And you may believe yourself now,
but it still sounds fake to me.
My talons are the length of your fingers,
they pierce your flesh when you
stab me. Your blood stings.
Don't cry, Charlie. I wanted you to.

IV.

So I was born a dragon,
but they will cut me open as a frog
and they will not find a single drop
of blood, I promise you.

Cathy Zhang, age 15



Out of Breath
Grace Xia, age 15

Death of a God

I was a god once.

I was invincible, being ever the benevolent, gifted ruler of my people, ever the kind figure to turn to in times of need. I lacked nothing. Everything and anything I ever wished for would materialize in the palm of my hand, shining and golden and perfect.

Everything was perfect.

There was no reason for me to panic, not then, not ever – my world was unchanging, predictable – just how I liked it. I was powerful, my power so far removed from those beneath me that I never had occasion to truly wield it.

As all gods do, however, what I failed to realize is that gods die, too. Just not quite in the same way that people do. People feel a sense of fulfillment, or regret, or something. One reflects upon one's life as a journey travelled, and so, what purpose does a life with no end aim to serve? At the very simplest, a god exists for no reason other than to garner the worship and respect of her people.

Me – I had already started dying long before I met you.

It was a pathetic, stifling kind of death. Existing without direction, without reason for being. Power had coddled me. There was no fear or desperation to drive me onward, to drive me to improve or grow – everything was all too steady. At the time, I didn't mind. This had been my reality for as long as I remembered. My people spoke to me – they did – just not in the way you did. No, they lay well beneath me, they knew it, and they made sure I knew it, too. And it wasn't their mortality, it wasn't their delicate hands and feeble minds alone that kept them chained to the grey, sparse earth far below. It was the way they looked at me, distantly admiring, as if I were just as untouchably shining and golden and perfect as the stupid embellished idol figures that stood in the shrines.

They chose to believe in distance.

Worship from afar.

I must admit that I once did as well. The fact was that I was the greatest, and as long as that was maintained, I didn't quite mind whatever else happened.

Now, you were something else entirely.

As one would expect of my almighty highness, I didn't make much of you at first, taking note of you one bleak morning as you set foot upon my temple grounds.

You entered, approaching the golden idol in my likeness that stood towering in the middle of the chamber. I waited for you to kneel, to clasp your hands in customary grateful prayer – but you didn't.

You simply stood there and stared.

In that single moment, as a grotesque smile stretched across your face, it felt as if you were looking right at me. There was awareness in your gaze. You knew who I was and what I could do. You were no idiot – this was a threat. Your gaze promised to burn my undeserved throne to the ground.

For the first time in my arrogant, self-absorbed existence, I was unsettled. Where was the distance? Where was my overwhelming command, my suffocating power, my vast superiority?

That day, you left without a word.

I snapped. A foreign thing flooded me, writhing and prickling and burning and utterly out of my control. I hadn't conjured this. I hadn't wanted this. An unintelligible, grating shriek rang through the still air. I hadn't heard my own voice in so long.

I could have quashed it right then and there. In that moment, I could have stopped it all, went back to my placid immortal existence. I easily could have reached out and grasped your glistening life in my palms, twisting and twisting until you lay cold and still.

I thought about it. I didn't want that. Because for the first time, emotion came upon me. You, with your fragile mortality and your delicate hands and feeble mind, had me terrified of losing.

It was unbelievable. All I felt was excruciating pain, and yet this pain was the most stunningly, intricately beautiful feeling I had ever known – so I let it eat away at me, day after day. You came back at the break of dawn each morning. I would regard you with the burning hatred of a thousand wrathful suns, and a sick, pining admiration I refused to recognize until well after the fact.

As time went by, you remained true to your unspoken word. You really were something special – I looked on as you rallied my once-complacent people against me, crushed my golden idols underfoot, brought upon humanity a new era of stubborn arrogance.

I could have reached out and strangled my downfall in its infancy, but I didn't. I couldn't bring myself to give up this beautiful, wonderful, agonizing thing called fear that festered inside of me. I couldn't bring myself to go back to the grey, sparse existence I'd known up until that fateful day. Being humanly impermanent, you died not too long after.

Strangely, this hurt cut deeper than anything else. You were, by all rights, a god. Here I remained – alone once more. You were the first and the last to see me, to really see me for what I was.

My people had long since left me. This meant that as a god, I had died. There wasn't much point in the power of creation when nobody would so much as acknowledge my being.

I had let myself die, and I didn't regret a single moment of it.

