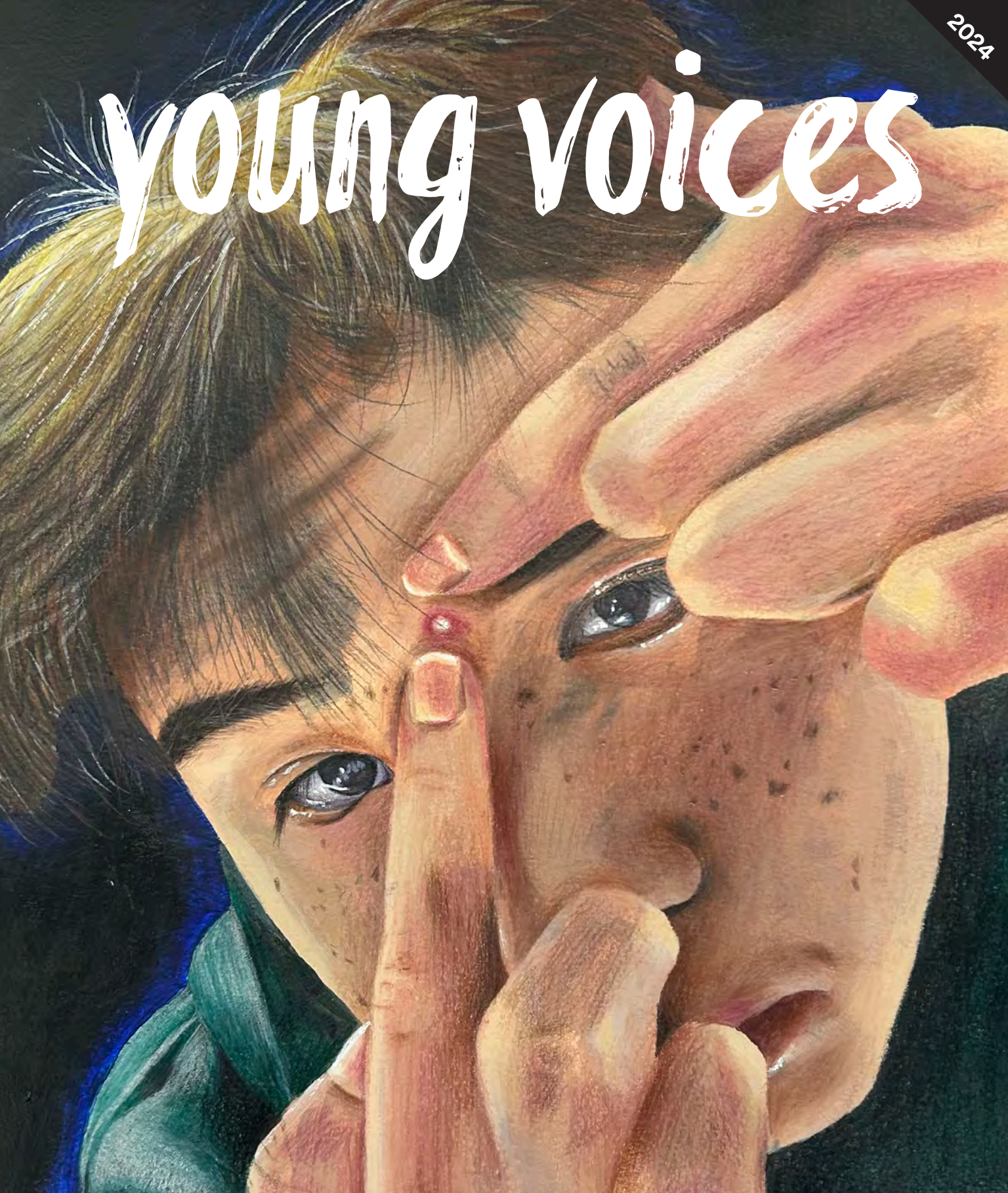


2024

young voices





A Thousand Lanterns

Yichen Wang
Age 16

young voices

With each turn of a page, Young Voices magazine is replete with ideas and imagery that illustrate the artistic prowess and creative brilliance of Toronto.

Every issue captures a snapshot of what young people face. As the masks slip off, as global temperatures rise, as one cohort graduates and a new one joins, each year brings fresh and creative perspectives. The 2024 issue of Young Voices showcases the works of artists, writers, and poets from ages 12 to 19. Whether it is self-discovery, love, or complex social issues, each word and brushstroke emerges from the glossy sheets into the hearts of readers.

From admiring the composition of *The Day in the Life of a Participant* to immersing yourself in the narrative of *The Letting Go*, this year's Young Voices exemplifies excellence and sophistication.

Relishing the work of young writers and artists in a vibrant city is a privilege. Take this opportunity of seeing into their colourful souls and remember the young voices of Toronto.

Elly Peng, Sundari Subramanian, and Pearl Zhang
Young Voices Teen Council volunteers

- ! You may find some of the magazine's content challenging, so be mindful and explore with care.

Young Voices is Toronto Public Library's magazine of teen writing and visual art. Volunteers from the Young Voices Teen Council work with professional writers and artists to select the work to publish.

Get Published in Young Voices 2025

Send us your stories, poems, comics, paintings, drawings & photos. See page 95 for details.

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Embrace the Battle

Anthony Su
Age 14

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My Head

Yue Ge Qu
Age 17

Excerpt from Islands

Emma Russell-Trione

Age 19

Each time I come home, there's less of it left for me to recognize.

The speedboat moves in jerks, forcing its way through the waves that crash against the prow and spray across the deck. I'm wearing just a t-shirt under my windbreaker, and my jaw is clenched to keep my teeth from chattering. I always forget that April in the city and April on the island are two different things.

It's always striking, seeing it like this. Water spreads out far past where the shore should be. The sea comes crashing through the tree line, and low branches float on top of the water. The scraggly tops of bushes rise above the surface of the deluge, as if waving for help.

"What's your plan to get us on dry land?" I ask Oliver. It's the first thing I've said to him since he picked me up at the airport. The awkwardness between us is suffocating. Really? I texted Mum when I saw who was in the car. After I came all this way to help you, I was tempted to add, but didn't. Probably Oliver was chosen to come get me by default; probably no one else is left on the island.

He doesn't reply. Maybe he doesn't hear me. The wind is deafening. It's blowing my hair across my face in thick clumps. Today is the first time I've seen Oliver since growing it out, and I suspect my hair is why he keeps glancing at me. That, or he's trying to figure out what it is about me that suddenly turned me into a lesbian.

"You're not going to find any horns," I say. "No snakes in my hair."

"What?"

So, he heard that. "Nothing," I say, looking away from his hurt expression, away from the island. I fix my gaze back the way we came, across that expanse of rippling blue, all the way to the blurred grey shoreline.

I should be writing a psychology exam right now. The last one of my second year, and the one I studied hardest for. I was taking the mock exam online when Nat called. "It's your mother," he said. "It's the house." Panic seized me and I gripped the phone, sitting down on the edge of the bed so my trembling legs wouldn't drop me onto the floor. Was it a flood? A fire? Had I lost both?

"She won't leave," he said. "She won't let Marin in to pack anything up. We thought we could wait until you got back, but the storm's supposed to hit in a few days. She needs you, Ilse."

"She needs you." How many times had Nat called me over the last two years with that same message? And where was Mum when I needed her?

"You have to go," Jacquie said when I hung up the phone and faced her. It wasn't a question. I nodded, buried my face in her shoulder to hide the tears pooling in my eyes. "You'll be back," Jacquie whispered. "And I'll be here, waiting for you."

I met Jacquie at an event for the English department. She found me standing in the corner and dragged me over to her group, who all had piercings and dyed hair cropped into short, jagged layers. Like her, they seemed at home with themselves in a way I was beginning to realize I didn't think I'd ever been.

Jacquie introduced me. "Where are you from?" someone asked.

"Salt Island. It's tiny, way out." It must have been obvious. Since my arrival in Halifax, my body had felt too big or too small. The only time I felt at ease was when Jacquie spoke to me. As we stood to go, she slipped her hand in mine, and I realized I wouldn't have to come out here. Jacquie had known without me

saying a word.

Jacquie knew everything about me. She was the first girl I kissed, the first girl I slept with. She said “I love you” first, in the back of a crowded queer bar in downtown Halifax, the words hot next to my ear. I felt them in every part of my body. Being with Jacquie transformed me into the person I’d been before Oliver told Mum, and Mum tore me out of her life as if I were something insignificant. Until she needed me.

Until the storms, the one we’d been waiting for my whole life, it seemed.

“Are you leaving, too?” I ask Oliver. He nods.

“We’re going to Alberta. Since the oil sands closed, they need people working there.”

I try to picture Oliver in Alberta, surrounded by flat land and concrete, and come up short. He’s as much a part of the island as I am. We grew up here. We did everything together because even then, people were leaving — not just our island but all of them, across the planet, before they could be swallowed by the sea.

“The end of everything,” I whisper.

Oliver shrugs. “Not everything. They’ve been saying that for decades.”

I think of the Halifax pier, shifted inland the year I started university; the rain that won’t stop; the wind that blew the window of Jacquie’s dorm room into shards of glass; the university itself. No one needs a degree anymore, and most people can’t afford to pay for what they don’t need. Our graduating class — the ones who stayed to learn — will be the last one to pass through King’s College. “What are we supposed to do with everything we’ve learned,” Jacquie says often, “if no one else can understand it?”

In Marine Biology, we watched a documentary about the disappearance of blue whales. I had seen only one, in the speedboat with Oliver. Nothing suddenly became an undulating animal, breaking the ocean apart. The force of it rocked the speedboat, and we tipped. I opened my eyes through the stinging salt, watched the dark shape vanish. Then I emerged, coughing, to Oliver reaching for my hand.

eternal; ephemeral

Sana Huang

Age 16

Too weak to hold
the weight of the world
But wise enough to rise above
the clouded realm of dreams

Accepting a hand unfurled
only to be dragged
down

A

rabbit

hole

Forcing cake down my throat
until the room is a winding caterpillar
squeezing the breath out of me

Even in this wondrous land
my soul is ephemeral
floating on the tip
of a double-edged sword

My pocket watch rings with a final tone
but I am too late.



Rented Space

Mendel Josh Neo Naigal

Age 17

Nagkakalimutan

Justine Gaw

Age 16

The dust will have long settled when you go home, piling ash-gray on the rich mahogany brown of the old shelves devoid of books. What if you have forgotten how to twist the key just right into the lock, or to reach in behind the gate and let yourself in. Maybe the sticky wooden floors will disgust you and maybe you will tug on your slippers for once. What if the smell of the thick smoke seeping through the mosquito screen makes your eyes water and your nose sting? Maybe she is dead and all that is left is you.

The stars don't remember your name anymore; you call out to them and they turn away. Run while you still can but the constellations have moved thirteen billion light years away from you and you will never catch up. They will turn away as you would turn away should you see a specter, a corpse, chasing after you. Lift your ankles, see your soles flash bone-white, check your ribs, feel the squirm of maggots nestled against your rotting heart. Show your hands, watch the flesh slough off dying fingers. Watch your supernova as it happened millennia ago.

They wept for you but one can only weep for so long. They wept and laid flowers by your grave, cradled you to sleep so why do you dance on the headstones? Why do you move until the gelatin holding you together finally disintegrates? Why must you stir the earth again and again in every old effort to matter again? Fold your arms together and lay your dried bones on the ground. Twist the trampled flowers into a crown and place it on your bare skull. Let all that is left of you sink into the ground. Your bones will be for the dogs.

war updates

A. J.

Age 16

*we lost count of corpses as we did with the stars. your maroon-painted lips smile as you swallow the wine. nine-year-old girls drink the tears falling from their eyes. the son carries his father's soul to an empty, ruined home. perhaps one day the carefully-crafted schemes would cease. but a ceasefire seems like a centuries-old dream. i stare out my window. green blades of grass, *could they cut me?* like the heads of the fathers bringing a scarce amount of food to their starving children. the wind oscillates the trees, *could it sway me?* maybe they could be swayed in their resolution to torture the innocent. the top of the buildings hide in clouds, *could they conceal me?* perhaps the lies that have been concealed far too long would crash down and be seen. along with the millions of pleas, the sounds of infants crying, an entire nation dying. the sun burns my eyes, *could it blind me?* though it may appear as though I already am. munching on cereal, blind to the wicked game being played. those children haven't seen the sun in days. *all while my phone rings with war updates**

Your Actions Echo Beyond Just Yourself

Adrienne Liu

Age 15

There was this small pub that was usually empty except for an old man with a wispy, white beard who always wore a dusty top hat and held a huge newspaper glued to his face and a tall, lanky teenage boy named Jason whose dark brown hair was long overdue for a haircut. He would never stay anywhere for an extended amount of time, but since becoming familiar with the owner, he kept coming back.

Jason's eyes glazed over as he started thinking about everything.

He never had nice toys like the other kids, nice snacks like the other kids, nice clothes like the other kids. But he was nothing like the other kids. It was always just him and his mom, for as long as he could remember.

He remembered her soft, dark curls, her kind eyes, and her rosy cheeks. He inherited her features, so it was a constant reminder of his mother every time he looked into a mirror. He never knew his dad, but from the way his mother's eyes would always shift uncomfortably or the way she would use her pinky finger to twist the edge of her sweater, he decided that that wasn't a topic to bring up. They were always moving from basement to basement, attic to attic, and from garage to garage, but he remembered how she would hold him in the dead of winter and protect his small, fragile body with her own, how she would always offer him her food whenever he finished eating his own.

It didn't matter how far they went, whatever odd place they stayed at, as long as he had his mother, everything would be all right. She was all he had until one day, he was alone.

The old pub owner, known simply as Old Tom, glanced up from the mojito he was making for the man with the pipe, as Jason slid onto the stool directly across from him. The boy's usual melancholy demeanor seemed even more pronounced today, his eyes heavy with unshed tears.

"Hey there, Jason," Old Tom greeted, removing his pipe from his mouth. "You all right, lad?"

Jason sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping. "I don't know, Old Tom. I've been thinking a lot about mom lately."

Old Tom nodded sympathetically. He had heard bits and pieces of Jason's story over the years but knew there was more. "She was a good woman, your mother. Always loved you more than anything."

Jason's lips trembled as he fought to hold back tears. "Yeah, she was," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "But she was also...broken."

Old Tom listened quietly as Jason poured out his heart, his words punctuated by the sound of occasional glasses clinking in the dimly lit pub.

"She...she used to drown her sorrows in alcohol," Jason continued, his voice thick with misery. He started to pull out a knife from his belt, "She would come here, Old Tom. She would drink your negronis until she lost her mind and all control of herself. You fed her the poison that killed her. You fed her every drink, every sip she took, you brought her one step closer to her demise."

Old Tom reached out a weathered hand and placed it gently on Jason's cold, shaking hand. "Sometimes, lad, people carry burdens that are too heavy for them to bear. It doesn't make them any less worthy of love or forgiveness. She couldn't give you the life she wanted to, the burden upon her became too great to bear."

Hearing that, tears welled up in Jason's eyes. He nodded and dropped the knife in his hand, the weight of pain and resentment towards Old Tom lifting slightly from his shoulders as his whole world

began to cave in. “I killed her?! She’s killing me. I have nothing now. Absolutely nothing.”

Old Tom squeezed Jason’s shoulder reassuringly. “Lad, you must understand none of this is your fault. Your mother made her choices. She tried to run away from her life. Holding onto that anger will only hurt you in the end. Your mother may have made mistakes, but she loved you more than anything in the world. And I believe she’d want you to find peace, not pain.”

Jason wiped away his tears, his gaze distant as he stared into the bottom of his empty glass. “I’ll try, Old Tom. I’ll try.”

With a nod of understanding, Old Tom returned to his newspaper, leaving Jason to wrestle with his emotions in the quiet solitude of the pub. And as the night wore on, the two of them sat in companionable silence, each lost in their own thoughts but united by the bond of shared sorrow and understanding.

Neurodivergent

Esther Abire

Age 17

It’s Wednesday, a normal school day, and we wait for the bus as we do every day. He stands there, in front of the bus station, a foot away from the other kids. He appears to be in his own world, talking to himself, saying words that only he can understand, pacing up and down, not in a worried way, but in a free way. He is free in the world he creates by himself. Unbothered by the staring eyes, he stims happily, continuing the conversation he is having with himself.

He looks happy, happier than most people who have friends. Happier than I, who sit alone, longing for a friend as I always do. For a moment, I want to join him, I want to jump happily, say the millions of words I have squished up in my brain while smiling as wildly as I always want to. Like every neurodivergent kid, I long to be free. Some find their freedom, like the kid standing in front of me, whom I stare at with jealousy, and some don’t. They keep finding a way to make that voice in their head go off, they keep wishing they didn’t have to wash their hands every time they touch a door knob, they keep wishing they weren’t irritated by the texture

of a zip, they keep wishing they could write freely on a paper but they can’t endure the feel of paper on their skin and everywhere they go is either too bright or too loud for them. And that is me. That’s why I sit alone in the bus station and in class, and that’s why I fight the urge to put on a glove so I can force my hands to get used to the textures I very much detest! I’ve seen him around school a couple of times. He uses photosensitive glasses just like me, he goes around wearing noise-cancelling headphones just like me and I haven’t seen him with a friend before. Again, just like me.

Standing a foot away from him in that bus station, I realise that he is a reflection of the person I have locked up inside me, the person I try so much to hide to avoid being called ‘weird’, the person I am, but do not allow myself to be.

His bus comes and he gets on. I want to chase after him, to ask him the secret to being free, to ask him the secret to being oneself. I try, but I can’t catch up because, in reality, he is there, right inside of me.

Portrait

Shaganaa

Age 14

Person out of the portrait

In my grandmother's kitchen, sits a portrait of a beautiful girl. A girl so beautiful that the word beautiful may not be enough. She is ravishing, elegant, and ethereal. With her cheekbones high, her cupid's bow defined, and her eyes dark cerulean like the color of crashing waves during a thunderstorm, she sits.

She sits in a meadow. Dahlias, gazanias, and carnations, in her hands, in her hair, and falling from the heavens above her, as if she isn't already there. The sky behind her scintillates, creating fiery streaks of scarlet; the same shade that stains her cheeks. I hope she knows how beautiful she is. I like to sit in front of the painting and imagine how amazing her life must be. I gaze at it wishing I could have everything she does. I wish, with everything in my heart, that I was the person in the portrait.

Person in the portrait

On the other side of the portrait I live in, sits a little kitchen. In this kitchen live two people. A girl and her grandmother. A grandmother and her girl. I know everything about them, as I've been watching them since they first hung this painting up. Of course, I'll never know when that was because I do not know the passage of time. I also do not blink, fidget, or move. The grandmother and her girl do all of these things. All I do is listen and watch.

Listen and watch, as I sit in this dreadful, dreadful meadow, on this cursed swing. They also laugh, talk and cry. And when they do cry, they dry each other's tears, and the grandmother will shower her girl with hugs and kisses. I wonder what a kiss feels like. I hope the girl knows how lucky she is. She often sits in front of this painting adoringly, as if my life is amazing. Gazes at it as if she wished she could have everything I do. I have nothing. All I wish for is to be the person out of the portrait.

Fish-Lungs, The Vise, Daughter and Little One

Thea Star Harrison

Age 14

She laughs like a smoker
The fish in her lungs begs for water
The lungs, air
Yet they co-exist
Peacefully isn't the word I'd use

The fish and the lung go silent
They know better than to mess with her
He contorts himself around her
The Vise
Young isn't the word I'd use

It isn't her fault they whisper greedily
Some are just born bad
Daughter would never
Little do they know
Daughter, hair box dye blue
Sprawls over the bus seat smirking
Hollow bones and coffee blood
Innocent isn't the word I'd use

She reprimands him, the Little One
To not snitch, or she'll snitch back
He curses and acts older
Mature isn't the word I'd use

We shanked a kid, they all brag
Stole his shoes, gave him two black eyes in return
I look up and sure enough
Worn shoes dangle from the power line
Gray shoes against a gray sky
Pretty isn't the word I'd use

I look at them
Fish-Lungs
The Vise
Daughter
Little One
Hopeless isn't the word I'd use



Try again

Wajiha Ilham

Age 15

Please Mind the Gap

Wendi Cui

Age 15

Mr. Jones hovered outside of the subway's open doors, motionless as he peered down into the crack separating the car from the platform's faded yellow warning tiles. A teenage girl had killed herself by jumping onto the tracks at the same station last week, his friend had told him over drinks the night before.

"Bam." His friend snapped his fingers. "And she was gone, just like that."

He hadn't said much then, too drunk and overworked to care about some girl he didn't know. He had just hummed in pity and mumbled out a weak, "What a shame."

The mechanical voice of the subway station's intercom system was drowned out by the usual bustle of the Tuesday evening rush hour, leaving only bits and pieces of the announcer's speech audible. The train platform was filled with the usual burnt-out office workers; jet-lagged tourists hauling around 80-pound luggage; and rowdy college students who, for God knows what reason, had decided to go out partying on a Tuesday night.

Now, staring down into the narrow chasm, he felt how fleeting and insignificant the girl's life was. Gone with a single snap of fingers. He looked down at his own wrinkled hands.

