

2020

# young voices





## Breathing Room

Sarah Lachmansingh, 18

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Front Cover

### Vanity Kills

Sofia Prencipe, 16

From cover to cover, Young Voices magazine features the work of Toronto youth ages 12-19. These pages hold essays, poems, comics, photographs and more. Every piece was carefully selected by the editorial team, a group of youth who have been published in previous issues of Young Voices, working alongside professionals.

As you read through this magazine, remember that this is representative of what the youth of Toronto are thinking, seeing and what they believe needs to be heard. They address difficult subject matter with clear vision and courage. We hope that you gain a new idea of what the world looks like from the perspective of the youth in this city.

Thank you to everyone who submitted, who took part in the selection process and whose work is showcased in these pages. If you find yourself interested and inspired by the following pages, please consider submitting to the next issue.

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# young voices 2020

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## these old thoughts i am too young for.

i am fifteen.

  i'm near the age to enter university.

  it will be a long three years until i reach that age.

  it will only be three short years until i reach that age.

  i have already missed too much in half a year because i was so sure time was plentiful.

it will be three years until i am considered an adult.

  i am elated to feel a new kind of freedom at last.

  i am terrified of the new weights on my shoulders this will bring.

  do eighteen-year-olds feel jaded? they have finished childhood.

  do they miss things that they can still do in their youth now?

it will be fifteen years until i become thirty.

  i will be lucky to find success at this age.

  fifteen long years until i find success and stability.

it will be thirty years until i become forty-five.

  this is my mother's age.

  i saw an obituary in the paper. a woman, a talented woman, has died at age seventy-six.

  i think, that's only thirty years older than my mother.

  will i have to mourn her so quick?

i long to hurry, and do youthful things while i still can. but i plan, so i can find a success i can find only in fifteen long and short years.

will i regret everything?

**Ashley Kim, 15**



### **Radiance in Youth**

Karen Qin, 17

# Mama Lives in My Mouth

I almost left my mouth in the pool last summer. I didn't mean to, but I'm forgetful sometimes, and Mama and I were swimming, and there she went to get it back for me — breast stroked from the deep end, past my milk teeth, and into the fatty slick of flesh behind my backmost molar. She hooked her fingernails into my cheek and put my mouth back onto my jaw, hung on like a screw. She's been in there a long time, and she likes it — no rent to pay.

Today, Mama and I go to the dentist. On the green chair, the dentist checks behind my teeth and there's my mama — waving at the bright light that makes my tonsils look like real superstars. Mama and the dentist get along always — she calls him Jeff, sometimes. I've never called him anything. He's taken care of us since I almost forgot my mouth and Mama saved it, gives me cubes of bubble gum after he brushes Mama with his zippy toothbrush that makes me taste like peppermints.

"Calcium is the only place gentrification can't get you," Mama says today, which makes Jeff laugh. I don't know what that word means, but Mama never elaborates. She laughs too, and the sound is wet and muffled, and then Jeff laughs more, and pokes a poking tool into my gum.

I sit on the curb with Mama in my mouth, and lick at an ice cream cone Jeff gave me two dollars for. Two dollars wasn't enough for a cone, so I had to dig into my pockets for fifty cents more. Dribbles of chocolate race down my chin, and land in Mama's eyes. I heard Jeff say quietly to Mama, and Mama only, that when my milk teeth fall out and my adult teeth move in, there won't be enough room for everybody. Everybody meaning the incoming adult teeth and Mama. This was after they'd laughed. After she said she liked the smell of his hair gel. Mama stamped her toothpick feet into my gums and it hurt, but I comfort her now, letting clumps of ice cream sit on my tongue before swallowing so Mama can get some on her hands.

"Can't we upgrade?" I ask, because I've heard Mama ask this when she's unhappy with something. Once at the Chinese restaurant, when she wanted two servings of broccoli and not just one. Once when she didn't like the speed of the school bus because it propelled her around in my mouth too much to be comfortable.

Mama is crying chocolate ice cream. "Teeth will take my place."

"What if I don't let them?"

Mama sits on the ledge of my molar — I feel her dangling legs. "It's impossible."

"I'll pull them out," I say. Chocolate chokes on my tongue.

"I want to protect you," she says.

"I'll pull them out."

Mama says nothing. She doesn't even accept the little piece of floss I always get from Jeff after every appointment to wipe her face off. Mama cries salt and chocolate, and her tears land on my tongue.

"I'll pull them out," I say again. I dread my incoming teeth.

Mama curves into my cheek, and cries there.

**Rachel Lachmansingh, 18**



**Justice**

Isabelle Loobie, 17

## Pride is a Body Part

The same way as you have an arm, a knee. I have pride. The way hair can flow in the wind and skin can glow in the moon. Pride may soar with glee, or sink in sadness.

I believe it is somewhere near my heart, somewhere dear to me. Not very close to my head, with little to no intelligence. But ever vulnerable. Positioned perfectly for optimal success, or failure and humiliation. I believe mine to be brown in nature, being that it is earthly, and accustomed to recovery. Vital for its survival and face. Like the heart, it beats. Like a drum, it paces on and on about glory, and one's relevance in the world. It boasts about its holder whispering confidence into one's ear and visions of tremendous success. Of course, no person has ever seen such a beautiful and powerful thing. It cannot be seen. It can only be felt, envisioned and fed.

**Julia Kadas, 14**

## eleutheromania

for the first time

singing to me softly  
sweet like honey  
the lullabies pacify me

trapped in a land of filters  
where is the silver lining?  
my gold scars  
conquer silver tongues

take on the journey of hope  
fall in love with  
everything:  
the skies, the seas, the stars  
anything  
but the 9-5

blossoming after withering  
shining after fading  
in search of my fate  
in the longing for success  
in need of an epiphany

cotton candy and peaches across a blue sea  
the sea, the sky  
all the same  
flowing across  
floating away

the constellation is my guide  
i am the follower  
the trail of a shooting star

in the end, i become the sun  
i may be  
the sun who sets  
but i am also  
the crescent moon  
in the lonely night sky  
outshining

once again

**Katelyn Mo, 14**



### **Freedom of Love**

Aliya Hirji, 15

# **educating a woman (in my culture)**

why do we teach our women  
that sex is dirty and shameful  
that it's something done only during a marriage  
after dark, quietly when no one's watching  
and that they should never discuss it out loud  
because that's a quality of a pure woman

why do we teach our women  
that they must be protected by men  
that they must rely on a man for success  
and that only a man can make them happy

why do we teach our women  
not to get raped by covering their bodies  
thinking pieces of cloth will surely fend off predators  
thinking more clothes will make them less desirable  
but either way if they get raped, they're sluts who asked for it

why do we teach our women  
to idolize physical beauty  
and force them to give in to unrealistic, colonial beauty standards  
because skin too dark  
or hair too frizzy  
or a nose too wide  
are simply considered "ugly"  
apparently, the scars on their faces  
and other "imperfections" are flaws  
that must be covered up  
by a thick brush dipped in foundation the colour of flesh  
and just like a hand brushing the surface of water  
the inner beauty that lies underneath the surface is skimmed over

i don't understand  
why we don't teach our women  
to embrace their sexualities  
to be independent and fight for what they want  
to instead teach the men not to harm them  
to love what can and cannot be seen by the eye  
because if our community was a better teacher for women  
we would have more successful alumni

**Nasirah Hakim, 18**

## Spring Flowers

“Spring flowers are a gift from Mother Nature herself,” my grandmother whispered in my ear, handing me a flower I recognized to be a primrose. It was early April at the time; I was no older than eight years old. The cool breeze of mid-afternoon surrounded me as I walked alongside my grandmother down the village streets. As we walked, she enchanted me with various tales of foreign lands and life outside the village. My grandmother was a storyteller, as was my mother, or so they say. Poverty, however, was my greatest enemy and dearest friend. The small village in Sichuan province in which we lived was incredibly poor, anything beyond basic necessities were a luxury we couldn’t afford. Poverty was the only thing I knew; the only life I’d ever lived.

As I grew older, I saw grandmother less and less. She worked every day, working almost any job she possibly could. The times I did see her, she looked exhausted. The less I saw grandmother, the more I longed to hear her stories and share my own. One spring night, I sat outside, the grass between my toes. Grandmother was still working, even at such a late hour. Sleep overtook me as I lay my head against the stone of my house, awaiting her return.

“Foolish child,” were the words I awoke to, as I opened my eyes to see my grandmother’s disapproving face. My eyes, still adjusting to the light, caused me to squint. Sitting up, I took notice of the bag of my clothes grandmother had packed. She let out a sigh, brushing my hair with her fingers. “Chunhua,” she began, looking me straight in the eye. “Pack a bag. We’re leaving.”

“We’re leaving.” My grandmother repeated, placing herself several feet away from me. I looked at the ground, avoiding her eyes. I couldn’t fathom the idea of leaving the village, the only place I’d ever known. I turned my back to her, unable to comprehend her betrayal. Without saying a word, she moved closer to me, placing my hand in hers. She lifted my chin, our eyes meeting. At this moment, I remembered why I loved her so much. She had such kind eyes. “My flower,” she began, as I smiled at the affectionate use of my nickname. “You have no future in the village. We must leave China for your sake.” I shook my head, confused.

“Where are we going?” I asked, countless questions filling my head.

“America,” she replied, picking me a spring flower.

The journey was an adventure I knew I’d never forget, my head filled with both fear and excitement. With each moment I spent on the boat, the further the village and my childhood felt from my grasp. Visions of the waves crashing against the boat, the sickness and hunger we faced, still haunt me in my nightmares. My grandmother’s stories were the only sense of home I felt. Her stories transported me to another world; they allowed me to live a life I’d never lived. I began to write my own stories, tales about the spring, the village, and the foreign lands I’d heard so much about. “Grandmother?” I asked one night, longing for the sense of security I felt I would never regain. “Will life be better in America?” Grandmother placed her hands on top of mine, a warm smile on her face.

“Chunhua, my spring flower. Do you remember how the spring flowers died each year, only to be reborn in the spring?” I nodded my head, my mind painting a vivid picture of the fields of wildflowers back in the village. “Like the spring flowers, this adventure is a form of rebirth. It will be just as beautiful as the spring flowers.”

We had little to eat and lived in a cramped one-bedroom apartment in New Jersey. Despite the circumstances in which we lived, I was fascinated by the new culture and foreign language. I learned English within a year, discovering a newfound appreciation for literature.

I was unaware I was undocumented until I was in my senior year of high school. I came home to a note handwritten by Grandmother, stating she’d been sent back to China. She’d left me with a few thousand dollars and a promise that she’d contact me regularly. From time to time, I reread the note, a memory of the woman who risked everything for my sake.

April is what they call me. April is my chosen name, the month my grandmother adored. Chunhua is my given name, meaning spring flower. I still cherish the stories told by my grandmother, clinging to each word.

Emma Parkinson, 14

# Évanescence

## Merveille de printemps

Grands yeux innocents, clairs comme l'étendue bleue du ciel, s'ouvrent émerveillés sur le monde. Joues rougissantes, embrassées par le vent qui siffle sa chanson parmi les branches verdoyantes. Les premiers pas hésitants, le sourire cristallin comme une cloche dorée, le câlin maternel doux et chaleureux.

Regardez l'herbe qui pousse, sentez le parfum des fleurs qui déploient leurs pétales de papillon vers le soleil!

...c'est moi, c'est toi, c'est la saison de l'enfance sans tristesse et inquiétude.

## Splendeur d'été

Joie vorace de vivre, les mains étroitement liées à l'heure de l'amitié. Les premiers frissons d'amour, le baiser passionnant de l'accomplissement, une ardeur intrinsèque et débordante. Le courage sans bornes, la soif insatiable de percer les mystères les plus profonds de l'univers.

Regardez audacieusement l'avenir, soyez maîtres du monde, car aucun obstacle ne peut entraver vos projets magistraux!

...c'est moi, c'est toi, c'est la chaleur torride de l'été et la jeunesse intrépide.

## Sérénité d'automne

Maturité nonchalante, pensée fort crayonnée, en unisson avec des rêves parfois tranquilles, parfois encore bouillonnants. Routine familiale, maternité accomplie, affection aussi inébranlable que les vagues de la mer cherchant le rivage. Les feuilles rougeâtres tombant une à une, les gouttes de pluie frappant aux fenêtres chassent les minutes, les heures, les années.

Le dos toujours étroit, la main toujours ferme, cueillez les fruits des champs, les fruits de la vie!

...c'est moi, c'est toi, c'est l'abondance de la nature en automne et la plénitude de l'âge adulte.

## Chagrin d'hiver

Cheveux blancs dansants dans le vent, flocons argentés couvrant la terre gelée d'un manteau épais et sombre. Les branches nues étirent leurs griffes durcies vers l'obscurité désolante de la nuit. Sagesse, patience, le calme imperturbable d'une existence riche et juste, entremêlés de mélancolie et peut-être un brin de regret.

Embrassez le crépuscule éternel qui se repose lentement sur l'âme âgée, touchez l'éternité, l'infini de l'espace!

...c'est moi, c'est toi, c'est le temps qui s'écoule implacablement ... c'est la fin?

# We Remain Strong

Things are not normal anymore  
This pandemic has changed everything  
Fear, worry and sadness  
Is what we feel every day  
We stay home all day  
Finding ways to keep ourselves occupied  
Others are working long hours  
We are all nervous about this virus  
Scared for family and friends  
But can we remain strong?

We are healthcare workers  
Each day is another obstacle  
For us to overcome  
People walk in, coming to get tested  
Swab after swab, sent to the lab  
Supplies are dwindling, cases are rising  
Working long hours is exhausting  
Not being able to see our families is difficult  
We may feel anxious, we may feel scared  
But we remain strong

We are students  
The bright light illuminates our faces  
As we turn on our electronic devices  
We rush to online classes  
Clicking "submit" for every assignment  
We video call friends and classmates  
Wondering when face to face can happen again  
COVID-19 is scary and unpredictable  
For us online school is the new "normal"  
Proms and graduation ceremonies go virtual  
Everything is so different, uncertain and strange  
But we remain strong

We are the laid offs and the unemployed  
Before, life was normal, same as always  
But not so much anymore  
Places have closed down, occupations shrink  
Government aid comes in  
But panic still sets in every day  
We wonder when things can go back to normal  
When we can work again  
The virus has changed our lives  
Not a day goes by without hardship  
But we remain strong

We are cashiers  
Coming face to face is risky  
We wear gloves and masks  
There may be plexiglass to protect us  
But fear still floods in  
"Beep beep"  
Another item scanned  
Another person done with shopping  
We hope we won't contract the virus  
Things can be scary at times  
But we remain strong

We are bus drivers  
Sitting behind the wheel  
We watch as passengers climb aboard  
Keeping them two metres apart is our job  
Making sure everyone is safe  
Has always been our priority  
Taped-off seats, frustrated riders  
It can be difficult and challenging at times  
But we remain strong

We are couriers  
We drive around, delivering packages to people  
We ring their doorbells  
People used to open their doors to greet us  
Now it is different  
We work longer hours than usual  
As online orders skyrocket  
Fatigue gets to us  
But we remain strong

Things are not normal anymore  
This pandemic has changed everything  
But strength, kindness and love  
Is what we give each other every day  
We find new things to learn  
Search for new ways to connect with others  
We may be frightened  
As we do not know what lies ahead  
But we can get through this  
We are all in this together  
We remain strong

**Natalie Fung, 12**



### The Conductor

Kimberly Luu, 18

# Human

She walked through the dreary hallways, past the run-down lockers and the broken faces.

“Just hold on,” she told them. “Things will get better.” At this point she wasn’t even sure she believed herself.

“But I’m in so much pain,” they said. “Please help me.” And with each falling tear her heart broke a little.

She didn’t know what to do, she couldn’t answer any of their questions. And seeing their defeated faces over and over again crushed her.

“Trust me when I say that we’re trying our best,” she’d tell them when she didn’t know what else to say. She knew it was true. Doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers were spending days on their feet, doing anything they could to make a little progress. But sometimes their best wasn’t enough.

She used to love her job. She loved feeling that sense of accomplishment when a patient finally recovered. She loved knowing they were doing better now and she was part of the reason for it. She loved seeing patients come out of the hospital, a new person, breathing the fresh air after so long in a hospital room. But now the only people walking out of the hospital were medical professionals through the back door, taking the body to a funeral home.

She knew what she signed up for when she decided that this was the path she wanted to take. She knew that there would be times when she didn’t know what to do. She’d been through her fair share of storms, but she’d never felt so lost.

In her hospital alone, hundreds of people had died. Hundreds of family members and friends weeping, screaming, “How could you have let this happen? Why couldn’t you have saved them?” She didn’t answer.

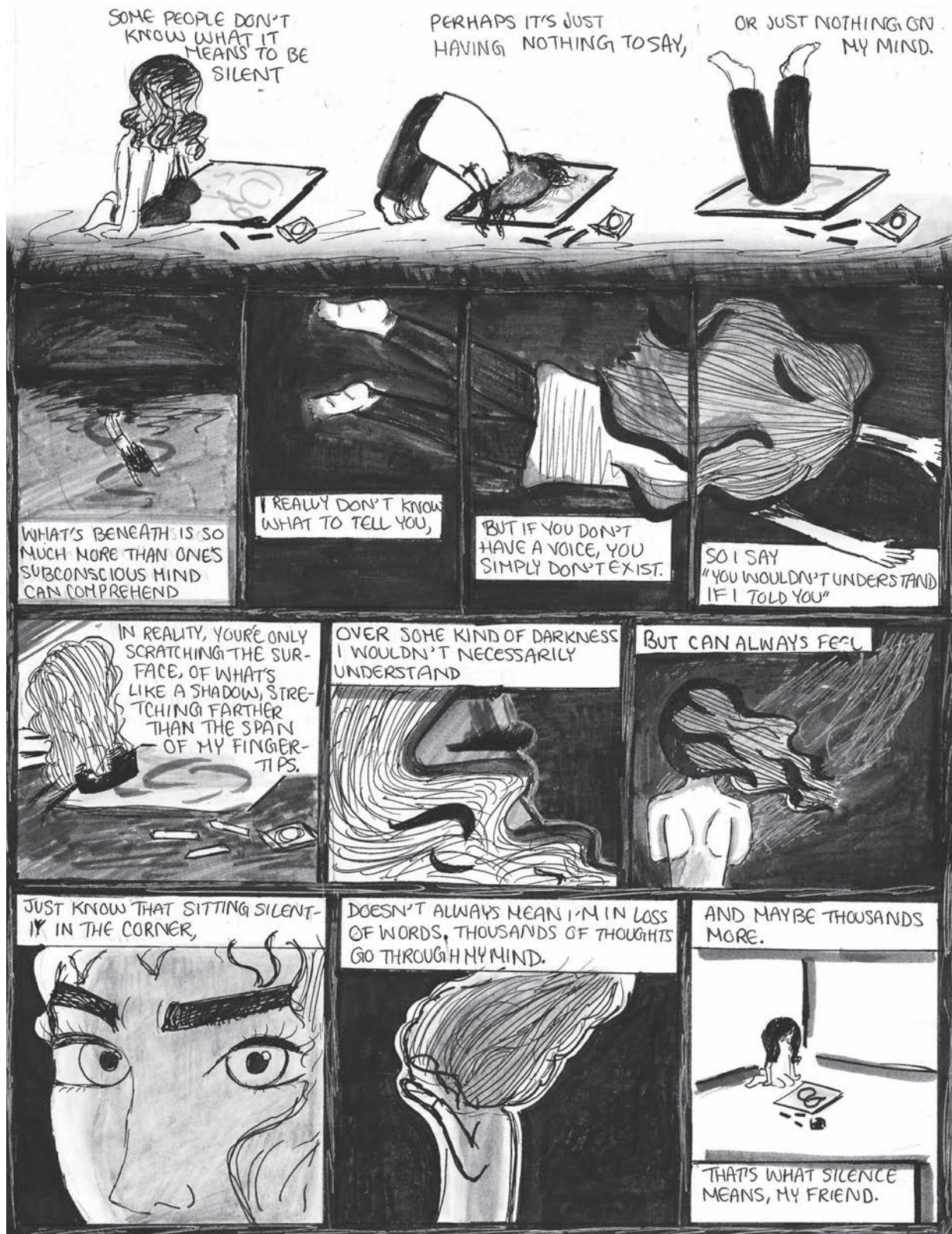
All she wanted to do was curl up on her couch and have a good cry, but she didn’t. She couldn’t, because there were people who needed her, and every day, that number was increasing. She wished she could just wave a magic wand and ease everyone’s suffering.

