

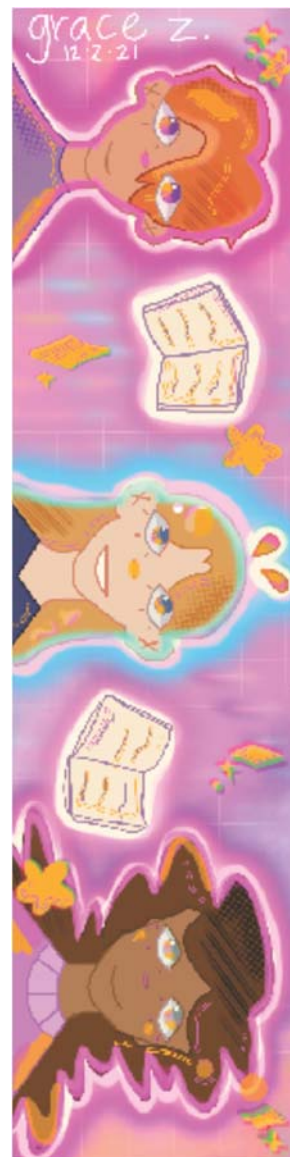
On The Write Track



Mayme Killeen



Lily Velez



Grace Zesinger

The 31st Annual
Literary and Art
Magazine of
Thomas W. Pyle Middle

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Contest Winners

Mosaic Writing Contest (sponsored by MCPS and FOLMC)

Rosha Rizi, Honorable Mention, “A Background Sketch,” page 30

Alexandra Weinstein, Honorable Mention, “My Bat Mitzvah,” page 36

Caroline McCann, Honorable Mention, “My Culture,” page 37

Pyle Poetry Contest Winners (sponsored by the Writing/Newspaper Club)

Sophie Levine, “Guardians,” page 48

Annabel Taylor, “A State of Mind,” page 57

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Pyle Graphic Novel Contest Winners (sponsored by the Writing/Newspaper Club)

Reila Flowers, “Burnout,” page 84

Naz Kutlukaya, “Detective Bugar,” page 87

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Pyle Short Story Contest Winners (sponsored by the Writing/Newspaper Club)

Ilona Agur, “Take Shelter, Mariupol,” page 62

Annabel Taylor, “The Luck of a Raven,” page 80

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Pyle Bookmark Contest Winners (sponsored by the Media Center)

Lily Velez , winner, front cover

Mayme Killeen , runner up, front cover

Grace Zesinger , honorable mention, front cover

Kiran Schott , honorable mention, back cover

Melissa Solomon , runner up, back cover

On the Write Track 2021-22

The 31st Volume

On the Write Track contains original writing and artwork created entirely by sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students at Thomas W. Pyle Middle School.

Students were invited to contribute their own writing and art throughout the year, and the writing and art selected for publication were based on quality, appropriateness, and inclusion.

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"The Bird That is Unwilling to Fly"

by Ilona Agur

My hands float over my keyboard, pondering how to put this.

I mean my life.

It just is. Not much more to say.

I'm a passionate person, I think. I like to write.

But when I look around me, around at the people who are typing like their life depends on it, I'm not so sure.

Who am I?

Why am I like this?

I don't know.

I just read over what I wrote, and I'm thinking, *Duh!* Life doesn't really work like this. Things are just born that way, meant to be that way, flying over this world that way. You write what you write and you don't get upset.

But I am upset.

I'm in this world, yes, but sure of myself? No. I'm writing, typing, wondering who I am and why I can't fly like all the others. And I write it like I know philosophy. I wish I did.

But I don't.

Poems, trains of thoughts coasting through my head like they should be there, but they shouldn't. There's a girl here who reads Shakespeare sonnets and memorizes them for fun. It's like her fingers were meant to fly over that keyboard, her words meant to break through in a way that no other does.

But I can't.

I don't, I won't, I shouldn't, I can't. Repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat. This is my life.

I write this like I am a trapped person.

But I am not.

Is this a poem? An epic? A life story? Or is it a representation of what I feel, what I'm proud of, what I think?

Because right now, at this moment, I feel like a bird, trapped, but unwilling to fly. If a bird is unwilling to fly, is it truly trapped? Or is it trapped by its soul and not its surroundings?