A quiet sob to his right shook him out of his stupor. A girl pushed her way past him and stumbled out of the train, tears and snot streaming down her gaunt face as she glanced back towards the open doors with a crazed look in her eyes. Losing his footing, Mr. Jones shot a glare at the back of the girl's head. Teenagers were always so careless.

She swiveled towards the commuters waiting on the platform, breaths quickening and hands shaking with fear as an older man stalked after her.

"Please," she begged, voice breaking. "Help me."

No one made a sound, heads bent and eyes focused on the world within their screens. The man approached her with a sadistic smile twisting his face, capturing her arm in a bruising grip.

"Oh, don't worry about us," he announced to the spectators, "my daughter's just throwing a fit."

Her scream cut through the silence.

Mr. Jones stepped into the train car, settling down into a dusty fabric seat.

As the doors closed, he watched the girl desperately struggle against the man's grasp amidst a crowd of recording spectators. Her eyes connected with his. He looked away. It wasn't his business, after all.

A woman sitting to his left broke the silence, clicking her tongue in annoyance.

"Girls these days are so dramatic," she bemoaned, shaking her head. "When I was her age, I would never *dare* disrespect my father like that. How pathetic!"

Mr. Jones solemnly nodded in agreement, feeling sorry for the man for having to deal with his daughter. She was at the age where kids tended to start their rebellious phase.

An elderly man sitting on the other side of him sighed. "Her generation is doomed," he lamented. "They never cherish the privilege of their youth. She'll find out what she's taken for granted when she's

my age.”

Mr. Jones took a closer look at the man and concluded that he may as well have already been resting in his coffin. His frail figure was hunched over in his seat, brittle joints seeming to creak at every bump and rattle of the train. The deep lines and wrinkles in his face looked as if they had been formed through the course of centuries.

The train lights blinked off, plunging the car into darkness.

The low rumble of the tracks masked the unnatural stillness within the train.

“If you don’t mind me asking, sir, how old are you this year?”

“I don’t quite recall,” the man replied, frowning as he tried in vain to dig up the memory. “Last I remember, I was somewhere between 160 to 170, but that might’ve been a couple decades ago. Your perception of time becomes warped when you’re stuck in a train for this long.”

The old age had probably gotten to the man’s head. Mr. Jones mustered a strained smile, shifting in his seat in hopes of changing places at the next stop. “What do you mean?”

“I am bound to this train,” the man simply replied.

Now he was *really* sure this man was deranged.

“How long have you been here?”

“I... don’t recall,” the man muttered in reply, voice slow and unsteady, “for as long as I can remember anything about my life.”

It was just the two of them then, their figures cloaked within the shroud of darkness. The train sped up, first the greenery of the landscape and then the cement of the tunnel flashing past him faster than his eyes could track, melding into a blur of colour.

Within seconds, the elderly man was reduced to a corpse, skin giving away to bone as if his previous vitality had been nothing but an illusion. The man gestured to his decomposing body, a manic look in his eyes, milky with cataracts.

“Look at me!” he declared, a wide grin splitting his face, exposing his rotting gums. “I am deathless. I am immortal!” He patted the seat beside himself, then offered a rotting hand to Mr. Jones. “Accompany me, won’t you?”

Mr. Jones stared at the hand. Maggots squirmed within decaying flesh, creatures of death, but also of transformation. A new beginning. He remembered the girl’s eyes as she gazed at him through closing doors: brimming with disgust, regarding him as if he was no better than an insect.

He reached for the hand and sank back down into the dusty fabric seat. He looked down at their intertwined hands, one flesh and the other bone.

The lights flickered back on, casting the deathly pallor of his face in a fluorescent glow. The doors opened with a chime. Another girl staggered into the train, bruised and bloody. He was unable to move as he watched her, bound to his illusion of normalcy for eternity.



Purple Pain

Milena Gareau

Age 19

The Price of Expectation

Sofia Szabo

Age 18

Ask me.
ask me and I'll answer,
cotton-ball words stuck in the back of my throat
I vomit at your feet.
Words cascading in mounds of tangled letters and sticky tack
dreams.
You hear nothing but the echoes of
has-beens
should've
could've
If only I'd—
you asked about the colour of the sky
my sky,
sunset, sunrise,
the why
and I had nothing to give you but the shadows of other's dreams

Ask me.
ask me and I'll answer,
I said
but there is a rock tied to the end of the rope
pouring from my lips,
It's sinking,
what will happen when you see?
empty out the magpie horde of broken bits,
abandoned trash,
treasure,
treasured,
It's mine.
Canary song long gone silent.
You asked me who I am,
but what will you do when you've hollowed me out,

no new bottle caps and swallowed chewing gum,
Will you leave?
I know you will
I show you butterflies in the silence.

Ask me
ask me and I'll answer,
Idle hands,
Idle mind,
wandering eyes,
feet stuck in wet cement, i'm on fire
yet, nothing's moving.
rattling skull,
puppet in the hand of a Bird.
I open my mouth,
my throat in a chokehold grasp
You asked about my dreams,
as if I wasn't tumbling head-first into
nothing,
white-knuckled grip on the wall,
holding
don't fall
I said I'd like to fly,
you laugh,
you don't see my fingertip
slipping
slip
ing
Ask me,
ask me and I'll answer,
I never promised you the truth.

after math

Yuchen Fu

Age 17

bang!

The sound of an explosion ripples through the air
causing you to jerk in the middle of
typing a message to the group chat

bang!

You glance out the window
As a white spark streaks past, up into the air
and bursts into a shower of red sparkles,
illuminating the black night sky.

bang!

You exhale shakily, reminding yourself today is Civic Holiday
So there's no need to be scared of these ruptures
in the silence of ten thirty-seven pm

bang! Bang!

As the fireworks go off outside
The explosions reverbrate throughout your chest
The fireworks are outside
But they are exploding inside you too

BANG!

The room goes dark
You are hugging your knees to your chest
Trembling as you silently recite a prayer
Aching in your legs
from sitting on the floor for too long
But you won't make a sound

BANG!

You can't make a sound

BANG!

*Just
your eyes squeeze
shut*

B A N G !

The equations you were copying down only 10 minutes ago—

B A N G !

—forgotten, like the digits dropped after rounding to the nearest tenth

B A N G !

You suck in your breath

and the room is light again.

The fireworks have finally stopped

but your hands still tremble.



Microscopic

Qori Aparicio

Age 17

Feeling of Home

Eva Belga

Age 14

I am from the beauty of the flower Belga,
and from the tall almonds of Amendoeira. From Adam
and Eve,
from the angel of Maria and the bright man of Helder.
I am from the shimmering rays of sunlight,
hitting the sea on the salty beaches. From laughter
surrounding warm fields,
to the moist scent of soil after the clouds rest,
to bruised fruits from fallen trees.
I am from the buzzes of drowning bees and rusty dull
walls.
Along with the prickly green grass under inflatable
pools embedded with dirt, around
the family table between three closest members.
I am from grilled sardines on the darkened porch,

and the passion of Portuguese tarts bringing vivid light to
the room.

From smoky brown chicken to steaming cooked potatoes
and chewy rice filling the stomachs of all.

I am from a supportive mother, "Don't forget to smile,"
and from a strict and stern dad, "Stay focused."

From a caring "Try your best," that always comes with a
strong

"Don't disappoint us."

I am from the lonely photos of my sister and I.

From the dim, isolated kitchen infested with crawling
ants

along

the wooden boards, and the wide curved staircase
leading to my childhood's chamber.

misconceptions

Cas MacDonald

Age 17

man in black
middle-aged, white
sitting

on the park bench. go past.

he coughs

walk
faster

almost down
check your sights:
no one in front
no one behind

down

shoulders come with
easy breathing: take a break
by another
bench. empty. dedicated to someone lost.

cross the bridge
arrive at crossroads

c o u g h

don't turn
don't turn
don't turn
around. go *left*
follow the path you know. discreet
check your shadow
see he is there
at the crossroads
man in
black. middle-aged. white.
standing.

keep going
increase
your pace: toss your head back

he went

right

nothing to worry about. calm
down. shoulders come with. breathe
easy. don't
stop.

keep pace. check your sights
people passing,
zero danger.

noise

turn
nothing.

keeping pace. check again
nobody
and nothing.

alone.

and then

cough

check your right
side. he is
advancing. speed
up. you are

ALONE

ALONE

IN DANGER

know your
whereabouts; almost
there; too far; no
escape and

man

in

black

one

step

away

"passing on your left,"
"i don't want to scare you."

behind him

slow down
pulse
breathing
pace

thank him
belatedly. he is already gone.

One Flight Away

Lindsay Chen

Age 18

I can't sit still.

The airport around me bustles with energy, from the families trying to control their excited children to the panicked travellers racing to meet their departing flight. I get up for the sixth time and stare at the screen at my gate.

2:45. One hour to go before departure. I sit back down. Rummaging through my backpack, I make sure all my documents are in order and that my things are all there and organized. I check my carry-on suitcase one last time to ensure it fits the requirements, then let out a relieved sigh. Yet my knee continues to bounce up and down uncontrollably as I cast another glimpse back up at the time.

2:48. Fifty-eight minutes to go. My hands fidget mindlessly with the drawstrings of my hoodie, twisting and tying them up into taut knots just to undo them and repeat right after. My heart skips a beat when my phone vibrates and I snatch it up from my pocket, but it's just another annoying advert notification. I put it back down.

2:49. This time, I make eye contact with the front desk attendant, who gives me a weird look. I quickly glance away, feeling heat creep up the tips of my ears.

I can't stay here. I have to find some other way to pass the time.

Standing up, I collect my belongings and take a quick peek over my shoulder at my gate before merging with the crowd. I stride down the airport, smile at a dog in its carrier, mumble an apology as I squeeze by a large group of students piling outside the washrooms. Despite my antsy hands drumming against the side of my leg and the urge to constantly run my fingers through my hair, my mind is completely blank. I know when I pull up to the airport map, I will have no idea where to go. Arriving at my destination, my eyes glaze over the directory. Scrolling down the list, I try to find something intriguing or somewhat entertaining, but my heart stops when I suddenly stumble upon a familiar logo.

Starbucks. The first time I met Charlie. I had just walked out of the coffee shop, exhausted from the exam I had taken an hour before and wincing in the bright sunlight. My eyes focused on her, sitting on a bench, basking in the sunshine. I remember how she turned to me, flashing a smile, and I couldn't help the edges of my lips creeping up too. A flood of warmth came over me, something different from the summer heat I'd been accustomed to, something I'd never felt before. With her soft amber eyes that sent butterflies tumbling down into my stomach and goofy personality that was always ready to make me laugh, she really was the light that guided me out of the dark mental pit I was in at the time. With her, I found a purpose beyond the endless lectures and assignments at school. I became more energetic, my self-confidence and my grades skyrocketed like never before, and every time I thought of her, it was like all of my problems just washed away. Together, we blossomed and thrived, and I couldn't have been happier.

Until the co-op opportunity came . . . something I just couldn't pass up. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity abroad. Although it tore me up on the inside, I knew we would have to part. Two months, the school said. Only two months and then I'd be able to head home. Yet, somehow, two turned into three, which turned into five and then ten. Of course, the networks and connections I made, along with the work I did, are priceless, but it killed me on the inside that I wasn't able to wake up and see her next to me each morning. How we wouldn't be able to do our walks down the promenade every Sunday, race across the lake in our sailboat during the summer months, play in the snow when winter came.

I stand here, tens of thousands of dollars richer and with new bounteous and invaluable knowledge in

my brain, but at what cost? Will Charlie be able to forgive me for being gone for so long? Will she be the same, or will I meet a total stranger when I land? Will we be able to do the same things we used to do, or has she moved on, leaving my outdated, irrelevant self behind? I let out a shaky breath, trying to steady the loud pounding in my ears, and close my eyes.

I think — no, I know that Charlie will still be there when I return, waiting at the airport, maybe with a sign, for sure some flowers, and ready for a big, endless hug. That's the Charlie I know and love.

"Now boarding all passengers to Vancouver on WestJet flight WS 705," echoes the intercom, snapping me out of my thoughts. My watch flashes the time: 3:45. Time to go. As I walk briskly back to my gate, my phone buzzes. It's my boyfriend, well-wishing my flight and sending a hopeful message for our soon-to-be reunion. It's accompanied by a picture of a chipper pit bull, ball in mouth and tail wagging. Stepping in line to board my flight, I open up the image and zoom into the dog's saucer-like eyes, scroll down to her puffed-out chest full of pride and then to her tappy little paws.

"Oh, Charlie," I murmur, hands itching to give her a scratch behind the ears. "I'll be home soon, girl. I promise."

Ponderings as of Late

Younna Asaad

Age 17

Are excitement and anticipation only present in the absence of satisfaction and contentment? We have a desire within: to be in a constant state of change, wailing and wrinkling into new forms of being.

For there is a sense of dread at the notion of potential nothingness, so we clap, cry, and cackle — hoping to extinguish the flickering flame that is dullness itself, hoping to breathe passion into the stillness that is our surroundings, leaving tufts of carbon dioxide in our wake.

We fear the calm before the storm and in a sickly-inevitable way, itch for the chaos that follows — indicative of our distaste for predictability.

How is it that obviousness evokes our displeasure when we ourselves are formulaic? The heart and the lungs, for instance, act in a self-sustaining way, much like the sound of a record player after the needle reaches the end of a vinyl and a subtle crackling sound is played on loop.

Accordingly, we look on the past as if it is

within reach, grasping at mere crumbs with our fingers, sticky like the stomach of a fig, while our present is held in an unfathomably restrictive grip. How is it that we allow non-existent things to control us?

For delusion is the mother that nurtures regret, her womb only nourishing our irrational, contradictory thoughts. How do we possibly breathe the air of a time that once was, and never shall be, when the air of the now is what keeps us upright and conscious?

We claim we crave the sporadic, yet we stay circling the drain, too invested to swirl back out of the sink, too cowardly to let the muddy water swallow us whole.

Why is it that we lie to avoid being perceived as ordinary when our existence is evidence of anything but mediocrity? To go against the grain, or to be a conformist, that is the question. How will you answer?

rainy tapestry

Tianyi Li

Age 17

october is slinking out to the roof
again, loose-limbed and lithe as she pads
 off of the fire escape.
she doesn't bite, you say, hands bathed scarlet.
she is very clearly sinking
her teeth into the meat of your palm. october is primal
and starved and your wounded reflection
in the windowpane of a butcher's shop.
 that is to say, october is a deboning.

in my dreams you are october.
in my dreams i am october, growing weary
in the endless summer rain.

(a double take,
 a scattering of bluebirds.)

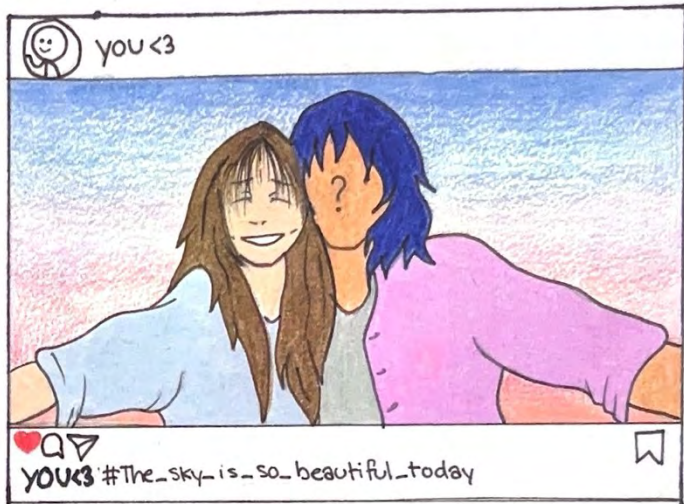
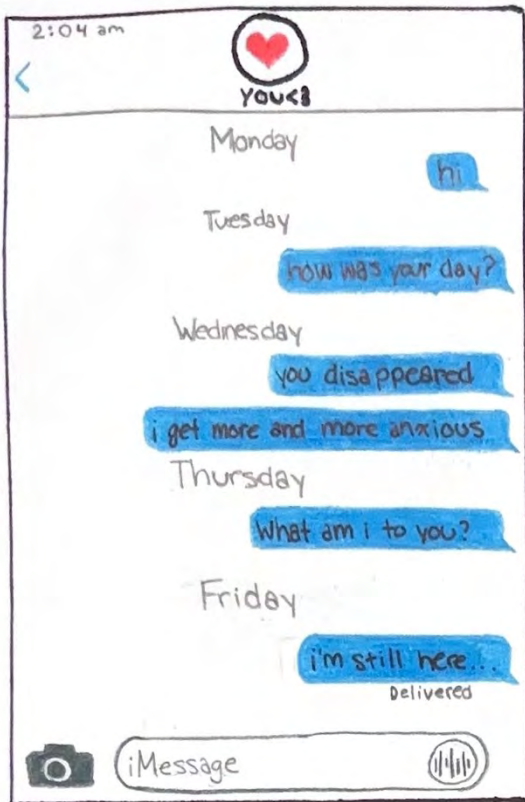
imagine the moon
ripe enough to be plucked, and a fruit basket
left on your doorstep. your hands turning into clouds
 of rabbits and running away from you, all
 milky white and sweet cream, your hands
 melting like a sugar cube stirred into the mug of black
 tea left out on the kitchen table.

i meant it when i said this could be enough for me.
 steam from the kettle and ochazuke
 and a warm house, made into a home.
falling asleep on the floor of your living room, the city obscured by fog like a cascade of lace
overhead. layers on
 layers and a constant refolding of the pleats.

and subdued light, splayed out in all the strangest places, coalescing into a being,
into october, into buckets
 of rainwater that we drink from to soothe scratchy throats.

the truth: you don't have to be a star.

the truth: i adore the night sky even on the cloudiest of evenings.



Ghosting

Mirab Adnan
Age 18

Scarred Symmetry

Isaac Wu

Age 16

i don't know which side of my body i like better,
the left or [back]
they're all *me*
but where is the symmetry
the b(ala)nce, the harmony, the proportions

i am a pair of mismatched socks,
my thoughts are a profusion of scrambled puzzles
my body is a broken mir(ror)
i wish i could accept myself
but the cacophony of their voices drowns out the sight of who i once was
i hear the jeering that mocks my imperfections
silent hands point at me through the exhibition glass

i'm the creature
i can never be like them
Neveroddo*re*veN
i climb the tower of defects, one that will take a lifetime to comprehend
don't stutter why won't my mouth ever listen to me)
don't laugh why is my laugh so jarring)
don't smile why can't i find happiness)
Don t noD why is this happiness painful)
You're not on our
level

their boundless expectations
CRUSH
Me

Will I ever be what they want me to be?

just a little more fixing

forever, the smallest disfigurements will burden me
on my left cheek is a mole, is a beauty mark?
no, it's a brown, blotchy stain on an unblemished canvas

(I'm unique)
(I wish I wasn't)

under the skin *dig*
maybe it's just underground *dig*
it's still there *dig*
i'm hurting *dig*

my cheeks are so red and youthful (I'm a rose)
filled with mounds of barren, rough pimples (I hide under my petals, yet my thorns still show)

there's one *squeeze*
go away *squeeze*
my skin doesn't care *squeeze*
but they do *squeeze*

plump hands, they exude warmth and nurturing energy (a well-lived testament to my work)
but no, I'm F A T (a work of gluttony and bingeing)

stop eating *growl*
hunger is temporary *growl*
malnourishment is better than judgment *growl*

when i look at my reflection
i don't recognize myself
my scars reveal the very secrets i held dear
the ones i concealed and tried to suffocate
even underwater they grasp my legs and take me with them

let me B R E A T H E
the dents of the moles
the acne scars
the loose skin
was it ever me? or was it them?
was it ever wrong to strive for perfection?
no, it was wrong to think perfection was within grasp

i am broken
i am imperfect
i am symmetrical.

The End

Elim Shen

Age 14

We have reached the strange blue planet,
The last time we visited a very short time ago.

The planet's sky once a beautiful cerulean,
Was left a watered down grey,
The planet cried out black plumes,
From the metal tubes.

What had happened in the short time away?

Once the pride of the system,
A symbol of life,
Now harming itself,
Was this what would happen to other planets?

The heat is unbearable,
As some drop beside the bones of others.
Dust swirls like a violent typhoon,
As the final plants crash to their death

The planet has been far too kind,
Letting the inhabitants slowly end its body,
Poisoning the water with slimy gloop,
Stabbing the ground with plastic.