The next morning at work, she saw those broken faces again, but she stayed strong for their sake and for her own. And when she wanted to scream, “I’m trying but I’m only human!” she would take a deep breath and say instead, “I understand what you’re going through. If there’s anything else we can help you with, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

She wished the pandemic would end. She wished for no more people to suffer, but above all, she wished people would understand. “Please stay home,” she pleaded. “Please practice social distancing. We’re trying our best, but this is new to all of us as well.”

“Just hold on. Things will get better.” And every day she believed herself less and less.

**Sophia Yang, 14**



## Silence is Golden

Zuhal Olomi, 14

## Middle Gray

“Where are you from?”

I blinked once. Then twice.

*Uhhh... Canada?*

“No, I mean, where are you really from?”

Of course I knew what she really meant. She was asking me where my roots were from (or at least she was trying to ask), and being a first generation Canadian, that meant where my parents were from.

*Canada. I was born here.*

I wasn’t satisfied with my answer and as her brows furrowed in response, I could tell that she wasn’t either.

*And where are you from?*

“Canada.”

No raised eyebrow or prolonged stare in reply; just a clear-cut, simple dismissal.

So why should I have to deal with the dilemma of choosing between two vastly different worlds when someone else could get away with the same answer? And had I been cheating my Indian culture by not actively identifying as Indo-Canadian?

*My parents were born in India.*

I’m as Indian as I am Canadian. And yet, I’m too Indian to fit in here and too Canadian to fit in there. These brick walls that keep us from embracing our heritage are fueled by identity — or the lack thereof. First-generation immigrants have an identity of their own, and we find solace in uniting with each other because we recognize the struggle of feeling the need to box ourselves just to please others.

She nodded in response — as if that one line had explained everything — accompanied with an, “Ooohhh,” and, “That explains it.”

But does it?

I smiled in response.

“Yeah,” I said flatly, feeling deflated.

There are many things I wish that I’d said that day that took many years of self-reflection (and what felt like an identity crisis) to conquer. It sparked an internal conflict in me that led me to the realization that this dilemma was something that many other fellow first-generation immigrants relate to.

Often the answer to the question, “Where are you from?” does not do justice to the identity of a first-generation immigrant. It does not represent the pain and struggle our parents have gone through trying to give us a better life. It does not represent the ostracization we have faced which has altered our perception towards our culture out of shame and resentment.

And most importantly, it does not do justice to our culture. To the opportunity of visiting our parents’ home countries. To meeting the extended family that we have left behind. To learning a language that our own native country does not follow.

So yes, I am from Canada and my parents are from India, but those are just the facts; the black and white. My Indian and Canadian culture that I am so deeply connected with, is fulfilled and discovered through the middle gray which reflects me: cool, neutral, and balanced.

**Saesha Kukreja, 16**



## Isolation

Patrick Sheng, 15

# Home

I have a sweater in my closet that still smells like the detergent my mom used back home. It has been hanging there since I unpacked two years ago, unworn mostly because it fits awkwardly around my neck. It reminds me of my friends who told me constantly it smelled like baby powder. In the cold, it keeps me the warmest of all my sweaters, even though I never wear it.

My family spent many spare weekends on the beach. I looked forward to it because my mother would make *mahshi* which, because it took so long to prepare, was a dish reserved exclusively for Saturdays. My aunt loved to pass time sleeping in the sun. My mom did too, but she would cover her face with a hat and her arms with sleeves. While I waited for them to wake up, I tried to concentrate on a book or my phone, but the pecking heat often tore my attention away. I looked up at the sky, hoping to see a cloud swooping over the sun, for its wings to shield the Earth below it even momentarily. But all the clouds were wispy and slowly dying as they fed on their moisture, consuming themselves entirely; some sprawled like the roots of cacti searching for water in a helpless drought, stretched so thin by desperation that they disappeared into it. I could only find the sun pulsing above me, hurling its heat in shells down on its creation, its assault harsher every time I looked at it. Most people took refuge from its barrage under umbrellas or in the strip mall nearby, but my aunt, she could lay in the desert sun for hours. Then, I did not understand her obsession with warmth, but I do now.

We would stay there until late at night when the cool breeze came in and most people had gone home. My sister, aunt, and I would climb the giant breakwater at the east end of the beach. My aunt would help us find the boulders that were safe to step on, taking us with tender hands too kind for the sun she loved. We would sit on the rocks in silence and listen to the sounds of waves gurgling and sloshing as they ricocheted off the rocks, then again as they crashed into the shore behind us. I would look down at the crevices pooling with the slush of barren seawater and bait left by discouraged fishermen, then up in the sky. All day, it was stretched and pale and dry like the sun it held, but at night it relaxed into a rich indigo you would not expect from a sky tried so much by the heat.

It's been so long since I've been home. I miss the *oud* in crowded malls that coated the back of my throat, and the musty bus rides with friends I don't know anymore. Here, I feel betrayed by the road names that are in a different language and the weather that cries too often. For many months, the parquet flooring in my room felt like plastic compared to the cool white tiles I was used to, and the new house furniture felt strange and too new. The rags we used to clean were no longer old punctured shirts I recognized, but store-bought in matching sets vibrant with dye that age has not yet stripped. Every day I wake up in a house that is not mine, and I feel dumb forgetting what intersection it sits on every time someone asks. But the winter and the angry wind it brings are the hardest to adjust to. Even if I covered my ears with my hands, I could not escape its shrill wail, like a lost loon wading through the tough sky that could never seem to find its way home.

Getting the opportunity to start a new life in a new country should be freeing. I thought I could fly away from my old nest and restart in a new one. I did not account for the time it would take to rebuild it, and how tiring it was to re-learn the world with no nest to rest in.

The first weeks of school, trying to find acquaintances in awkward conversations, I spent much of my time staring dully into eyes sparkling with familiarity I envied, listening distantly to them reminisce about 8th grade graduation trips to places I did not know. I felt a block of ice crushing against my lungs, and this feeling did not leave me for a long time. It seemed time only made me more subservient to the beckoning warmth of memories, and it destroyed me. But the cold came back stronger every time, enough to make me ache for warmth again. The need for my next high kept me up late every night. Then, I would stare at the ceiling for hours, wondering if I would ever find home again.

On the last day of winter break, the sun set early and red, a phoenix spreading its wings to reveal its glowing breast, too bright. Its show was short and it escaped into the horizon, leaving the sky alone again. That night, the world did not sink into the empty navy it often did but was carried by a remarkable orange light into midnight. The stubborn haze that held the city for days surrendered, and it started to snow. For a long time, snow was a menacing bombardment of furious white knives, its brightness stark against sad trees and other life made useless by the winter's suffocating cold. But I have seen snow so much now that my eyes have worn its ugly protrusions to unthreatening stubs, simply a part of the sky.Flushed against my window, the snow glistened innocently in the ginger light and for once, I thought it might be beautiful.

**Nada Salem, 16**

## Scarlet Rose

My heart is like a scarlet rose.  
Whatever beauty I have left is mine to keep.  
For I've already lost petals plucked by sharp claws,  
squeezing its natural fragrance.  
They held the pieces of my petals.  
Sweet, scarlet liquid drips,  
drips down the abyss of lies and betrayal.  
They know the scent of my fragrance.

With pieces of my petals lost to me forever,  
I vowed to stop believing in liberation.  
I vowed to stop flaunting my beauty for the evil eye to tarnish,  
for the insects to feast upon its sweetness.  
My Rabb has thus gifted me with thorns.  
Leftover petals remain intact,  
guarded from the evil eye of the insects.  
Liberation is celebrated in the culture I live in but boundaries are my true liberty.

I shall lift my thorns in the presence of loved ones.  
Gentle lips whisper *Mashallah*.  
A word with the power to create more thorns.  
A word with the power to kiss with love.  
Oh! How my petals blush a scarlet shade!  
Perfection isn't their beauty.  
I need both sunshine and rain to nourish my roots.  
Sunshine is soft, nimble fingers,  
caressing my blushing petals.  
Rain is the tears flowing like a river of wisdom,  
anchoring the strength of my thorns.  
Love has grown back my lost petals.  
Thorns preserve that love.

**Mahnoor Khwaja, 16**

## Cover Him in Dandelions

There would be a lot of people. Her parents, obviously, her grandfather with his vintage grey suit and his silent wife (her other set of grandparents were not welcome; they had a rough history no one wanted to talk about), her husband, who frequently wore a hat to hide his thinning hair which gave him a strange tan line that made him feel old and pathetic, her children, dressed up and sagging like the dolls of Xochimilco. They would cry, and they would be very, very sad.

Her friends would hold each other's hands and mourn, oblivious to the fact that one day they will use her death as pity talks with their coworkers, late-night conversations with future lovers, insert the topic to achieve some sort of deeper connection with another. They would sigh and rub their eyes, speak of their unforgettable memories like late-night drives through the neighbourhood or watching clouds pass on the roof, how she was so kind and caring and loving, how she was gone, and how they missed her so much.

Everyone else would be a mix of complicated relationships and distant acquaintances, friends of friends who felt they weren't sad enough to be here and teenage cousins who met her three or four times at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Amongst them would be me.

I would watch everyone watch everyone else, see how many people loved her so dearly. I would sit for a while and listen, sulking like a child, tracing circles on my knee. Then I would leave, not sure where I was headed.

Walking through weeds and grass, I'd think of how beautiful nature is, how fantastic the houses were, how they had cold basements and a backyard, a little patch of nature of their own, how the gardens and painted fences were delightful family projects. I'd admire the roofs, the sky, the clouds, and how I'd love to climb atop the tiles and watch time pass with people who would one day cry for the absence of me.

Staring down at my feet as they took me somewhere, I would spot a lone rotting squirrel in the corner of my eye, ungracefully scattered in an awkward stance, disappearing slowly into a sea of maggots. I would squat down carefully next to him and watch the bugs dance in the sunlight.

I'd cover him in the brightest yellow dandelions, making sure to leave his hollow eyes exposed even though I know they don't see anymore.

I'd lay down and tell him that, thanks to his body, his maggots will grow up to be strong, independent flies, how they will buzz across the world, go places neither of us has ever dreamt of exploring.

**Hayeon Song, 16**

## Grave of the Fruit Flies

Once, when vacuuming in a strange part of the living room  
I noticed the zings of a few odd comets in the air  
And pulling the large red couch aside  
I realized I had displaced a headstone  
For the grave of some hundred fruit flies  
Who, knowing that it is better to die together  
And in the shade of houseplants  
Had fallen forever in black mounds  
Shrunken raisins  
Like dried fruits in biscuits we ate as kids  
I paused momentarily on this display of sleeping solidarity  
Then suctioned them into the next world

**Ben Elhav, 19**



### A Voice Unknown

Mirab Adnan, 15

# girlhood

next to a busy road, with plastic bags flying to the  
anthem of crushed soda cans,  
i tell a boy how girlhood is a fistfight.

how leaving the house means trading in your smile  
for something less approachable, and  
how it's a bad habit to want it back. to reach for it with hasty,  
desperate hands and know, already, that it's over.  
how existing like this (like us)  
is a paradox. where the world wants to keep you quiet,  
but they still relish how they can tear your tongue apart.  
You, their only audience. you, who can recite the story  
by heart. you, with the growing pains that follow  
even after you've begun to rot.

i tell the boy how we've learned to stand;  
some straight, poignant,  
stick in the mud. fear holds the spine strongest,  
crowbar splint to keep the poker face.  
i tell him what my mother told me. what my father told me.  
what i tell my friends before they leave my eye,  
all reassurance and brave faces. living leaves the most scars  
and we can't afford to put up a fight.

Then,  
the boy tells me he understands.  
understands what?

he speaks —  
something about conflicted feelings,  
something about hesitation, about *him* —  
but,  
i can't hear past the girls in my law class;  
huddled in the hall against the cold  
dramatisation of wandering eyes and hands  
and the recollections we try to ignore, flashing on the big screen.  
invasion of innocence, of every soft quiet  
thing, small enough to wrap your fingers 'round  
the other side;  
oh, we can fulfill every fantasy! except our own.

i can't see past how my shoes never fit the footprints  
he tracks in my house, on me,  
in the back of my throat. how he can  
float in the gutter and still come out unscathed. untouched.  
what a privilege it is to hesitate  
And live.  
in the silence, the boy looks at me like he's won.  
all avant-garde.  
some modest victor.

so he tells me he understands once more  
and  
i almost believe him but,  
at home,  
mama tells me how her mother crawled  
through rice fields with a swollen belly. through  
air that crackled with gunfire and dying prayers,  
muddy knees, a dress in fistfuls.  
we sit in the living room. faux leather sofa, warm breeze  
through half closed blinds — the air  
molds to the memory she speaks. and my knees  
are the only ones to ache for days after.

**Abigael Kichko, 17**



### **Self Journey**

Munira Ibrahim, 15



### **Grasp**

Adrienne Luong, 15

# My Brother Tommy

I watched helplessly as Tommy bashed the brick over and over into Arthur's skull. With every thrust, the old wooden floor of our tree house turned more and more crimson. My heart was going a mile a minute, my breathing shallow, senses heightened. I'd never seen Tommy like this before. Well, not with people at least.

"This...is what you get... when you take things that don't belong to you!" Tommy huffed, enraged. Little Arthur screamed in agony, a high pitched, desperate squeal. But no one was around to hear his suffering. His blood seeped through the cracks in the floor and dripped onto the ground. Tommy paused. Arthur was sobbing now, snot, blood and tears smeared across his face. And with one final blow, he was gone. Tommy set the brick on the ground gently.

"Tommy...!" I whispered anxiously. "Oh, god..."

Tommy drew in a short breath. He hadn't known that I'd seen the whole thing unfold. He looked at his hands, dirty and bloody. His expression was not one of shock, or regret, or fear, but one of slight frustration.

"It made a mess, Mary..." he murmured. Tears sprung up in my eyes as the gravity of the situation started to unfold. My big brother had just killed someone.

Tommy brought me back home, holding my hand. His fingernails were caked in blood. We entered through the fence gate and Tommy gestured to the hose.

"Wash your hands," he said sternly.

Tommy was only older than me by a year. He was always so protective of me. He wouldn't let me play football with him and his friends at recess, because he didn't want me getting hurt. He was a big oaf that looked and was threatening. He was always kind to me, but he had a serious problem. I'm not sure when it started. Maybe it was when he found a mouse in the backyard and trapped it in a plastic bag, or when he punched his friend in the throat for describing his shoes as "silly" in the second grade. He was a slacker and a misfit. He was enraged by everything, but gentle with me. His tendencies set him back a grade, which is why Tommy and I were in the same class.

Arthur was also in our class. He was a frail, skinny boy with tousled brown hair and wore a permanently worried expression. One day he came into class with a black eye and a broken tooth. When the other kids asked him what had happened, he said that he'd fallen off his bike. But that was a lie. I lived two houses down from him. Walking past his house, I would hear the angry shouts, the hurling of glass objects and the incessant crying. One time I caught him rummaging through our trash for food. He told me that he hadn't eaten in two days, and I was left wondering why he was so neglected. That night I took a slice of bread from the pantry and gave it to him. Every once in a while I would find him at the door, and every time I would give him a slice of bread and sometimes a cookie. He usually came three times a week. The third time he was supposed to come, he didn't show up. That was the day Tommy found him at the door, rummaging for scraps since I hadn't come home that day. That was the day Arthur was dragged into the woods by his ears and beaten to a sad, small pulp.

The next day in class, Mrs. Boyle walked in with a grave expression. We all sensed something was wrong, and the class pet, Darwin, took the liberty of asking if she was all right.

"No, it's not all right," she sighed. She glanced at Arthur's empty desk. "Children, there was an accident... Arthur was found in the woods last night." An eerie silence followed. Most of us weren't over the age of ten, so while we had grasped the concept of death, it was still foreign. Even though she hadn't said that he'd died, we all assumed the worst. She began again.

"If anyone has any information on his whereabouts yesterday or what happened to him, please tell me." I felt a sudden pang of guilt. I had to speak up. I started to get up from my chair ever so slightly, but something stopped me. I sensed Tommy's gaze on the back of my head, drilling into me. I bit my tongue.

"Is everything okay, Mary?" Mrs. Boyle asked.

"Y-yes." I stammered. I sat back down and retrieved my math textbook.

Evelyn Clay, 14

# How to Flirt at your Best Friend's Funeral

## 1. Do not feel guilty.

You've already wept for a week,  
dizzy in sorrow, dying of grief. You're so tired of carving  
tears into your cheeks, scrubbing your body  
red, trying to get rid of her reek. So tired of the smell of her  
sun kissed smiles and pink Columbia jacket, so tired of the smell  
of her home baked brownies and lavender hand lotions.  
So today, you've sprayed on some *Tease Rebel* perfume.  
So today, you're wearing a gold necklace on top of a black suit.  
Go grab a goblet of red wine and down it in one gulp.  
Go pile your plate with chocolate chip cookies, and offer one  
to that cutie on your right. So what if it's your  
best friend's funeral? You've already buried her  
in your chest. And right now you want to unravel  
your sadness. You want to feel                           a new type of tipsy.