What am I saying, I think. So many questions, too many questions. A fluffy feather detached from a wing, floating in my mind, tickling my consciousness, landing somewhere, sinking deep in there. Somewhere.

Where?

I'm not going to read back on this. I'm not going to think back on this. Surroundings stay the same.

It is the bird that is unwilling to fly.

“Art”

by Reila Flowers

What is art?

Art is music

Art is words

Art is whatever you want in the
world.

Art could be you, art could be me;

Art could be love.

Art could be free.

Art is painting,

Art is crayon,

Art is whatever is made by your
hand.

Art could be here, art could be
there;

Art could be near

Or not anywhere.

“Be Yourself”

by Avi Juneja

It is kind of hard to be yourself

When you are around other people

That you think are a lot better to fit in

But it is more important to be yourself than being some-
one else

Be yourself

Being yourself is a lot more important

Be yourself

Be yourself no matter what

Everyone thinks that it is better to fit in

then to be themselves

"The Artist"

by Luke Fu

As he was putting the finishing touches on his latest and most prized art piece, He couldn't help but exhale a sigh of pleasure. "This piece of art will go all over the internet!" He thought. He closed his eyes and he went on autopilot. This artist was an underrated perfectionist. This piece of art was a true beauty and took him over 120 hours total to make. An extra ten minutes of revising was nothing.

The artist dipped his brush in the white paint and carefully manipulated his brush over the art piece. His eyes were still closed as he thought about what might happen within a day of the release. For the first hour, he reasoned, not many people would see. Within 12 hours, famous artists would start noticing. After another hour, they'll start reposting his art, and within 24, it'll be an internet sensation.

Suddenly, something flashed. He quickly opened his eyes and looked in dread as his smock, pallet, and clothing were smeared in white paint. What's worse, is that his almost completed painting was also completely destroyed. He couldn't move as a year worth of his current income flashed before his eyes. His misery was immeasurable.

"Wonderful," he thought miserably, "Just what I needed."

"The Boy in The Closet"

by Maggie Blond

The first day I heard Fritz, he only spoke nonsense. I was only two years of age when he started babbling all these random things. He kept stumbling on his words, and it scared me at first. I screamed and cried when I heard him for a week. But after that, he finally noticed my crying, and for the first time, he actually said hello. Suddenly, we started talking to each other, and my mother would tell me years later that she saw and heard me talking to the boy on the baby monitor, but she never heard him. I named the boy Fritz, and we soon became best friends. He would never show himself, and he always stayed in my closet. My parents said whenever they would come into my room at night, it would always be cold and windy. He would always be reading whenever I started to talk to him. However, when I was about four, my family decided that our house was not big enough, as my baby brother and sister, who were twins, had just been born a year before we moved. The last night I slept in my room, Fritz did not speak a word. I never saw him again when we moved, however my parents told me he lived in our attic, which you had to go to my room to get access to. I never heard a ghost again, and I always told people it was a paranormal experience from when I was small.

"Call on me! Please!"

by Sophie Levine

My hand
Shooting up into the air
My idea
Brilliant
My voice
Ready to be heard
Ready to
Speak
Ready to
Wow
Everyone with my
Genius
My teacher's eyes
Scanning the classroom
Calling out names
Asking people for their
Answers
All of them saying
Basically
The same thing
My idea
So drastically
New
Fresh
Brilliant
My teacher's eyes
Scanning the classroom
"Anyone else?"
Her eyes seemingly
Oblivious
To my
Plea
To my words
To my need to be heard
"No one?"
"Ok, let's move on."

"The Bright"

by Caroline McCann

They choose only the most compassionate,
Of which I am one.
To carry the quiet village,
That smells of stone walls and rum.

For on the day I was given life
My heart became a light,
They call me one of the bright,
One of the reasons we're here tonight.

They choose only the most resilient,
Of which I am one.
To keep the village lit and working,
For we are unworthy of the sun.

To stride across the farmers' fields,
To let the musicians, repair their guitars,
To help the black smith in her shop.
To keep company to the stars.

The farmer asked me to his field tonight,
For he could not harvest alone,
The soil turned many times over,
Felt cool on my bare toes.
For hours we sat in the field,
I told him stories while we worked.
About a time when fire gave one light,
At that he tiredly smirked.