Its tears pour down on the land
While bleeding out deadly sticky blood
Fires roar across the plains
Its suffering was for everyone to see,

So with a heavy heart,
I enter the ship,
Leaving the tragic scene behind
Despite everything that could've been done

Her Lungs

Enya Dragana Jovicik

Age 18

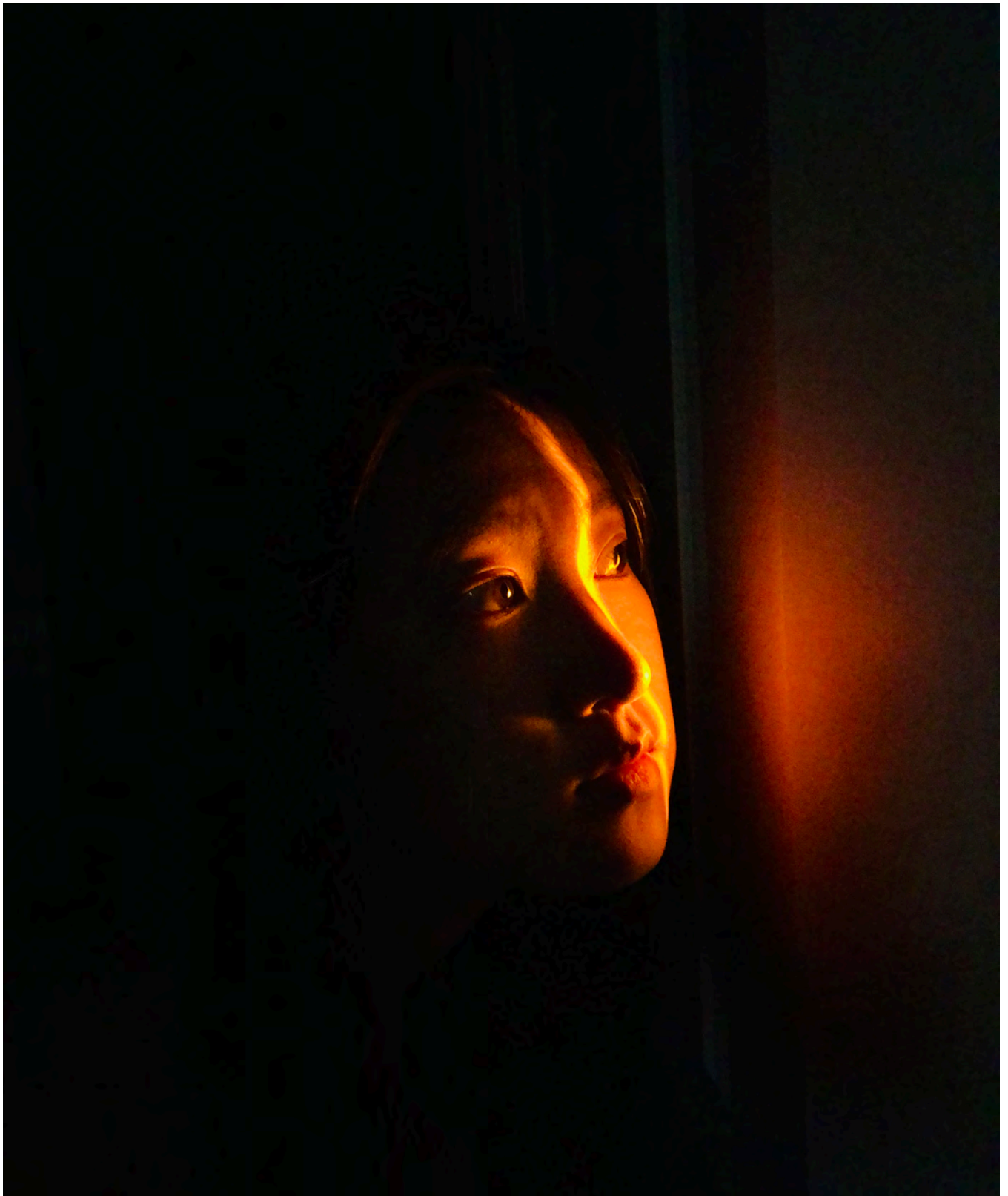
Dead is the green of yesterday;
the forests have all turned red.
Can't you see their scarlet foliage
kissing the sky? The kiss
of death, the kiss of
noxious breath, the darkening
exchange of air that we
have granted a season.

We're in the end times, baby.
The rivers run crimson with blood
and waves paint the sand a pretty pink
as we run blind and wave goodbye
to the array of hues we once knew;
we're at the end of the colour wheel now.

Dawn seeps into the sky and
no longer fades like it once did.
What was once blue
is now rusted over
and Mother looks tired and old;
the wrinkles seem to have formed
overnight and only now you realize:
this can't last forever.

There is an ending worse than death
and it's watching the clock hands
count down and join in the middle,
intersecting like your hands do
around Her throat.

Can you breathe without Her lungs?
Keep strangling Her with greedy hands
and tell me, can you
breathe without Her lungs?



Through the Cracks

Demi Yang

Age 15

Merciless Sea

Sanjana Monga

Age 16

I wake up to a chilling breeze within the air. A peculiarly shaped charcoal mug is set aside on the countertop as the coffee brews. The kettle proceeds to make a hissing sound, almost alarming. As I make my way outside the hotel room, the trees cast shadows over me.

An uneasiness rises in my chest, full of strange thoughts and emotions. The entire resort has settled from the new year's celebration. The warmth from the night before has shifted into a harsh sensation, one that brings doubt and danger. No more sun-kissed parrots are to be seen - only a foul grimness wafting in the air. I feel a chilliness nipping at the back of my neck.

I look out towards the horizon as the bleak clouds obscure the sun's comfort. My eyes trail the ocean in front of me; the air howls as the crimson sand masks my complexion. Worry fills me. The wind's pace speeds up while faint cries begin to circulate through the atmosphere. The ocean begins to growl with a callous intention to feed. Moments pass as frantic waves emerge from east to west. The sea has awakened. My insides coil and turn as they plague me with fear.

I can't breathe. It feels as though the ground beneath me is softening. I struggle to stay controlled. Voices and shrieks shoot at me from every corner. The ones surrounding me are masked with deranged terror. The beast is coming, and we are all at the brink of death. My breath hastens and before I can free myself of this nightmare, the beast has me in its grasp. My hollow cries are hidden beneath its wing. I beg for mercy, but the brute is merciless. It claims its property. I am no longer a person, only a product of the storm.

What were once arms are severed by fragments of wood and nails. My vision blurs, yet my eyes form the outlines of buildings collapsing.

Ashes fall upon the sea's dark venom, and destruction begins to float atop. Piles of rubbish begin to accumulate throughout the flushed streets. As a pungent odour drifts within the surroundings, I gasp for air, but the beast lures me in deeper. It becomes strife against the sea. Large pools of water clutch my face and muffle my weeping. Eventually, I find myself out of its reach, hovering over a rotten door. I look down to see my front scorched with red marks as blood begins to seep through.

My feet plant themselves on the patterned gate. I've found some form of leverage as I latch on to the handle. Time passes until I hear the faint wails begin, and once again, I'm in the absence of protection and back in the beast's clutches. My body races through a stream of destruction as a tree branch tears my bottom lip apart. Red begins to pace down my shirt and mark its territory.

At some point, my perception becomes shallow as I lay face forward on shattered glass. I bring myself to my knees and notice the gash plastered across my cheekbone. The streets are no longer flustered with chaotic weeping; it's almost serene, like angels knocking on heaven's door. My heart rate begins to escalate. Uncontrollable anger strikes me in the gut, but the shriek in my voice won't let me channel my fury. Homes that belonged to people have been demolished by the flood, as dust and rubbish shift abruptly with the wind. The sky is more eerie and gloomy than before. I glance back down at my reflection and see a tainted version of myself. The pounding in my chest is no longer there. Death didn't scare me until I was standing right at the gates.

Dream

Kevin Lee

Age 14

Walking under the scorching sun
Four half-filled bottles of water in the bag
Walking towards the oasis
The dream of my life

Streams of others behind and in front
All with different numbers of bottles left
Some fall and some struggle
But no one dares to quit.

A fierce scorpion comes to pick a fight
The venomous tail tauntingly approaching
The motionless inky eyes looking to end my journey.
We fight for hours
Adrenaline keeping me up
And finally after an uncountable amount of punches and kicks
The scorpion is slain, and I continue my journey.

Another day another way
The sandstorm tears up blisters on my face
Aching from the wounds by the scorpion
My mind is farther down the road than the feet
The heat stops the mind
Stops the arms and stops the feet
Slouched over helpless
I fall into a deep sleep

“Wake up. Let’s get going.”
The man gives me a sip of water
And treats my wounds with his kit.
A new friend, a person that I can trust

Walking and walking
Across the years I gain irreplaceable experience
New friends that are reliable
A wife who will never leave my side
A pet cricket that never fails to make me smile
And a house that is always there to greet me at the end of a harsh day.

Although I never get any closer to the oasis
That’s fine.
The dream isn’t just to achieve it.
It is to also enjoy life along the way.



Mixed Media Self-Portrait

Jubencio Carino

Age 19

HAMPTER

Samuel Yunxuan Yao

Age 13

Franco's hamster died a week ago. It was only now that he could get his family gathered for the official burial of Joey.

"You know, Joey probably killed himself because you stopped giving him those freeze-dried strawberries," Franco's little brother whispered.

"Shut up," Franco whisper-snapped back.

Since Franco's little brother insisted on burying Joey, he dug up just enough soil to bury the rodent, before placing Joey in the small hole.

That night, Franco snuck out to the backyard, wanting to have a last look at his long-time furry friend. He dug up the same spot as earlier, but to his shock, Joey wasn't there!

He dug deeper. Still no Joey. Franco frantically started launching spades of soil everywhere. Suddenly, he hit something hard. No, like, really hard.

In a frenzy, he used his hands to clear the area. He found himself kneeling on a grimy vault door, with one of those spinning door handles. Franco didn't know what to do.

Should I try to open this door? No. It's too late. I'll just come back to it tomorrow, Franco decided, as he replaced the soil.

Fortunately, tomorrow was Saturday but unfortunately, it was also raining cats and dogs.

"Mom I'm going for a uh.. run!" Franco announced.

"But it's pouri— Franco, honey, that's the backyard doo—"

"Okay bye!"

The door, which did indeed lead to the backyard, slammed shut as Franco left, cutting off his mother's sentence.

Franco ran out, and dug up Joey's grave again, revealing the crusty, musty, rusty door. He twisted the handle and used all his might to try to pull the door open. It didn't budge. Not even a bit.

Just then, he heard a voice yell from under the door, "Lefty loosey, righty tighty!"

"What?"

"Lefty loosey, righty tighty! Turn the handle to the left!"

"Oh, yeah..." Franco responded, spinning the handle the other way. This time, with just a little bit of force, the steel door flew open! There didn't seem like much inside the tunnel, just a steel ladder that was mounted on the concrete wall of the tunnel.

"Git down 'ere!"

Franco peered into the darkness beyond the open door, his curiosity piqued by the mysterious voice. All of a sudden, a wave of sayings such as "Curiosity killed the cat" raced through his mind.

With a deep breath, Franco descended the ladder into the dimly lit tunnel below.

"Oi, shut the door, will ya?" the voice yelled.

"Oh yeah, sorry."

He pulled the hatch shut and continued to climb down the ladder. The air was cool and damp, sending a shiver down his spine. At the bottom of the ladder, Franco found himself in a small chamber. The space was dimly illuminated by flickering torches mounted on the walls, casting eerie shadows across the rough stone floor.

Standing in the middle of the chamber was a gnome-like creature with a long, wispy beard.

"Welcome, young uh...child," the gnome said, his voice echoing off the stone walls. "I am Glimmerwick."

Franco's eyes widened in astonishment.

"What is this place?" Franco asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"This is the Forgotten Realm," Glimmerwick replied, gesturing to the tiny chamber around them. "A place where secrets are buried and mysteries lie waiting to be uncovered."

"Uh, that's it? It's a bit small, eh?" Franco blurted out.

"What? No! Our budget got cut this year, okay?!" Glimmerwick replied, a bit angered.

Glimmerwick cleared his throat.

"Anyways, sorry, like I was saying, you've been chosen to be the carrier of our legacy."

"But why me?" Franco asked, still trying to make sense of it all.

Glimmerwick chuckled softly.

"Fate has a funny way of choosing its champions, young Franco. And it seems that fate has chosen you to be the one to unlock the secrets of the Forgotten Realm."

"Now, if you don't mind, just follow me this way," Glimmerwick said, sounding like a hostess at a restaurant.

A series of long, eerie tunnels, spiralling staircases, and one very sketchy elevator ride later, they arrived at The Room.

Glimmerwick opened the museum piece of a door, revealing a vast chamber, unlike anything Franco had ever seen. Crystal formations, each sparkling with an otherworldly glow, lined the walls, casting an iridescent light throughout the room. In the center stood a pedestal, and upon it rested a glowing orb, pulsing with mystical energy.

Franco stared, mesmerized by the sight.

"This," Glimmerwick announced, "is the Heart of the Realm. It is the source of all magic and power in this forgotten place."

Franco cautiously approached the pedestal, his hand trembling as he reached out to touch the orb. As his fingers brushed against its surface, a surge of energy zapped through him, leaving him tingling from head to toe.

Suddenly, visions flooded his mind. He saw scenes of a forgotten civilization. He saw a time of peace and prosperity.

The visions faded as quickly as they came. Franco's head was intoxicated with questions. Who were these people? What caused their downfall?

"Seems the Heart has chosen you to be its new host," Glimmerwick stated, his voice laced with a hint of awe. "It's revealed to you the history of this place, and now it awaits your command."

Franco stared at the glowing orb with a cocktail of emotions surging through him. The weight of this responsibility settled heavily on his shoulders. He was just a regular kid, thrust into a world of mystery.

"What do I needa do?" he asked

Glimmerwick's smile widened. "There's much to learn, Franco," he said.

"Go home."

"Okay, then. Bye, I guess."

Franco walked out of the room, down the hall, up the elevator, up the stairs, through another few halls, and finally reached the exit. He climbed up the ladder, flipped open the door, and exited the complex. He swiftly replaced the soil and sprinted back to the house.

"Dumb child," resurrected Joey murmured to himself as he took off his gnome costume, "still can't believe that worked!"



I need a quarter

Jesse Miletin

Age 17

The Letting Go

Myah Rathi Litteljohn

Age 13

When we first set out, the sea is a vast opal of azure blue. A light breeze gently weaves in and out of the deep folds in your leathery hands as you untie our sailboat from the dock. As we move into open water, the waves are still inviting and the wind still playful. In silence we gaze on at the horizon - there's no need for words. Your fuzz of white hair bounces like a baby rabbit on the smooth egg of your head, and I smile. Our hands intertwine and it never crosses our minds that we might have to let go.

I took you for granted.

I thought you would always be beside me, the breeze dancing through our hair.

Yet I'm sure you knew even then.

The lighthouse fades into a blur of reds and whites on the disappearing shoreline and we find ourselves surrounded by an uneasy blueness as far as we can see. As a fierce wind begins to tug at your once-red hat, your eyes fill with a fear I do not understand. A menacing wave rushes past our boat, and we lurch; I realise that our small vessel is completely at the will of the elements. You promise it will be fine, yet your eyes are glazed with an unmistakable terror. Your grip on my hand tightens and I can feel the ragged map of your palm etch secrets into mine.

A howling wind carries our sails this way and that, and we forget the direction from which we've come. Furious waves begin to pour into our boat. Your hat is finally stolen, and we watch as it dances away on a wind current, mocking our helplessness. Silent tears roll through the ancient riverbeds of your cheeks. The waves seem to follow you, they pour in wherever you stand; they want you for their own, to hold you close and to never let you go. And you are fighting in your own determined way, but the jealous sea is draining you slowly until you will be nothing but skin and bone. The sails billow violently, reminding me of the borrowed off-white sheets that will rise and

fall to your final laboured breaths.

I held your hand, but our minds were in different places –

Mine lost in my own worries and yours in your uncertainty.

And yet we were both afraid.

Your glory is fading now. The secrets of your youth and the worries of your past seem to melt away, revealing a fragile version of the person we have known. The wind chases you still, whipping the frayed ends of your favourite shirt. The water soaks you to your soul, pursuing all your forgotten places and secret hideaways. And it is now that your strong grasp on my hand begins to falter. Our boat struggles against the unrelenting waves; it moans and screams with all its might. But the fathomless sea is so much more. It whips our little boat and shows us no mercy. We huddle close, seeking shelter. But the murky water is everywhere and you forget how to fight it. Sails all tattered and torn, draping our vessel like a ghostly burial shroud, we are sent flying into the sea's open arms.

Somehow, I still grip your hand and we are together, although flailing underwater. I try to pull up, but the water pulls you down. You are limp except for the dwindling strength of your grasp - still clinging to life, not wanting to let go. But the sea is begging for you; it holds you close in a melancholy embrace. But I am holding onto you too...

I emerge into the sunlight, latching onto the wreckage of the boat. You're not there. My hand burns where you held on so tight, a secret map beginning to form. Did I let go of your hand or did you let go of mine? Or was it the sea all along?

Sometimes I see you sailing gently along.

You wave your red cap and I wave back –

Secrets abound.

It's Just a Prank, Bro!

Ayman Zubair

Age 16

Ten thousand viewers averaged this month on YouTube.

That was a 30 percent decrease in viewership compared to last year.

Not to mention the heart wrenching amount of subscriber loss.

He didn't want to admit it, but he was falling off the map. And he knew exactly why.

Aaron was a YouTuber, or a social media influencer as he liked to call himself. The former term couldn't really describe what he did, he thought.

He was an entrepreneur.

He entertained the masses with his endless charisma.

He gave kids a source of inspiration to follow their dreams, to be who they wanted to be. Aaron's primary content involved pranking people and capturing their reactions on camera.

He was known for his chainsaw act, where he went around swinging a running chainsaw at people. He didn't actually hurt them of course, just waved it around their faces. Their terrified expressions were hilarious. Coincidentally, that was when he had peak average viewership.

This year though, he had moved onto less 'obnoxious' and more 'safe' pranks after he received pushback from his old fans. He should have never listened to their whining.

Now, he was bleeding viewers and subscribers. Every day he looked at his SocialBlade, his heart sank deeper. His family asked him why he had such dark circles around his eyes, and he told them he couldn't sleep at night. He told them not to worry though, he had a cure for the cause.

Standing a few meters away from a bridge underpass, Aaron looked over to his side, "You ready?"

Mike held up his camera and grinned. "Course."

Aaron nodded and put on his clown mask.

It was time to bring back the old him.

His first victims were a sweet couple enjoying their late night walk.

He signaled Mike to start recording when he spotted them coming their way.

He gripped his chainsaw tightly as he waited behind the underpass. Giggling voices echoed through the tunnel. Just a little longer, he thought. Footsteps and a faint conversation about pets was all he heard before he decided it was enough. He revved up his chainsaw and jumped into the tunnel and started sprinting towards them. The couple's reaction was delayed due to shock, but once they saw him getting closer, their faces twisted into fear and they both shrieked as they ran away.

Aaron stopped chasing after a few seconds. He didn't want to be too tired at the end of their prank session after all. And speaking about pranks...

"Yooo that was fire footage, bro." Mike dabbed him up, and Aaron laughed.

"You think so?"

"Hell yeah, this is gonna be your comeback. Trust me." Mike reassured him. Aaron grinned, that was exactly what he wanted.

After a couple minutes or so they peeked their heads into the tunnel and saw an old man at the end. He was wobbling towards them with a cane in his hand. Taking a deep breath, Aaron popped into the tunnel once again, sprinting towards his cash cow. He guessed it proved too much for the old man as he gasped and fell backwards onto the ground. Aaron immediately turned around and told Mike to stop recording. It was good footage, but he wasn't going to stick around if the man got injured or something.

Aaron and Mike giggled as they replayed the footage. They were currently at their second location, a similar underpass, waiting to film their final shot. This was going to be a teaser video to bring back eyes on his

channel, just a taste of what was to come. They talked and waited. And waited.

Until Mike told him someone was coming. Aaron peeked his head over and saw a hooded man at the end of the wide tunnel. He tightened up his clown mask until it fit his face snugly.

When the sounds of the footsteps got close enough, Aaron waited no longer and charged straight into the tunnel. It happened too fast for him to notice. The hooded man jerked and took something out of his pocket, and the last thing he heard before he fell to the ground was a sharp bang. His chest hurt, first with a dull sensation and then a searing pain. His vision blurred around the edges, and he fell into darkness right as he heard Mike's fading words— "It's just a prank, bro!"

Waking up in the hospital with a bullet wound wasn't fun.

He took a deep breath that turned into a hacking cough. He forced himself to take another and think. It was all he could do strapped to the bed like this. He was angry at first, but that anger quickly faded into depression.

The court case was coming up in a month. His lawyers told him it was unlikely he would be getting anything from it. His family was sick and worried about him, and his fans forgot he existed—until a news channel covered the shooting.

He took another deep breath and pulled out his phone. Thousands of unread notifications popped up. Angry fans. Worried parents. He blocked them all and went straight to his channel.

Confirm deletion of content? He pressed yes.

Every single post he made, gone just like that.

He didn't mind, it was time for a rebranding of his channel.

He heard Minecraft YouTubers were trending. No one finds pranking fun these days anyway.

Scarecrow

Efimia Christodoulou Tavares

Age 16

I can feel my skin peeling from the sun, the hay inside me squirming to see its rays once again.

I understand. I too wish I could rip off my arms and legs to escape the pole I'm tied to. My limbs once hurt from the strain, but I've learned it's easier to ignore my body than to pay it any attention.

But at least I do my job, right?

The crows circle above me screaming, and I can't help but smile. Ever since I came to the wheat field not one has dared to touch the crops. I think I scare them. I didn't understand until I saw my reflection on a tractor, but I've learned to just close my eyes when it drives by.

I feel my dangling legs. My pants used to be as red as the leaves during fall, but recently they've turned more of a faded peach. A pity, I really liked the old colour, but I've learned to just pretend it never left.

I've done a lot of learning, haven't I? I think learning is the most important thing in life. If I never learned, I would be screaming right now!

I would yell and yell, but no one would hear me because I'm just a scarecrow! Scarecrows can't talk! Scarecrows can't feel!