## 2. Tap on someone's shoulder.

Don't care if they're a classmate or a stranger, if they're  
a friend or a neighbour, what their gender is, what they look like;  
as long as if they're breathing, if their flesh is warm, if there's  
a pulse on their neck, then they're alive  
and nothing else matters. So when they turn around,  
give them a wink and tell them they're  
drop dead gorgeous.

## 3. Do not let them leave.

If they leave, you can't flirt.  
The conversation will die. And besides,  
you've already had enough of death. So instead,  
why not ask them some questions? Like would you rather  
hot chocolate or chocolate milk / do you prefer sunny days or rainy days / do you like hugs / do  
you like dogs / do you like hot dogs / what's your pet peeve / what's the best type of cheese /  
what's the funniest meme you've ever seen.  
You talkative teenager, you random question generator, spitting out  
sentences as if your sanity depends on it. You've got this. Don't  
let them wonder why you're keeping this conversation alive  
as if your life is on the line.

#### 4. Laugh.

Giggle and laugh like  
they're the most interesting person on earth, like they've just told  
the funniest joke you've ever heard. Lean closer,  
twirl a strand of hair on your finger. Then laugh.  
Stumble forward, brush  
your hands on their shoulder. Then laugh. Bat  
your eyelashes, blame it on the wine. Then laugh  
like it's the first day of fifth grade  
and you're sprinting across the field playing tag with her.  
Laugh like you're at a sleepover and she's  
braiding your hair with a strand of blue ribbon. Laugh  
like you're stealing a chicken nugget from her lunchbox,  
an eraser from her pencil case. Laugh  
like there's a math test tomorrow and  
she studied but you didn't.  
Drop the plate of cookies and the wine glass. And laugh  
with your head tilted back, laugh with your eyes shut,  
with your arms crossed, with your body facing up.  
Laugh like you're in a casket.

**Jessica Yu, 16**

## black & white

I am staring into the endless darkness  
I wonder for brightness to come  
I hear the painful silence  
I see it closing in  
I am swallowed into the darkness  
  
I pretend light dances around me  
I feel comfort, in the light that is almost familiar  
I grasp the emptiness, trying to hold onto the glow  
I worry if it will come, if I am truly waiting  
I cry that I may never see my dreams, be led the right way  
I am gazing into the darkness

I understand my wish may not satisfy me  
I say the dark is here for a purpose  
I dream about light reaching me, embracing me  
I try to accept the shadows, not escape them  
I hope I'll find the light; finding my way instead of awaiting its arrival  
I am seeing the darkness... embedded with light

**Sundari Subramanian, 12**

# The Soul Train

In our town, there was a myth: the soul train, they called it. The myth wasn't specific to our town, but the people here strongly believed in it. "What's a soul train, Grandma?" I remember asking when I was younger.

"A soul train is a train that comes by and stops an ambulance when the dying soul is not meant to be saved. Once the train finishes passing by, it disappears. Like it never existed in the first place," my grandmother explained, patting my head.

"Do you believe in it?" I had asked out of curiosity.

"Yes. Yes, I do," she replied, smiling. "Sometimes... souls are trapped and need to be released, you know?"

"If Grandma believes in it, I believe it too," I had chirped back.

Now as I stared at the freight train passing by through the window of the ambulance, I refused to believe the myth was true.

"Can't we drive around or something?" I nearly yelled, my eyes never leaving the monitor that displayed my grandmother's heartbeat.

"It'll take just as long to go around, maybe even more. Our best choice is to wait it out," the paramedic said, but there was a hint of unease in her words. She knew it too. My grandmother wouldn't be able to last that long.

"Please... she's going to die like this," I sobbed. The paramedic shook her head slightly, rubbing my back in a comforting motion before returning to observe the monitor.

"It's very unlikely that your grandmother will die," she consoled. "Your grandmother has bradycardia, which means her heart rate is considered extremely slow. It's most likely the reason why she fainted. And the chances of—" her explanation was cut off when the monitor started beeping a lot faster than before. I heard her swear under the breath and soon she was all over the place.

"What's happening?" I asked, my voice shaking as I looked back and forth between the paramedic, my grandmother, and the ongoing train.

"She's going into cardiac arrest," she replied, not even looking at me.

"What is that? Is it the same as a heart attack?" I asked. I could feel the colour draining from my face, my vision blurring a little.

"No," was all she said as she worked on keeping my grandmother alive. I turned around, unwilling to look at the scene and stared at the train, praying it could pass faster.

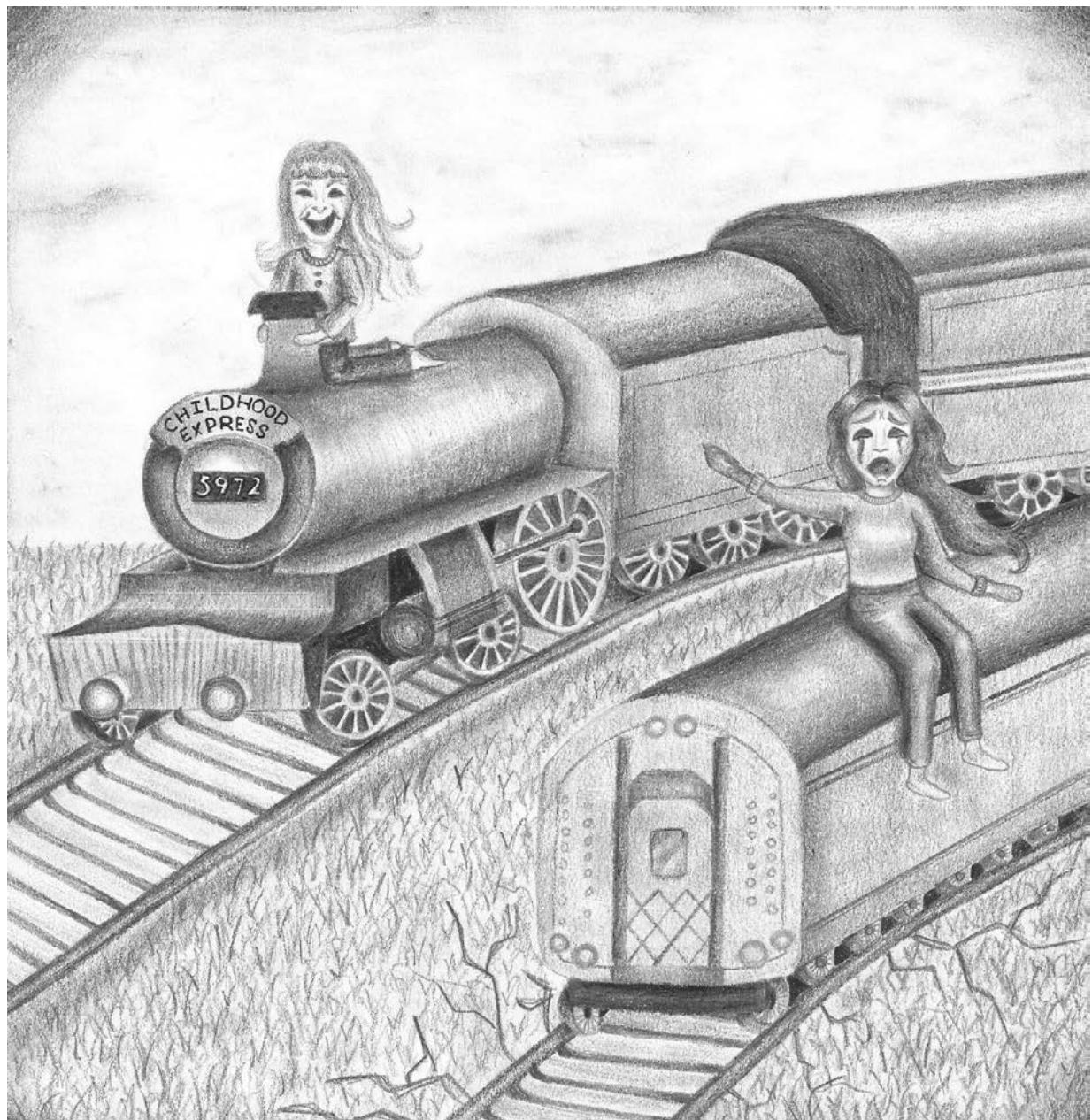
"I'm sorry, but she didn't make it," the doctor explained, his voice was quiet but it still rang in my ears.

"I see," was all I could manage to get out of my mouth.

"Do you wish to see her?" I looked up. It was the paramedic from before.

"Yes," I replied, tears spilling onto my cheeks. She nodded and led me to another room where my grandmother was lying on a white bed. "I didn't want to believe it. It was just a myth..." I nearly laughed at myself.

JingYi (Joella) Lin, 14



### **The Past Has Departed**

Tajreen Ahmed, 16

## The Boy of Metaphors

He and his heartbeat were waves. Receding further and further from me and as I chased him, the more danger I was in. Further from known territory, further from safety, and closer to the riptide. I was pulled in and before I knew it, drowning.

Drowning in his eyes that were like electrified sugar, his jokes that felt like the first snap of a soda can being opened. The calloused way his gaze snapped towards the sky and seemed to hover just above the horizon despite what was in front of him. Always searching for something unfindable.

Drowning in his coiling dreams and powerful visions that were so vivid they washed out any glimpses of the world without him. Tints of metallic and ivory ideas thick with saturation and sugary colours too promising to be part of our tainted history.

Drowning in his laugh. His laugh that convinced me joy could be made into a sound. And it was addictive to hear. So addictive. It was my favourite song, and the lyrics were our memories.

Drowning in him. He looked like burnt sunset in the summer and crumpled paper in the winter. Perhaps beauty is subjective, but it wasn't his appearance that made him so beautiful. It wasn't his rough hair or his spotty freckles that shifted as he held a conversation. It was his soul. His soul, it was gorgeous.

It was brilliantly alive, folding and falling and jumping into the beyond. How such an untamed and defiant existence could fit into one person, I'll never know. And it made him so intoxicating, so easy to choose, like sirens to a sailor. Like the moon to the sun and the ghosts to the living. It almost wasn't a choice. Once I started drowning, going back was impossible. His heartbeat, like waves, seized me and then the shore wasn't an option. Going back to black and white. That would be like saying no to oxygen. In the end, I would only ever need to gasp more.

It would be to rebel against nature to not fall in love with him. To not breathe. To not drown. And so I drowned. I choose to drown in the boy of metaphors. I only wish he had chosen too.

**Mimi Tsay, 15**

## in the aquarium

standing alone behind the glass — watching schools walk/  
swim by quietly. harsh grey glimmers through dark murky waters/  
dim flickering lights, steadfast eyes peering forward  
and moving together. but in circles — weaving between tanks/  
corals and seaweeds, they never stop or slow. pushed down by the water  
pressure — indistinguishable, some go astray and get lost/  
eaten. Only one stops to look around and wonder. But  
they will be the same when they leave, packed together in cubicles/  
in cans, processed.

**Joseph Lee, 19**

# The Lady's Dressing Room

I am from therapy,  
tethered to a boy holding scissors,  
pulled around by ignorance is bliss.  
Stop catching me with your tyrannical grip.  
Unrest, distraction, toying with the taboo.  
Everything changed for the 4th time,  
"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Everything changed, forced into the world of all I've wanted.  
I fed myself lies.  
I wandered the streets alone, but was taken in  
and thus, it began ...

Everything changed, we were finally on the same team.  
A little older, a lot less bolder.  
In the end, I just cried happy tears.

Everything changed, flipped the world on its head.  
We were too busy being happy, stupid, awful,  
didn't realize that we wouldn't love each other the way we promised to,  
for ever and ever.  
I never want to be that small fry again.

Enter when I loved mornings, but sadly, I was mean then too.  
I turned nice, those people don't know me anymore.  
Appreciate and make amends,  
confessing the way I can't do now.  
Sometimes I want to be this girl again,  
that part of me inevitably remains

I am from the people I will love beyond my last breath,  
from the truest form of happiness I can think of,  
from the clothes on my back  
to thinking I could sleep in a city that doesn't.  
I am from Tigger and bad books, leading myself to me,  
from lost faces with whom I shared my best self.

Everything changed for the 5th time,  
I am from finally blossoming, from that not-so-cruel summer.  
I am from Devils rolling dice and angels rolling eyes,  
now I write love letters to myself and seek that ancient happiness.  
Golden like daylight,  
each day I am from waking up slightly newer.

**Emma Wong, 16**

## Wake Up Call

Tired. With one word, Sofia could sum up how she felt about pretty much everything. She was tired of having to balance just about every aspect of her life. Her shoulders drooped a little at the thought. She couldn't even think, let alone recall how she had gotten into this mess.

"If I follow exactly how I planned my schedule, I'll be OK," she thought, her eyes snapping open.

She glanced over at her clock and read 11:58 PM, sending herself into panic. She should have started studying for her science test 28 minutes ago. She scrambled off her bean bag chair and dug through the haphazardly piled papers on her overflowing desk. It was 12:02 by the time she managed to find her notes, and she hadn't even eaten dinner yet.

"Don't cry. You'll wake everyone up and you don't have time anyway," she muttered to herself under her breath.

For the next ten minutes or so, Sofia was able to keep all her other worries and thoughts at bay, but it wasn't long before they leaked through her intense focus.

"I haven't unpacked my bag from school or math class or even packed my lunch for tomorrow. Oh my gosh, I have soccer tryouts after school tomorrow and I don't even know where my cleats are. But this test is my unit test."

She sighed and snuck another look at the clock — 12:25 blared out at her. Another five minutes wasted doing absolutely nothing and she knew she had to study for a minimum of at least another hour to even get a half decent mark on this test. Why was she even doing this to herself?

She wasn't sure. This had all started with the school she chose. What had her 13-year-old self been thinking? It had seemed so impressive, full of opportunities and potential at the orientation. It had been clear that everyone there was ambitious, with big dreams and determined mindsets to bring them there, just like her. She wanted to be just like them and fit right in. When her exam results and entrance application succeeded, she was overjoyed. She hadn't been wrong. The school was amazing, a perfect fit for her, and she was satisfied with her choice, mostly.

However, that was only the start of her problems. She had stacked more teams, more clubs and another volunteer job onto herself as if her advanced school work wasn't hard enough. She got all those perfect grades, but now four years down the line when it really mattered, when the universities were watching, she struggled to maintain them on top of her jam-packed schedule. She wanted to do so many things, but didn't have the time for them, let alone the energy. Even her mother had been worried about her.

"Sofia, are you sure this isn't too much for you? This seems like a lot."

"Don't worry, Mom. I can handle it," she had replied.

That was well before she had really gotten deep into the mess, where she was now. She laughed bitterly at the thought. She was really behind schedule now — it was already 12:36. She knew she was going to have to study on the bus tomorrow. The house was silent except for her sniffling. It was 3:57 AM when her head hit the pillow.

Nine years later, Sofia woke up to a phone call. She had fallen asleep on her desk again.

"Hello? Head Business Associate Sofia Beckett from Nation's Bank speaking. How can I help you?" She said, putting on the most cheerful tone she could muster.

After hanging up, she let out a sigh and opened her laptop, clacking at her keyboard, a tired expression resting on her face. Four years at this job, and it had only gotten more boring. Sure, she was making good money. It was no secret that she held one of the highest positions at one of the biggest finance companies. Many would give up so much, work so hard to be sitting at the desk she was, to get the view she got on the fourteenth floor of this office building, just like she did. They would work just like she did, to graduate from one of the top universities and programs of the country in four years instead of six years, just to be where she was now. Even now, Sofia herself wasn't even quite sure how she had done it. She had toiled, all to get here.

Where was she? What had she achieved? She was envied by so many who wanted to be Sofia Beckett, Head Business Associate at Nation's Bank. All the all-nighters she had pulled studying for tests, working to obtain that quality education for a desk job that wrote what people called a success story. Every parent-teacher interview, she beamed as all her teachers had told her parents, "Your daughter is going to go far. She has incredible potential."

Sofia had watched her parents tear up, holding their cameras, as she walked across the stage at her university graduation with the top marks of her whole class, of course, grinning right back at them. That day she remembered thinking that her life was now set, permanently steered in the right direction. All her hard work and energy was about to pay off. She had been absolutely clueless about the dreary life she had just chosen alongside this path.

She had risen where others failed, done what others were afraid to, to acquire this future. The education and knowledge she had spent years honing, practically dedicating her whole lifetime to, was all for this, and was now a tool sitting there just waiting to be picked up, yearning to be fulfilled. It was ironic really, she scoffed at herself. So where had all that ambition and work gone? Towards this? She didn't know. She just knew that she was supposedly living the life, the life that everyone wanted, the life earned by overachievers.

**Faunia Shen, 14**

## The Midnight Storm

Inky darkness spills  
Silence spreading over Earth  
Cold, light breeze picks up

Little tears fall down  
Each drop advocates its pain  
Tip, tap, plop this goes

Now dark clouds invade  
Lightning flashes through the sky  
The thunder rumbles

Wind howls viciously  
Cold lonely trees thrash wildly  
Raining cats and dogs

Sky's angry tantrum  
On and on and on it goes  
Dawn arrives slowly

Pinkish purple skies  
Sun peaks out of horizon  
Grey clouds run away

Dancing drops cascade  
Small happiness crescendos  
Wet applause ceasing

Gently blowing breeze  
Brings relaxing memories  
Wafts of soft cool air

Moist dense wispy mist  
Wet dew glistens on green leaves  
Warm sunlight pours in

Morning is here.

**Elizabeth Zhou, 17**



**Swirling Consciousness**

Isabella Iacoe, 17

# Hair

I think of you when I am brushing my hair.

All the chilling ways you ran your hands through it, as if always on the brink of yanking. The night you led me to the other side of the fence, then the other side of the door, you smiled. And I thought I could love you. I thought I could loan someone happiness and charge a small percentage of interest. Maybe I could earn a profit that way. You had other ideas.

You toured me around, the cherry dress dragging around upon me, jewels and makeup smirking on my skin, the diamond clasping my finger. Around stairs that someone had wiped with their life, to rooms of equal grandeur, lights burning to provide maximum brightness. At last, the kitchen. It looked like it came out of those home magazines; all shining steel, an eager employer. I smiled at my reflection through the steel haze. I take the smile back.