And when our hands were raw and our eyes were heavy,
I bade the farmer goodbye.
But as I went he asked something strange,
He asked if I thought it right,
That I alone must be stretched so far,
Being one of the bright.
I looked at him a while,
Then eyes closed, whispered to the sky

"I vowed lead my people,
I ensure my people live,
But it's true sometimes I wonder if they take
More than I can give."

They choose only the most obedient.

“The Hidden Truth”

by Emma Liu

As I close my eyes, I remember why I'm fighting my comrades in this war. The memories turn into daydreams. It becomes a typhoon. It sucks you in, wanting to relive those memories. However, there are two types of pain, one that hurts you, and the other changes you.

Nevertheless, it's all over. I know my place in this war, and they have made it clear to me that they would rather hurt me and stay with Karin rather than be friends with me and be associated with Kira. It hurt at first, but now I know that everyone has two faces in this world, and nobody can be trusted.

1668/6/26 - Japan

As I slowly drifted off to sleep, my brain began to wonder about my past misfortunes.

When I was little I fell off the slide. My brother runs to me asking me what happened. I explained everything to him, from start to end.

“There are two types of pain,” he began in the wise tones I am familiar with, “one that hurts you, and the other changes you. This will only hurt for a bit.”

All I could think about was the pain. It didn't hurt too much anymore after a bit. All I could do was ask myself, how could the pain come so quickly and leave so slowly? As we walked to our makeshift house.

My eyes snapped open to be greeted with the darkness of my room. I felt an unknown weight on my chest as I gasped desperately for air. I threw many punches and kicks at the strange being. A loud thump smashed on the floor beside my bed, and the weight above me finally released.

I yell, “Who, are you? Where do you come from?” still gasping for air.

The mysterious person didn't say anything, so I leaped over and ripped off their mask. He is knocked out cold. I can't see his face too clearly in the darkness of my room, so I drag the body down the hall, suddenly his body moves and kicks me. I see his face in better lighting.

“Brother?” I say.

“Who is this brother? I know no person by that name,” he says seriously.

“Haru, it's me, your sister, Akamaru,” I explained.

“Huh? What,” Haru said, confused.

“What-? Really? I thought you had died! They told me that!” Haru exclaimed

“How would I have died?” I say, confused.

“They said they poisoned you or sent an assassin,” Haru said.

“Well, anyway, why did they send you to kill me when I'm already dead,” I said mockingly.

“I—I—I don't know,” Haru sighed.

“Are you honestly really that blind? How could you forget me that easily, or just accept the fact I was dead,” I screamed in anger.

“Was I that easily forgotten? Was I just nothing to you? How could you accept the fact I was dead, and not hold out hope I was still alive!” I continued to yell.

Haru just stood there, taking what I said in. He couldn't believe it, he thought his sister was dead, but he was sent to kill her instead. He just stood there in disbelief.

“I—I—I'm sorry,” Haru said quietly, stuttering.

I had stopped yelling by then.

“Anything else?” I said angrily.

“I'm—I'm—” Haru sputtered.

I smacked him in the back.

“Stand up straight and say it like you mean it.”

“I'M SORRY!” Haru yelled. He went down on his knees pleading that I would forgive him.

“I—I can't choose right now. I have a lot of thinking to do,” I said quietly. “I'll show you to your room for the rest of the night, a guard will be watching you, by the way, I can't trust that you won't do that again,” I continued.

He got up from his knees and nodded, I called a guard in and said just watch him for the night. I showed him to his room, he thanked me and changed, and went to sleep. I couldn't sleep, I had a lot to think about. I was torn on the inside, whether I should forgive him or not. He was just as I remember him, tall, muscular, blond brown hair with blond tips, and ocean eyes. As I fell asleep again, I dreamed about when I was a kid.

“Hi! Yuri!” I yelled as I ran over to my best friend.

“Hey, Aki!” Yuri yelled back.