I would pull and pull against the ropes until my wrists and ankles were withered down to nothing, leaving them dangling where I hung.

I would fall, and finally feel the soil rub against my skin while my peach-coloured pants turned black from the dirt.

I would then open my eyes and look to the sky. The crows would be circling above, and I'd beg them to let me join. To feel wings pierce out from my body, and a beak growing from my lips.

I would join them in the air and leave. Finally leave this farm and see what lies beyond its picketed fence, slowly forgetting about my days on the pole.

I would breathe, really breathe, and I would know that I was truly alive —

But I've learned to stop thinking, so it's okay.

Dreaming

Maya Marium Sufi

Age 13

What is it behind the murky umber in your eyes, the lentils and pomfret you eat every so often, and the brown skin that embraces the flesh in your body?

As tears trickle down a face you are so unfamiliar with, falling into a lake of white and pink lotuses you've never seen before, what is it that you feel?

The call for prayer you've never heard in the place you say is home appears in your dreams. The adhan is heard throughout the city as pinks, oranges, and reds drown the sky. The streets all head in one direction amid chaos and traffic you yearn to be a part of.

Minutes before, the congested and colourful roads filled with rickshaws and workers coming home to their children were jammed, overloaded, and in absolute mayhem.

The salwar kameez worn so naturally, floral cotton scarves adorned with comfort, and the delicately braided long black hair of girls with faces like mine taking a break from their studies pack the roads.

Men serve breaded potatoes in cheap paper bowls and an old woman sells fragrant yet pale roses. I open my eyes and look at the fuzzy red box filled with golden bangles, necklaces, and jhumkas on my dresser.

The intricate embroideries of my vibrant saris and kameez that I wear every Eid peek through my packed closet.

The uneasy feeling of unfamiliarity drifts away.

I look to a woman, sharing my murky umber eyes, cooking lentils and pomfret with my brown skin and smile.



It's Just Hair

Harman Banga

Age 17

We Should've...

Lara Chamoun

Age 14

We saw the storm coming, the spiraling dark mass of clouds forming in the sky, blocking any light that might have tried to peek through the mists of the canopy they created. We felt the winds pick up through our heavy firefighter uniforms, nipping at our faces until they were red and raw. We saw the downpour on the horizon line of the Humber River, racing towards us with the panic and force of a round of bullets on glass.

But we didn't see this coming, not here.

There's never been a hurricane quite like Hurricane Hazel in our Weston neighborhood, let alone Ontario. We were not prepared as we scrambled onto a dinghy that was dispatched to us by the Chief. We were not prepared for the torrent of freezing water pelting us. I could barely see my own trembling hands in front of my face. I searched for our Chief through spraying sand, certain that he could see through the storm.

I didn't notice that our float had foundered until I was up to my chin in sludge, struggling through soaked, discarded uniforms. I was surrounded by a swarm of volunteers, who, just like me, were calling for directions from the Chief.

"William? You slug, over here!" Liam moved his arm freely as he waved me over, having discarded his mud-caked coat. He extended his arm, allowing me to climb onto the sandbags piled onto the shoreline to keep the flooding in check.

It wasn't enough.

"Liam," I wheezed, "This is serious, you've got to wear your—"

"Wear my coat? *You're* the one not taking this seriously. We have to act now if we want to save lives."

I retorted, "That's disobeying orders."

"And keeping our promise to save lives. The rest of us are heading upriver to Westmount bridge," he paused, and for a moment it seemed as if the gales hesitated, before he let slip with the wind. "Are you coming?"

"Do I have much of a choice with you?" I huffed, gesturing to the group in the currents, plodding along the river's edge through waters already knee-deep.

"No, none," came Liam's reply, disappearing into the storm.

I followed the sounds of falling boots, yells turned to whispers caught in wisps of wind, lashing at our faces. The water rose as we continued upriver, currents threatening to pull me down. Was anyone behind me?

I hoped no one would be: no one would notice if I fell out of line.

We didn't realize we had reached our destination until the world came into focus and the weight of the fog lifted. The winds still whipped, the rain still raged, but we were beneath Westmount Bridge. I was up to my chest in water, but the concrete above our heads was strong. *We could get people to safety from under here, bring in supplies...*

"William, you're still wearing that blasted thing? No wonder you were so hard to drag through the mud!" Liam exclaimed, unlinking his arm from mine.

I didn't even bother to answer him; I was looking around for someone who could give us some

direction: a captain, lieutenant. But I saw none. We were a dozen despondent, mud-caked volunteers.

The world around the bridge was unrecognizable: shingled houses and English gardens floated down the same Raymore Drive where we used to play four-square.

Only Liam stood above the rest of us, with a confident stance and steely eyes as he took position on the base of a pillar. He cupped his hands around his mouth, mimicking a megaphone the way a schoolboy would on the play structure to get his peers' attention.

"Boys, this is our base. We're safe under this bridge, in perfect position to reach headquarters when the power returns and help if the road goes slick and cars start to lose control."

Liam was our commander.

Our plea for purpose was answered through the cries of a little boy, as a car skated right off the road into the rubble.

The front of the car was mangled along with its front passengers. I craned my neck in unison with my comrades. Everything became blurry, except for the red of the car and the red in the water. I forced down the bile rising in the back of my throat. I blinked away the black spots dancing in my eyes. I wasn't prepared for this.

The little boy in the backseat was saved by the car's headfirst dive, but the car was quickly filling up with freezing rainwater.

Liam didn't hesitate as the rest of us backed away to where the elements could rip our senses away from this abomination.

He didn't see it coming. He didn't see the swell tearing through the road. He didn't hear its roar, not with the cries of the little boy getting louder *and louder*. He didn't feel the storm's spittle tear into his face, tracing its way down his cheeks.

He gave no cry of desperation when the wave took over, ripping the bridge from its pillars, sending the concrete crumbling down. He gave nothing when a fallen parapet split the ground, sending him stumbling forward and the car flying back.

He tried to lift it, scale it, even slick with slush. He ignored my pleas to run. He ignored the boy's desperate cries, delivered with the pitch of a thousand invisible knives in the air, slowly drowning.

He didn't even seem to notice when a fire hydrant was sent rushing into his head, the ripped pipes of the fireplug stabbing through his stomach. He didn't acknowledge the brewing storm of red blood swirling around him, a dawn-touched reflection of the sky. His fate only dawned on him as he was swept away like all the victims of the hurricane.

He didn't look back as the river swallowed him.

He didn't see us fall out of line.

Liam didn't see it coming.

I did.

I watched the little boy fall. I watched Liam drown.

I gripped my coat. *I should've seen it coming.*

A Second Home

Abby Wang

Age 16

The familiar sizzle and potent smell of garlic flooded my thoughts as I stepped through the ever-familiar, worn-down entrance of the compact little *chácāntīng* tucked away in the corner of 4th Street. The rustic frame opened up to a boisterous room filled to the brim with diners. I was seated beside a traditional brush painting placed haphazardly into a flimsy IKEA plastic frame — a poor imitation of the French fine dining experience you would find in midtown.

It must have been thirteen years. Sacred to my mother, it was a long-lived tradition to dine here every Sunday afternoon. When we finished, we would take what was left of our gobbled *yuānyāng* just in time to watch the mesmerizing sunset together and venture on a quick walk down the irresistible harbour boardwalk. Talking into the starry nights, dreaming of our future.

I had met dozens of beloved regulars, just like myself, struggling to fit into the puzzle. These children were different from the kids I studied alongside. School friends were for security, to have a seat in the cafeteria, and not to stand out — friends. On the other hand, these ones understood me. Together, we stood in the shadows, afraid of embarrassment, trying to blend in.

We were magnetized moths attracted to the flame of the American dream.

It was our getaway, our home — it was a chance to be ourselves, camouflaged from America's laser eyes. Nobody to judge us, nobody to hide from. It was a tradition that lasted thirty youthful years. It felt like we belonged.

That was until she passed away. I felt like a trespasser.

I had to leave this tiresome town in the hope of starting my own traditions. Fleeing town, I dreamt of studying life beyond and the concept of connected galaxies. Building a reputable career in astrology, I worked a devouring 9-5 job. Consumed with my voluminous work duties, I found no need to come home. I was bustling with business and I had no one back home calling for me. With the annual astrophysics conference in town, I opted to stay a night. Perhaps it was time.

The thought of opening up this closed chapter stood as a challenge. *Was I meant for this?* I sat there in a chrysalis as the waiter broke the silence, "Are you ready to order?"

Hesitantly, I muster in a thick American accent, "I'd like a *mápó dòufu*, please."

She returns, "Will that be all?"

Nodding, the words that used to be so natural, simply vanished. I could no longer recognize Chinese characters, with no option, but to oddly analyze pinyin. My ties to home were coolly crumbling, it was what I had to do, what we all had to do, to fit in.

I used to think we could be both, that we didn't have to pick a side. But the truth is, only one side is respectable, and unfortunately, the Western world won. So we erased our identity and followed along. Pretending to live lavishly, we eagerly climbed the social ranks to build standings, to build a community of respect.

A sea of memories flooded my mind as the same bowl of macaroni and ham that I used to order was brought out to the family sitting next to me. It smelled like childhood. I used to insist on packing this standard Western lunch, not because it was my favourite, but because it was similar to what others would have. Feeling outcast, I would idolize the white kids. All I had dreamt of was to feel the same belongingness as the other kids, inconsiderate of the sacrifice.

These thoughts continued to resonate within my overwhelmed mind.

Moments later, my own piquant plate of *mápó dòufu* was gently placed in front of me. The same way it was thirty years ago, comfort — a bowl of delicate hand-pulled noodles, tender and savoury meat paired with fresh vivacious vegetables. *I missed home.*

Glancing around the *chácāntīng*, I noticed the subtle changes that time had brought. The plastic-framed painting on the wall had been replaced with a more authentic piece, adding a touch of genuine elegance to the space. It was a testament to the resilience of tradition, a reminder that even in a rapidly changing world, some

things managed to hold their ground.

After finishing up my meal, I signalled for the check and left a generous tip for the waiter — a small gesture of gratitude for the comforting meal that had stirred my emotions. As I stepped out onto the bustling streets, I realized that the past and present were not meant to be adversaries; rather, they were threads intricately woven into the tapestry of my identity.

Walking along the vibrant harbour boardwalk, I felt a connection to the younger version of myself, the child who had once yearned to fit in and find her place in the world. I also felt a deep connection to my mother, whose love and traditions had shaped me into the person I had become.

As the sun began to set, casting a warm glow over the horizon, I found a quiet bench by the water's edge. With a sigh of contentment, I realized that I didn't have to choose between my heritage and the world I had embraced. I could be both, unapologetically and authentically. The complexities of cultural identity were not obstacles to overcome, but layers to celebrate, adding depth and richness to the person I had become.

And so, I watched the sun sink below the horizon, its vibrant hues painting the sky with a breathtaking display of colours. At that moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of belonging — to my past, to my present, and to the future that awaited me. As the stars began to twinkle in the velvety night sky, I whispered a silent promise to myself and to my mother, vowing to carry forward the traditions that had shaped me, while forging a path that was uniquely my own.



See

Alice Yang

Age 16

and her skin glowed with the luster of a pearl. Delicate brows arched over slender jet-black eyes which curved into crescents when she smiled. Gold pins gleamed from the dark coils of her hair and a red peony was tucked in one side. Her inner garment was the blue of the noon sky, paired with a white and silver robe that flowed to her ankles. Wrapped around her waist was a vermilion sash, ornamented with tassels of silk and jade. Some nights, as I lay in bed, I would listen out for their gentle clink, and sleep came easy when I knew she was near.

Pinger assured me that I resembled my mother, but it was like comparing a plum blossom to the lotus. My skin was darker, my eyes rounder, and my jaw more angular with a cleft in the center. Perhaps I resembled my father? I did not know; I had never met him.

It was years before I realized that my mother, who dried my tears when I fell and straightened my brush when I wrote, was the Moon Goddess. The mortals worshipped her, making offerings to her each Mid-Autumn Festival—on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month—when the moon was at its brightest. On this day they would burn incense sticks for prayer and prepare mooncakes, their tender crusts wrapped around a rich filling of sweet lotus seed paste and salted duck eggs. Children would carry glowing lanterns shaped as rabbits, birds, or fish, symbolizing the light of the moon. On this one day a year I would stand upon the balcony, staring at the world below, inhaling the fragrant incense which wafted up to the sky in honor of my mother.

The mortals intrigued me, because most often I sat in their world with such yearning. Their stories fascinated me with their struggles for love, power, survival, although I had little comprehension of such intrigues in my sheltered confinement. I read everything I could lay my hands on, but my favorites were the tales of gallant warriors battling fearsome enemies to protect their loved ones.

One day while I was rummaging through a pile of scrolls in our library, something bright caught my eye. I pulled it out, my pulse leaping to meet it.

My Celestial Grace

With thanks to “Daughter of the Moon Goddess” by Sue Lynn Tan.

Nevaeh Mijares

Age 13

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL EXPERIMENT IN BIOLOGY

Cheryl Chen

Age 15

Strawberry DNA spools wet wool around my fingers.
In the grade eight science lab, I break 2 rules and a graduated cylinder
dumping everything in that room that can be melted into a fiber
down my throat.

In grade nine, I can make my knuckles crack to the beat of Rush E
play cricket with my teeth, kiss girls —
the primordial sin.

At home, I shrink on the living room table.
My family tells me let some light in so I swallow
fairy lights to firefly in the dark.
My skin so translucent,
green-yellow glow spilling through my stomach.

In grade ten, I am a wax-crayon Frankenstein w/paper bolts
striking through my neck. I retch, my guts spool strawberries,
baby teeth offending everyone.

In grade eleven, my girlfriend and I sit in an IMAX theatre
where they're playing The Notebook, except Allie is
a beetle, body blistered with metallic shine
& Noah loves her anyway.

I reach for her hand, she puts on plastic glasses colored like police sirens
turns and tells me *you look too 3D*
kisses me anyway.

In a hagiography, they
dub me doofus with a hula-hoop halo.
In her arms I am deceptively simple.

Grade twelve, it was an amicable breakup. On her front porch I stand
& feel the rush of my own blood sifting —
past riverbanks, down hallways with linoleum floors,
into locker gills & her lips
her lips, maybe my neck.
Back then, so cold & electric

I think how, walking out of that science lab,
we were the most beautiful experiment.

Lovely Women

Monette Nicole Ancog

Age 19

The woman in the white dress
has a reputation
She haunts the roads and puts a curse on you
Or so I was told.

My older sister loved to sing
finished one year of college, on her way home
her car found idle on that road, alone
She must've run away; a failure, a fool

My mother held my hand as I grew
for the millionth time she sobbed by that road
scratching and grasping for her heart
She keeps going back; too forgiving, too weak

all alone, I passed by the road
to the concrete bridge, a thirty-foot drop

The woman in the white dress
perched on the edge
she reached out and
wiped away the tears

angelic voice
warm hands
her face a mirror

inside was
a love so familiar
she wrapped her arms around me
and we fell together

She was just like the others; poor family they were
Or so, it was told.

Grass Sways for the Girls Who Cry

Catherine Lee

Age 14

Me and my friend.

We visited the park after class while the sun was still up and the grass was high, carrying bubble tea, our cell phones, lip gloss, and the rest of the world with us. I had acne scars on my face from picking my skin. She had glasses too big for her face and hair longer than a mermaid's.

We sat on the swings and giggled like little girls at our secret loves, holding them out like marbles in our hands.

I thought I saw an old lady staring.

"Sorry," I said. "I know we're being loud."

She gasped. "Oh, not at all! It's just so nice seeing you girls talking and having fun. When I was a girl, my friends and I would talk all day and have such fun, but now all kids do is text!"

I thought that was so typical of her to say, past generations rambling about the youths of today. But there was nostalgia in her voice, and her eyes were like pools reflecting the moon.

The sun climbed the sky, the wind grasped the leaves, and I wondered what this feeling meant.

When we were happy like this, the days I cried because of my looks and comparing my body to the starlets onscreen, mascara running in great black streams of L'oreal Telescopic. My begging sobs at the sky to turn me into a simple echo in the woods, they all condensed into nothing but emotion. And I was okay, because I was in a mortal moment with people of my kind, and tomorrow was a sun yet to rise. We were a small god. The clouds praised our existence.

The grass swayed for us.

Whoever said girls don't matter, or words to that effect, was quite wrong. Girls, young Girls, Girls contemplating themselves and crying, Girls a virgin huntress in the woods, Girls who tell each other secrets carved from the crypts of the earth, Girls made from the foam of the sea, Girls who became the Queen of the Underworld, Girls who cry and cry and cry, we are the sole reason the Earth goes round.

I would accompany a Girl I barely knew to the bathroom, pass tampons from under the bathroom stall. I would pray to be desired and then wish I could disappear from the world. I would hold a Girl's hand when she's shaking with fear, or rage. I would walk her home at night. I know she would too.

We know we're mice in our personalized traps. But we've got pain built in our bones and survival tucked in our boots. And sunshine for anyone who'll see through us. It's tender and beautiful. We can smile through the anger and endless period cramps and spill ourselves on the floor when we're all alone, or with each other. We carry our mother's pain, and our children's stories, and it's so much more glorious than you would imagine. It's evolution.

And when we step into a world full of endless streets, with men who catcall us and worse, where guns go off and the sky falls, and bones break and we become prey or bait, the clouds would rumble for our sake. And the grass would dance for us.



Our Little Reality

Kelly Zhu

Age 13

Strawberry Fields

Lejla Jirku

Age 12

A lot has changed since she was younger

A little girl

Picking strawberries in her sun hat with the red ribbon
Carelessly twirling with the wind atop the bluffs
Skipping barefoot in her mother's little garden

A country girl

Wandering through the strawberry fields
Left her sun hat with the red ribbon on the table
Sketching sunsets out in the meadow

A longing girl

Wants more than the strawberry fields
Her sun hat with the red ribbon doesn't fit her anymore
Sitting on the porch, dreaming

A gone girl

Left the strawberry fields
Forgot about her old sun hat with the red ribbon
Living a new, different life

A lot has changed since she was younger

Now you're a city girl

You barely ever think about the strawberry fields
But I kept your sun hat with the red ribbon
Did you keep the little girl inside of you?
Did you keep the memories of the strawberry fields?

A lot has changed since you were younger

When the Girl with the Satin Bow is Not a Girl at All

Arianna Kanji

Age 14

My lungs burn. The air's crisp, rotting away my throat like the disease currently infesting the kitchen cabinets or the maggots living in the forest just near the cottage we never visit anymore. For a moment, I cannot breathe. But of course, that doesn't make sense, because if I cannot breathe then I cannot think and then these words would merely be saliva dripping from a rabid mouth. So then I do, and it comes quite easily, like hot chocolate on a winter day when my fingers have long since brittle away to blue. I no longer have any features. My voice remains in a hum, a songbird pressed against warped static or the rhythmic buzzing of a hundred bumblebees. The dark night bends near the soft crinkles of stars. My cheeks have been scrubbed of their creases. A monster, maybe? That seems right. My skin's melting away from my bones in scalding hot lumps.

Your body's failing you. Crumbling away piece by piece. Do you notice? Is this self destructive nature a product of your father or your mother? We will fix you, little girl. Press normative ideals onto your skinny shoulders and smile as you drop them one by one. We'll only care once the pages graze your skin and you wander towards us with a tear-stained gaze. As more blood accumulates, we'll claim your dress was always that shade of crimson. It brings out your eyes, after all.

I realize suddenly that I have no limbs, either. As if having read my sluggish thoughts, something slithery grabs hold of my body and slides itself through my skin. They reform, splayed out on the ground like blurry stars in a cloudy night sky, constellations bleeding into each other. Somebody once cut two slashes across my chest and then handed me a bottle of capsules to relieve the pain. I can see its dust slowly falling onto my worn-out, broken-down skin. When it begins to melt, caving in on itself like the universe in time with its eventual demise, I cough and discover I no longer have any lungs.

You are a monster of your own creation. A freak of nature hitching balloon skirts up to your knees and shedding skin onto spotless carpets. Stripping yourself of your organs will not free up space in your body. You will only wonder why you can no longer speak. They will never again pass flames into your shivering fingers and lay their lips against your neck. Do you not want this? Would anyone?

The mirror stands near the edge of the desolate driveway, bulbs searing a glow against its glass. Before it, my background stretches out like a demonic vision from a faraway land, beating every so often with the shiver of midnight-twisted branches. I slink forwards, scales bumping against gravel. Herbs and pesticides sliding inside my stomach. Scars along my arms from where brilliantly white birds tried to peck

away at my blisters. I grow, slowly but surely, until my head, then my body, then something akin to my legs shine in front of me.

The monsters in storybooks would never fight, in the end. They were either hung in the town square, left for rotting in forests where nobody could feel their pulse, or sink to their knees and beg for mercy. But I have the flames of billions before embedded into the nape of my neck. I do not beg, or hang limp, or gaze with open eyes in agony at a heaven I cannot reach. Perhaps that was always my greatest flaw.

I gaze at my reflection, smooth curves stark white in the light of the flickering lamp. Something close to tears - though I'm not crying, I promise, my hands are shaking out of joy - slides down my nose, my cheeks, my neck. So realistic. So human. But there are paint smears near the edges of my eyelids, and my fingers bleed into puddles on the glass. I smile, anyway. What a good imitation I must be, that even the mirror itself acknowledges my presence. Perhaps it will let me into its home, and allow me to curl up amidst something warm and soothing, like a mug of hot cocoa or the breath of a dragon barred away in a cage of its own creation. How often do creatures press their finger-like digits against bars and wonder why it feels so much like their own skin?