I think of the emptiness, of the weight of air on my head, like a bejewelled crown pressing me down, commanding me to straighten my back and wallow in my new-found strength.

You gave me three pieces of silk and told me to wear them on my head, that my hair should be covered as your wife. I accepted it. I wrapped one around my hair every morning before I had to come down to the breakfast table. Well, the kitchen. It took three minutes. In the first, I would wrap my hair around, slip the hair tie from my wrist and secure the hair I'd tied up. In the second, I would lay the cool silk on my scalp and stare at the mirror, the silk breathing on my hair. In the third, I would clip it in place and look at myself again. I bought the silk in many colours.

A child was not on the horizon, and my body knew your frustration. I knew it under the moonlight after the sun had set. You explained it as your love, that you needed that, but I knew your sighs: longer and heavier with every beat of the clock against my chest. My womb finally complied and I could see your mansion awakening; chandeliers gleaming once again, like aristocrats sparing the luxury of their welcome. I could picture the second take of my entrance. I take that hope back.

I think of my new pink hair, how it's proud under the sun. Would it catch your eyes or would it deter them? I don't know if I want to know.

You once said black was not my colour. But what was mine? In stolen minutes of contentment, I decided I was okay. I decided that that was enough happiness for me, even if it was not profitable. It came at the cost of your anger, not that I cared for our blueprint of a bridge, but the anger that crossed the ocean anyway.

You held my hand. I gasped. Tears collecting in my eyes. And you said: "I could hit you, but I am better than that." Somehow, I would have preferred a physical bruise. Somehow, you achieved the same effect without any trace. A bruise that found no one to blame, so it blamed the skin. I take the tears back.

I think of the length of my hair, how I could never cut it out. It asks for commands of your hands, not mine. And never a barber's, of course.

I called my mother. She picked up the third time. She asked why I had called, and then greeted me. Suddenly, I was angry at you. Enraged, infuriated, resentful. It awoke in me like passion in the kid who, tired of missing out on account of his anxiety, decides to go taste the world. I told her. She told me: "Let the baby arrive." The kid felt awkward the whole time, and his thoughts ate him up; so he let the weight of his shoulders drag him all the way back to his room. I take the anger back.

I think of how you wanted my hair tied. I think of how you wanted me tied.

When I ran, you were there to watch. You took your heir and then slammed the door shut.

I think of doors. How they can be opened to let you in, they can be closed to trap you in, they can be opened to kick you out, and they can be closed to shut you out. How that wood held power over me.

So I got rid of the cloth around my hair to protest.

But I take that silk, along with the three minutes to put it on, back. This hijab belongs right there, right where you wanted it. Right where my hands laid it down and cherished the gentle sheath in its vibrant colour. It will never be, nor ever has been, yours.

## Jokes and Words and Apathy

He's sweet afterwards. She expects otherwise. She expects to feel fundamentally different, like something vaguely important has just been ripped from her hands. It is supposed to be difficult and it is supposed to be life-changing, but she doesn't feel that at all.

Instead, he's sweet. His voice is kind and he tells her that she's beautiful, and that seems like all she could ever ask of the world.

Happy and satisfied, she curls into his arms, and shuts her eyes. He feels warm and she feels safe. Sunlight pours in through her window and reminds her to see how much longer they have before her parents come home.

But that's not all.

A few days later when she walks into third period there are eyes on her, and there are usually *never* eyes on her. She doesn't notice them much, except that she does. Each and every second that they burn through her body, along her skin and up her spine. She doesn't know them but, somehow, they know her. *They* know her. They know her. And she doesn't like it one bit.

For a moment she thinks maybe something about her did change, after all.

She hears later that he may have let something slip at a friend's house. He apologizes profusely and says that they're only glances. She decides they're only glances, and glances are nothing. She decides it's nothing, then.

He takes her hand and there's one pair of eyes that she doesn't quite mind. They're deep and a caramel brown, and they would never do anything to hurt her.

He would never do anything to hurt her, except by accident. And an accident means they get ice cream after class and he pays for three whole scoops with sprinkles on top.

He wipes cream off the corner of her lip and rests his fingertips against her cheek.

She melts along with the cone.

But that's not all.

Late at night, she admits things to close friends who would never say a word. They laugh and things are odd, but she loves him and somehow she feels guilty for sharing. She belongs to him, and so what she gave away was a piece of him.

She calls him first thing in the morning and profusely apologizes, but he doesn't sound convinced. She hopes this is an accident, but she's not sure what flavour ice cream he likes.

Soon enough the whole school knows about her indiscretion. They know her, again, more than before. They are unraveling her.

Unraveled, she sits in the bathroom stall at lunchtime crying on her own. But he sends a text asking where she is, and at the thought that he might have forgiven her, she jolts up. She wipes tears from her eyes, and decides that this was repentance.

She deserved it and she's paid the price and now he's okay, and they're okay.

And that's what really matters. So she says the murmurs are nothing, then.

But that's not all.

One day after school they are standing in the corridor as she eagerly waits for him to finish talking to one of his friends. The bus ride home is like the cherry on top of her day, and she gently presses her fingers into the palm of his hand so that he might get the message.

But she doesn't want to rush him and be the girl who doesn't let her boyfriend have a life outside of her. No one wants to be that cruel, relentless bitch, that so many women clearly already are. Keeping boys from being boys and men from being men.

She notices that his friend's gaze lingers too long on her chest. She doesn't say anything. This dress is low cut and it's not like he meant to do it.

When she tells him about it on the bus, in the back corner where they always sit, he doesn't say much. Mutters something about how she could be imagining things.

She's always imagining things when nothing is there. So this must be nothing, then, too.

But that's not all.

She gets closer with his friends because she's cool and they should like her. She's not like the other girls, and somehow girls don't make her feel that great to be around anymore.

They're all talking one night and someone makes a joke about that first night they spent together. Apparently she wasn't spectacular and he didn't want to tell her in person, but he wanted to vent. He needed to vent. It was his, and she was his, and it was all his to give away.

She realises that's what the glances must have really been about.

His friends laugh at the recount. For some reason, she freezes and can't bring herself to do the same. After a few awkward seconds of silence, she hears a low chuckle escape his lips. Usually the sound is rich and smooth and makes her feel like she's walking on air. She's not sure why it doesn't make her feel that way now.

She looks over at him, with her lips in an involuntary pout. He gives her a shrug. And he shrugs when she's being crazy. She's being crazy, she decides.

This feeling deep inside of her, like lava building up in her stomach, like an iron claw is grasped around her throat... it must be nothing but crazy. So it's nothing, then.

But that's not all.

When things are tranquil in the summer, and they have found their personal escape. She's washing paintbrushes over the kitchen sink one day. Her parents are on vacation for the first time since that first night. And he walks up behind her.

Nothing matters but him, and the year is behind them along with the glances and laughs and all of his friends.

He wraps his arms around her waist and rests his chin on her shoulder, and she falls back in a soft hum. This must be what heaven feels like.

Then his fingers slide across her stomach, slowly making their way to her chest. She's frozen again, and she can't breathe.

It's okay. It's okay. It's okay.

He's pawing at her, and she can hear him moan and he must be expecting some words to escape her lips but she opens her mouth and... nothing.

The words don't come out and she swallows hard. She turns around to face him when he's finally done, and there's that caramel brown that would never, ever hurt her.

She didn't want that. She didn't want that. She didn't want that. She didn't — it's nothing. He's kissing her now and it's nothing. A small hiccup that's just some fucking nothing. He's here in her house, and she is all his. Her skin and her limbs. His.

And she's the one that didn't speak up.

So it must be nothing, then.

A slow crackle. A violent snap deep inside her.

And that's all.

**Aysha Tabassum, 19**

## Warriors

We are still trapped in a cage  
A cage of misery, where our screams repeat  
We are victims of those reckless beasts  
Our pain, so indescribable, we are silenced  
The zipper on our mouths, it's always caught  
Boom boom boom, over by stampedes of disgrace day by day  
Tick tock, time feels like centuries, trudging through sandstorms of insults treated like trash

Being submerged into our tears of melancholy, every single day  
Tears that will remain, a grim reminder on our cheeks  
Each day we would wither until we are nothing  
Eerie, musty halls, chaotic battlegrounds being bombarded by words and actions  
Fighting externally and within, the strong hunt and the weak are hunted

A happy façade put on like the makeup the popular wear,  
“Idiot! Freak,” they’d call us  
As we pray to be freed from the grasp of our own despair  
Our reflections tell us that we are filled with individuality  
We will be weaved together to make a firm bond to become stronger  
Blooming into a delicate flower, budding into an exuberant being

We’re not puppets or toys. Not something to be controlled  
We’ll cut the string to freedom  
Yet, will we ever see the gleam of light, that is a small bit of hope? Yes  
Even if we are our own unique type, we are champions that will conquer the obstacles in our path

**Angelica Tse, 12**



## Battlecry

Alice Calineac, 16

# I haven't seen him in a while

I couldn't comprehend it at my age  
Why I had not seen him for a couple weeks  
That kid who lived right below us  
The walls were thin in our tiny duplex  
My mom would vacuum whenever his music was too loud  
I'd see him at the park downstairs  
With his friends riding their bikes  
As my mom pushed me on the swing  
Him and his friends would circle the entire block  
& come back with drinks from the corner store  
I thought he was the coolest  
And my mom liked him too  
Our moms would talk downstairs when the power went out  
Or have a small chat when one of them ran out of sugar  
That day was scorching hot  
The air so thick with humidity you could choke on it  
He went out to play basketball for some odd reason  
My mom and I watched him from the balcony shoot hoops in his drenched tank top  
My dad went out for some food to bring home  
Most fast food vendors refused to deliver to where we lived  
Our broken AC glared at us with guilt  
As the temperature rose to 35 °C  
And then something didn't feel right  
My mom left the apartment to throw out the trash  
The strong smell of marijuana from the hallway floated into our apartment  
I grimaced at the scent  
I then heard the loudest sound I ever heard tear through the air  
I whipped my head in the direction towards the window in shock  
I told my mom about what I had heard  
She chuckled — not believing me  
Shrieks and cries were heard outside in a matter of minutes.  
We rushed downstairs to see his mother  
folded almost like a pretzel  
The way she fell to the ground  
Her legs and arms overlapping each other  
Her wails attracting a small crowd in front of the court  
The night came by and offered cool air  
And most of the time tranquility  
But not this one  
Tenants were gossiping in the lobby  
Or smoking on their balconies talking on the phone  
My mother — grief stricken but robotic in a way  
Staring at the television screen  
To me it was just a normal night  
That was 15 years ago  
"Things get better with time," they say  
I wish that was true  
But I see him all the time

I can almost see his face but I can't  
I can form eyes, a mouth, and short curly hair  
But I can never make out a face  
There's so much I don't know about him but I feel like I know everything at the same time  
But how do you miss someone you don't remember?  
When I'm long gone I hope to see him again  
So we can finish our conversations  
I try not to worry too much  
Because he's with his creator now  
And I hope he tells him all about it  
Some humid summer nights like that night  
I blink and then say to myself out loud  
"Wow. I haven't seen him in a while"

**Salma Ahmed, 16**

## The World Made by Art

The different shades of blue separate the sky and sea,  
A Sun powered by paint lights the sky,  
Bright strokes of day dash across the water,  
A splash of gold forms the shimmering sand,  
The brush completes the glimmering world  
As it leaves a trail of fluffy whites.  
The painting is simple; simply perfect.

The world made by art falls into the parents' hands.  
"I love it, but isn't it a bit empty?"  
The drawing did look a little plain.  
The brush tiptoes across the canvas,  
Creating little figures swimming, running, sailing.  
Blots of colour weave their way  
Into the simple sparkling painting.

The world made by art falls into the friend's hands.  
"Why are there no unicorns? It looks so boring."  
The drawing doesn't need them, but children like them.  
The brush intrudes the canvas,  
Conjuring a unicorn stomping across the sky.  
A dangerously sharp horn tears  
Through the sparkling innocent painting.

The world made by art falls into the teacher's hands.  
"It needs more details and layers."  
The painting is already overwhelmed with colours.  
The paint brush cuts into the canvas,  
Leaving scars of shades and highlights.  
Fresh wounds of black and white pollute  
The innocent extravagant painting.

The world soiled by art returns to the girl's hands.  
Confusion infects her eyes.  
The disease of society disfigures  
The simple delicate painting.  
Where is the light blue sky?  
Where is the sun-coloured sand?  
The painting is forgotten in the trash.  
The girl has lost her art.

**Yunxuan Jiang, 15**

## Prison Roots

There is nothing better than a warm cup of tea in my hands. Well, except maybe the time spent with my family and friends, but tea is much easier to obtain.

Especially in the place I am, it comes pretty often within my grasp.

But today, I place the cup down, unable to concentrate. Despite the clatter and motion around me, I stay silent, anxiously fidgeting in my seat, the cooling tea sitting ignored. My gaze flits across the room, restless, and takes in the many other women in the cafeteria, all in the same prison-issued uniforms. Unsatisfied, my eyes take in the police officers in the back, looking on, but they avert away before I catch the stern gaze of one of them. My eyes shift over to the double doors, the only way in and out, and watch a policewoman step through, holding a clipboard, face neutral.

“Excuse me.” Her voice booms over the cafeteria, and the murmuring descends to subdued tranquillity. I sit up and push my food tray away, eager to see what she has to say. She clears her throat, glances down to her clipboard. “May the following people please come forward. Madeline Francis.”

A younger woman with a tattooed arm stands and walks to the front.

“Kate Tamerin.”

With some effort, a teenaged girl gets up from her lonesome table and crosses the floor. The police-woman continues to recite names, some familiar, some foreign.

“Warren Doe.”

I stumble to my feet and amble briskly to the front, heart pounding. With a nod to the crowd watching her, the policewoman turns to us and signals to follow her out the door. The cafeteria becomes busy once again as we leave, and I steal one last glance before exiting the room. As one corridor becomes another, we wander through the maze of endless doors until we reach a glass one and are ushered in. The open room holds many tables, some carrying snacks, others paper and crayons. The officer finally smiles at us.

“If you haven’t noticed, today’s a special day for you all.” Grins of acknowledgement are passed around, the room becoming pressured with excited tension.

“Each of you has been chosen today to spend the day with your families.” She pauses as static passes through her walkie-talkie, and she checks her watch. “They should be arriving momentarily; however, the paperwork will take some time. We have planned some activities for you and your loved ones, but for now, you may get settled in.”

With a confirming inclination, the group disperses, some huddling over the same table, others spreading out. I maneuver through the room, aware of the officer’s unbroken gaze over us, and glance over people’s shoulders.

Settling down at an empty table, I fiddle with my uniform. My heart pangs at the thought of my family back home, the beaming kids, the hyper Pomeranian that I left in their care.

A sound interrupts my thoughts, and I jerk my head up at unfamiliar voices, wiping away the unexpected tears that surfaced. A young girl enters the room, followed by an older man, and we all jump as she squeals abruptly and races across the room. The teenager from before bends down to embrace the young child, and lifts her up, nuzzling her face into the girl’s hair. The youthful man sheepishly grins as he glides over next to the teen, his hands completely full of bags of all kinds, and pecks the girl on the cheek. All eyes are on them as they find a table to settle at, and jealousy pangs my chest. Additional voices greet us as more visitors enter the room. Smiles are shared, tears are shed, yet I sit alone, still waiting. My uniform remains ignored in my wringing hands as I am unable to peel my eyes from the door.

But as time goes by, my fears and anxiety climb.  
Were they not able to make the bus?  
Did something happen to their babysitter?  
Did they get lost? Hurt? My head pounds, my hands shake, as I fear for the worst.  
All my efforts have gone to waste, all the time and money spent on making this a reality. I should have known. Tears threaten to spring, but some motion catches my eye from behind.  
“Mommy!” I lift my head, my stomach dropping. I recognize that voice anywhere.  
“Christine, baby.”

My daughter runs up to me, dress half unbuttoned, hair tied in messy braids flapping behind her. I kneel down and she collides with me, arms tightly wrapped around my neck. My cheek feels wet as Christine buries her face into it, and I kiss her ear. As we pull away, I laugh inwardly at my daughter’s chaotic state, and I adjust her clothes as she takes in mine.

“Hey, Mom.” I glance up as Jackson walks up, bowed under the weight of Christine’s toys and a backpack. We exchange smiles.

“Aw, Jackson,” My voice cracks midway as I get up to embrace him, but my arms reach his midsection, not what I’m used to.

“You grew,” I remark, stepping back to get a better look at him. The last time I saw my son, he still looked like a child. Now he resembles his father as he reaches his adult years, with a sparkle in his eyes and thick curly, outgrown hair. Jackson shrugs.

“Well, you shrunk.” I raise an eyebrow, lips pursed, but don’t mention anything as he sets down his bag-gage and helps his younger sister get settled at my table. Christine raises her hands, chubby fists opening and closing, and I pick her up and place her on my lap. She produces a piece of paper, and I turn it over, revealing a drawing of all of us together holding hands, the prison in the distance. My vision blurs as my face becomes wet once more, and Jackson puts his arm around my shoulders.

“Happy Mother’s Day, Mama.”

**Lindsay Chen, 14**



### **The City of Individuals**

Niya Gao, 17



# The Hunt

The four riders fled across the wastelands and the hunt followed, donning their silver masks.

The tall towers of forgotten civilization stood above them as they traversed the hostile road to the south, once glorious pillars of human achievement, now reduced to a pile of rusted and crumbling rubble. The broken roads had lush green grass sprouting from the cracks and all types of abandoned, rust-covered vehicles lined the streets.

Their journey down the road was an endless one. There was never any end in sight. It was days and days on end riding down the crumbling roads, and when their horses grew tired they walked, and when the riders grew tired they would rest and drink from their water skins, filled with rainwater from potholes.

The days would change to night and the cold would set in, so they built fires to keep themselves from passing in the night. While the days were mostly quiet, filled with introspection and reflection, the nights around the campfire featured lively dialogue, of what they had seen and where they were going, of the past, the world before the towers fell, before the wells ran dry, before the bombs were dropped, before the connections were severed, before life had to cling so hard onto their world as to not be taken by death.

What was that world, filled with colour? The world filled with life and love with heavens above. The world where water flowed a beautiful blue and people's laughter warmed the air carrying the joy through the winds, making connections. Connections, the fundamental essence of human life, not survival, but life. This beautiful world remained as only a blur in the minds of the riders, three of them. One was too young to have experienced yesterday's world. The world the other riders regarded as perfect.