It was the closest thing I ever had to fulfillment.

Anna Xing, age 16

Flu Season

I sat on the bench, rocking my legs back and forth. It had been a long and tiring day at school, and all I wanted to do was watch my favourite television show for the rest of the evening. I'd watched every episode so far, but it looked like this would be my first time missing one. For all I knew, I would still be stuck in this small, white room. I gazed upwards at the ceiling lights and sighed sadly.

I heard some voices talking outside. It might have been my mom, but I wasn't sure. A few moments later, the door swung open. A tall, thin man walked in. He looked up from the clipboard that he had been holding and smiled at me. "How was school today, little guy?" he asked.

"It was okay. We learned how to tell time," I told him.

The man had his back turned towards me, but I could see him nodding his head. He placed his clipboard on a desk and searched through the drawers. He soon found what he was looking for and held it within his hand. The man then turned around and looked at me. He still had a smile on his face.

"I like your t-shirt. It's a nice shade of blue. But, who is that on the front?"

I glanced down and saw the man's bony finger pointing at the star-spangled Avenger and his mighty shield. I was surprised.

"How do you not know Captain America? He's the best superhero in the world! He's not scared of anything!"

"Really?" the man laughed. "A good superhero does have to be very brave. Now, hold very still for me. I see a tiny, red spot on your arm. Let me clean that up for you."

I looked closely at my arm. I saw no mark of any kind. But the man had already pulled out a tiny piece of cloth and started to rub it gently against my arm. The cloth felt wet. I wrinkled my nose. It smelled funny, too.

"It might have been a bit of tomato sauce," the man continued. "What'd you eat for lunch, sport? Was it pizza?"

I suddenly remembered the gooey cheese melting in my mouth. I was too busy licking my lips to nod my head.

"Well, I guess that explains why," he chuckled. "So, how do you feel? Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"I'm just a little tired," I told him. "I want to go home."

"You'll be going home soon," the man promised as he reached back to grab something. "Do you see that poster over there?"

I followed the man's finger to the poster on the wall. It was colourful, but I didn't understand any of the words. I stared at the pictures of all the healthy snacks that I should be eating. I scrunched up my face. I hope I don't see them any time soon, I thought. I heard the man clear his throat behind me. He was holding something behind his back.

"You were great today," he exclaimed. "I have something that I want to give you before you go."

He held out his hand towards me, and in it was an orange lollipop. I wondered as to how he knew what my favourite flavour was. I smiled at him as I took the lollipop. I leaped off the bench and walked towards the door.

"Your mom told me that you hate getting shots," the man mentioned. "But you did fine today. I hope the needle didn't hurt."

I turned to face him. I was confused. "What needle?"

The man was grinning as he watched me hustle out the door.

Rakshan Balachandran, age 16

Dying Words

You keep them in a hole.
Bury them in nothing.
Hold them down with strands of empty thoughts.

Darkness is where they hide
Masked by emotions and complexity.
You memorize the feelings.

Word for word.

Distant.
You are surrounded by a world right out of reach
And memories of a time without misery.

Drown.
You plunge into the water and swallow the verses.
The acid burns your tongue.

Itch.
Bottomless and unforgiving;
You look away only to turn back again.

Fear.
Do they see it?
Grins pull at their lips, taunting.

Illusion.
You smile innocently at those around you.
Only a "Good morning" escapes your lips.

Wilt.
You can sense them fade.
A grave already dug out for them.

A grave dug out by you.

Hole.
They grip your ankles, pulling you in.
They are ready to swallow.

Escape.
Foul and rotten;
The flowers you chose to hide seek freedom.

Choke.
Your throat is dry.
They climb out, reaching for the light.

You let them.

The feelings melt on your tongue.
They ramble and make no sense.
You speak in a formidable tone.
Confidence overruns your voice.

The claws no longer scratch at your throat.
Your heart beats against your chest;
A sign of a worthy battle.