Aki was my nickname, we went to the same elementary school, we were best friends, and inseparable. She gave me new clothes, shoes, and food but little did I know that she was thinking of something horrible that day. After school, she asked me if I wanted some new shirts, saying that I had no parents or my brother at the time. I was desperate for new clothes. So I agreed. After school, I followed her to the girls' bathroom. She had locked the door without me noticing. As I watched my younger self get beaten up, tortured, and talked poorly of me. I couldn't do anything to save my younger self. All I could do was just watch, and relieve that pain again, and feel helpless that I could only watch. After that day, it happened daily, and I had to act like I was fine, and when someone asked I had to make an excuse. On the inside, I was dying. It was like that for a few years. Until she moved, I was so happy. By then, I was emotionally

broken. I had gone through four years of being bullied, put down, and tortured. At that point, I couldn't trust anyone. I woke up at 8 on the dot. There was work to be done for the war in two days. I was going to win the war for myself and my parents. I walk over to Haru's room. I see him gone with the guard. With a note, *eating breakfast at the table*. I walk over to see him with sushi and onigiri. I used to love those, my mother would make those before she was murdered. I sat down as he slid me a small plate of sushi and onigiri.

"Who made this?" I asked.

"Your chefs did, well I mean I kinda did," he explained.

"Well, what do you mean?" I said.

"I gave your chef the recipe and they made it," he continued.

"Okay, thanks. I need to use the bathroom," I said.

I excused myself and instead of going to the bathroom, I went to the kitchen. I asked the head chef.

"Did a man help you make sushi and onigiri?"

"Yeah, why? Did it taste bad?" she asked.

"No, I just wanted to ask to make sure he didn't like putting anything into it that would poison me, also, he's my brother."

"Ah, ok, he didn't put anything in it. I made sure of that because I don't want to be beheaded," she chuckled.

"Okay," I laughed as I left.

I go over to the dining room to see Haru still there waiting for me.

"You still look the same," he said with a heartwarming smile.

Black hair, dark brown eyes, beautiful, slim, but strong.

I ate sushi and the onigiri, which were quite good. I said my goodbyes and told the guard to stay with him at all times, never to leave him alone. My brother still insisted that he didn't want to be a bother. I ignored him and left to go to the training hall. There I trained for a couple of hours. I took a break to wipe the sweat from my face, in the mirror, as I looked at my reflection I knew my only purpose left was to win the war for the Kira. My only purpose. It was the only thing I could think of when training. I felt so much anger, they were the reason my parents died. How can they just leave it like that! I was fighting with anger instead of being smart and patient. I knew I needed a break, so I went to the armory. It was almost time. I looked at my armor, clean, pristine, red and black, the color of the Kira. More determined than ever as I go back to train. As I was walking over I saw my brother...without the guard. I start dashing to him,

"Get back here!" I yelled.

I eventually caught up to him and pinned him down. I drag him back for questioning. Turns out, it was just a realist mask. And it was a person with a similar voice to Haru. I questioned him for hours, and he wouldn't tell me anything. I decided it was time to break him like how Yuri broke me. It was the next day by then. I decided to burn his skin and whip him till he broke.

"Agh, please stop!" the man pleaded.

I couldn't stop. His pain, it gave me... *joy*? I thought to myself.

When I realized it, it was too late. "Your brother killed..." were his last words. The man was dead, I was furious, not by the death, but how he couldn't endure more.

I'm becoming Yuri, I thought.

I had the man buried with peace, I couldn't forgive myself that I did that to the man. No man deserves a death like that. By then, it was the evening, I couldn't think about that now. The war was tomorrow. I took a hot bath, I had to think and question. After an hour or 2, from the bath, and went to sleep

The War

1668/6/29 - Japan

I woke up at the brink of dawn, it had begun. I saw guards, soldiers rush out the doors, the archers, with their bows ready to shoot. It was amazing, I knew the war had begun. I grabbed my armor, put it on, it was beautiful, dark red scales, with red silk. I snapped myself out of my awe. War had started, I had no time to waste. I could finally get my revenge on Yuri, I knew she was going to fight in this war, it's required on Karin. I figured she was the head since her father was the overlord, which let her get away with the torture she gave me. She had moved castles. I rush out, this is a war of a lifetime my friends, I say to my soldiers. *All is fair in love and war*. As we charge, all the memories flood back. I felt the blood inside me begin to boil. As I rush forward, I start killing the Karin soldiers with ease. I made a straight line. Soon enough I reached Yuri. I saw her, and she saw me, we locked gazes. Her face looked shocked. She still looked the same, blonde hair, green eyes, and just slightly taller than me. I start to approach her and we start to walk around in circles as we start circling each other preparing to fight,

"Ah, I see, it's been years since we last saw each other, you going to beat me again?" I say mockingly.