Somewhere along the line the world took a wrong turn and the perfect world crumbled. Where had it gone wrong? Their memory of this world was in fragments, they could see the colours, hear the sounds, smell the scents, and feel the warmth, but these visions lacked clarity. They were nostalgic remembrances of an idealized past, a past that was built on the backs of others who would look back and see a world that was already broken, one lacking warmth of generosity. A world that rejected them yet demanded their presence all the same. They were glad to be rid of that world. They watched it burn with smirks on their faces.

During the riders' voyage, the era of reconstructionism had already begun. "More and more civilization, no more open country," the riders would say. No longer reminiscing the world before the fall, now looking back on the world before civilization crept back in. Communities were built, connections were made but the riders rejected this progress in favor of their journey south. The hunt could not apprehend them, not again.

The youngest rider once asked what awaited them to the south. The oldest rider motioned to the others to stop. He dismounted and told the youngest rider to follow. She climbed off her horse and grabbed his hand. They walked until he kneeled under a large oak tree and pulled her closer. He showed her a baby bird squirming on the concrete, bloodied and bruised, that had fallen from a nest high up in the tree. It had fallen from its home, where it had felt warmth and love and care. She wanted to look away but he pulled her closer and they watched as the bird let go and moved on. He got up, and they returned to their steeds. Lost in deep thought, the young rider remained quiet from there on out.

On the road, time was a faulty thing, one could tell day from night, but not week from week, month from month, or year from year. It was impossible to say how far they were from their destination or how far they had gone. Perhaps the only measure of time on the road was aging. Aside from their wrinkles growing deeper, the older riders didn't change much over the course of their journey. The young rider, however, got much taller, but it was still anyone's guess how long they had been going. But it didn't matter.

The day they arrived at their destination was like any other, but the world around them had changed. The towers around them were no longer ruins, they were now the foundation for a new civilization. Connections were being made.

It came to them that night, what they had waited so long for. When the light blinded them, they weren't crying tears of sadness, they were tears of relief.

The world continued and the towers grew taller once again. Connections were being made. The young rider rejected the light that day and the world moved on. As an old woman, she looked out her window at the new world but all she could think of was the world before, with the fallen towers and broken roads. She got on her horse, donned a silver mask, and headed south.

**Matthew Sneyd, 14**



### **Equilibrium**

Youngbin Moon, 18

# Hibernation

He scuttled furiously from beneath the undergrowth, pausing every few seconds to catch his breath. He didn't know if he had enough time. The blanketing beings of crimson, violet, rose, and turquoise had just begun to rise from their deep slumber and flood the sky in ripples. He grimaced as he noticed the light — it might have been too late.

His heartbeat quickened as the planted cluster around him began to grow thinner, knowing full well that he'd nearly reached the end of the protective forest. The rounded nut in his paws began to tremble and coat with sweat.

The first time he'd embarked on this mission, he'd nearly gotten killed.

His brave mama had tried to show him the ropes. Her voice echoed softly in his ear: *"Now, when you get up to the grey and rocky soil, be very, very careful. Keep your ears close to the ground, and listen for a great roaring or rush of wind."*

Paws clasped together, watching for a break in the stampede, they'd taken one step. Then another. And then an ear-piercing honk had left a bright shock of colour right before their eyes, metal blurring into an afterimage. A violent yelp brought in a lungful of reeking, putrid air, driving both of them into a coughing fit.

Throughout the unnaturally cold winter, they'd been cuddled in their new burrow, built on the little land they could find after their old home had been toppled. He hadn't been able to breathe properly since he'd started making the trips. All he could think about was the incident that day, knowing that after their hibernation was over and spring started to flock in, they'd have to revisit the same horrendous path to uncover the food they stored in the fall...

As he treaded out of the bushes, he saw it — the wide murky stretch just coming into light, looming out in front of him. The death track he'd have to race through to a finish line of tree and shrubbery. *This is it. I've got to hope I make it through in one piece.*

One paw-step. Two paw-steps. Silence.

A third paw-step. A fourth paw-step. Silence.

A fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth...

His claw brushed against warm dew, and he knew he was finally safe! Gasping hoarsely with relief, he steadied the nut, ready to scamper back to the burrow. But then...

He stopped to look at the scene behind him.

Still... *silence*. Not a single shiny beast shooting along the grey ground, growling from the depths of its empty belly. For minutes he stood there in mere shock, the path staying broad and empty as the sun continued to climb. Empty.

He took a nervous breath, tasting the sweet and oaky breeze dancing past, no longer muddled by the familiar heavy reek. He could even faintly make out, drifting over the treetops, the cardinal's first chirp of spring, no longer hidden by the mighty roars.

*Were they... gone?*

He gazed past the foliage in awe to a lake-like sky — shadows of geese swimming in the currents, dipping their wings through the waves, a clearing of cotton-dotted sapphire his mama only murmured stories about. In the forest before him, more of his kind had begun to emerge, hesitantly twitching their noses, sniffing at the air that had never felt so fresh.

*Maybe, they've travelled to a new home. Maybe they've found a different place to run about.*

*Or maybe...*

*Maybe they've finally gone into hibernation. It's their time to rest.*

**Sherry Shu, 16**



### **Living in the Wilderness**

Samantha Chan, 12

## Mother Hen

The bakery spoke to me after hours. You said that was a psychiatric problem, but Mom had communicated this way for months. She appeared in unexpected places, spoke cryptically through the bubbles in a saucepan. Whenever I opened the oven, the fan burbled, as if sending secret messages meant only for me. Sometimes I heard her voice while watching yeast breathe. Sometimes she appeared in the steam from the French cooktop, the outline of a woman appearing only for a moment. Once I tried showing her to you, pointing as she appeared discreetly above the pot, careful like the tooth fairy. You couldn't see her.

"That's an optometric problem," I said the last time you came to visit. I nudged your feet off the table with a mop, the soles stamping a mark on the freshly wet tile. Your head hung lax against the booth, a cigarette in your mouth.

Mom had hung a no smoking sign near the door before she died, but sharing a cigarette was a better bonding exercise than therapy. I cupped the edge of the smoke with my left hand. The white furled between the rings stacked there. Mom's wedding band, birthstone, pearl, the 14-carat diamond I baked into a cake once. The smoke felt like my baby, so I sang to it, arms cradled below my chest. Soon, the tobacco baby disappeared, my bare arms reappearing.

I leaned against the pole of the mop. My dress swished below my calves. A willowy one from Mom's wardrobe.

"You're going to burn yourself in those things," you said, pointing to the loafers I took from Mom even though she dedicated them to her sister in the will. They were a size too large and made of vegan leather. I'd filled the gap under my feet with cotton balls because insoles went up a dollar at the drugstore, and pulled the laces so tight the tongue puckered.

"Mom won't let that happen, Max. She's my guardian angel." I spoke to the eggshells left on the counter, filching the shell into my palm and nudging it toward you. "I'm going vegan, Max," I said. "Mom appeared here last week. Eggs are her new home. She slept in those broken shells for a while, but probably thought there was too much of a draft. All in the open like that. She's found her way into the yolks now, could be in any of those." I pointed to the eggs on the counter, which stood upright in the carton.

You held the shell, and it gleamed like a bone. "You're not going to accidentally eat her. She's gone. Like very much dead."

"You think too much. I heard her sing from inside one of those eggs." I pushed my finger against his palm, pointing to where I'd once seen a crumb of a woman. She'd drifted inside like a bubble. "She was right there."

You dropped the shell, its edge collapsing, and smoked the cigarette until it ate itself.

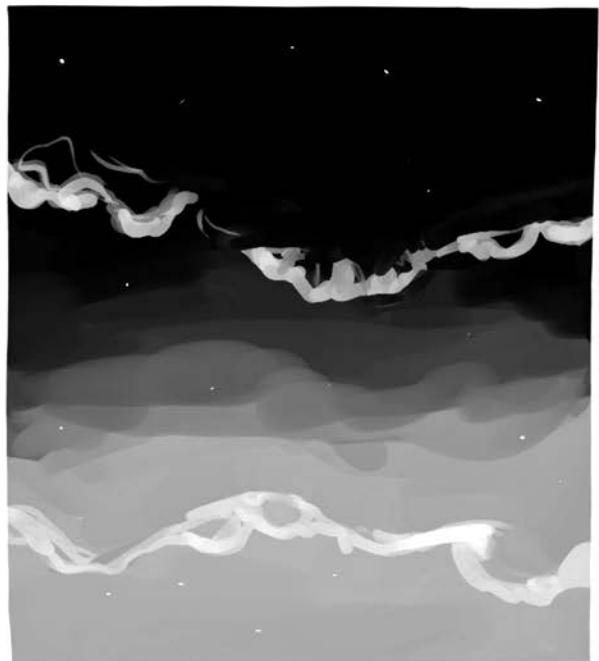
"It's not my fault she chooses to live in such inconvenient places. But I can't take any chances." I nursed the shell against my chest, the edges ragged. "Cruel. You're so cruel."

You swapped the box of cigarettes for the egg carton and disappeared into the kitchen's belly. Ten minutes later, you returned with curdles of yolk vomited onto a cookie sheet. They were scrambled, the nubs chalky and overcooked.

You nudged the plate to me, a fork speared through a curd.

We ate the eggs in silence.

**Sarah Lachmansingh, 18**



## Home

Kavya Sivapatham, 15

## Kern River

The Kern River runs through one hundred and sixty-five miles of canyon halfway between the desert and the sea, in a place where the sequoias reach for the heavens and the rocks plunge halfway to hell. Of the three rivers that run through this stretch of California — the Kern, the Kings, and the San Joaquin — the Kern is the wildest. Its energy draws the kayakers and the fly fishers to stand in its currents, and just as many children to try, only to be drowned in a churning barrage of water, their heads knocked into the rocks that line its banks. From Bakersfield to Sacramento, every mother's worst fear is to lose her baby to this river, the one that even the trawlers cannot pull bodies from. All that it leaves behind is a newspaper clipping.

But, for those whose families have known the Kern for generations, it is a life force as much as it is a lethal menace. It winds its way through the throat of the land, feeding America one drop at a time. It is possible to make a home out of the Kern, to accept what it offers and then run. But, those unfamiliar with its temperament blur the line between accepting and taking and forget that the Kern is not a river to be coaxed into giving up more than it offers. It is a river that takes no prisoners.

Marilyn Alvarez is exactly twelve years old when she learns this for the first time. She is young, still doll-like, with glossy black curls that slip from her ponytail in the summer heat and cling to the nape of her neck when she sweats. She is sweating today. It is summer, 1976, and the water in the Kern is high as it always is. Marilyn's spirits are higher. Her father has promised to take her fishing, their first outing together since he lost his job in January.

Juan Alvarez has been many things: a soldier, a worker, a father. He shook hands with the world, kept his promises and paid his dues. But he never bothered to question to whom he was making his promises and who he was trusting to keep them. Today, Juan knows there has never been anyone on the other side holding them up. The Juan Alvarez of 1976 is not a soldier or a worker anymore. He is barely even a father.

When Marilyn sees him now, he is usually passed out on the couch covered in a sheen of sweat that smells the way men do when there is no more space left inside of them for sin, so it leaks out the back alleys, searching for something else to rot.

It is a tricky thing, ridding yourself of sin. Marilyn is old enough to understand this and forgive him, but still young enough to believe he will one day atone. This man has given her everything she knows, and so she will give him everything she can, even if what he has given her is thirty percent of a paycheck, and what she has given him is a soul.

When they park the station wagon, the rocks are no longer canyons, just cliffs. Her father pulls two sets of waders from the trunk. They are small on him, and gigantic on her. There is only one fly fishing rod in the car, but that is okay by Marilyn. They will take turns and when she pretends to be incapable of catching one of the Golden Trout that frequent these waters, she will relish the pride in her father's eyes as he shows her how it's done. It is one more thing she can give him on top of her forgiveness and the weekend shifts at the movie theatre.

He enters the water first, leaving time for her to measure his steps and follow them with her own. She is all too aware of those less careful daughters who follow their fathers recklessly, only to meet the apex of the current and get sucked away in the churn.

Marilyn digs her heels into the silt to secure her balance and watches as her father winds back and whips forth the line, tracking it with his eyes until the entire thread is submerged. Nothing bites the first time round, but the second time he catches a small one. Three more of those and they would have dinner for tonight. He throws it back.

Now it is Marilyn's turn to catch her own fish. She is weak in her wrist, and the line barely flies ten feet. She reels it back, embarrassed and determined to do better. Her second cast arcs through the air with the momentum of the river, lifting her from the silt for a split second. It is a minor error, a rookie's mistake, and enough to send her tilting off her centre of balance, vulnerable to the hunger of the current.

Twenty years ago, the water of the Kern was clear and fresh. Now, it is murky and tastes vaguely bitter, like the bug spray her friend Carolina wears on bike rides. It is this bitterness, not the chill of water, that most disarms Marilyn as she is pulled under. She knows enough to lock her knees, to try and dig back into the silt and regain footing but she cannot. One moment, she finds herself looking the sun in the eye, the next, her temples scrape against the riverbed.

This is what the Kern does. Takes no prisoners. Plays no favourites. A small girl with a big heart is no different than a junkie on a bad trip. She can give the river all her anger, all her fear, and all her might but the Kern is not sympathetic.

Marilyn often imagined what the drowned children felt in their final moments. Now she knows it was not panic, not terror, but the realization that perhaps to stop fighting is not to give yourself up but to give yourself over.

**Sara Chiarotto O'Brien, 17**

## No Exit

I feel trapped by the city,  
Its streets bars in my cage.  
Confined to a busy life of honking cars and flashing lights.  
Its buildings tall walls in my prison cell.  
Stuck in the flow of passing buses and subways.

Oh to be a wild flower in the garden on a peaceful farm.  
Perhaps destined to be cut and displayed in a vase.  
Or perhaps destined to be eaten by a wandering cat.  
But still, the simple, beautiful ignorance of knowing no life other than  
The rising sun  
And cows in the pasture  
Is intriguing.

I feel disoriented by the city,  
Its roads a winding maze.  
Confined to a busy life of walking each path to the next dead end.  
Its houses unsolved puzzles.  
Stuck in the flow of mindless people who don't know or see me.

Oh to be a small pebble buried in the beach by the ocean.  
Perhaps destined to be worn down to grains of sand, bits of nothing.  
Or perhaps destined to be picked up by a curious child and thrown in a bucket.  
But still, the tranquil, undemanding ignorance of knowing no life other than  
The crashing waves  
And seagulls in the sky  
Is captivating.

**Chloe Dynin, 14**

# When The World Closes In

It always starts with a single sound. Maybe it's a pencil on the page, or the rain starting to hit the window. Maybe it's someone breathing too loud, or the slight hissing of a metal water bottle. But it always starts with a single sound. Then it's a feeling. Maybe it's the toe of my boot on the leg of the desk, or a blister forming on one of my right fingers from the pencil I've been gripping so tight. Maybe it's a rush of wind or the blow from the fan, hitting my face and pushing my hair around. Suddenly I can hear everything. I can hear my heart pounding in my chest, I can hear my brain reciting statements I memorized the night before. I can hear the breathing of my classmates, and the screeching of wet boots in the hall.

My hand starts to shake. I keep trying to write but all that appears on the page are illegible scribbles and lines. I notice my blinking, starting to get scared to close my eyes. If I just close my eyes... no, I have to keep them open. I have to keep them open, finish this test. I can hear myself swallowing in my ears, the little click as I feel my throat get dryer and dryer, no matter how many times I swallow.

There's a chill, like a ghost passing through me. The hairs on my arms stand up, my skin on high alert. I know no one is looking at me but it feels like someone is watching me. No, not just someone. It's like there are millions of pairs of eyes watching me, fixed on the back of my head, waiting for me to notice them. There's a hitch in my breath, an invisible knife hitting the back of my throat. The hitch makes a noise, like a small gasp, or a whimper. Maybe one or two heads turn to look for the noise, but it feels like every head has whipped around, and begun to pierce a hole through my body with their eyes like thin red lasers.

My breath hitches again, the invisible knife digging deeper in the back of my throat, to the point where I would've tasted the blood. My hand is still shaking as I try to reach for my water bottle. I start to cough, my lungs starting to panic. My breathing gets louder and louder, and my lungs stop working. I can't get them to start working again. For a moment, I forget how. In and out, in and out, in and out, I think. It doesn't work, it never does. My shaking hand reaches the end of the table, and I open it, reaching for my water. My trembling fingers can't grasp it, and knock it off the edge of the table. There's a crash as it hits the ground, and my breath hitches one last time. The invisible knife falls down my throat, landing in my lungs as they seem to leave my body. It doesn't matter, I couldn't use them anyway.

Now everyone's eyes really are on me. Some with annoyance, some with concern, some with confusion. My eyes dart around as every face, every person, blends into the walls around them. I'm trying to breathe, trying so hard, but my lungs are long gone. I'm way past being able to breathe.

*Mira?*

Then the hands come to my throat. The ghosts have reached me, all of them grabbing a hold of me. I slam my hands on my desk, throwing my head forwards, starting to cry, though I still can't make a sound. My tongue is too big for my throat. My face becomes soaked with tears, the hands getting tighter and tighter. My lungs find my body again but, once again, they're useless. No air can come in with the hands around my throat.

I reach my hand to my neck, trying to block the hands. Somehow there are more and more, piling on and on until the people around me are gone. It's just the ghosts and their hands. I'm aware it looks like I'm choking myself, but there's not much I can do. The ghosts begin to squeeze my brain, and suddenly I'm wearing earplugs that only I can see, only I know are there, somewhat blocking noise.

*Is she OK?*

It's a whisper from across the room. But maybe it's not a whisper, maybe I just can't hear anymore. It's always from someone I don't really know, because the people I do know, know I'm not OK. They know what's coming.

My face is covered with tears at this point, dripping onto my paper. The test is done, I know that. It's done for me. I can't come back from this. I was reciting facts in my head before, I still am, but now they're screaming at me. I walked into this room shaking and it's how I'll leave.

My hand slams against the desk, creating a bang even my brain can't block out. My body starts to slip to the ground, as I slide off my chair, crashing to the floor. I'm trying to escape the hands. I try to look for my water, but it's probably rolled away by now. Probably. I can't see anything clearly anyway, my eyes are behind Niagara Falls.

*Mira?*

Everyone is staring at me. Everyone. The ghosts have become real and it's my own damn fault. Their eyes are the red lasers, burning real holes in my body.

*Mira? Breathe, Mira, breathe.*

My brain is laughing at this point. Breathe. Wow, what great advice.

The world gets fuzzier and fuzzier. Classmates crowd around. It's been a matter of seconds since that single sound, but it feels like I haven't been able to breathe for hours. It happens every time. But what can you do when the world closes in?