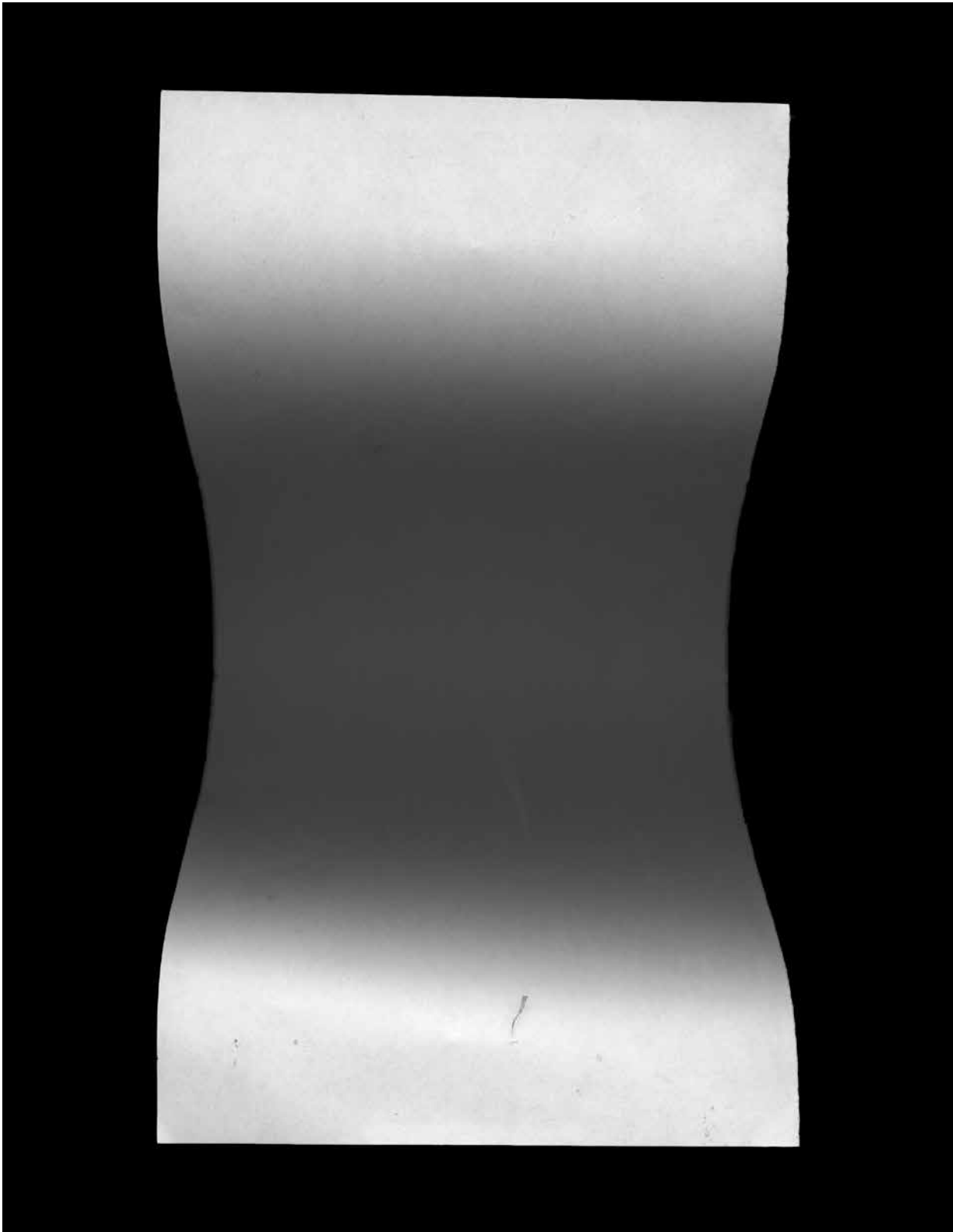
You feel light.
You feel free.

Whole.
Relief fills your soul.
Darkness no longer fills the hole.

Instead, on paper
Ink gleams silently.

You revive your dying words.

Afnaan Moalim, age 14



G-1-1
Spencer Julien, age 17

The World We Live In

The constants constantly keep changing,
As variety becomes the only constant.

The variables are of such variety
That their diversity creates a unique unity.
And that unity is of such distinction that
That itself becomes a variable.

Where stability is of the utmost fragility
And fragility the only stable norm.

A world ruled by rules of such fragile stability
That they can be broken by the slightest intelligence.
And the intelligent are so ignorant
That their ignorance becomes bliss.

And this bliss keeps them from looking further,
As satisfaction satisfies their insatiable hunger.

And that insatiable hunger that is greed
Divides their division even further.
This division is of such vastness
That it is vaster than the vastest oceans.

This vastness keeps them from ruling the vast expanse
As they are too busy fending off an enemy of their own creation,
An enmity that springs from divided friendship.

This division keeps dividing itself, as they feed their uniqueness.
They seek unity in a place where they feed uniqueness.
Yet none of their unique selves have yet perceived of the perception
That unity cannot survive without the annihilation of uniqueness.