"N-no," Yuri sighs.

"Tell me! Why all those years of pain and you just disappear," I yell.

"There are some things you don't know," Yuri says.

"Like what? Like how you're a coward?" I say.

"It's your parents...and your brother," Yuri sighs.

"H—Huh?" I stutter, confused.

"It's, uhh, your parents, your brother," Yuri sighs.

"Your brother killed your parents, he was hired by a friend of your friend, he was paid a lot, here is the docu-

ment with all the information,” as Yuri took a sheet of paper out of her jacket and handed it to Akamaru.

Akamaru read it, and reread it over and over again, she couldn’t believe what she was seeing, suddenly a soldier stabs Yuri. Akamaru runs over to the injured Yuri,

“I—I—I’m sorry,” Yuri says as the light in her eyes dims.

Akamaru couldn’t believe her eyes, the person she hated most was hiding something so large that would have crushed her if she knew back then. And that’s how she toughened her up for the day they would meet again. Because she knew she was going to die, but rather keep her best friend alive longer and have herself killed, she agreed in a heartbeat. Akamaru screamed in heartbreak.

The sun rises, she looks off into the distance, knowing her new purpose is to avenge Yuri. As she runs off into the distance she could only think, pain, one hurts you, but the other changes you. She knew what both meant now. As she ran off, in search of her brother to have the final duel, a duel of a lifetime, the duel of the century.

“Dream”

by David Gong

I felt my head create a picture
when I lied in my bed
It showed a time when I was in school
when it was almost dismissal.

My teacher passed out the report cards,
The teacher gave the card to me.
I looked at it, and I jumped in terror.
I felt my heart pound,
and my breathing grows faster.
I look at others’ cards,
and they all got straight A’s.
I feel myself shrink in embarrassment,
and I would think: “My parents would kill me.”
Then the picture vanished,
and my eyes showed myself staring up at the ceiling,
while lying in my bed.

“Murder on the Ship”

by Avi Juneja

Allen wrenches the door open and yells in a shaky voice, “Wake up, Dominic, you gotta see this!” Dominic wakes up by the slam of the door, then he looks around and finally sees a dark figure in front of the door blocking the hallway's warm glowing light.

“Allen, is that you there by the door,” Dominic questions.

Allen replies, “Yeah, get out of bed!”

“It is 4:30 in the morning,” Dominic looked at his bedside clock.

“Sorry, I know,” Allen apologizes, “hurry up! I will explain everything to you on the way there.”

Dominic immediately jumps out of bed and puts on some jeans and tosses a black hoodie. Seconds later, both of them are running down the hallway.

“Okay Allen, tell me what was so important that you had to wake me up at 4:30 in the morning,” Dominic asks, annoyed.

Allen looks at Dominic and Sharpley answers, “There is a dead person in front of cabin 230.”

“Do you know who it is?” Dominic asks with wide-open eyes, “I think it's Edward Smith the Third, the wealthiest person on the boat.”

Allen responded immediately! Both of them were now sprinting to the crime scene.

Once they got there, four other people were surrounding the dead body. The group included the captain of the ship Martin, one crew member Chris, the wife of Edward Smith, and her daughter Jackie. When they came closer the wife was crying her heart out, while the son was talking to the captain demanding an explanation of what had happened. Captain Martin and Chris both looked confused and tried to tell her that they didn't know what had happened. As soon as the captain saw the boys approaching, he turned his attention to them. The Captain told the crew member to go back to his cabin.

The captain said, “I see that Allen got you here. Dominic, sorry for bothering you this early in the morning but we need your help. Allen said that you were the best detective we have.”

“Why are you asking two sixteen-year-old boys with absolutely no experience to solve my father's death? They can't do anything.” barked Jackie at Captain Martin.

“We are fifteen years old and we have 5 years of experience in solving murder mysteries,” Dominic corrects.

“Captain Martin, no worries, I am will help you solve this murder,” Dominic asks as he kneels to examine the dead body.

Dominic lifts the corpse's arm, “He is stone-cold dead and he has been dead for about 2 hours, so this happened around 2:30 today,” he stands up.

Then Allen kneels and lifts the arm higher up, He looks up toward Dominic, “It's a murder for sure.” “How do you know?”