**Mira Posluns, 15**

## one of a kind

i'm not one of a kind  
don't tell me  
i'm strong  
it should be clear by now that  
i have potential  
is that a joke?  
i'm a bad person.  
they make me feel like  
the scale of my issues is too large to tackle  
but i'll try  
it's not easy  
changing the world  
is something i'll never do  
giving up  
it's the only solution  
"move on"  
how can i  
i'm slowly dying  
unless i make the most of my life  
i am in need of saving  
it is ridiculous to think  
everything is fine  
i'm a quitter  
you'll never hear me say  
i'm one of a kind

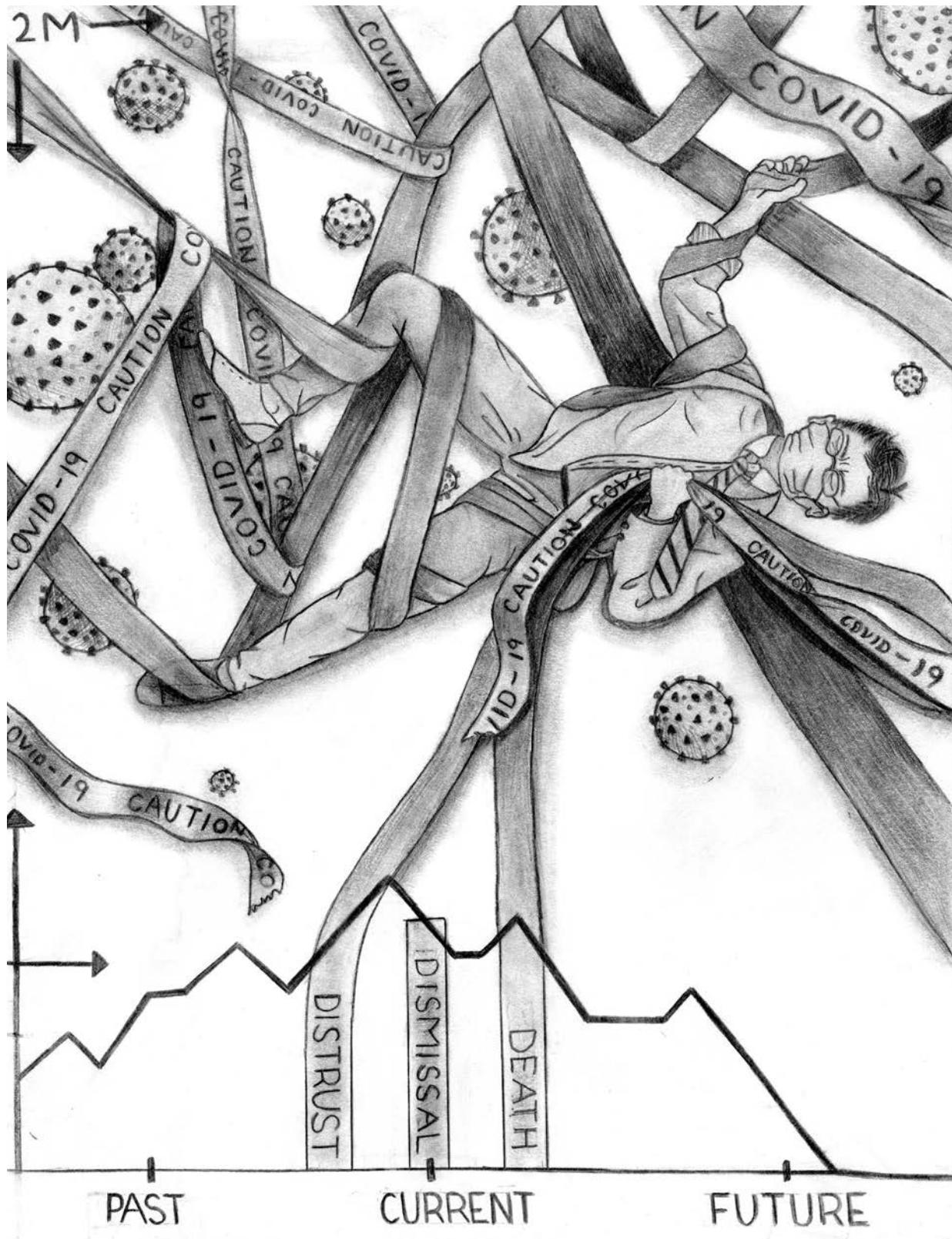
## expectations

us, immigrant children  
own fractured identities  
cracks sloppily patched  
with pure maple syrup  
  
us, immigrant children  
erase our own language  
to blend into groups of  
fellow erasers  
  
us, immigrant children  
blur all lines between us  
a small, proud echo  
of equity's laugh  
  
us, immigrant children  
have legacies spanning  
at least as long as God himself and  
our genius mother  
  
us, immigrant children  
are used to said pressure  
  
ah, shine at your brightest  
until you burn out

(now read from bottom to top)

**Elena Osipyan, 15**

**Zuhal Olomi, 14**



## The Outcome

Christina Yoon, 15

## Mr. Suit

Mr. Suit, they cry,  
you are needed.  
Three rare words for us all.  
How we work to be treated.

It seems as though  
recognition is forbidden.  
We are hiding as the sun does at night,  
but are not truly hidden.

A smile and nod are what I receive.  
They say a skirt doesn't belong.  
Worshipped as the divine,  
the men can do no wrong.

Today is a day like any other.  
The smells of printer ink and coffee fill the air.  
Heard is the cacophony of office bustling,  
while we are neglected more than we can bear.

I need to prove to them that I am worthy.  
To a man, a task foreign and unknown.  
The pressure is an anchor weighing us down.  
We must pave the path all on our own.

I am an ant climbing a mountain,  
while they are a spider, highly predatory.  
They are but a snapshot in history,  
but I know I can change the whole story.

To all the women fighting out there,  
we won't be silent, voiceless, or mute.  
Be the boss, rise up, make them see you.  
Change is upon us, right, Mr. Suit?

**Simone Halpern, 15**

## Worst Enemy: Fear

Fear is not a concept, but a limitation  
Which disables risk across the nation.  
Overcoming these fears is the key  
To allow you to become, to be.  
Fear only disables perception  
And causes us to make an exception  
To avoid the problem at hand  
And change what we originally planned.  
When life is going so swell,  
The past makes our fears dwell  
On the negative possibilities of chance  
Which only further enhance  
The strength that fear gives  
Ensuring fear always lives.  
Overcoming fear is hard  
But when done can seem like art.  
It will help spread your wings  
And let you soar as it brings  
Growth, peace, and jollity  
As it reveals your true humanity.

**Sujal Thakur, 12**

## pandemic

We are like words  
Standing in a sentence  
Only a space apart.

**Maximus Nitsopoulos, 12**

## Queen of the Underworld

Hades lurks in the shadows of a garden, half-wishing Persephone, the gorgeous girl gathering roses, would glance his way. Zeus' advice has been echoing in his head since the day he disclosed his greatest secret: Persephone is *the one* — his future wife and queen. As his brother claims, the only way to dazzle a woman is by brandishing authority and power.

A clock ticks in Hades' head as a harsh breeze sweeps in. Persephone drops the roses and raises her hands, preparing to summon her weapon: an army of flowers. Hades' heart somersaults at the innocence of her actions — only a woman would ever defend herself with something so harmless.

While daisies and tulips bloom around Persephone, swirling in the developing tornado, Hades channels his power to the patch of grass she stands on, watching in glee as cracks form at her feet. The ground splits open, swallowing Persephone whole, and the thumping of his eager heart drowns out her cries.

*Finally.* She belongs to him.

Thanking Zeus for the wind, Hades travels to the Underworld with the snap of his fingers. He finds Persephone in his grand throne room. Her gaze swiftly shifts to his, causing him to swoon like a love-struck fool. As abrupt as his decision is, he has wisely chosen a quiet, docile woman to stand by his side for the centuries to come. Certainly, it is not a careless mistake.

"Welcome," he says before Persephone can speak. Since this is their first encounter, Hades must prove that he can bless her with the life any woman desires. "I'm glad you arrived all right."

"You kidnapped me," Persephone whispers, her eyes narrowing while her brow furrows.

"That is beside the point," Hades continues, touched by her soft tone. "Allow me to give you a tour. I must say, you will find my palace fitting for your taste."

"Fitting?" she scoffs, showing disdain for the first time since he took up a hobby of observing her in the mortal world. "Why is my opinion on your palace of any concern?"

Hades beams with delight. "I assume you would want your living quarters to be of your liking if you are to live here for eternity."

"Pardon me? Live here? With you?" Red creeps into her fair cheeks, out of appreciation for the offer Hades believes. "Why in Zeus' name would I ever live in the Underworld?"

Sparks fly in Hades' eyes. In the two weeks he has stalked her, she never once displayed anything besides a soft demeanour. Why is she suddenly so furious?

"I understand your astonishment, but I can assure you that you will live a splendid life here as my queen."

Persephone's cherry lips fall ajar. "Your queen? You... you mean—"

"Yes." He closes the distance between them and places a hand on her shoulder. "You will be my wife, my queen, my—"

A bone-crushing slap stings his cheek.

"You are so full of yourself." Persephone marches to the throne and plops down, slouching in an unladylike manner. "Do you truly believe I would marry someone who abducted me?"

"You've misunderstood—"

"No, you've misunderstood. An honourable man respects a woman's rights. You, Hades, are not an honourable man."

"But I am a god," he protests in alarm. "I am a king." How can the love of his life oppose him? Did he overdo his greetings?

“That does not make you any more desirable than an abductor.” Her chocolate eyes flare with resentment as she waves a hand, beckoning him to stand before her on the dais. Hades complies out of determination to prove his worthiness. “Since you have offered me a home in this palace, I will accept”— her gaze drifts upwards — “on one condition.”

Hades hesitates. From experience, he knows a woman’s condition is as threatening as a flower. “And that is?” A vicious smile flits across Persephone’s face. “Give me your crown.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your crown — I want it.”

“But — ”

“You said I will be your queen. In my books, a queen rules her kingdom by her own means, not by the side of a king.” She speaks over Hades’ objections. “Under no circumstances will you expel me from the Underworld. I will leave on my own accord.”

Hades is speechless. This goddess, this woman he perceived as angelic and harmless, wants to overthrow him. He has never seen a woman act with such boldness... such confidence and power. And she has the nerve to address a man so rudely —

A rumble erupts from the marble floor. Hades stumbles off the dais while Persephone rises, extending a hand. She nods curtly at him when the windows burst into dust. Vines slither in like snakes, making their way to Hades as flowers of every kind sprout amidst their red-tipped thorns. Hades cannot muster a defensive reflex as his crown — his icon of authority in the Underworld—is swiped off his head and delivered to Persephone’s awaiting hand.

“You cannot do this!” he argues.

To his disbelief, Persephone giggles. “Are you implying that you can kidnap me, but I cannot make myself a queen?” She rolls her eyes and sets the crown on her head, allowing scarlet roses to grow over its black spikes. She is not the delicate woman he gushed over for the past two weeks. How is she suddenly so authoritative? How does she possess such control? And most importantly, why is she doing this?

Hades summons power into his voice. “Return it at once.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” She grins menacingly. “You can have it back when you learn your lesson. Until then, I will be Queen of the Underworld.”

The roses on the crown glow with crimson light as Hades’ powers are transferred to this lowly woman.

Or... perhaps she is not so lowly after all.

**Gimasha Perera, 16**



### **Sally and the Rat King**

Lucy Mason, 13

# **Eat Sky, Bitter Woman**

Eat Sky  
Bitter Woman  
Peel the clouds from their arrogant perch  
and hang them from your ceiling fan  
Sink into sleep  
with the heavens imprinted on your bedroom ceiling  
Let the universe course through your veins  
like a sedative  
Blurring your mind and feeding your ego  
Shitting infinity  
For you are all of us  
but we are not you

Eat Sky  
Bitter Woman  
Let us race through the cosmos like silver comets  
leaving a trail of starlight in our wake  
Encase yourself  
Shroud yourself  
Swaddle yourself in sheets of midnight blue  
with a splash of constellations  
dancing across the seams  
and disappear  
into the cosmic realm of your plaster walls  
Lose yourself  
in the marshmallow softness of your blankets  
And  
set your sights low,  
Bitter Woman  
For then you can achieve them  
You,  
with the dream of cramming  
infinity  
within your bedroom walls

Eat Sky Bitter Woman  
and then find that you have nothing to gaze at  
Nothing to lose yourself in  
Nothing to ponder  
Nothing to look up to  
and  
Nowhere to dream  
Just perfect blackness  
stretching  
all  
around

**Felix Quastel, 17**

## Field Trip

Today my class went on a trip to the zoo, and I'd been looking forward to it for a while. It's almost the end of my school year so my teacher decided to treat us with a fun activity. Grade six has been fun, I've made new friends and learned a lot of new things. The work has gotten much harder, and homework isn't nice, but it's manageable.

My classmates and I got off the bus and there we were, surrounded by all kinds of different animals. Our teacher told us to be careful, because we don't want to disturb the creatures. But they can't see us anyway, so we shouldn't worry too much.

We first touched down in the Arctic section. It was frigid and there was snow and ice everywhere; it was the coolest place I'd ever been to. We slid around as our teacher told us not to fall, mumbling something about how she hated her job. We saw some big blubbery grey things that were apparently called seals, and I almost cried when one got bitten by a big white furry creature, with big teeth, which crawled on all four legs. What a wonder!

But the Arctic seemed barren when compared to the forest area. Many of the animals there looked scary, fearsome even, but an equal amount were timid, and were hiding in the forest. There was this really cute one called a rabbit, but it lost its mother and our teacher told us it would probably die. The foliage was exquisite however, looming trees overhead, and dense underbrush made the area seem so wild.

Afterwards, we were told that we may get wet, which upset me a little but I endured it. We were taken underwater and there were so many different fish, all so unique and brightly coloured. But then we were shown a dying coral reef, and our teacher told us about pollution. It had to do with carbon dioxide and the atmosphere, but I wasn't paying attention. I was more focused on a strange snake-like creature slithering through the water.

Once we finished our tour, my class was told that we had one last stop before we returned home. We were off to see examples of the ruling species of the planet, which we had been learning about in science class. How fun! One of our children's stories told the tale of how one of our people got banished to their planet. When they started moving things around the people got scared and thought they were seeing ghosts. How silly, spirits aren't real.

When we got to our stop, we got off in a very crowded space. They were everywhere, walking about on two legs, with tufts of fur on their heads, and some near their mouths too. They came in all shapes and sizes, different colours as well, what a unique sight. They wore different kinds of cloth all over their bodies, even though it wasn't cold. How strange.

Then we went to go see different spots where they lived. There were some really nice ones, surrounded by plants, living in big houses with their fancy metal transportation. It wasn't very impressive, but they were kind of cute. We also passed by a spot where they send little ships into space from, but they don't do much with them.

Sadly, that was when the field trip turned into a lesson, and it started next to a big building. It was spilling all sorts of goo into the water, and some clouds into the air. Apparently the goo was poisonous, and the clouds were bad for breathing, but they did it anyway! Our people shoot our bad waste into space, but we're taught that it's safe that way, so we don't have anything to worry about.

Even worse, we were then taken to a place even more grim. There was sand everywhere, and a bunch of people who seemed really skinny, and sad. It was so hot, and they didn't look like they had any water, which we were taught they needed to survive. One of my classmates asked why. My teacher said because their world is too divided to get over themselves and help each other. I didn't really get it; I wasn't a stickler for politics.

Our teacher finally sent us back to the cities to think about how bad it really was. We hadn't realized it before, but it was true. All of the tall structures were boring and grey, the creatures seemed to be mad at each other for no reason, and some of them sat on the ground covered in dirt, their coverings tattered. Most of the animals ignored them.

I finally got the courage to ask why we don't just talk to them and tell them that they're doing it wrong. My teacher paused and thought for a second. Then she finally answered.

"These things are not worth our time, they aren't smart enough to realize what they are doing wrong. They're ignorant of their mistakes and their reality. For us to intervene would also be wrong. We have to let them decide their own path, and if they figure their problems out, maybe they're worth our respect."

She finished by telling us, "The lesson is to be nothing like the humans; bigger brains, opposable thumbs and some flimsy rules are all that separate them from the other animals on this planet." With that unsatisfying answer, we all filed into our bus, and flew out of the atmosphere to go home.

About halfway there my friend asked, "So, if they can't see us, and don't know what they're doing wrong, what if there's something like that happening to us?"

"Preposterous," my teacher answered. "We have advanced technology, and our lives are as good as ever. Stop thinking of these ridiculous things, and be happy with what we already have." With that, we pensively sat out the rest of the ride home in silence.

**Drake Senécal, 16**

# Privilege

I wake up at 7:15 with beads of sweat plastered to my forehead. Once more, the story of how my classmate died three years ago plagued my nightmares. He was only thirteen years old: a smart, charming boy who nobody here believes deserved that bullet. Yet this is just our neighbourhood's new reality; each day, we gather and pray as a family that a similar fate doesn't fall upon one of us.

This morning is no different. My mother calls me downstairs to pray while practically dragging my younger brother away from his cereal. My father follows her to the living room, and I trudge after them reluctantly. I have a science test this morning, somewhere to be. I can't be late.

My mother clasps her hands together and bows her head. The rest of us follow suit. She begins to speak, her voice quivering with passion and heartbreak as she dutifully recites the Lord's Prayer before uttering her own words. I feel a dreadlock fall in front of my face, but I don't tuck it away until after she's done, when we start eating breakfast together. My brother finishes up his cereal as I make myself a bowl.

"How was rugby practice yesterday?" my mother asks me, her brown eyes soft and kind. With my mouth full of food, I nod my answer. I swallow hard before reiterating my response with coherence.

Next to me, I hear my father snort. "I still don't think girls should be playing such a rough sport," he snaps, and my heart squeezes once.

My mother shoots him a glare but doesn't say anything. My brother continues eating, one hand on his spoon and the other on the little blue car that came in the cereal box. Usually I'm the one to reprimand my father for such comments. This time, my lips stay sealed. I have a science test this morning, somewhere to be. I can't be late.

Before leaving home, I yell a quick goodbye to my family. Our house is right on the edge of our neighbourhood, "where the ghetto ends and the big city begins," as I've heard some kids at school comment in harsh whispers. I shrug my backpack onto my shoulders and begin the long journey to school. Rubble crunches under my feet from where the pavement was not finished, just abandoned. The city said they'd get on it as soon as possible. It has been eight months.

The difference between my neighbourhood and the main city is so stark that, even after routinely making this trip for the past ten years, it still amazes me. Where I live, aside from the chatter of teenage boys smoking weed behind the corner shop and the isolated yells from broken homes, it's fairly quiet all day long. But the big city is always bustling with life, filled with different sights and sounds and smells.