Unity can only thrive with the existence of sameness.
And embracing sameness means the abandonment of identity.

A world where identity cannot identify itself,
As sameness becomes the norm,
And unity supersedes diversity,
And diversity is betrayed,
Leaving only the constant.

Ayman Arik Kazi, age 16

The Ride

It was obvious that we were new. Considering it was the middle of September, we were slightly overdressed; to say the least. My brother was wrapped in a cocoon of mufflers, and both my parents were also overdressed in preparation for the “cold weather.” My head was covered by a heavy, knit toque; my mother’s version of preventative medicine. While I uncomfortably shuffled in my clunky jacket, I perhaps unknowingly drew attention to my naïveté. Regardless, I continued to observe and attempted to adjust to the ambience.

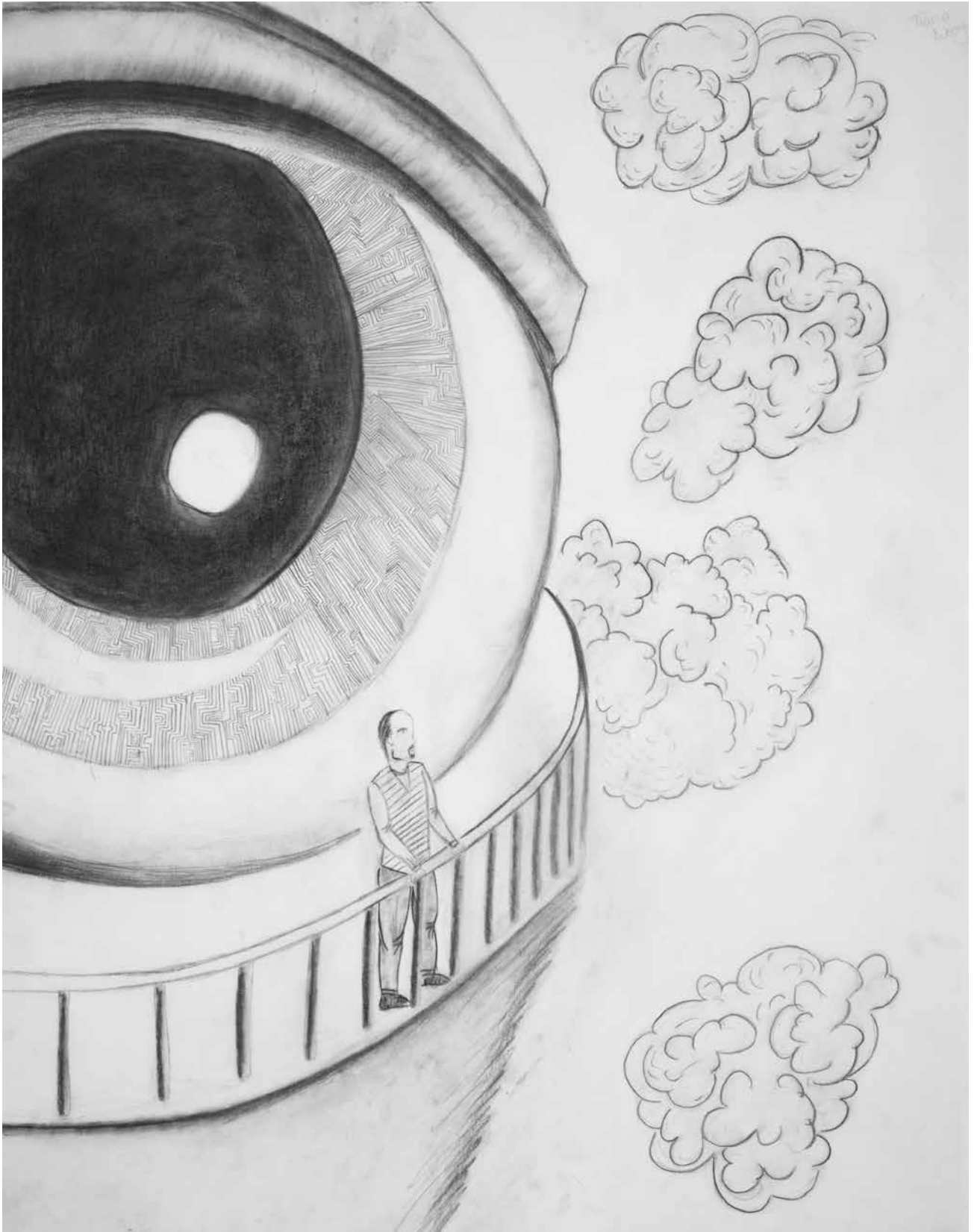
A girl was slouched in front of me, her unruly hair leaking from the hair ties that attempted to tame the strands. She was sitting elegantly but casually, one hand resting on her cheek and the other on her thigh. A man standing tall and poised near the pole in front of me reeked of smoke and burnt rubber. There were rebels with huge headphones slumped against the “do not lean” sign. People with tattoos, piercings, coloured hair, green eyes, and even cornrows were scattered around the train.