Jackie says. “There is a puddle of blood under his back and there is a bullet scar on his left shoulder” The wife started to cry even louder but then she went back to her cabin. There was silence for a couple of minutes.

Chris's fast feet pounding on the floor broke the silence. “Sir, I think you see this. There is a trail of blood starting from the front of the boat and it ends here,” Chris trying to catch his breath.

“Show us, Chris,” Martin says.

Chris and Martin started to run. Dominic, who was observing the crime scene and the surroundings. Allen, Dominic, Jackie ran after Chris and Martin. While they were running, Dominic asked what Allen was doing at 2:30 in the morning and the reason was that he was hungry and wanted to get an early breakfast before the concert on the ship started.

Then he asked Jackie the same question and her response was, “I was sleeping and I heard knocking on a door so I got up and went to go check it out. So I went to check it out and when I opened the door the other man looked at me then he ran away, leaving my dad's body on the ground.”

“I was sleeping and I was woken up by Allen,” Dominic replied quietly. They caught up to Chris and Martin. The morning air was chilly and still dark but the deck was well lit. Dominic walked along the trail of blood looking for patterns. He got to the end of the trail and examined the puddle of blood.

"He was shot in the back because the blood is in the shape of a firework, that means while he was down here someone shot him up there," Dominic said sharply, pointing to the upper deck of the boat. He looked at Jackie and asked her who the person was next to her dad.

"Larry Smith--," she replied. "He was in a meeting around 11:30 last night, he was talking to a couple of his workers and telling them not to do something. His room number is 368," Martin interrupts.

A couple of minutes later they knocked on door 368. Larry opened the door and was sort of surprised to see Jackie and everyone else. He invited all of them inside his cabin. Everyone knew the reason why he invited them in without even talking to them. Larry started to tell them what had happened last night.

Larry says, "I was in a meeting last night exactly around 11:20. My workers were complaining that they weren't getting paid enough. So, they told me that if I didn't pay them by the time we arrived at the dock, they would kill my brother Edward Smith and take all his money. I told them that they shouldn't do that and I would give them all the money I would have. They said that wouldn't kill Edward. But I knew that they were lying. Everybody went back to their cabin, but I couldn't sleep. So, I decided to go on a walk. I left my room around 2 this morning. And that's when I saw one of my workers. He had a gun pointed at someone below the deck. Then the gun went off, then came the scream of my brother. Edward turned around to see what happened. My worker was going for another shot but I tackled him from behind but the bullet had put a scar on his left shoulder. I took the gun from his hand and told him to leave or I would shoot him. He did leave and I threw his gun overboard. Later, I walked him back to his room. I told what happened at the meeting. He told me that family is worth a lot more than money. I knocked on room 230 to get his wife but just collapsed on the floor. That's when Jackie's door opened and she saw me next to a dead body. I didn't want Jackie thinking that I was the person who killed her father." Larry finished his story and he looked at everyone.

"Now, things are starting to make a scene now, but do you know what your worker's name is," Allen asks.

"Joe Flinch," Larry answered.

"Next stop is room 421," Martin said tiredly looking at the time, "it is 5:45 right now the passengers start to wake up around 6:30."

Chris says, "I will clean up the mess."

"Great, there should be no evidence that this has happened," Martin orders, "you are in charge for now. Get on with it." Allen, Dominic, and Jackie all watched intensely as Martin opened his phone and selected a number.

"This is Captain Martin, send up a security team to room number 421 and wait for my instructions," he hangs up the phone. He looks at the group and says, "I think that something is wrong so be careful."

They got to room 421, the team of officers was all wearing helmets lined up in front of the door. Martin knocked on the door and waited 15 seconds then he tried again. Then he called out his name. There was no response so one of the officers opened the door. The door thwacked the soft carpet in Joe's room. All the officers went in and scouted the entire place.

One officer came out of the room and told them what they found, "We looked at the whole place. The room is so clean that we think that he didn't even use his own room." Martin punched the officer in the face so that the helmet's visors shattered and the officer fell backward.

"Wow, that was a right-hand cross," Allen says excitedly!

"Why did you punch your own officer," Jackie asks, amazed by the punch.

"Because that was Joe Flinch dressed up as an officer," Dominic claims.