The warm scent of a hot dog stand piques my attention, and I'm immediately drawn in. I have some extra change from the salon, so I decide to treat myself this morning. As I walk over, the hot dog man's eyes shift up. He takes one look at me, and suddenly his nose is wrinkled, his eyes squinted. Still, he knows I'm just another paying customer. He takes my three dollars, then hands over the sizzling hot snack with his pale, meaty hand. Even though I know what he's thinking, I thank him politely anyway before heading on my way. I have a science test this morning, somewhere to be. I can't be late.

One bite of this hot dog fills me with warmth and joy, and I can't help but smile to myself. I continue to eat gleefully as I walk on. I end up finishing it before it's time for me to get on the subway.

Hopping into the car, I stand in the middle so I can grasp onto a handrail. A group of four girls — all blonde, all tall and thin and pretty — get on a few seconds after me. I recognize two of them from my English class. They're in the middle of an animated conversation, laughing amongst themselves. Soon, one of them locks her hazel brown eyes onto my deeper ones. Her expression immediately turns dark and cold, as if my mere presence has ruined her day. "Come, this way," I hear her whisper to her friends as she ushers them to the next handrail. I look down at my phone, pretending not to hear as they comment on my "ghetto ass" neighbourhood, my "nappy, gross" hair, my "big sausage" lips. Nobody around the girls says a word or even seems to care, and when I finally look up again just before my stop, I can see why. I don't have time to worry about that, though. I have a science test this morning, somewhere to be. I can't be late.

What is meant to be a ten-minute trip ends up feeling like an entire hour. I'm eager to get off the train, to let the loud sounds from the platform finally drown out the girls' conversation. Finally, I'm out of the station. My school is just a couple of blocks away from here. I check the time, and it looks like I'll be a little early today, just as planned.

As I approach a street to cross, I see an old man sitting along the wall of the local church. He's hunched over, his shaking hands together as he watches despondently after everyone who passes by him. One look allows me to read what is on the cardboard sign propped up in his lap: VET W/ MIN. WAGE JOB. ANYTHING HELPS.

When I'm closer to him, I tuck my hands under my armpits and pick up the pace. Staring down at my feet, I shuffle right past him and pretend not to notice.

I have a science test this morning, somewhere to be. I can't be late.

**Zaneta Wilkinson, 17**

## Freedom Fighters

They say that they've got freedom,  
When they carry guns across the street,  
Because, "If you take my second amendment,  
You're oppressing me!"

But when an unarmed Black man  
Yells that he can't breathe,  
Those freedom fighters turn blind eyes  
And act like they can't see.

They protest social distance,  
Because, "Church is an essential service!"  
But say nothing of the countless deaths  
Of young people's innocence.

So preach and talk of freedom!  
Just as they always have,  
But when blood spills on your street,  
Don't just look away and laugh.

Because although you may be privileged,  
Not everybody is,  
And the person lying on that street  
Is someone's wife, brother, or kid.

Black people have been oppressed so long,  
But please, by all means,  
Hate them as they riot  
But remember it was you that did them wrong.

**Leilani Carranza, 18**

# I Am a Feminist Because...

## I am a feminist

Before you stop reading, please let me clarify a few things, because I'd hate to lose you after just one sentence.

**I am a feminist.** Yes, I know that all men aren't like that. I know that there are good men in the world. I know because my father is a good man. My older brother is a good man. With their good example, my younger brother is growing into a good young man. I know that there are double standards for men, too. I know that many men struggle with the pressure of toxic masculinity, that they are expected to be strong and have minimal emotions. No, I do not hate men. I do not think that the solution to a world dominated by men is a world dominated by women. Women should not go from being oppressed to oppressing others. I'm not calling for a complete flip of power.

And **I am still a feminist.**

Why?

Not because I want to belittle good men, make them uncomfortable, offend them, or hurt them in any way. **I am a feminist** because there are men who do all these things to women on a daily basis. And like I said before, not *all* men do these things! But *enough men do* that there is a problem.

**I am a feminist** because I am scared to go to the public bathroom by myself. Men joke about women going to the bathroom in groups, but we do it for safety.

**I am a feminist** because I cross the street when a man is walking behind me, and I look over my shoulder once I do to make sure he hasn't followed me. **I am a feminist** because I know it would not be safe for me to walk outside alone in the first place.

**I am a feminist** because when I take my phone out in a group, people automatically assume that I am using it to text or call my boyfriend. **I am a feminist** because people automatically assume that I would want a boyfriend at all.

**I am a feminist** because I have been told by another woman that I should not wear floral patterns when presenting to an audience at corporate events, because the men in the room must feel that I am "approachable" and "not too feminine." **I am a feminist** because it is considered a negative thing to be feminine. **I am a feminist** because, even before I get up in front of a corporate audience to make a presentation, I already know that 90% of it is going to be made up of men.

**I am a feminist** because people assume that I am physically weak because of my gender. Now, I happily admit that I am not a physically strong person. But that is because I do not work out or go out of my way to exercise every day to become stronger. These are choices that I make about how I live my life as a person. Not as a woman.

**I am a feminist** because I have been told I throw like a girl. I am a feminist because growing up, I played baseball in a non-gender-specific league, and over the course of three summers, I only met three other girls.

**I am a feminist** because women are attacked and retaliated against for saying "no." **I am a feminist** because there are men who do not respect a woman's "no." I am a feminist because sometimes a dress is taken as a "yes."

**I am a feminist** because I have been told by my own female role models that I will have to wear makeup when I am older in order to be respected and taken seriously. **I am a feminist** because if I wear too much when that time comes, I will be judged. **I am a feminist** because if I do not wear enough, I will be judged. **I am a feminist** because whether I want to wear makeup at all will not factor into that equation.

**I am a feminist** because there are women who are catcalled and yelled at walking down the street, sexualized and objectified. **I am a feminist** because even though I know that catcalling is not right, I still feel like I am not as pretty or as desirable because I have never been catcalled.

**I am a feminist** because that is not okay. Because *none of this* is okay.

**I am a feminist** because if I was trying to explain these serious and real things in a conversation, I wouldn't have made it past my first sentence. **I am a feminist** because I probably would have been interrupted before I could explain my point of view. **I am a feminist** because that interruption would have been to point out that, "Not all men are like that," that men have problems and expectations, too. **I am a feminist** because I had to write a paragraph clarifying that I am not a man-hater before I could get to my point.

**I am a feminist** because some men assume that feminism is man-hating, but it isn't. That's not what feminism is at all.

Feminism is not thinking that women are superior to men. Feminism is simply thinking that women are *just as important* as men, and that we deserve to be treated as such.

**I am a feminist** because I still feel like I should apologize for having these thoughts at all. For writing them down, for having an opinion, for using my voice. I feel like I am not allowed to take up space, like nothing I say will make a difference, like it's impossible that things could ever be different. But that is why it's so important that I *do* have an opinion, that I *do* speak up, and that I *do* use my voice.

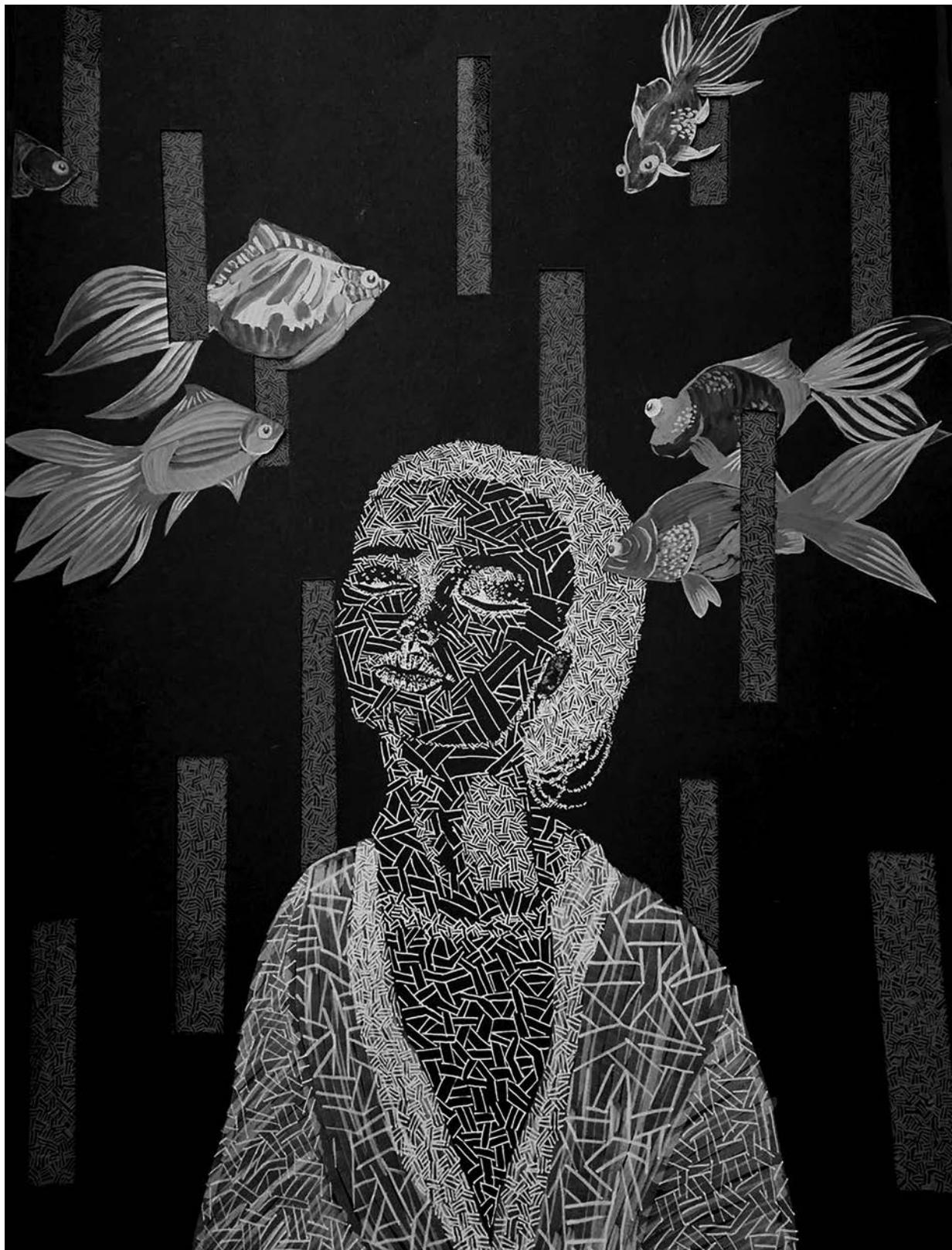
**I am a feminist** so that, one day, no woman will ever feel like that again.

**Anne Pettigrew, 15**



**Day In, Day Out**

Michaela Yarmol-Matusiak, 17



**Dream and Reality**

Jessica Jiang, 15

# THIS IS WHAT I DID IN SPRING 2020

## APRIL 15

It's Christmastime after the pandemic and everyone is finally allowed to go back outside. My sister is setting up her camera on her tripod to take our annual family picture around the tree. I tell her to hurry or else I'd be late to Bad Bunny's Christmas party. My mom breaks a life-sized porcelain version of El Niño Jesus. "That sucks," I tell her. We pose, the flash goes on, and then I'm in Puerto Rico. I'm at Bad Bunny's house and it seems like he has the entire town at the party. It's a beautiful home, and he's hired a selection of local food vendors, the entire thing is a block party. He goes on to give me a tour around the house, mentioning that he just moved in, and I suggest that he get more furniture and maybe the help of an interior designer after I see only an air mattress in the centre of his room.

## APRIL 25

I'm following a middle-aged woman down a crowded street downtown and I have the urge to keep her safe because I feel something bad is about to happen to her. After a few minutes, I notice she stops to look, to touch and scratch something on her neck. I watch from afar and I just know that a spider has bitten her, my eyes zooming in on the area where two dots swim in a small pool of pink. I keep following her, and as I walk behind her, a black leg the size of my arm slowly starts emerging from the bite. She's turning into a giant spider.

## MAY 27

My high school writers' craft teacher has been arrested because it turns out she was a vampire and had killed six kids from school. She had gone to each of their houses after school, coercing them for their overdue short stories or whatever, using that as an excuse before bloodsucking away. It's on CP24 and everything. I tell my friends I knew something was up with her the moment she would miss an entire week's worth of school at a time with no given reason — Edward Cullen style. She also once wore a pair of black Air Force 1s.

**Xavi Meza-Wong, 18**

## Birthday Wishes

It was 12:00 AM  
My friends didn't wish me a happy birthday  
I should be doing my work  
But I was checking my phone over and over again  
Maybe they're taking a shower  
Or they've already fallen asleep  
They're just tired today, yes... they're just tired

Ah, silly thought  
Why would they be asleep now  
When their status has always been 'online' at 2:00 AM  
I threw my phone in the corner where I couldn't see

There  
Much better  
At least I can now focus on my work  
I hope

It was 12:31 AM  
I heard a buzz  
I went straight to the corner and picked up my phone  
Finally  
I thought  
And as soon as I turned on my phone  
All I saw was nothing more than a notification from my school app  
Funny  
Why would they care about my birthday when they have other friends  
And why should I be disappointed

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.  
The clock displayed a gigantic 3:00 AM  
No  
I wasn't waiting for their wishes  
Even though I'd never stayed awake past 2:00 AM  
I was just...celebrating my own birthday  
For myself

My feet were cold even under the blanket  
Sweet 16, they said  
But all I could feel was the wild wind biting on my neck as if I couldn't breathe  
In fact, I really couldn't  
I turned my head to the side  
Tiny drops of tears coursed down  
Across my nasal bridge  
And greeted the other eye  
All the way down to the core of my heart

I miss them  
The ones whom I could share my whole life with  
The ones who were buried in my memories

I remember the night we stayed up till 6:00 in the morning  
How we promised  
To talk about songs we like after we graduate  
How we promised  
To always support each other no matter what paths we're taking  
And how we promised  
Not to forget each other

It wasn't until the next day  
One of them realized  
And sent me a late birthday wish  
I replied simply with a 'thank you'  
The kind you'd get from an acquaintance  
And no more

It's time  
To move on

**Annie Li, 17**

## **Birthgiver**

You have the audacity  
to clench your fists and curse at her  
when she doesn't cater to your every need  
but you say nothing  
when she comforts you on sleepless nights  
and clings to you when you're in pain.  
Don't you ever forget  
that if it weren't for her  
she who planted, nurtured, and cared for your little seed  
your flowers would have never bloomed  
and all that would be left  
is a quivering weed.

**Aunkita Roy, 16**



*home is such a lonely place without you*

**a day in san francisco**

Andy Nguyen, 17

# I Actually Failed

The skinny minute hand strikes nine on the dot, it's time for the test.  
I studied and finished my homework this time, it'll turn out better than the rest.  
My breathing accelerates with every step towards my seat,  
Thoughts of doubt, uncertainties and academic defeat.  
The teacher isn't entirely convincing when she tells me not to worry.  
The test lands on my desk like a U.F.O on virgin territory.  
I exhale, pick up my unsharpened pencil and try to concentrate.  
Answer the easy questions first and try to accept whatever fate.  
Just remember the formulas and don't glance at the clock.  
You'll have time to spare, you have the poise of a rock.  
Okay maybe just one little peek just to gauge the time.  
What's the worst piece of news I can get, all will be fine.  
Oh that's almost ten whole minutes down the drain!  
Four questions answered, forty percent is the highest I'll obtain.

These answers are all wrong, but I can't stop to change anything.  
I feel smoke being released from my ears now, my heart is pounding.  
I'm going to fail this test and work in fast food for the rest of my life.  
I'll have to live in Mom's basement, I'll never be able to find a wife.  
Oh god, I might as well kill myself right now in this filthy classroom.  
I know the kind of lecture I'll get from my parents, it is impending doom.  
I look back to the clock and see that I've only a mere twenty-five minutes left.  
I complete the multiple choice section with a shaking hand and bated breath.

Just as I finish the last question, the teacher says that time is up.  
I walk out of class with my eyes like those of a sad pup.  
On Monday, I receive my test,  
I scan it three times, I am obsessed.  
I calculate the mark in no time.  
I got a forty-seven percent, it's far from fine.  
I go to my friend who is noticeably down.  
I ask who or what is responsible for her frown.  
She says she actually failed the test horribly.  
I ask for her mark ready to give comfort blindly.  
She responds, "Oh, I only got a ninety."

**George Yonemori, 15**

*A tribute to my mother's experience, trauma, and survival through the Cambodian Civil War and Genocide during the 1970s. & for those in my family who didn't survive.*

## **And yet she survived**

8 days before her 8th Birthday  
Not a cloud in the sky  
She was laughing, playing, living  
But then men came rushing in  
The moment she was forced out of her home, it would be the last she would ever see of those walls  
Now remains, fractured pieces of a life gone extinct  
She walked for days, the rumbling sound of hunger growing louder and louder  
Running  
Hiding  
Caught between the remnants of being a child, had to muster up the courage to keep moving on

Separated from her only comforts  
But not even men armed with rifles could stop her  
She found her way back to them  
As she slept on the sides of cold, lonely, dark streets  
The fire inside her kept burning  
2 quarters of her life taken, a loss so unimaginable  
And yet, she survived. She lived.

Cambodia — 2 million people — slaughtered — generations destroyed — families ripped apart — this is the unknown war

But the woman I know fought  
That girl was my mother. A survivor.  
A little girl who became a warrior amidst the darkness of war.

She was 16 when she came to Canada — a place so unfamiliar, faces she couldn't recognize, a culture so foreign — she didn't look like everyone else  
But still, nothing could break her  
Because like Cambodian women  
She is unafraid, determined

Her culture lifts me  
Knowing her history is a proud part of my identity  
The resilience has always been in our blood

Although we have lost so much  
We still keep flying

The voices of women survivors of genocide, war, violence, faces you don't see — minorities — they are beacons of light

Millions of girls and women have died because of genocide  
There are still 130 million girls in this world without access to education  
We're still fighting for equal rights, equal pay, positions in power, to say that "time is up" for the same respect and dignity as any other person

So don't listen to those who say that there's no problem — we are still in the ripples of a long, dark history that has always held women down

So now it is our time:  
It's time we reclaim our places — It's time we tell our stories — It's time we speak our truths

**Antonietta Gutierrez, 17**

## An Ode to Hope

My great grandfather was a King  
And I too  
am a King  
He was from the mountains  
And hills  
Winds with the dancing trees.  
His crown threw light on the beautiful night.  
Black like me.  
It brought joy to neighbours rushing home.  
I come from the land of concrete and tunnels.  
Perhaps mine is too bright  
Is that why eyes judge  
And some avoid

I wonder whether his crown was as heavy as mine  
Did his neck also have to strengthen from the load  
No marks for these questions  
That's why I ask these flakes  
Floating  
Breakfast thoughts  
And the Day carries me  
Forward

**Kisenge Mbaga, 18**

# You Are Walking Home Alone at Night

You are walking home alone at night. It is just like every other night. The pale sliver of light stretching a grin into the vast space bares its yellowed teeth against the whispering wind. It is a starless night, and the thought of a many-eyed creature shutting its eyes with a feral grin does nothing to comfort you as you hurry down the sidewalk.