I had never felt so out of place but so fitted at the same time.

The train car was a world of its own. People were buzzing and chattering in languages I had never heard before, foreign melodies to my ears. There were smells of food, and smoke and even wet boots – all unfamiliar but so sweet to my nose. The visuals were distracting and mesmerizing: some people with skin tinted the colour of creamy coffee while others were paler than blank sheets of fresh snow. Some had fallen asleep on the edges of the frosted windows, and some tapped their feet to their favourite songs.

This little bubble of the train car sustained a sampling of people from all different cultures and backgrounds and each was as interesting as the next. My immigrant status seemed insignificant; because in a society like this, your differences are seen as a strength, and uniqueness is what unites. I knew I belonged.

Marzan Hamid, age 15



I'm Watching You
Tiana Neogi, age 14

young voices

Call for submissions

Express yourself!

GUIDELINES

1. Submit art, photos, comics, stories, poems and other creative writing.
2. Toronto Public Library has one-time print and electronic rights to all work, as well as the right to excerpt from the work, both online and in print, for purposes of promotion.
3. Written submissions will be selected from each of the following age categories:
12–14; 15–16; 17–19.
4. Related pieces (i.e. artwork submitted in conjunction with writing) may not be considered together.

WHO CAN SUBMIT

Teens 12–19 years who live, work or go to school in Toronto.

WHAT CAN BE SUBMITTED

You can submit two pieces each year:

- One piece of writing per person
- One visual piece per person, either a piece of artwork OR a photograph OR one single-page comic

Written Work: poems, stories, rants, reviews...

- 1,000 words maximum
- Typed entries preferred, but not required

Artwork:

- 8 ½" x 11" preferred
- Black and white artwork only

Photography & Digital Art:

- High resolution
(8x10 inches at 300 dpi)
- Black and white only

Comics:

- 8 ½" x 11", one page maximum

HOW TO SUBMIT

In a Toronto Public Library branch

- FULLY complete the submission form
- Attach the form to your work
- Drop your work off at any Toronto Public Library branch
- For hand drawn artwork and comics dropped off at library branches, originals are preferred, but if you submit a copy **you will be required to submit the original should your work be selected for publication**

Online submissions

- Submit work online using the submission form at tpl.ca/youngvoices

Artwork & Comics

- **You will be required to submit your original hand drawn artwork OR comics should your work be selected for publication**

Photography & Digital Art:

- High resolution
(8x10 inches at 300 dpi)

SELECTION TIMELINES

Submission deadline:

Tuesday, April 3, 2018

- Editorial teams meet to make selections during spring 2018
- Contributors selected to be published will be contacted during June 2018
- Only those with work to be published will be contacted
- *Young Voices* magazine is published once every year in October
- Questions? Contact Ken Sparling
ksparling@torontopubliclibrary.ca



**He Loved Nature
So Much That He
Became It**

Helena Zhang, age 16

YOUNG VOICES 2018 Submission Form

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

Submission Deadline: Tuesday, April 3, 2018

Last name _____

First name(s) _____

Address _____

Postal code _____

Email _____ Phone number _____

Age _____ Male Female Other

Today's date _____

Title of your submission _____

Genre of submission:

Poem Fiction Rant Review Art Photograph Comics

Other (please specify what type of work you are submitting) _____

Name of library branch where you submitted _____

I heard about *Young Voices*:

Young Voices Sketchbook Someone at the Library
 Library website School
 From friends and family Facebook/Instagram ad

Other (please say where) _____

tpl.ca/youngvoices





Echo Chamber
Emi Yasuda, age 18



Catch Me While You Can
Jaime Pattison, age 16

The Young Voices program, including the publication of *Young Voices* magazine, is supported through the generosity of the Daniels brothers in honour of their mother, Norine Rose, through the Toronto Public Library Foundation.

tpl.ca/youngvoices