"Why are you staring at me like that?" the girl with the satin bow asked.

"Like what?"

"Like you're jealous or something."

The idea that admiration's only a thin veil for an ongoing culmination of greed stands only to divide and stigmatize. I can gaze at a precious artifact without wondering what I would be like if I'd created it. Yet at the end of the day, we're all cut from the same thread, baked half open and charred on the same kiln, left to rot in different forests but connected by the bandages around our wrists. Of course, I'd never say that, because my skin's plaster and walls cannot speak.

The glass shifts, catching against my fingertip. Crimson smoulders against the might-be pavement. Etching a fond farewell just beneath my bare feet. Burning, becoming ash. Blood rushes to my cheeks, dripping down my lips. Sliding down my thighs, painting my skin as if it's nothing but a canvas, no living being hiding under it like a maggot under tree bark. What would they say, if they saw me now? But then again, they never will. My insides crystallize before I'm even able to speak, though I'm unsure now if I can. My tongue peels at my gums and licks them clean, whittling away my sharp teeth. Someday soon I'll have enough energy to extract my mangled carcass from the glass. Someday soon, I will clean every crevice between my bones and scrub the blood from my shoulders and stand in such a way that my knees will never buckle again.



Harmonious Dichotomy

Angela Yue
Age 13

A Letter to Yeye

Connie Cao

Age 14

By the time I read my letter to you, you won't understand why or what I'm reading to you. However, the point of it is not for you to understand, but for me to see you smile one last time.

Dear Yeye (爷爷),

You told me, when holding my hand, the lesson of life: how there's a sunrise for every sunset. Now here I am, pencil in hand, to tell you the story of you and me.

It started at the bus stop when I was side by side with you. Droplets of water fell from the sky, showering us. You knew I hated getting my hair wet and my favorite boots soaked so you brought an umbrella. Cold breaths escaped our mouths and we shivered in the rain, but that didn't stop you from making friends. I remembered watching you striding around holding my hand, waving at passersby. How energetic you were! How you were so much more fun than all my teachers at school. Yeye (爷爷), you talked with everyone around you. I wish I could do that too. Teach me one day. I would like to learn.

You liked to sing, and I liked it too. I bet everyone did, but no one can sing quite as well as you. Yeye (爷爷) you have the most beautiful voice. The loudest voice, so powerful I don't understand how you can sing so loudly.

Then, in grade seven, when you sang Chinese songs, I couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed.

"It's Canada here, Yeye (爷爷), not China," I said, but you didn't care, and my Chinese was poor, so I don't think you understood. Instead, you sang louder.

I remember, too, how you sat beside me when I was doing my Kumon English reading homework. "Ah!" you said. "Dumb birds always fly first!"

I looked at you. You looked at my homework, a thoughtful expression on your face. Perhaps you were trying to figure out all the English words like I do with Chinese.

"What does that quote mean?" I asked.

You looked at me and smiled.

I loved that smile. I could tell it was real by how your eyes turned to slits and your teeth glittered as if they were smiling, too.

"It means those who aren't as smart as those

brilliant people have to learn ahead to catch up."

We caught each other's eye and I looked at you, confused and offended, and you laughed.

When I was in high school, we visited Montreal. You were so fascinated, even more intrigued than I was! I had been dreaming of this day, studying French since elementary school. As you walked by the unique buildings of *français* you would look at them with such admiration. You tried speaking French, and you learned a couple of words. You asked me what they meant and I didn't bother telling you. After you learned those words, you went around and yelled, "*Ça c'est mon fille!*" in poor French, but others smiled and waved at you. You walked around yelling, '*Ça c'est mon fille,*' and '*bonjour,*' and everyone laughed. This time, I was certainly not embarrassed. I was proud, very proud.

My most recent memory is lying beside your hospital bed, my head against your chest and the beeping heart static ringing through my ears. My most recent memory is filled with tears because you can't sing anymore, because your voice is hoarse, and your lungs are weak. My most recent memory is gripping your hand and watching you try to breathe. My most recent memory is that you have forgotten about the adventures you and I had.

Yeye (爷爷) when I am looking at you. I feel so alone, so down, but I am asking myself, 'What would my heroic Yeye (爷爷) do?' That's how I continue, even though I can't find the motivation to move on.

Please teach me one last lesson before you go.

Teach me the most important lesson that I will never be able to understand.

Teach me how to be you.

Love,

Connie

The sun crept from the hospital window, lighting Yeye's (爷爷) face. Tears rolled down his cheeks, his cheeks turned red, his hands shook and his lips were fighting to go upwards. I believe that Yeye was trying to give me one last smile and that deep down he understood everything I said.

Father Mikhail / Motherland

Ghazal Faridihafthkhani

Age 19

I remember father, But,
His cigar and I were more sincere with each other,
I loved my father, But,
When he wasn't in sight I tried to read him in braille,
It was never enough, I tried,
Speaking to him in fingers, Russian and French, But,
Mikhail Yahontov didn't exist in words or letters
I could roll in my mouth,
He praised in absence,
Appreciated with ruthlessness he'd spout,
A writer illiterate in love,
His paternity a full unreachable glass in a drought,
Died the way he lived,
Ruling with an iron fist,
With his fingers curled beneath the white shroud.
His writings and ideals pressed under the soil's weight,
Not only he died,
But a legacy also died that day,
His name turned to a word mom muttered
Like a curse,
I knew my father, But,
I knew more that I never wanted to be like him.

"In farewells, it is usually said, 'Sleep quietly, dear Comrade'. Mikhail wasn't one who sleeps but one who fights. May your dreams of a better future come to fruition. Your activism and generosity will never be forgotten. Fly high, Mikail. Fly high."

In the balcony where father would smoke sitting,
Sometimes standing,
A box with few sticks next to it,
Sat longingly for his return,
Next to it a mountain of heaping cigarette corpses
Left untouched,
Behind the curtain,
The door grew creaking and old,
The glass table a covered massacre,
Like the city streets of Saint Petersburg.

"Pack your bags Viktor. We have two more days before leaving."

– "But what about? –"

"Forget about it, forget about everything. If we don't flee, we'll both end up dead. Dead! You hear me?"

Our already small house confined to two suitcases,
Other than clothes,

I fit two things in my bag too:
Beckett's *Endgame*,
And a friend's gifted notebook,
Sketches and all,
I kept it thinking I would see him again after our temporary stay,
We'd meet again where we usually did,
By the street corner,
As dad would say,
Close to the 'corrupted cathedral',
I later learned it wasn't temporary when
The guards stopped greeting with "Privet (привет)".
Gone were the days of,
Trying to climb higher each day on the trees,
Honorary bleeding, raw and
Scraped knees.

"I'm sorry for your dad, Viktor."

– "It's fine."

"My babushka said you're leaving. Are you, really?"

– "I guess what mom says goes. I'm sure we'll be back though."

"Do you know where you're going, at least?"

I shrugged. There wasn't a world beyond the borders of our house for me.

– "No clue. I can send you letters from there though, maybe. Would you read them?"

"I will, promise."

I reviewed the forged passport like
I would for every exam,
But my throat swelled
With the bitter accent of homeland,
Starting from one to one thousand,
I counted every repetition by
The tips of my hand,
Until who I was, and
where I came from
Became blurred in speech and mind,
A mantra,
My God-forsaken mantra:
"Je m'appelle Marc. J'ai vu le jour le 24 décembre, donc j'ai onze ans. On va rendre visite à un
pote de mon père à Versailles."



Reminiscence

Sofia Lebovics
Age 16



Do You Want to Call Tomorrow?

Demi Yang

Age 15

Leaving one's home country means many things. For some, it marks the start of a new stage in their lives, a journey ended and another begun. For others, it means letting go of old connections and making new ones. It means having a never-ending yearning for what could have been and a constant anxiety for what will be. It means struggling to keep up familiar banter and clinging to elusive friendships.

For me, it means forgetting.

And being forgotten.

My grandma raised me. When my parents worked long shifts at their jobs, she was the one who cooked me dinner and lulled me to sleep. Just breathing in her scent – a mix of rich flower oil and fresh laundry – comforted me. Growing up, she was always in the background, quietly giving her all and never once demanding anything in return. When I cried over a scraped knee, she was there to hold me. When I ran home from school, starving, she was there to give me a peeled 茶鸡蛋. When I stood at the airport gates, she was there to say goodbye.

So I was sad when she called me by my cousin's name on our FaceTime call. Sad, and perhaps frustrated at both of us. Sad that she had mistaken my name. Sad that she, perhaps, didn't care enough to pay attention anymore. Frustrated that our relationship had spiraled down to this point: both of us spectators in the other's life, unable to intervene. I didn't want to let this go on any longer, so I sent her a message that read: Do you want to call tomorrow?

She agreed, and we sat down in front of our devices, face to face and 11844 kilometers away.

It was the year 1954. A five-year-old girl watched, eyes wide with fear, as her mother flung her newborn sister against the wall. She could sense the heavy shroud of rage and despair around her mother, could almost hear her ragged scream: *why is it another girl?* The cramped apartment was filthy, filled with crying and the acrid smell of sweat. She wanted to escape from there, that void with no love, no warmth.

After a few months, her newborn sister fell ill with jaundice. The doctor told them to feed her medicine, or else she would die. Her mother didn't care. "Let her die," she said, as if the child wasn't her own. It was her older sisters, twelve and ten at the time, who brought her back to life. They'd held her tentatively, feeding her the medicine drop by drop.

"And that was probably why she died at 68," my grandma said.

I didn't speak. I knew the loss of her sister still pained her, and I was unprepared to handle her emotions.

The little girl was in elementary school now. She asked her father for money in front of his store. An unfamiliar emotion flickered across his face, but she couldn't understand what it was. They went inside together, hand in hand...

And there was no warning before he slapped her across the face. Hard. She fell back against the floor, stars bursting in her vision. That was the first time she realized being slapped could hurt this much. Her world collapsed along with her limp body. She dared not move, nor speak, nor hope. She dared not do much except stay sprawled on the ground, her head hurting and her heart hurting more.

She understood her father's emotion then.

It was disdain.

"I used to say I grew up like a tree. When the tree grew, I grew, neither of us receiving any care nor warmth," my grandma said.

I could see tears twinkling in her eyes.

“My mother used to call me mute, because I never said anything when I was at home. What was the point? No one listened to me.”

“Oh,” I replied.

I didn’t know what else to say.

It was the year 1961, when the great famine started. The girl was a teenager now. Her older sisters had started working, her younger ones brought back to her father’s rural hometown, where there was still some food. She was the only child left in the city. She trekked ten kilometers every day with a rice sack to look for purslane during the height of summer. Sweat beaded on her forehead, seeping through the thin fabric of her shirt as she walked on. There were no emotions, no complaints – just one step after the next, with one goal in mind: survive. After hours of fruitless searching, she finally found a patch of purslane and started to pull it out of the ground. The sun glared down at her, scorching her back. Dirt caked under her nails as she dug out the vegetable with her bare hands. She heard shouting in the distance, but she didn’t stop her frantic movements. She didn’t stop until the farmer who owned the land stood in front of her, swearing and spitting. She didn’t stop until he tried to wrestle her rice bag from her, demanding that she return everything. Tears streamed down her face as she begged and begged, but nothing worked. She lost everything that day. Her bag and her vegetables. Her hope and her dignity. She cried so hard that her nose started bleeding. The metallic tang of blood mixed with her tears and sweat, trickling down, down, down, into an endless abyss of broken hearts and unfulfilled promises.

“That’s why I’m the shortest in my family. I barely had any food when I was a teenager. But I feel happy now. I have a good family, and I have a good life. But sometimes I worry about you guys, what with being overseas and everything,” my grandma said.

“We are doing fine! Don’t worry at all.”

My grandma smiled wistfully.

“I just want you to know – no matter where you are, who you become, I will always love you. Our bond won’t be broken even when there is thunder and lightning. No one can change that.”

She smiled, and I could see laugh lines around her eyes. I could see her wrinkled cheeks. I could see strands of white hair peeking out from under layers of hair dye.

“It’s late now, so you should probably go sleep. Call me again sometime!”

She waved and hung up, the laptop screen frozen on her content expression.

I closed my laptop, quietly pondering what I just heard. Our childhoods were so different. Mine was filled with laughter and vibrant colors, and hers was a picture of dread and gloom. I now knew that her past shaped her into an inexpressive person, constantly hiding her true feelings and opinions from others. But she still loves me. Despite my sporadic calls over the past four years. Despite our lessening familiarity. I realized I must reach out to reestablish our waning connection because she didn’t have the strength anymore – it started diminishing ever since she was five years old. With this realization, my frustration transformed into resolve. Into hope. I have the power to heal our relationship, and I will. So, I opened our chat page. I sent her a voice message – *Do you want to call tomorrow?*

Finding the Golden

Enid Kohler

Age 18

My clammy hands shake as I peel back the skin of an overripe banana. The brown spots daunt me like cancerous tumours as I feel the rubbery peel between my fingers. I throw the skin in the compost bin and shut the lid tight. I don't want to see the brown spots. Methodically, I pour ghost white sugar and flour into a mixing bowl, the cream marble of the countertop blinding me under the heat of the kitchen lights. I grab a wooden spoon, gingerly avoiding the sharp edges that threaten to penetrate my skin with a splinter. As I stir, my heart beats faster, remembering the last time I made this circular motion.

One year ago, my mother had tears in her blue eyes as she picked up my sister and I from our boxing class. Appropriately, it was dark and rainy, a siren wailing in the distance.

"Girls, I have to tell you something." She paused before saying, "Uncle Larry has cancer." Her voice was matter of fact but her eyes pleaded with us as she turned around in the driver's seat. "It'll be okay, I promise you."

My heart felt like it was going to lurch out of my chest, my fatigued limbs limp. Yet I masked my concern. "I'm so sorry," is the first thing I said. But "sorry" couldn't save him.

As we drove home in the dark, the silence lay thick and heavy in the back of our car. My boxing gloves were forgotten under my car seat as images of my uncle, sick and weak in a hospital bed, clouded my vision. I was helpless, out of control.

I like control. But when I learned about my uncle's illness, I felt like I had none. So, I did what I could to help: I baked banana bread. The dessert had been a favorite of my uncle's. He was a busy man, a criminal lawyer who lived across the city, but he always made time to visit. His tall frame would climb up my porch steps, and I would smile as his kind blue eyes crinkled at the sides upon seeing me. He would sit at my dining table, and I would cut a piece of banana bread, baked just enough that the edges were golden, blueberries poking through the moist dough.

Four weeks after his diagnosis, my uncle was deteriorating quickly. The cancer was spreading, and all I wanted to do was make him happy. And so, I grabbed a banana, my fingers blending into the brown infesting the yellow peel as I began to bake banana bread.

The loaf came out slightly under-baked, but I packaged it anyway, putting a handwritten Post-it note on top of the clear plastic wrap. My mom and I drove to my uncle's home, my knee shaking anxiously against the cold car seat. Upon approaching the tall door of his Victorian house, I inhaled sharply. I was nervous about seeing my uncle, who was normally so strong, at his weakest.

I pasted on a smile and entered the home, handing the banana bread to my paling aunt, who had abruptly become the primary caretaker for my uncle. The air was stale and quiet, nothing like the boisterous shouts of laughter that had filled the house only a few months ago. Moving through the hallway, I found my uncle on his leather sofa, a hockey game on television masking his quiet groan of pain as he pushed himself up to a seated position. He thanked me for the banana bread, and we chatted about my plans for university, as if he would be there to see it all.

That night, he texted me to say that my banana bread was the best he had ever had. Never mind that it was under-baked.

Over the next few weeks, I continued to bake banana bread for my uncle. I would meticulously add each ingredient to his favorite dessert, yet each time, the banana bread turned out just the slightest bit under-baked. No matter how hard I tried to mix in all of the correct ingredients, I could not control the end result. Even so, without fail, my uncle would eat my under-baked banana bread with a smile on his weathered, graying face, graciously accepting the raw dough like he accepted his cancer diagnosis.

The last text message I ever received from my uncle was about my banana bread, which affirmed his appreciation for this sliver of joy. In the midst of one of the darkest times of my life, my uncle taught me how to turn black bananas golden.

One week after he sent this message, malignant tumors overcame my uncle's body like brown spots on a banana peel. He died at the age of fifty-eight.

Nearly one year after his death, his loss weighed on me like a thundercloud, yet his face blurred in my mind. I was afraid of forgetting his humorous, loving spirit, and yearned to hear his voice. And so, on a cold evening in February, I searched for his last text message to me. I pressed on his contact information, but our previous conversations were nothing more than a white

screen. All of his words were gone.

When brown spots threaten to overtake the yellow of a banana peel, there is nothing you can do to stop it from growing black. But you can turn the black into something beautiful.

So, on this February night, when I have lost the only tangible memory of my uncle's words and

my bones ache with the pain of his loss, I walk down my wooden stairs to my kitchen. I take out an overripe banana, the sugar and the flour, and I begin to bake. As I find peace in the circular motion of my wooden spoon against the soft batter, I remember the power of finding the golden in black bananas.



A Rose for Auntie Elinor

Santina Brearley,
Age 19

Superhero

Jiya Warsi

Age 13

Running through the ashes of burnt memories, the ones I want to forget but they linger in my hard washed throat and force me to remember. The past in my eyes, and the fear trapped beneath my soul. My breath as palpable as the thick, brown air. The fresh ache in my heart when they told me she was gone.

I wear your dress to feel your sadness, to feel the way you used to feel. To remind myself how much you meant to me, how much you will always mean to me. So that one day I could carry your ghost in my arms and take away your pain, bury it beneath the ground.

If only you told me sooner, I could have been your superhero, just like when we were younger. The one you would never forget.

I wait for the day you come back, the day that I truly start to live. We will celebrate all the birthdays you missed and I could give you the four presents I meant to give you each year on the 25th. Now all that's left is your shadow, and the hollowness of your heart.

But, I still remember the way you called me your superhero, the one you would never forget.



there are people to love and dishes to do in the meantime

Samuel Huang

Age 16

These Human Hearts

Eden Wong

Age 14

How are our hearts so weak
So easily broken by simple words
Never fully fixing all the cracks

Why are our hearts so foolish
Led astray and blinded
By sugar-coated words and silly promises
Always starved for just another taste

When did my heart fall so quickly
A symphony of colour to this gray world
I drown in an ocean of you

What did my heart do to find the will to live
When I was ready to fall apart and die
Decided to keep on going

When my mind told me it was all pointless
Where did my heart find all this love to spare
When I could hardly love myself
Ready to comfort their every broken heart
As I neglect my own desire

Why must hearts be so savage
Our greatest weakness
Yet at the same time
So utterly kind
Our most beautiful blessing

How are human hearts so strong
It shatters over and over
Yet it still beats for us

Dawn to a North-Facing Bedroom

Maya Pax

Age 18

Slow motion smoke rises from tiny chimneys
like the spirits of sleeping people.
Start the day, start the day.

To the east, glass buildings become golden ice
the treasure of my morning.
Slow motion smoke rises from tiny chimneys.

All the houses are dusted with crystals
some sparkling, some soft in the shade.
Start the day, start the day.

The clouds are newborn kittens pink and grey.
Against the ombre blue sky;
slow motion smoke rises from tiny chimneys

My cat stretches, kissing slumber
He'll miss the morning view.
Start the day, start the day.

Few winter birds serenade my plight
I join them amongst the cold and ice
Slow motion smoke rises from tiny chimneys
Start the day, start the day.

They Say I Should Be Grateful I'm Not Trapped in a Concession Machine

Nikka Rabbani

Age 14

Twenty-eight hours ago, I was watching a television show with what I consider to be my family. From my spot all the way up on the green countertop in the kitchen, it was hard to understand what exactly was going on. Amongst the collection of poorly dressed people, dirty plastic seats, suitcases wrapped in cellophane, and an antiseptic scent I could almost smell from the TV, I think we were watching something of a subway station. What really grabbed my attention, though, were the flat chicken sandwiches trapped in concession machines in the corner. I recall thinking back then, *thank God that's not me*.

Now, I'm ironically sitting on a steel rack inside a porcelainized oven cavity, patiently waiting to be brought out. Just a few moments ago, I was being bombarded by radiation of frequency 2.4 GHz, and it was extremely cramped and hot and I don't know how I even managed to fit inside. Just a few moments before that, my skin was being aggressively rubbed and stretched to make way for a bundle of herbs, diced onion, and cold pieces of butter. *Flavour*, they called it.

That word only masked what was actually happening to me: they cut me open, let me bleed, and left me hollow. My legs were turning numb, and the tension in my face had relaxed; *what is happening to me?* I wanted to cry. I wanted to yell and ask them why a hole of nothingness was growing in my belly, but I felt so worn out. It's not like I couldn't feel anger, but I was slowly losing the feeling that I actually wanted to be angry. The hole of nothingness was enveloping me. I felt nothing. I was nothing, just a broiler chicken waiting to be filled up with the proper ingredients and aromatics. Apparently, there was a strict recipe to follow so that I would come out "just right", but I didn't understand why they weren't satisfied with who I really was. After being stuffed and slow-roasted for three hours, I hope they're at least satisfied now.