"That is correct, Dominic! When I was on the phone with the security team, the receiver on the other side had a deeper voice, but my receiver usually answers the phone with a high-pitched voice.

"Take him away," Martin commanded the other officers.

"Where are you taking him," Allen says, yawning.

"We are putting him in a cell in the cargo storage area. The most protected area on the secure area on the ship. I think you guys should get some rest," Captain says with confidence.

"Happy Belated Birthday!"

by Jamie Lozada-McBride

This birthday card, it was belated
Because it was torn and mislabeled
Shipped to Bangladesh
Covered in lime zest
The poor shipping must be berated

"Lunchtime Blues"

by Jamie Lozada-McBride

My lunch today was mediocre
PB&Js are such a joker
It isn't the best
Honestly, this chef,
Would not be betted on in poker

"Call On Me"

by Jamie Lozada-McBride

This discussion is really a bore
My ideas make the others seem
poor
I wish I could share
And while waiting is fair
My arm is really getting sore

"Bad Report Card"

by David Gong

I felt my head create a picture
when I lied in my bed
It showed a time when I was in school
when it was almost dismissal.

My teacher passed out the report cards,
The teacher gave the card to me.
I looked at it, and I jumped in terror.
I felt my heart pound,
and my breathing grows faster.
I look at others' cards,
and they all got straight A's.
I feel myself shrink in embarrassment,
and I would think: "My parents would kill
me."

Then the picture vanished,
and my eyes showed myself staring up at the
ceiling,
while lying in my bed.

"Someday"
by Alana Applebaum

We will be together
We will hug
We will laugh
We will talk
We will smile
We will feel the joy
Of being around others
Someday

We will chant in the sanctuary
We will read the holy words in the prayer books
We will raise our voices upwards
We will show our Jewish pride as one
Someday

We will walk away
From the glow of the screen
It has helped us to come together
But still limits our connection
Real connection
We will finally be able to stand united
As the pain and loss comes to a close
Celebrating our heritage hand in hand
Someday

We will eat hamantaschen
Shaped like the triangular hat
On Haman's head
We will blow the shofar
And eat apples and honey
For a sweet new year
We will do this together
Someday

We will be released from the boundaries
No more "Six feet apart!"
No more cloth coverings
That makes my face itch
That block your smile
Someday

I will see my family again
I will smell the apple pie baking in the oven
At my grandparents house two states over
Aunts, uncles, cousins and friends
The people I've shared tears and laughter
Joy and heartbreak with my whole life
Around the table for Thanksgiving
I will help prepare for the Passover seder
Parsley and salt water to remind us of the tears
Matzah in place of the absent bread
And a boiled egg for the circle of life
Someday

We will be with friends again
We will go from house to house in our costumes
Comparing how much candy we have
We will walk and talk late into the night
We will celebrate the day of Halloween
I will go camping with my Girl Scouts troop
Being out with nature
I will learn new skills and have fun experiences
Someday

We will celebrate the sabbath
Dad will put on his kippah and tallit
We will eat challah and matzah ball soup
We will light the Shabbat candles
Whispering to them an ancestral prayer
We will not worry about the pandemic
Fully welcoming the peace
Someday

We will shed tears of joy
We will break through the loneliness
We will break through the terrified thoughts
That haunt us as the cases rise
We will break through everything this dark time has brought
us
And look towards a bright future
A future of friends and family together again
A future of praying undivided
A future of exciting memories and honored traditions
Because I am nothing without those I love
I am nothing without you and me
Someday

“My Second Home” by Annabel Taylor

We are living through a historical moment. The pandemic has brought out both the best and worst of us. Covid-19 is the sort of thing that my own future children will be learning in their history classes. And I'll be recounting the events along with them, recalling the memories of me questioning things, pouring over the immensity of what's happening to me, my community and my entire world. But I'll also remember the best parts.

But that's in the future. And I have no clue what the future holds. All I know is that today is a milestone in my 12 years of life. I'm going to the house of my Ong and Ba. Ong is grandfather and Ba is grandmother in Vietnamese.

Funny how that must sound, a milestone being able to go to your grandparents' house. But I haven't been in 6 months, 6 months of communicating through calls and missing Ong's hearty laugh and Ba's beautiful smile. And they only live a neighborhood away.