Every building you pass looks the same: concrete fields enclose slabs of manicured grass. Towers loom equidistant from one another, their colourless stone purpled by the night's palette. Each tall window lacks any movement behind it — as if someone left the lights on in their rush to evacuate the room — and the emptiness is left to watch you, unblinking, as you pass by.

You pick up speed, though you don't really know why. You are alone, aren't you? The streets are vacant, lampposts maintain their perfect cone-shaped canopies, and the crowds of nightlife are but a distant hum. It's not as if whatever hides in the cracks and streams in the pavement can hurt you. You are bigger than them. You can crush them under the soles of your shoes and not even notice the carnage. They are not even a blip on your radar.

A shiver crawls up your spine. Footsteps echo around you, footsteps that are just barely off from the pace of your own. You do not need to search all around you. There will be nothing out of the ordinary. It is just you on this road. Just you, and the empty windows, and the insignificant things underneath you, and the footsteps that are not quite in time with yours.

For a moment, you consider stopping, getting confirmation that *something* is following you when the sound doesn't stop when it's supposed to. You can almost imagine it now:

The steady rhythm of your shoes falters at the edge of the sidewalk's gap. The wind whistles in your ears, sharp and heavy, and hovers its fingertips over the hairs on the back of your neck. Your pulse begs you to keep moving, to run as far as possible, for as long as your lungs can take you, but you can't move anymore. Your eyes dart back and forth — studying, calculating, straining against the pull of the wind who whispers to you — frozen and silent, no longer alone at night.

The voice breathes from every direction, walls closing in on you until you are infinitesimal, just a speck drifting through the breeze.

*Shut your eyes, it says. Let the vast nothing embrace you. If we are all unseeing, we are all unseen, and wouldn't that be nice? You hear the cackle underneath the words. To be invisible to even yourself? Trust me, trust us, the voice swells. It is much safer to be blind to it all. To shrink back into your eye sockets, pull down the blinds, and turn off the porch lights. Whispers bury themselves in your ears. If we do not look, we cannot see the predators, and if we cannot see the predators, they won't exist.*

You gaze up at the creature stretching across the sky, its millions of eyes camouflaged in the void. You are what hides in the cracks and streams of the earth. You are not even a blip on the void's radar.

Yes, the wind picks up. *Do you understand now?*

You nod, transfixed on the emptiness beyond. The blank-faced watchers peering out the buildings turn their eyes on you as the darkness closes in. The last thing you hear before you shut your eyes completely, is the cold laughter that lingers over you, like a shoe poised to drop any second—

Shouts sound off down the road. On the other side of the street, a group of club-hoppers stumble in the opposite direction of you, laughing and shoving and hopelessly lost. One slows to a confused shuffle. He holds up a phone, smacking it, waving it around and pointing it in every direction. The others in the group charge ahead, unconcerned.

You watch him for a moment before he passes you, then face forward once more. You are approaching the end of the block. The wind lets go as your feet touch the asphalt. You should warn the lone club-hopper. *Don't stop moving. Keep your eyes open. Never turn around.*

But you won't.

You hear the moment he is too far away. The streets in front of you are lined with apartments and houses and shops, windows unlit for the most part, and those that aren't, illuminate the company within. Stepping onto the new sidewalk, you feel the change in the air. Those that stroll up and down the path are with someone else, conversations aimless and easy.

You are walking alone. Just like every other night.

**Tamara C., 16**

## Bathurst and Glencairn

To aesthetically sensitive eyes,  
Bathurst and Glencairn is a wasteland.  
Washed gray with closed-down stores,  
Littered with unformed hopes and stillborn dreams.  
It is lazy suburbia,  
Bloated houses and engorged cars,  
Silent neighbors with greedy ears,  
Whispering moths and muted streetlights.

To eyes blind to common sense,  
Bathurst and Glencairn holds a quiet beauty.  
Wreathed in quivering lilacs and flushed peonies,  
Cradled in the golden arms of a weeping willow,  
Bathed in rainfall and honey.

Skimming eyes sneer at its  
crumbling landmarks,  
Wilting in the unforgiving sun.  
The perpetually empty Cash For Gold that  
cryptically remains open,  
The lingering spirit of a bowling alley, slowly  
strangled and stretched into a soulless condo,  
The sleek synagogue that has shed its  
sentimental skin.

Careful eyes crinkle at its  
intimate secrets,  
Blooming in the nurturing moon.  
The imprint of an old dog's paws on the sidewalk,  
The baby maple tree, red and trembling,  
The countless Shabbat candles that illuminate  
earthly constellations.

Rushing eyes will never forget themselves in  
the morning hymns of crimson cardinals.

Rushing eyes will never lose themselves in  
the heady aroma of freshly baked challah.

Rushing eyes will never find themselves  
transported to a twilight-stepped realm where  
Darkness and Light  
swirl and dance and melt into a  
Perfect Whole.

**Nina Katz, 17**



### **Solivagant**

Ruqia Akhtar, 17

## Burial Rites

The first time I swore out loud was during recess in fourth grade.

It was hot, sweat glistening off the browned backs of the boys we'd watch play hoops. There I was, with my best friend, Parker: static, feverish, crouched against the school's walls.

"You gotta promise not to tell, though," she said solemnly. "Mom would ground me, for sure."

I nodded, pinky finger interlocked with hers. Parker would go first.

"Ready?" No.

Maybe we were 'goody-goodies,' girls who did their homework and cared about the rules, but maybe we hated the sound of the title; so Parker turned to face the bricks, opened her mouth, closed it. Opened it again, and this time, the swear escaped, hastily but plain and certain. She grinned at me. I flinched, in awe or horror or both.

"Your turn, your turn!"

My turn and the word sat, unprepared, unbudging on my tongue, waiting for some stubborn cue that wouldn't come. It was heavy as a rogue wave, my lips a dam heavier still. I squeezed my eyes shut and forced it to tumble out, barely bigger than a whisper, so fast it was already gone. The thrill of it flooded heat into my cheeks, and in that moment, something dormant itched under my skin. Parker clapped her hands in delight. We laughed, jumped around, celebrated our brief revolutions.

That was the beginning of it, one fear tossed to the wind and swallowed whole. But even then, I was afraid. Even then we had tied them up neatly, the words small and bold and protesting like newborn birds — buried there like a secret, in the corner of the schoolyard.

If you ask me today, I'll say that I've heard it all.

I've heard that they destroyed the temples, cracked the gate lions open and sprayed 'X's over the manes; here was peace and protection and prosperity, their marble heads now rolling on the ground. Used the sledgehammers to tear apart prayers, the most sacred, blessed sounds, left a raw kind of silence in their wake. The next morning the monastery-goers woke up, arrived, had a little bit less to believe in.

And I've heard that they smashed a bottle over the woman's head while yelling: "Take your corona back to your country, you dirty Asian bitch." She was on the floor, shrinking, the fires inside of her put out by broken glass. Sometimes I think I am more afraid of people than sickness.

"Oh, you're a Chinese? Does that mean ya eat bats?"

"No, I don't." Dull dissent, early defeat.

"Ha, I bet ya do! Y'all were the ones who started this whole thing!"

And I've heard it, door shut in their faces again and again, pain thrown around like games of catch, voices stuffed back into their throats until they choked.

I'll say that I've heard it all, and none of it surprised me one bit.

I am watching people cram words below the ground and remembering that for the most part, I have been doing the same.

Now, I think we should scream at the top of our lungs. No whispering into the soundless crevices of walls, nor promises made to keep quiet, nor folding wings into hiding. So let us unearth the power from the ground we've been seeking refuge in. So let us uncover each voice and use them to build an empire. So let us pare the fear from our skins, because we are not the ones who are afraid.

And I'd like to think that after all this time, these words that we buried have fossilized into something bigger, flaring in the sunlight, free to run, to dance, to devour. *Ready when you are.*

Jun Ying (Jane) Wen, 17

# Shedding the Cloak of Invisibility

It was an ordinary Saturday evening, bustling as always. Streetcars zoomed by on the asphalt road, leaving flashing light trails. Restaurants and pubs were filled with cheerful weekend crowds. The ding of clinking glasses and loud laughter slipped from the open windows. It was chilly and dark outside. I was walking down the streets with my dad, plastic bags in our pockets. It was Saturday, which meant the eggs at Shoppers were on sale.

\$1.88 for a dozen eggs. It'd cost \$2.29 per pack on any other day. They were those large, white ones, quietly sitting inside the grey and stinky carton. We paid at the counter separately, pretending we didn't know each other.

"Hello. Would you like a bag?"

"No thanks." We always bring bags ourselves. There's no need for the extra cost.

"PC Optimum?"

"Yes."

"\$3.76, please."

*Cha-ching!*

"Would you like your receipt?"

"Uh...Yes, please."

"Thank you, have a nice evening."

"Thanks. You too."

A conversation like this would take place at least twice a month. Sometimes if I forgot to bring bags, I'd just have to hold the packages in my hand. Walking down the busy streets with two packs of eggs in my arms was not comfortable — people stared. This was the moment I longed for the Cloak of Invisibility. I'd disappear into the crowd, quiet and unnoticeable, with the two packs of godforsaken eggs, of course. Experimenting several times, I finally managed to find an elegant posture. The arm had to bend to a specific angle, the pace had to be at a specific speed, and the facial features had to show a specific I-don't-care-I'm-holding-eggs expression. Occasionally, I'd question why I had to do this. Just for two packs of eggs. Just to save those eighty-two cents. The fact was, that's how my family was. I called this the "art of frugality." Certainly, there are many ways in our household to practice this art. I inherited hand-me-down clothes from my older cousins in childhood. We try to bargain for a better price when grocery shopping, although we wouldn't always have the heart to see it through. My family rarely ate out after we moved away from China. In my Dad's words, "Nothing tastes better than home-cooked food." Indeed, this was the excuse I used every time my friends asked for recommendations on restaurants. "Oh, my parents are great cooks, so we don't usually eat out." I'd spit this out, then sit back and listen to their discussion about steaming hot ramen, spicy Thai dishes, and some special matcha ice cream. This would be another moment I longed for the Cloak of Invisibility. I was too Asian to fit in with my peers.

I was born and raised in China. My childhood, adolescence, and teenage years were all immersed in this oriental culture. The five Confucian values of being cordial, upright, courteous, temperate, and complaisant were tattooed on my heart. I appeared to represent all of them, but it also made me ordinary and plain. I was only a grain of sand on the beach, a drop of water in the ocean. But I felt safe. I felt I belonged.

Things changed after I left my homeland, my traditional view on personal values collided with Western ideologies. I was an outsider to individualism, critical thinking, leadership... This was when I started to question my traditional values — the “art of frugality,” the “art of obedience,” the “art of harmony.” They started to seem irrelevant in Western society. I started to re-examine the environment in which I was brought up.

Reuniting with my extended family during the summer was a tradition when we were in China. My grandparents’ house felt like one of those ancient mansions in Eileen Chang’s novels to me. Yellowish dim light, fruits rotting on the tea table, dramas and tears between women, the re-discovered family history, and the century-long customs. Everything seemed so remote and melancholic. At the family dinner table, parents would put on a contest covertly. “My son has the highest grade in his class!” “Darling, come and play that Mozart for your uncles and aunts.” My parents never took part in this competition — the “art of frugality” was not limited to material life. I rarely received any straightforward compliments. I understand now this is due to their reserved personalities, and I know under their masks of reticence, they love me unconditionally. But as a child, jealousy and grievance filled my heart. I buried my head in my rice bowl, pretending the food was so delicious that I was too busy eating to participate in the conversation. My tears would stream down my cheeks and drip into my bowl. The taste of the mixture of salty tears and rice made up half of my negative memories. I blamed my Chinese culture for this unjustice. And once again, I longed for the Cloak of Invisibility. The realm that once made me feel safe seems rather unfamiliar now.

I was torn between the two cultures, becoming fragmented pieces like a messy mosaic. Then I asked myself, “What if you stop conforming to any of these cages? What if you find a common ground between them? What if you start living your own life?” As I started asking these questions, beautiful things began to bloom.

I began to explore the dreams of who I wanted to be in this world. I became more determined in pursuing my passion for music, even though it is viewed as “jobless” in Chinese society. I am now comfortable with my introverted and reserved personality, as it provides space for me to be myself. The seed of “true self” that was buried under the muddy soil of bewilderment and confusion was now awoken. I thought about enjoying the homemade peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the grass while bathing under the warm sunlight. I also thought about how my family has become more intimate as we supported each other to thrive in this unfamiliar country. Knowing there is always a cradle for me to rest is beautiful. I have collected those broken shards of colourful glass from the two cultures, piece by piece, and see the world through a kaleidoscope. I see a world with abundant colours, glistening hope, and incredible potential. I can now embrace my multicultural identity proudly with grace and move with confidence in this world.

It’s another ordinary Saturday evening. I’m walking down the streets with my dad. This time, no plastic bags in our pockets. But it’s not that big of a deal now. Because I won’t be longing for the Cloak of Invisibility anymore.

**Yuchen Zhang, 18**



### In-Between

Christina Dinh, 16

# Young Voices: Get Published!

## Submission Form

**Deadline for the 2020 Magazine is March 28, 2021.**

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

### Who can submit?

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

### What can be submitted?

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

### How do you submit?

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

### Need Inspiration?

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

**To submit, please go to [tpl.ca/youngvoices](http://tpl.ca/youngvoices) to review the full submission details, guidelines and form.**

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Submissions with incomplete forms may not be considered for publication.

Please use a separate form for each piece.

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

**Type of Submission**

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

Poem       Fiction       Rant

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

Review       Photograph       Drawing/Painting

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

Digital Art       Comic       Other \_\_\_\_\_

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

Young Voices Sketchbook       Library Website

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

Young Voices Bookmark       School

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

Friends and family       At the library

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

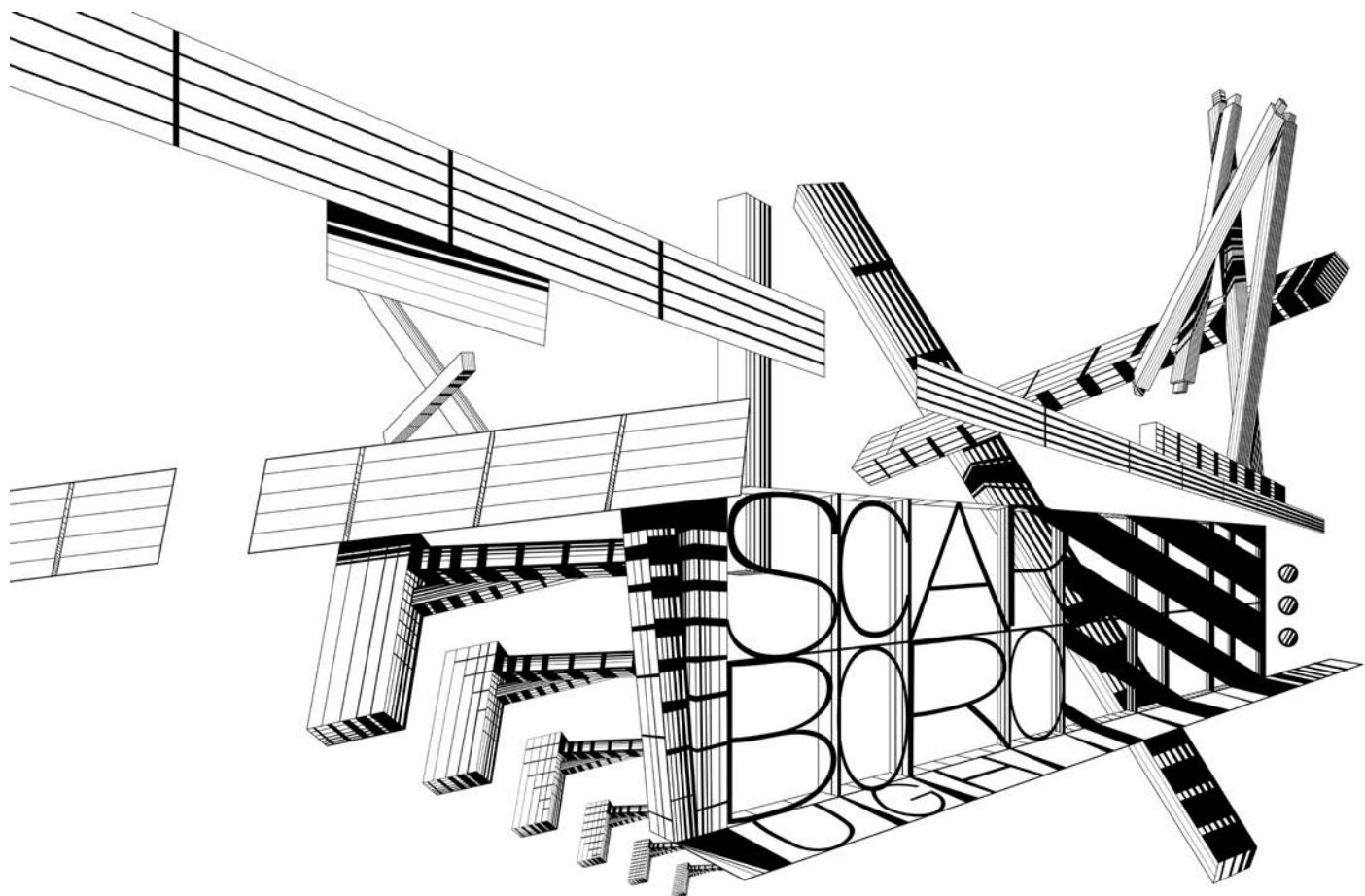
Social Media       I'm not sure

Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

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

The Young Voices program is supported through the generosity of the **Daniels brothers** in honour of their mother, Norine Rose, and the **Friends of Toronto Public Library, South Chapter**.





## Modern: Scarborough Civic Centre Library

Jethro Sanchez, 19



## 12 Feet Apart

Qin Bei, 17