The woman on the other side of the oven's door glass turned off the heat. I take this moment to observe the four surfaces enclosing me: they are crazed, with a network of fine cracks that almost resemble a snowflake, but not quite. It's not cold enough for a snowflake. In fact, one could argue that I'm currently sunbathing. Bathed in a warm, orange light and the garlic-stained smell of my own flesh, I almost feel peaceful for the first time in my forty-seven days of life. The key word here is "almost", because I'm startled by a sudden, loud creaking noise. The oven door swings open, and a large pair of hands — protected by mittens, of course — are coming my way.

My body is pulled through a wide egress that transports me from a December in Bali to a December in Yellowknife. The contrast in temperature, as well as the daunting proximity of four pairs of eyes, sends a tingling sensation throughout my limbs. As I'm hastily placed on the countertop where I was watching television yesterday, I realize I'm not alone this time. All around me are ceramic dishes filled with cranberry apple salad, mashed potatoes, honey mustard brussels sprouts, and peach crumble. Yet, I remain the star of the feast, and everyone has expectations.

"We better start eating before it gets cold," I hear the dad say. His voice is drowned out by the insistent, continuous bubbling of white wine and chicken broth boiling down to make a sauce. The pot is brought over my head and slowly tilted to shower me in its heat. I enjoy the texture of the scraped up fond and the lingering taste of parmesan, but by the time I'm transferred over to another plate, decorated with a wreath of chervil, and carried to the dining table, I realize that it's too late. I'm gone. Not my physical body, but my soul. My taste and *flavour*, as they like to say it.

“Where’d it all go?” The older child inquires.

“There was none to begin with. Your father always buys the wrong brand.” *The wrong brand.* It’s a mistake. I’m a mistake. Out of *Bell & Evans*, *Farmer Focus*, *Mary’s Free Range Chicken*, and all the other brands of chicken stocked in the grocery store fridges, I guess that tends to happen. There’s still other people who will appreciate me, even if it might not be this family.

“That’s not true! The city’s food just isn’t any good anymore.”

So now I’m not a mistake, I’m just worthless. I was never supposed to mean anything to anyone in the first place, not even when I was warm and fresh. Too bad they already ruined me— stuffed me and roasted me and braised me and chopped me up into little pieces so that it’s impossible to save myself. There’s nothing I can do about it now. I just have to keep trying my best, and that might just be enough to be loved.

“It tastes so bad. I can’t eat anymore,” the words of the youngest one make my stomach turn like a washing machine, and my racing thoughts imitate its obnoxious rumbling when the water pressure is too high.

Try? Is that all you can do? Try? Why do you pity yourself and use excuses all the time? Just get better, already! Just be good. Don’t you see? I sacrificed my time to get you from the store. Don’t you see? I sacrificed my money to buy you. Don’t you see? I sacrificed my evening to prepare you for dinner instead of relaxing.

I just stare at them with an empty gaze, the same emptiness from when they stripped me of who I was and replaced that with who I wasn’t. This time, though, I’m devoid of any emotion. There’s no anger, no sadness, just the passing of time... say something! Don’t you understand me? I’m just stupid, I guess.

After hours of sitting on that same rough, cold wooden surface beneath me, I begin to feed on myself. They didn’t eat me, so I have no choice but to slowly nibble away at my own vacant brain and fat body. *You should be grateful you’re not trapped in a concession machine like everyone else. Stupid chicken!* The words aren’t clear to me... I’m gone.

Despair

Louise Luo

Age 15

like watching a plane take off
i can only observe from afar
the gloominess that has washed upon you
almost unexpectedly
like a calm tide
before the tsunami

watching you change
like a mother watching her sweet, lovely, child
turn into a juvenile delinquent
except i'm not your mother
not your caretaker
yet the feeling of obligation
ties me down
and chains of steel force my wrists
to yours

i question your sanity
beg you to seek guidance
still protected by your stubbornness
lies flow out your mouth
"i'm fine"

if i received five cents
everytime you've told me that
i would be on a yacht
instead of drowning in a sea of my own desperation

tick tock
every tedious second passes by
as i hide behind the shield
of everyone's expectations
only a matter of ticks
before it bursts

you watched me change
no longer the person you sought
no longer the class clown
or social butterfly
yet you still attach yourself
only for these iron shackles
to bring you down
with me

the showers of your concern
pierce me with guilt
i am not your burden
certainly not a task for you
so i resolutely reply
"im fine"
only to manifest the truth
behind these hollow words
but for now
i am drowning in a sea
of my own desperation



Broken Connection

Aliyah Khan

Age 19

Dreams in Geography

Rubin Beshi

Age 19

Steven woke up at 8 am. He was late again. He threw on a shirt, kissed his wife goodbye, and hurried out the front door with his bike.

He biked for fourteen minutes until he reached his elementary school. He was a student there. He was twenty-seven years old but was still unable to achieve a passing grade in grade four geography. This was a problem. It was holding him back big time. He was a successful playwright who had many of his plays performed on Broadway. However, he was tired of writing plays. He wanted to be a journalist. He wanted it so badly. To be employed by the *Toronto Star*, he believed, was what he was brought onto Earth to do. He needed a university degree for that to happen, though. And to get a university degree he needed to pass grade four geography.

He arrived at class just after the morning bell. His teacher, Miss Fish-Wobbler, marked him late on the attendance. Two more of those and he'd be put in detention.

"Good morning class," Miss Fish-Wobbler said to the class.

"Good morning, Miss Fish-Wobbler," the kids chanted back at her.

"Today we're going to go over longitude and latitude."

Steven groaned. He was really bad at longitude and latitude. He always got the two mixed up. Miss Fish-Wobbler saw him groan and paused.

"Steven. See me after class."

After a grueling forty-five minutes, the bell rang and the kids left. Only the two adults remained in the room. Miss Fish-Wobbler was turning fifty-one the next month. She decided now was the time.

"Steven, you're a gifted man. Your plays are simply fantastic. They're funny, philosophical, make you laugh, make you cry."

"Thank you, Miss Fish-Wobbler." Steven's reply was automatic.

"Now, I understand you want to be a journalist," she continued.

"Yes, Miss Fish-Wobbler. Very much so."

"And for that to happen, you need to pass this class. Listen; it's no secret you're a bad geography student. I've never seen a student fail a grade four class seventeen consecutive times. But I'm willing to help you out. Your next play, *Esmeralda's Magic Broom*, is debuting on Broadway in three months. Now you may not know this about me, but I'm an aspiring actress. I've tried for years to find a breakthrough but never have. I'm turning fifty-one next month and don't have much time left. Tell you what: if you pull some strings and land me the leading role in *Esmeralda's Magic Broom*, I will give you a pass in my class."

Steven's heart sank.

"Miss Fish-Wobbler, I'd love to, and ordinarily I'd say yes, but I promised my wife, Amy, the role. And she's my wife, you see. I can't just take the role away from her now. Is there anything, anything at all, that I could do for you instead?"

"Now listen here," Miss Fish-Wobbler growled. "I'm not looking to negotiate with you. I've read the script four times and know I'd be perfect for Esmeralda. You've been in this school a long time, and I promise you, if you don't give this to me, you'll be here a hell of a lot longer!"

"Please, Miss! I'll write an entire play just for you, and have you lead in that. But my wife Amy, she's over the moon for this role. And I don't want to break her heart, see."

Miss Fish-Wobbler leaned in close to Steven, so close that he could smell the tuna sandwich she had for breakfast on her breath. "No negotiations!"

Eleven Years Later

"And the Oscar for best actress in a leading role goes to, Jenna Fish-Wobbler!"

The crowd went wild. People were clapping and whistling as Jenna took to the stage. She grabbed the award with both her hands, and, breathless, stepped to the mic.

"Thank you so much! Wow! I can't believe this. I'd like to start by thanking ..."

As she recited the speech she had rehearsed in the mirror the day before, her mind wandered off. In the happiest moment of her life, all she could think about was a former geography student. After getting the part in *Esmeralda's Magic Broom*, her acting career took off. She was signed by an acting agency and moved to L.A. There, she slowly started landing bigger and bigger roles and her performances all received critical acclaim. She truly was the face of Hollywood. Sometimes, though, after getting into bed and before falling asleep, she'd think of Steven. She was sorry to hear he'd been divorced. Amy bitterly split with him immediately after he told her she wouldn't star in his play anymore. Steven, Jenna understood, had moved off to Europe for a few months after he finally passed geography. That was the last she'd heard of him.

"... and lastly I'd like to thank my beautiful sons, Max and Dominic, who inspire me every day." Jenna broke off from the mic. She stared at the bright lights, the cameras, and the expectant faces of all the people in the crowd. She thought of longitude and latitude. She thought of Steven.

"I'd like to finish off by saying, I started off as a geography teacher, and now I'm here. People end up where they're supposed to be. Thank you."

Meanwhile, in a quiet one-bedroom apartment, Steven set off to write a piece for the *Toronto Star*. He was writing an article about the Oscars, and of all the talented men and women who won awards that night.



Academic Weapon

Eden Wong
Age 14

Fault

Glynnis Hoo

Age 16

Have you ever wanted to disappear into the floor during an argument?

Maybe you started something, by pure accident, and now you're trying to avoid the stinging words and slightly veiled insults being thrown your way. And you're trying not to cry, wondering where it all went wrong and what you did to cause this.

But this is what sparks the argument. You want to compete during the weekend. Some people think that you should be allowed to. Others? Not so much.

Maybe you think you can handle your work. You are a model student, after all. You've always handed in your homework on time, and your grades aren't as low as they could be. You're kind to your friends, you have a healthy work-life balance, and you do practice sometimes. But some people don't think that you're capable enough.

So, think about it. Think about all the fear and guilt that's drowning you as you're being torn apart for believing that you can handle your own work after a competition. Think of the doubt that is spreading as you question your own abilities.

Some people are standing up for you for something that you want to do. They ask why you shouldn't be allowed to compete. They stand, silent, defending your choices. And yet you're the one crying as they argue, shoulders shaking as you try to calm the buzzing in your ears. Why are you the one getting emotional? This was your decision, after all. You made the call. It's on you.

Still, you don't hate others for thinking that you're taking on too much. They haven't quite said it out loud, but you know they've been wondering how to bring it up. You haven't had time to train - you certainly haven't been keeping up with them. You don't want to face it, but if you compete, it's unfair to everyone around you. Competing means undermining the ones that deserve to compete and the ones that you know do a far better job than you. Even though they might not care about their image, you do. You know that you would make them, as a whole, look worse than they are. They are strong, they work hard. You do not.

And you know it's unfair to your parents as well - they're the ones dealing with your teachers when you don't turn your camera on in class because you're so tired you can't think and you're failing tests you shouldn't be failing. They're the ones who have to deal with your mood swings and outbursts as you let yourself down after every tournament, then as you desperately struggle to keep your head above the sea

of unfinished assignments.

Why are you doing so poorly in school, anyways? Everyone tells you that you're smart, so why can't you be smart like they think just this once? Why should you be allowed to compete if you're not doing well? You can't even take care of your own grades, so how do you expect to do well at a tournament? You get that line of thought - it's logical, and you can't deny it. That's on you. It's your fault.

Everyone seems to want a part in this argument - your parents, your siblings, your friends - and now you're hiding behind your supporters like they're sacrificial altars, shielding you from the stinging words being spewed at you like gunfire. And you hate yourself for it. You hate that you can't stand up for yourself and that you have to rely on the support of another person.

So, you decide to prove everyone wrong. You decide you'll make everyone happy, so no one questions your choices. You'll do everything so that the people around you don't have to take the brunt of your own shortcomings. You'll make sure to stay out of the way and smile. You'll go to practice every day so you can catch up to the others, and you'll buckle down and study so you stay above the water.

You have school after the tournament - so what? You can do it. You've done it countless times before, and you can do it again. You can submit your homework minutes before the deadline. You can seem awake, energetic, as if you're not completely drained. Besides, you won't be that tired. You only have six hours of class on Mondays, and you won't go and practice afterwards anyways.

You can compete in a tournament, and you can come out of it unscathed. You'll be fine. You can stay a model student, and you can keep hanging on. You can keep playing the piano - you've done it for so long, what's another few hours every day? You can wake up, you can go to class, you can float through your day and ace your pop quizzes and finish all your assignments and speed through your finals and go to training and be kind and keep smiling and be calm and be a good friend and be unpaid therapy and listen to everyone's problems and -

Everyone thinks that you're doing okay, and all you want to do is cry. But you did this to yourself.

Why are you complaining about competing now? Why are you saying that it's too much? You're the one that wanted to do this.

This is all your fault.

Space

Arya Bari

Age 15

“Did you know that Apollo 11 was the first mission to land humans on the moon? Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong, and Michael Collins were the crew and the first astronauts on the moon,” Simon says by rote.

He isn’t really asking me. Rather, Simon is regurgitating a fact from a page that my mother reads to him every night from 101 Facts About Space Exploration, a book Simon received on his fifth birthday. But, if he was talking to me, I would probably point out that out of the three astronauts, only two really walked on the moon. Michael Collins actually stayed in the spacecraft in orbit, denying himself a public role in one of the greatest milestones in the history of space exploration.

As my brother emptily echoes this fact over and over, I feel trapped in the spacecraft simulator that we are currently in. In an attempt to drown out Simon’s voice, I toy with the controls on the spacecraft’s familiar white console.

I smooth my fingers over a row of switches, finding solace in the contrast between the definite clicks and the ambiguity of my life. In the astronaut’s chair next to me, Simon continues to repeat his single fact about space, while his hands aggressively fidget with the severed tag on his shirt. Amid the millions of minuscule things my mother does to maintain Simon’s composure, cutting this shirt tag is one she forgot. In this instance, I can see my brother feel the weight of her forgetfulness, the only way he can: physically.

I press some buttons that light up in different colours. Then, out of sheer boredom, I reach forward to turn a knob on the console. It snaps back the opposite way as if it wants to be left alone, much like Simon. But my thoughts are interrupted when I notice the operator awkwardly lingering against the curved entrance.

Deb, the woman who usually works here is absent, instead, a purple lipsticked, bubble-gum chewing high school student takes her place. The new girl glances at Simon. I wonder what she must be thinking, seeing my brother, who is just about her age, in a spacecraft simulation designed for twelve-year-old participants, incessantly repeating a single fact about space, and tugging on the tag of his t-shirt. Much to her credit, however, she merely offers a smile when she catches me staring. Then, she clicks the door shut.

The introductory music for the simulator begins, stunning Simon into silence. He reflexively stops fiddling, folding his arms in his lap to ensure that he doesn’t get overwhelmed by sensory stimulation.

The spacecraft goes dark for a fleeting moment, and on cue, constellations begin to light up on the curved ceiling of the spacecraft. I wonder if travelling in space is ever lonely. Do astronauts consider whether living among stars is worth the isolation? Simon would know, for he lives in his own world. Everyone around him remains in constant orbit.

The constellations make me think of the glow-in-the-dark stickers I received for my seventh birthday. As little sisters do, I blindly followed my brother as a child. Like Simon, I too fell in love with space.

My mother had the grand idea to glue the glow-in-the-dark stickers to my ceiling, so I could bring the universe to my room. Ecstatically, I helped her prop up the ladder, hoping, for a moment, that she could just be mine. But my mother eventually left me with the stars, to tend to Simon, leaving the job unfinished. And when I lay awake at night, staring at my half-phosphorescent ceiling, I think of all the things that I have lost.

As the constellations disappear, different screens on the control panel light up, and the voice recording begins to spout facts about an astronaut’s lifestyle. I can almost recite the recorded script; I’ve heard it so many times. But for Simon, being in this simulation is the only time he is truly at peace. His hands remain in his lap, his eyes wandering, as if he is soaking in the scene before him for the very first time.

Simon lives like an astronaut. Everyone around him is constantly trying to bring him back to Earth with their energy. Sometimes he shines so brightly that I become his shadow.

The simulation reaches the end of the explanatory stage. This is the point where Deb usually turns it off, to avoid Simon's distress, something she has learned over the years. In light of her absence, however, there is no one to stop the next, more interactive phase. I sit at the edge of my seat, anticipating the rush of the take-off, high on my own self-indulgence.

"Buckle your seatbelts," the recording commands, in preparation.

"Buckle your seatbelts," Simon echoes, as I cinch the thick orange straps around both of us.

"Lean backward."

Our seats begin to shake ever so slightly, and the voice gradually increases.

"And get ready for take-off!"

I can feel Simon beginning to stim, frantically using his hands to fan the side of his cheekbone.

"5."

"Buckle your seatbelts," Simon repeats. His voice is getting louder, matching the booming air of the speaker.

"4."

He violently tries to swing his shoulders within the constraints of his seatbelt in an attempt to calm himself down.

"3."

Simon hits his head against the wall of the spacecraft trying to get some relief. Again and again. The hollowness of his skull hitting the metal wall reverberates within me. I reach past him, undoing the latch, and pushing open the door, terminating the recording. The lights turn on, and I unfasten our seat belts. Simon stays rooted to his seat, violently swaying side to side, quelling his emotions with his own inner coping mechanisms.

This very Apollo 11 simulation has been incorporated into our weekly routine since it first opened. I have never been able to stay long enough for the take-off before. My life is eternally a game of Simon Says.

I yell for my mother and begin to coax him out of the spacecraft. All the people surrounding us have stopped to observe the spectacle.

"Buckle your seatbelts," Simon continues to echo, still fanning himself with one hand, as my mother begins to pull him away from the crowd.

"How was it?" the new girl asks in my brother's direction as if he is in any condition to answer.

Deb knew when to turn the simulator off to calm Simon down. The new girl probably blames herself for his meltdown. But how could she have known? I chose not to tell her.

"It was cool," I answer for him, drawing her attention away from Simon. And despite my sinking feeling of shame, I smile at her so wide it hurts.

People around us look in my brother's direction as if they have never seen someone with autism before. I give them the most disdainful look I can muster, defending my brother in the only way I can. But I feel like crying, because today, I was the perpetrator.

I follow Simon and my mother, holding back tears. Although lost in his own world, Simon probably didn't even notice that I was gone.

People wonder why Michael Collins stayed in the spacecraft.

I think it's because he knew that he could bring the other astronauts back to Earth, even by remaining in the shadows, orbiting. I would know.

The Art of a Fake Smile

Parker Youtzy

Age 13

Life gets exhausting. To the blissfully unaware, it is believed that the quiet ones are the saddest in life, when in truth, the greatest pain hides behind the biggest smiles. It's like a mask. A mask I've perfected.

"Good morning, [REDACTED]!"

Noise. It's all noise. Meaningless noise. Still, I fake a perfect smile. "Good morning to you, too!"

The world feels dull. Nothing evokes emotion anymore. I'm not quite sure why. Everything used to be so filled with life, so colourful and warm. I used to be able to find beauty in even the darkest of times. Find the rainbow amid a storm. What happened to me? *Oh, that's right. I was pushed too far.*

There will always be people so enveloped and wrapped up in their darkness that they feel the need to pulverize the light of others. All I wanted to do was save them. To bring them into the light. Yet they were too strong, and I was pulled into the darkness.

"Why's she so cheerful all the time? Is there something wrong with her?"

"[REDACTED]? She's so weird. She's the biggest attention seeker I've ever met."

They all thought I couldn't hear.

The descent wasn't immediate, but I had started to notice little changes about myself. I had started to crave approval from others to raise my self-esteem. I'd feel lonely or sad at random times and be unable to tell why. No one noticed.

If they had noticed, would anything have turned out differently? Would I have turned out differently?

If just one person had seen through the lies and looked past the fake smiles and the empty laughter, would they have tried to make a difference? Could they have made a difference?

They may have done it in another timeline. Is there truly a timeline where it was possible?

But to notice would be to know. To understand. If they were able to see through my facade, they must be hurting. In truth, they'd be just like me. Two-faced and alone. Still, it would've been nice to have someone to be lonely with. Understanding each other's pain but not being able to help the other overcome it. *That would've been nice.*

The moment I knew that I had hit rock bottom was when I became a people pleaser. I would go out of my way to make others happier just to make myself feel better. All because I was desperate for someone to notice something was wrong with me instead of asking for help. Now that I think about it, it's funny how stubborn and naive I was.

Yet, the people-pleasing paid off. No one bothered me anymore. No one had the guts to say anything rude to me behind my back. I wish that made me feel better. It should've made me feel better. But it didn't. Because I knew better, if I was just friends with them without having to give something, they'd lose interest in me.

Always asking for favours.

"[REDACTED], could I take your seat?"

"I'm sorry, [REDACTED], I didn't mean to break it. Thank you for [REDACTED] it to me."

"If you want something, just ask [REDACTED]. She'll always give it to you."

Why am I such a pushover?

It was a sad and endless cycle. If I stopped giving, they'd stop caring about me. If I kept giving, I'd know it was all fake. I didn't have any real friends. No one was there to have my back if everyone turned against me. My parents didn't understand.

I'd become numb to tears. I used to cry myself to sleep at night. I was so confused. Now I don't feel anything. Tears are meaningless. Pointless. They don't make anything better, they only make the pain more apparent.

I think I understand it all now. Now I understand why I feel this way. It's a sad defence mechanism. To keep myself from getting hurt, I started to be fake. I've fallen so deep that I can't go back to how it used to be. Part of me wants to change, but part of me knows that things will never change. Never go back to the way they used to be. Never be "normal" again.

So that is why I must wear a fake smile. To protect myself from the pain of losing my real one all over again.



Overwhelmed

Sarah Zeng

Age 15



Home

Olivia Wiskin

Age 12

Working Late

Emma Brijlall Nakahara

Age 17

Nightfall tugs down her eyelids.

The laptop keyboard is carved up and smoothed —

The spacebar gleams at the spot where her thumb rests

— And now it spills the letters back into her

Untangling sentences and reweaving them into something new.

Echoes of conversation buzz periodically in her ears,

Silhouettes of derivatives slip into the corner of her view, then dance away.

The desk sighs, releasing a haze of old emotion into

The air, thickening it and warming it.

The Forest of the Lost and Searching

Katharine Zeballos Rios

Age 14

"Hello?" The young girl called. Her voice echoed against the impossibly tall trees, "I'm lost. Won't anybody find me?" They obstructed the view of where she had come from. She could no longer remember where that was.

The maiden ventured deeper into the forest, taking in her surroundings. Neon blue mushrooms grew from where she lifted her bare feet, they brushed the hem of her white dress as she walked. On the trees, moss the same colour as the mushrooms grew, but it'd fall just as quickly as it appeared, seeping into the ground the second it made impact. The mushrooms grew bigger with each cycle.

A small, azure light fluttered in front of her, though unlike the specks of light that fell from the tree branches, this one seemed to have a mind of its own.

"Hello," she approached the small light. "Have you come to find me?"

She only caught a glimpse of what might've been a face before it hurried away, leaving a trail of dust in its wake. Its soft whispering allured her.

"Come."

"Where are you going?"

She followed after its small form, tripping over the mushrooms that now grew haphazardly around her. "Haven't you come to find me?"

"Come."

The light only picked up its pace. Hundreds of smaller lights gathered around it, all flying at the same pace. The chanting grew louder. The thick fog stung her eyes.

"Come."

"Come."

"Come."

The dripping moss grew into vines that nipped at her ankles. She paid no mind to her bleeding feet. The girl couldn't ignore the enticing calls of

the strange creature.

"Wait - "

She fell to the ground, causing all the lights except one to disappear at once along with the mushrooms, the dripping moss, and the colossal trees.

She was alone. With only a single light, the fog that hid it, and the overgrown vines that held her by her limbs.

"Why do you hide?" She asked the bright form, "Did you not come to find me?" She was completely disregarding the vines that imprisoned her.

The light came closer, the fog thinning with each second. Then appeared the face of a boy about her age, peeking out from the smoky veil. He was slightly taller than she would have been if she was standing.

"Have you come for me?" she asked the boy.

He only looked at her sadly, the expression odd on his serene features. The boy lowered himself onto his knees, reaching to cup her face with his hands. He rubbed his thumb over her lips, but the touch didn't feel wrong or foreign, it felt like it belonged there.

"Audelette," he whispered, his voice sounding as if it hadn't been used for an eternity.

"You found me."

When her eyes fluttered open, she woke up in a field of sunflowers. She surveyed her surroundings, but she couldn't see past the glistening morning dew that fell in her eyes. The girl didn't know where she was, but she knew that she was in the right place, and she thought that she just might stay there.

Until I lose myself again, my fair prince."

Jump on Flight 18, Now.

Shirley Zhu

Age 16

*Air Canada is now taking off to Vancouver, Canada.
Gate 06 is now ready to receive passengers.
So, take your precious time to pack.*

Make a neat, clean list of everything that needs to be brought
To the single greatest vacation of your life!
Fold your clothes with precision and prestige.
Bag your hygiene products with dedication and dignity.
Explore the wonders of your trip with your heart and soul
For you have been dying for this.
Ever since you learned the value of money,
And the thousands of opportunities right at your nose,
You realized that there is a whole world out there waiting
For you to join it.
But not to worry, there is no rush!

*Gate 23 to London, United Kingdom is now boarding passengers.
Airplane 97 is now taking off to Melbourne, Australia.
There's still buckets of time.*

Meet with parents and relatives, and learn everything
From what your great-great grandpa achieved at the age of seventeen
With his own restaurant chain,
To what your third cousin from your dad's side is doing
As someone with an outstanding career in medicine.
Everyone is burningly ready to go off and seek
Their new beginning and destined ending
Through the different types of flights available
That lead to Impressive! Glorious! Outstanding! Grand! Extraordinary lives!
Now embrace your own life before the flight
For you have chosen your own destination after spending infinite nights
Deciding your future under the light of a small lamp
In your bedroom at 2:17am on a school day.

*Crew to Berlin, Germany is now boarding.
Passengers, please get ready to board as well.
Oh, and where has the time gone!*

It's a good thing you packed way ahead of time,
So, there's really nothing to worry about now.
Everything is planned out just the way you need it to be.
Just sit back and relax and enjoy the airport lounge,
And let time pass with
Every second releasing the tension from your body
And every ounce of stress vanishing from your mind.
It is almost your turn to live The Life!

*Gate 74 is now open to passengers leaving for Boston, United States.
Flight to Brasília, Brazil is taking off.
We wish you a safe flight; you have worked hard.
The passengers riding Flight 39 may start to board the airplane to Montreal, Canada.
Flight 18 gates are now open for passengers to begin boarding
Oh, but wait, where is your ticket?*

Your only proof of being a passenger on this flight.
Your only proof of years of hard countless efforts to get on this flight.
Where can it possibly be!
This whole trip will go to waste without this ticket.
All your work, packing, planning, and everything else in between.

*Dear passengers of this airport, please be ready to board your plane.
Our gates and flights will not reopen to latecomers,
So please hold on to your belongings, watch the time, and have a snack*

*Before you jump on!
This is a disaster!*

Everyone is already inside the plane
And here you are outside the gate scrambling to find
The smallest detail yet the most crucial part.
This tiny thing is going to ruin your whole life

*The gates are starting to close for Flight 18.
If this is your flight and you are not on, then what are you waiting for?*

The time is now.

Why does this have to be happening to you?

Were you doomed from the start?

Are you destined to fall behind?

Where are you going to go while everyone else looks back at you

From their amazing Life that you failed to join.

And what is your family going to think

Of their child who missed the flight of their life?

*Flight 18 is taking off in 1 second
I feel so overwhelmed.*



Flowers In Paradise

Bree Piquero

Age 12

made of love

Kadriye Daulet

Age 14

i love love
i love innocent crushes,
with only the purest of intentions

i want love
i want to love and to be loved
i want to receive gifts without nametags,
but in my heart, i'll know who they're from


i believe in love
i believe love can heal and restore,
and grant every story a happily ever after

i see love
i see the flustered expressions when hands are brushed
i see the acts of service and touches of love
will they be directed at me someday?

until then,
i'll look for love,
write about love,
dream about the day i can fill my heart to the brim
and have room for nothing else,
other than love

but for now,
from the bottom of my heart,
i hope love will surround you, protect you, and guide you
hopeless romantic or not, you deserve it



The world is full
of love & kindness.
But,
Who  shall me?

Who Shall Love Me?

Mhanaz Halim
Age 16



Father

Preesha Kalluparampil Prasad
Age 15

Blind

Kiana Sharifi

Age 19

His eyes loom over me. I feel them flit across the profile of my face. My eyes do not meet his.

“Are you listening to me?” he asks me.

He is asking me. He is talking to me. Where am I?

“Am I making sense to you?” I hear his voice again. It weaves into my ears and I almost smile. I love his voice. But I can’t see him.

He is sitting next to me. I still cannot see him. Where am I?

“I’m worried about you. I’m worried about us. I love you, but this is hurting me.”

I recoil. It is hurting him. I am hurting him. It feels as though every hair on my skin rises and every nerve in my body prickles. Everything is rotting and withering inside of me, but not a shred of it crawls outside my skin, outside the tight little cave where I have been housing my pain. This depression is my own and this weight is my own and I have no intention of sharing certain things that are mine.

I don’t want it to be mine anymore. But where can I put it down?

I want a mirror in this moment. Not to look at myself, but to know what he sees when he looks at me. Is it disdain? Disappointment? Anger? He isn’t looking at me anymore – something else has caught his gaze – but he was looking at me before. He sees me. I am afraid of that.

There are so many words that could’ve tumbled out of my mouth in that moment. So many actions I could’ve taken. I know I am in love with him. I search and rake throughout my body to muster up a sign to let him know that I’m still here, that I won’t shatter if he touches me.

But I am empty.

“I’m sorry.”

That is all I can manage. He places his hand on my thigh, and I feel the warmth of his hand radiate past the fabric of my clothes. He is here. I am here. I cling onto this point of contact, as I brace myself to meet his eyes.

I am looking at him now, but I still cannot see him. Where am I?

Schrödinger's Blank Slate

Saheel Siyam

Age 17

A blank slate

An empty canvas

A crisp white sheet of paper

A set of unrendered pixels in an unnamed slide in an unnamed project

What will you be later, for all your ephemeral austere sterility now

Are you a clock, melting like rubber in the hot sun - screaming violently as the very concept of time decays violently like an Iodine-131 nucleus in someone's cancerous thyroid gland - the atom selflessly exploding alongside its legions to save another.

Are you a wraith, a husk, a formless being with nothing distinguishable but that eternally gaping maw and two wide orbs of light or darkness, whatever they may be, leaving all to ponder your hideous fate as you suffer unimaginable torment under the sunset on that rotting wooden bridge?

Are you a muse, smiling cryptically, for your painter, for the past few days, and the only reason your lips don't curve up as much as they should is because you're slowly wasting away, while your dearest, caught up in some demonic frenzy of artistic passion, paints and paints the object of his desire, as if your dying energy fuels the accursed painting itself.

What are you, O empty, devoid one?

Are you the age-old tale of a prince darkened in mind and soul as he slowly loses everyone he loves and thus his grip on sanity until his world turns into a bloodbath as crimson as his fine coat or the bloodstains of his departed father at the hands of his kin.

Are you the epic of an otherwise insignificant piece of metal, one of many, which has made kingdoms rise and fall, and made men lust after the power you bring, such that the only good thing to do with that abominable cold steel ornament is to destroy it.

Are you the memoir of a girl from a nation once proud, one of many who are now nothing but outsiders in their own land, forced to adhere to the alien customs and ways and even thoughts of the invaders, or suffer harsh punishment as your sacred identity rips apart alongside your brothers and sisters and your friends.

Where are you, O pure one, so cold and deathly pale one.

Are you an absurdist portrait of a cartoonish simian, one of many in an ever-vast legion of bizarre digital representations, avatars of the repressed ordinary, all unique but united in a briefly exorbitant price that crashed like a waterfall as people realized the futility of it all.

Are you an insidious edit of reality, blissfully unaware of the havoc you caused when you came into existence and propagated, you who depicted an influential and controversial former leader's sudden and violent usurpation, much to the outrage of some and delight of others, and the irritation of all upon realizing it was an elaborately staged facade.

Are you a strange jumbled mix of technology business magnate, YouTuber and diminutive cartoon villain, all culminating in a single letter of the English alphabet and an entire series of piano compositions deep fried in musical batter, dedicated to the single most common letter of the alphabEt.

Why are you, O unknown one, you who tease and invite us all to tell a new story through you.

Whatever you may be is unknown. Deliciously so, tormentingly so, feel the strange indecision that all artists feel as they agonize over breaking the cold purity of their medium, much like the first dirty footprints upon a fresh white snowfall, the breaking of razor thin ice, or someone breaking off the first slice of a piping hot pizza.

"What are you," sighs Schrödinger mournfully, as he reaches for the box that does not exist.

The first stroke of pencil on paper.

Paintbrush on canvas

Stylus on tablet

And a new story slowly grows from the once pure nothing, which slowly becomes a something, along with its brothers and sisters the everything and anything.



BOAR BARING TEETH

NO FOOL

Age 18

Fermi Paradox/The Great Filter

Stella Philpott

Age 16

Aliens are real and I am going to die of cancer.

I want you to think of a sieve. A large sieve. Now think of a sieve so large it engulfs a planet. Think of infinite planet-sized sieves until you're hungry for pasta, and then think of ten more. Imagine stepping outside your door and turning, expectant, to the sky and watching as a sieve the size of a planet converges on Earth: Doomsday, Last Judgment, Eschaton, 2012, y2k, Shambhala—*Armageddon*, you might whisper if you're Christian. But if you're me, you might think: *aliens are real and I am going to die of cancer*.

Above, the dramatized *Great Filter theory* explains a theoretical solution to the Fermi Paradox, which describes the paradoxical discrepancy between the probability and evidence for extraterrestrial life. The *Great Filter* proposes that there is a determined threshold for the progress of any life in the universe; perhaps no one can make it past reaching a population of 10 billion, or conquering another planet, or draining the energy of their own. Think, again, of a sieve and those irritating pieces that go through it—these deformed bits of pasta are your surviving civilizations. So, aliens are real, probably.

The leading cause of death in my family is cancer. In the breast, nodes, skin, and heart, we are alike in more than DNA, we are alike in death, which is helpful when I feel disconnected from the gametes that made me. Hereditary history can be concentrated to its most simple elements: life, death, and why. The answer is cancer.

So, I am going to die of cancer, probably.

Therefore, when you are me and watching the great sieve overwhelm the planet and you think *aliens are real and I am going to die of cancer*, what you are really thinking is: In the perpetual strive for connection, it is time to stop looking down, sideways, and under. It is time to look up; the stars offer explanation in connecting me to you to everything. Under the assumption the Great Filter theory holds truth, then knowledge of our death becomes tangible. There is an end and we will reach it. Are you connecting the dots? Disbelief suspended in space, I know how I am going to die. This is micro: myself, with the known hereditary cause of my death, and macro: the earth and far-away galaxies, with a filter looming above their atmospheres. So, if any aliens are out there reading this, before you consider conquering our planet, I want you to know that we are more alike than you think.

A Blue Body

Ashley Dong

Age 16

I hope when we dive into the blue body,
euphoria numbs the limits we hear
and eases the countenance that sets the fears
that keeps us grounded in the face of reality.

The sun warms our clothing,
as we drift endlessly through gentle waters
and repose on a blue cloak,
serene.

When we gaze at a pensive judgement,
we are lonely by our company
when we expose our fringes and bizarre truths
to the rays of the flaring sun.
As the blue body rages in our hearts,
they remind us of the hefty tides and sanguine hails
that drown us beneath the cloak
with no way to go.

We find our arms and legs caught by the dark kelp,
strangling and drowning us as we tussle,
to meet the waste and debris at bottom.

What an awful sight, isn't it?
Wasn't it beautiful on the surface?

Oh yes, the lowest is where the true harshness resides,
so intoxicating yet wild,
that surely, a traveler unequipped
for the oppressive sun and rippling billows
would lose a battle of air and sea,
but the one who is free,
does not relent in the wake of striking waves,
but paddles alongside the merciless tides.

At the end of days I find myself near the blue body,
untethering the ropes that held my hands
and simply release them askew to the tides,
to engage just a little
in nature's remediating lagoon.
I admire the vastness of the blue body,
a body rested so idly among the pearls of midday sun,
urging to grasp a little to what you dream.

Is there a limit to how far that is?
Surely not,
as the sun warms you when you gaze,
your muscles relax and so do your worries,
because the waves are there to embrace you,
the algae to catch you when you stumble,
the stars to smile when you tame the currents,
labeling each action
as beautiful.

When you transcend beyond the sapphire depths,
and plant blankets of coral in the murkiest of days,
oh, their gaze of such tender,
will utter an azure infinity,
as they leave you alone to the calmness of this harsh world,
and let your dreams intertwine with the swiftness of the waves.

Once Upon a Tragedy

Khairunissa Bharadia

Age 19

Dear Reader,

I'm afraid to tell you that you've been deceived. The world is a far more tragic place than you could ever know. Under your very feet lie layers of death, pain, and the plaguing misery of many before you.

Damsels never do get rescued by charming princes. A person only goes from rags to riches through thievery and traitorous scheming. I hate to confuse you, reader, but there is no such thing as a true love's kiss. In the most darling people live the most devastating secrets. Despair and greed are encased in throats of desire. Sinister roots in the very seed of mankind. I could shrivel you with the many tragic lies you've been brainwashed with since birth, but this tale isn't about me or you. It's about her.

She was a child, kept for ransom by a witch.
Years locked away in her tower, she awaited her prince.
But when she lost her luscious golden hair,
Her beloved abandoned her, leaving her to the desert vultures.

She was a girl with black hair, whose skin was snow white.
Her fool of a stepmother sent her to death.
Craving flesh, she plotted her much desired revenge.
For her blood red lips were those of a vampire.

She was a wanderer, in love with the creatures of the forest.
She trusted the tree spirits, her only friends.
Had they told her her grandmother was a werewolf,
Her hood never would have soaked red with blood.

She was a black woman in a white society.
She was abused by her stepsisters and forgotten by her father.
And when the prince fell in love with her,
She was imprisoned, accused of witchery.

She was a siren, singing to the men above sea.
Obsessed with one deaf man who couldn't hear her beauty,
She grew legs and followed him.
And drowned as she watched him fall for a princess.

She was a dreamer, cursed with death and beauty.
She was tormented by the arranged future her parents planned.
When she fell, the princes greedily claimed their kisses.
But forever she stayed youthful in her sleep.

She is nothing like us, and yet, she is everything. Her story passes from one soul to another, whispering its lullaby into hearts that learn to rot, unable to find a home. Never content, always grieving. I'm afraid she will keep searching, agonising even the strongest of men.

Her story, never able to escape the mouths of many tortured, is now told in the softest form of heartbreak. Seared into my flesh, fusing reality with my nightmares, the ghosts of happiness, love, and laughter mock me. I no longer know the innocence she once had. I wish, reader, that you could avoid such anguish, but I must warn you: there is no such thing as the ever told happily ever after.



Unconventional

Isabel Fundora McFarlane

Age 16

Red Ink

Ashton Wilkinson

Age 15

I was never one for painting
I liked to draw
I always drew in red pen
The lines covering the page made me feel safe

I drew in pen because it doesn't erase
The lines on the page remain forever
It might fade away a bit over time but it will always be there

People stare at my book
They stare at the pages covered in red lines
They don't understand why I do it
I can't explain why
It's a comfort that some people recognize
The red lines on the page drawn in red ink

Medusa / Μέδουσα

Zoe Savic-Jovicic

Age 15

Act I

she pours libations,
tasting incense in the air
then hums along to hymns,
lovely and unaware

of Poseidon's lustful leer
as the god attempts his seduction,
paying no heed to whispered vows of chastity
he plows ahead— men don't like rejection

the sea takes & takes & takes;
violates.
Medusa pleads to her goddess—
to no avail

once the sea foam has washed away
she retrieves what remains of her peplos,
tries, ravaged, to piece herself back together
but the pain only envelops, does not yield

the scent of worship lingers,
yet cannot soothe Athena's wrath
at her temple, her priestess, defiled;
the hissing of snakes drowns out Medusa's cries.

intermission

monstrous

/ˈmɒnstɹəs/ noun

- *having the ugly or frightening appearance of a monster*
- *(of a person or an action) inhumanly or outrageously evil or wrong*

Act II

Medusa's sanctuary is once more restored,
gorgós — terrifying

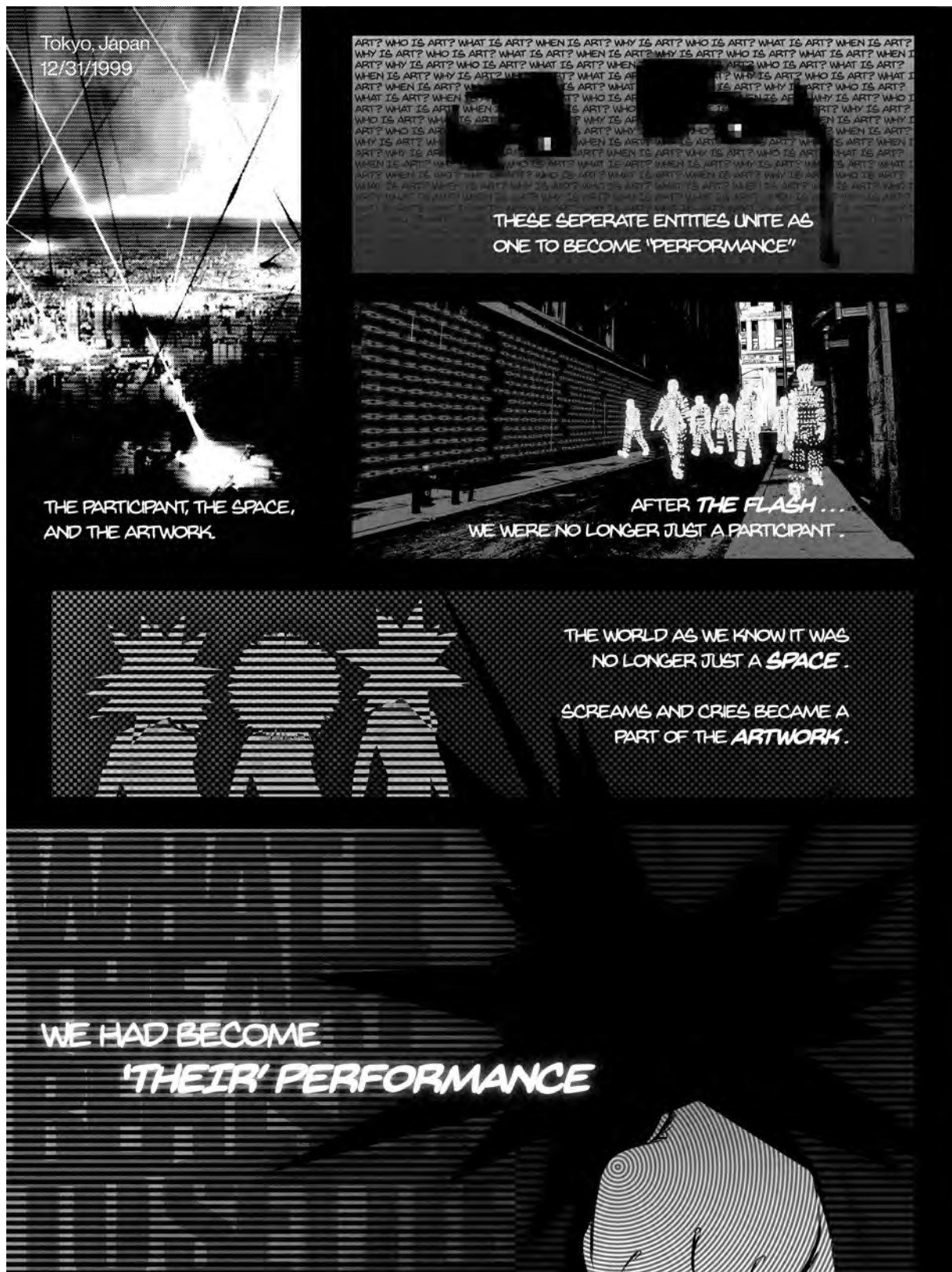
like the columns of petrified flesh
that decorate her living room.

grotesque, her beauty remains;
smears her lips with gore and
daubs blood onto desiccated cheeks

serpentine solitude coils 'round her neck,
writhes in time with her heartbeat
as if it knows that even
in death, she becomes a weapon
used & reused by men at war with each other

abuser and abused,
all it takes is a glance to bring
warriors to their knees
she laughs, mirthless and alone.

her gaze turns me to stone,
roots me to the ground
and in those final seconds
the pain still burns,
crimson in her irises.



A Day In The Life of the Participant

Jorge Cruz Toro

Age 16

Frankenstein's Modern Monster

Roukia Ali

Age 19

You are born Frankenstein's Monster — in defiance of death, life is brought into the world — eight-foot-tall in spirit, though infinitesimal on a universal scale. Beautiful like Adonis, resourceful like Adam, but shunned hideously and disqualified from the lives of human beings if not looking and acting in conformity at every instant and with every rule change. You awaken Frankenstein's Monster — you have no sense of anything besides the first burning sensation that there are golden minutes to grasp, over and over, in a chain before you — and with every blink, you are tugging it toward you, the beautiful and the terrible, and everything that exists in between that you don't know yet. In this succession of moments, death hides somewhere in between, like the semi-visible outline of something on a windowsill behind thick curtains — it lingers in view, and it disappears again because the curtains, for a moment, are pretty enough, average enough, and detestable enough. This voluntary ignorance of the hereafter is not easily discarded. Fear never is.

A piercing pain goes through your chin when you first attempt to walk and trip over your feet — it gets softer, toddling down grocery aisles or on carpets, and sometimes people will stop and clap and cheer you on, and then pick you up and smother you in kisses when you succeed. You like succeeding a lot — you fill up your parents' fridge with clumsy childhood drawings. You get praised for your elementary school pictures because you're always beaming, the light slants just right, and you're not insecure about anything. They keep the pictures, so there is someday something to comparatively point at when you inevitably grow wrong and rotten. It happens to everyone. You can hope it's not perpetual, and that matters. Attributing meaning to things and trading coping mechanisms with tragic smiles is how we all manage to live.

You laugh as people expect you to when you start getting to the age where there are subcategories to language — crude jokes, hidden messages behind plaintive eyes, gossip, bad news, intimate whispers. You don't want to try anymore — your parents used to be your heroes, and now they fight you or each other, and you are witness to every time words lash out like blades aiming for the heart — across dinner tables, stabbing ears pressed to walls and listening for the conversations that bleed through like water blooming down a paper towel, papers being waved authoritatively in hands (are they report cards, bills, or pages ripped from your diary?), in stares that have too much cowardice, patience, or love to have everything ruined with a slip of the tongue — you are never killed.

You make up the killing stories for yourself, and you exact them on other people — mental suicide, accidents, protection. You get into the habit of thinking too hard, even in moments where happiness clouds your judgement so severely that you can't make up the reprimands. You find God where you don't imagine He exists: on the banks of beaches, crashing waves relieving the terrible silence in your ears. The coin of fire that illuminates between the ends of two cigarettes touching in a kiss, your eyes falling in love slowly with the eyes of the one gently blowing smoke into your cheeks across from you. Your mother's laughter. Your father's punishment. The end of the world, a cataclysmic sun-exploding Armageddon of nightmares, is given the same existential attention as the private, quieter receding of it in you: people that leave with pieces of your heart that you allow to break into smaller and smaller pieces to accommodate all future abandoning,

all privilege of hurting you, and you must call them strangers, or the deceased. The books you never get to read, the songs you can't recall, and the answers you'll never hear. There is, between both endings, the certainty of everything leaving. In both, you stand alone again, like on the day of your birth. Always alone, head spinning from incredulous laughter, pitifully in the middle of it all.

You are Frankenstein's Monster — you ought to have been loved, so you try to find love in everything as you go from your teens to your twenties to your thirties. You stitch up your scars and suture — you go on all the physical and spiritual trips you want. You learn how to take care of yourself. You seek comfort in arms that tighten around you like cradles or nooses; mouths with bleeding, snapping teeth, or romantic words; things that aren't good for you and things people on the internet say are good for you; hobbies you keep behind closed doors, as you are always misunderstood or embarrassed of your talents; passions you scream into the wind. You want to succeed again. You want the patchwork of your disposition — the electricity in your veins that skates over repressed wounds and gaping holes waiting to be filled — to all mean something. You want the pain of living to be worthwhile. Maybe worthwhile because it is beautiful and nothing more. Finally, nothing complicated to bear.

Somewhere in between, your hair silvers, your face deepens in lines, and your brain dulls. There is the expectation that, even if prepared, you die suddenly — it doesn't matter if you're ready, if you had more love to give, or if you were just getting started living. The gold minutes dim like crushed fireflies or fade like the last embers of a fire. There's no line to tug; there's nowhere to go forward except into darkness. You remember hearing somewhere that things still exist in voids. You remember too that in that random science class you surely thought you would forget — and yet it is these seemingly insignificant moments that drift up into the eye of your demise as life drains away — that black absorbs warmth. That spacious nothing — the warm embrace you chased all your life — in that sensationless paradox.

You are Frankenstein's Monster — you are fearless in your hope for a paradise you believed lost to you in your ugliness, and therefore powerful. Powerful enough to be born again as a human.



The Fall of the Childhood God

Sophie Li-Fikree
Age 17

The Closing Water

Emma Gong

Age 14

At first it was only me and a boat
A red dot floating casually in the empty lake
No borders, no enclosures, nothing else
Only the joining of skies and smooth surface
Dissolving into one peaceful canvas of tranquil blue

I steer the boat's cycle
Tipping its body softly
As it glides in a spiral
How amusing it is
To watch the trailing ripples dance after my trail
To navigate through the world by my wish!

One day, as I drift in my liberty
The boat bumped on something hovering about the surface
Unusual, I thought
Never have I come across an object during all the times of sailing
So I bent down and scooped it up
Round ears, soft paws,
An endearing teddy bear gazes back at me in my arms

From that day on, more objects start to appear
A 300-piece puzzle box, a tyrannosaurus model, a Yankee's cap
I like to slow my boat and investigate them
All the objects carry a presence of nonchalance that I delight in
They embellish the surroundings
Until the veil of blue speck with a sea of color

I can't remember anymore
When those colors withered and died
Substituted by the monochrome of tasks and papers
When the place of the lovable toys was stolen by unfiled documents?
All I can focus on is rowing the boat with all my force
So I won't be drowned by the endless excruciating labor

Artist Statements

Cover

Embrace the Battle, Anthony Su

Throughout my life, I have encountered many skin conditions. I always have to fight my insecurities, but in recent years I have learned to embrace them and allow them to define my identity. I wanted to create an artwork that expressed the emotion I felt when taking on this journey.

Inside cover

A Thousand Lanterns, Yichen Wang

This piece focuses on the idea that there are a thousand lanterns, and there will always be one that belongs to you. The thousand lanterns signify the families and groups of people that are willing to accept. There are many of them, and you will always find a place where you belong.

3

My Head, Yue Ge Qu

My work is inspired from my frustration of being unable to fully translate my ideas onto the page. Visualizing my head as my favorite fruit—a pomegranate—I tried to depict the raw feeling of wanting to peel my head open to show those ideas. I thought about the question: What if I could open my head and show you my thoughts?

6

Rented Space, Mendel Josh Neo Naigal

Inspired by how landlords cover everything with a coat of white paint after tenants leave. It's a metaphor for a toxic way of grieving: getting over something by avoiding it. It will just create layers of resentment and it will be harder to get through the sadness and pain.

11

Try again, Wajiha Ilham

In my piece, the woman's expression represents how I feel looking at my own art; a part of me tries to seem impressed, a part of me looks for ways to hate it, and a part of me wants to scrap it all and try again.

14

Purple Pain, Milena Gareau

This work was inspired by what is occasionally my inner monologue. When I regret the choices I've made and feel alone, I feel the weight of my pain like a chokehold turning me purple.

18

Microscopic, Qori Aparicio

"Microscopic" is a reflection on my cultural identity. Last year, while visiting family in Peru, I picked a prickly pear without thinking, which buried spikes in my hand that stung for hours. I see a link between that prickly pear and struggling to reach one's culture from so far away.

23

Ghosting, Mirab Adnan

My comic was actually inspired by my favourite song, ghosting by tomorrowxtogether. I wanted to convey the fear of coming out to someone and them ghosting you for being the way that you are.

26

Through the Cracks, Demi Yang

This was inspired by the harder moments in my life when all was dark. This is me finally seeing light at the end of the tunnel, getting out of that dark place, and seeing the results of my hard work.

32

I need a quarter, Jesse Miletin

I have been making art since I could pick up a pencil. Recently, I have found myself drawn to creating works that convey the emotions associated with obsolescence. I often worry that my childhood may soon be considered obsolete. This piece is about an abandoned telephone booth and how we used to communicate together.

37

It's Just Hair, Harman Banga

The idea behind my art piece was my frustration as a child that I couldn't let my hair loose like the other girls. I used to think that, "It's just hair," but I now realize that some people saw my long, black hair as a stereotype. Even though I can now keep my hair open at school, I wanted to make this piece to remember how weak I felt that I couldn't make decisions about my own hair.

- 41 **See, Alice Yang**
When I was really young, I walked on a busy street, and I saw a snail trampled underfoot, and some dead insect bodies as well. At that moment I really wished that the string of the kite in my hand could fix them. In my eyes only they are colourful because they have become the miracles of eternity, and humans are just walking without a soul.
- 42 **My Celestial Grace, Nevaeh Mijares**
The blackout art that deeply inspired me was influenced by my mother, who holds immense significance in my life.
- 45 **Our Little Reality, Kelly Zhu**
Three islands represent the girl's life with memories embedded inside from childhood to young adult to adulthood. Life's hard on every person in the world, and they live in their fantasy. Everyone grows with setbacks – like crying where we find comfort in things that aren't human (birds). That's okay.
- 48 **Harmonious Dichotomy, Angela Yue**
The painting illustrates “slices” of people, each with a different ethnicity and personality, which highlights the diversity and complexity of our communities. One side of the portrait has dark makeup and wilting roses, which symbolize the spirit to fight against injustice. The other side portrays a welcoming attitude, with half-closed eyes, flowers and lighter makeup, illustrating the community's liveliness and openness to newcomers. As a member of City Memory Mosaic, I've interviewed many residents and social activists in West Queen West and found how much the women there make an impact on their society. Each person in the painting represents a different story.
- 52 **Reminiscence, Sofia Lebovics**
My series 'Reminiscence' bridges old photos with the corresponding year imprinted on pennies' surfaces. Pennies are both timely and timeless - holding both endless memorial worth, and no physical worth at the same time. Through Reminiscence, I can look back on my and my family's memories, reliving my past experiences and imprinting myself on experiences that imprinted themselves on me.
- 57 **A Rose for Auntie Elinor, Santina Brearley**
This was a piece that I had been working on for a long time. I was introduced to the art of latch hooking by my Auntie Elinor. She passed away earlier this year. I decided to finish this piece in memory of her.
- 58 **there are people to love and dishes to do in the meantime, Samuel Huang**
This is a piece I made which talks about the joy you can find in a mundane activity. The activity I chose to highlight was washing the dishes. This piece talks about the simple things that can bring pleasure to life, even if it's a chore.
- 63 **Broken Connection, Aliyah Khan**
In a society where neurodivergents struggle to fit in, I feel like the connection between my mind and body is dysfunctional. While my mind wishes to think freely and be creative, my body feels resentment towards my mind and wishes to simply complete the tasks that are expected of me.
- 66 **Academic Weapon, Eden Wong**
Chained by the expectations of all who know what I can do (myself, always), I must never disappoint. I must always push myself more — always continue to sharpen my blade. If I can't give 150% of my all — if my blade becomes dull, then what is my worth?
- 71 **Overwhelmed, Sarah Zeng**
This art piece showcases a young teen girl staring into the distance as a tear trickles down her face. Her sorrow reflects the hardships that many teenagers go through and the looming uncertainty of the future. However, this piece also reflects the importance of mental health awareness during these developmental years.
- 75 **Flowers in Paradise, Bree Piquero**
My painting attempts to show how beautiful and alluring nature can be. It's important to ensure that our future generations can see all the wonderful things the outside world offers.

- 77 **Who Shall Love Me?, Mhanaz Halim**
The girl is essentially hugging an imaginary person. This piece was inspired by how depression, anxiety, and suicide are increasingly rising in Canada, specifically in teens. Teens, specifically those who identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community, aren't being accepted by society and most of the time not even by family members. The girl, who is bisexual, is purple because purple represents bisexual people in the bisexual pride flag. In front is a suicide letter that the girl has written because of her feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and sadness.
- 78 **Father, Preesha Kalluparampil Prasad**
This depicts a relationship between a father and daughter. The daughter takes care of the father and sees the sad creature within the beast that he presents himself as. It's not meant to glamorize this dynamic but to give attention to a situation that happens far too often.
- 81 **BOAR BARING TEETH, NO FOOL**
Mechanical and organic elements come together to make an unsettling composition.
- 85 **Unconventional, Isabel Fundora McFarlane**
My inspiration came from the aspects of the lowbrow art movement in which many pieces poke fun at convention.
- 87 **A Day in the Life of the Participant, Jorge Cruz Toro**
My piece reflects on the three aspects of performance art: the participant, the space, and the artwork. The main premise is that "The Metalheads" (the characters with spiky heads) are transforming the world into their own performance, and we are subject to become participants whether we want to or not.
- 90 **The Fall of the Childhood God, Sophie Li-Fikree**
This painting depicts the loss of childhood ideals as we grow up. Set in a surrealist dreamscape, the painting depicts a battered knight making a desperate last stand against an incoming army of mannequins, representing the final remnants of childlike wonder in a cruel world.
- Inside cover **Land Back Moose, Polaris**
Perpetually active and engaged, personal growth, creating, and community are at the center of Polaris. Embracing their Red River Métis and Sami heritage, they express themselves through art. Polaris believes our past, present, and future are intertwined, using art to build a better future. Visit guidedbypolaris.ca for more.
- Back cover **Creciendo, Isabella Perri**
Creciendo means growing in Spanish, and my art explores the concept of growth in life through the visual metaphor of plants sprouting from my first pair of shoes. Shoes represent the idea of grounding myself. The symbolic imagery represents the idea of life, beginnings, reflecting the cycle of growth and redefining ourselves in different life stages.

young voices

get published!

Deadline for the 2025 magazine is March 24, 2025

Young Voices Magazine publishes writing and art created and selected by Toronto teens. We'd love to see what you've been creating! We accept submissions year-round and the deadline for the next issue is March 24, 2025.

Who can submit?

Teens ages 12-19 who live, work or go to school in Toronto.

What can you submit?

Up to two pieces each year: one piece of writing and one visual art piece.

How do you submit?

Use our online form or attach this form to your work and drop it off at any Toronto Public Library.

Need Inspiration?

Read past issues of Young Voices online! You can also get a copy of the most recent issue from your local library branch.

*Before you submit, please review the submission guidelines at tpl.ca/youngvoices

Please fill out this form and attach it to your submission. Please use a separate form for each piece you submit.

Full Name _____

Home Address _____

Postal Code _____

Email _____

Phone Number _____

Age _____ Today's date _____

Name of library branch where you submitted

Title of your submission

Young Voices publishes work by teens who live, work or go to school in Toronto. [check all that apply]

☐ I live in Toronto

☐ I work in Toronto

☐ I go to school in Toronto

Type of Submission [check one]

☐ Poem

☐ Review

☐ Comic

☐ Fiction

☐ Photograph

☐ Other _____

☐ Opinion

☐ Drawing/Painting

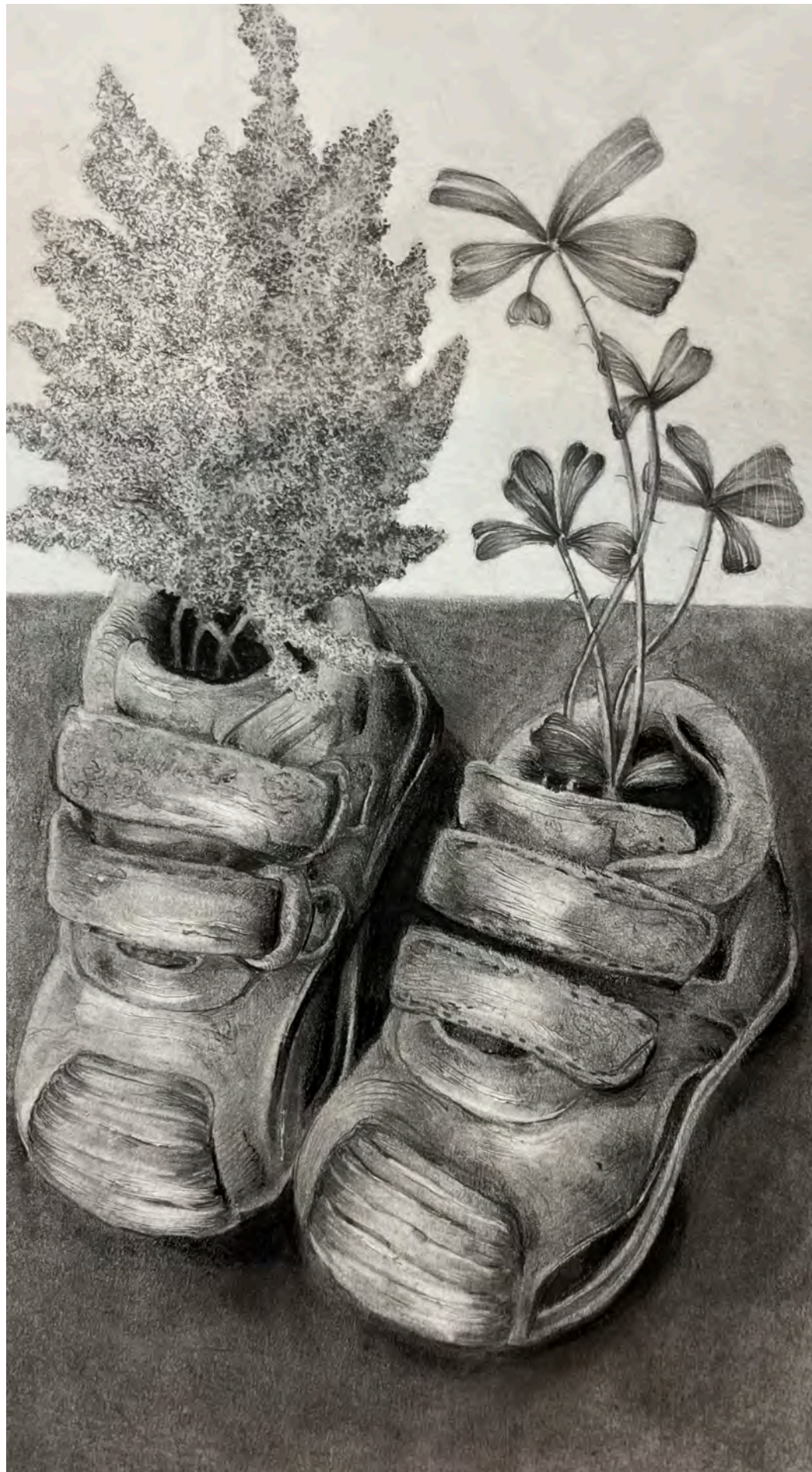
Optional: Attach a page to tell us about the inspiration or the idea behind your work. (max 50 words).





Land Back Moose

Polaris
Age 19



Creciendo

Isabella Perri,
Age 15