We go through the side of the house, through the close-to-falling-over gate and the porch door. Ba comes to see us, her beautiful smile hidden behind a mask. But she's still there. Before I can say hello to Ba, she says “Annabel! Sebastien!” She leans in to hug us, then she remembers. How I wish I can hug her. So she just smiles, and I know because her eyes crinkle in the way they always do.

Today is the Autumn Moon Festival, or *Tet Trung Thu* in Vietnamese. It's my favorite holiday, after the lunar new year or *Tet*. Ba has strung fish lanterns on the wall, and there is that oh-so-familiar smell of Ba's cooking wafting from the kitchen.

Ong and Ba have set up our dinner so that we sit in the screen porch and they sit in the adjacent kitchen. It's not the usual *Tet Trung Thu*, especially since there are three empty seats for my little cousin Emilia, who is more like my sister, my Auntie Olympia, and Uncle Brandon. But they're in California.

Ong is in the kitchen, reading a book. I say hello, and almost squeal at the sight of everything. It's like vertigo. The good kind.

There's the delicious smell of *pho* simmering in a hot pot and *bo luc lac* (Vietnamese cubed steak) sizzling in a skillet over the stove, and fresh spring rolls displayed on bamboo platters on the kitchen island. Every pot of beef broth, every bowl of coconut *oc* (baked snails) was made with the love of my favorite chef. My Ba.

“The food will be ready in a minute,” Ba says, stirring the noodles. “Go and play while it's cooking.”

My brother Sebbie, Mommy and Daddy are still in the screen porch, listening to Ong and Ba's favorite jazz music. So I take Ba's advice and travel through the little brick house that is my second home.

First is the living room. It's my happy place, a room that keeps my most cherished memories alive, with the great big piano that Sebbie likes to play on and the majestic statue of Buddha on an antique chest. I take a few minutes to pray. Because that's just what we feel most at peace doing - a lot, these days. Ong and Ba are still visiting the outdoor courtyard of the pagoda to pray from a safe distance, and we are praying in front of our Buddha shrine at home. I pray for happiness, health and peace for everyone I love.

As I pray, I clutch my Buddha necklace, a delicate golden chain around my neck with a little golden Buddha figure that Ong and Ba gave me for my birthday when I turned four. Another charm dangles from my fingers- a golden heart, gifted by Mommy some years ago. The chain of the necklace has needed to be replaced time and time again, but the Buddha has stayed with me everyday since I was 4. Everyone in our family has a Buddha necklace. Many of my friends ask me why I wear it everyday. The answer is simple - I feel safe with Buddha everywhere I go.

Outside the big bay window, I see the flowers and veggies that Ba has planted along the driveway. She has always had a green thumb, and can make anything imaginable grow and grow and grow. Outside, the golden sun is fading. Fading, fading, fading. I watch it set every day from my window at home, and now I watch it from Ong and Ba's window. It reminds me that, yes, the universe is continuing, the world is still at work, even in times like these.

This big window is always where we put out Ong and Ba's fake Christmas tree that has been around since Mommy was a little girl. It's a tradition - Ong and Ba always forget to put it up, so on

Christmas Eve, Daddy gets it from the attic and I decorate it with Ba's porcelain ornaments, coming in the form of beloved little bears and adorable angels. Then we open presents and eat more of Ba's wonderful cooking.

I flip through Ong's books, the covers made of leather with the titles embossed in beautiful gold fonts. They are his treasures. Written in French, Vietnamese, and English. I take a look at the ones that I've always loved best, like the Picasso and Matisse art books. That is something Ong and I share- a love for beautiful things. When this pandemic is over, I'd like to go to an antique store with him, and search for books and knick knacks that fill our hearts with joy. I turn around to see Ong standing in the doorway.

“There’s something I think you’d like,” he says. He pulls out a little brown book from the shelf and begins to flip through the pages. The pages reveal oil paintings of Japan's greatest villages.

“I got it in the 60’s when I went to Japan with my mother for a business school internship. We saw many great things, and this is a very special book that I added to my book collection. That’s a very special book, Annabel. I’d like you to have it.”

My mouth drops open. Ong wants me to have one of his books? He hoards them like treasures! It's too good to be true. "Ong, no, you keep it."

"I insist," he remarks, and pushes the book into my arms. He leaves before I can argue. I smile to myself. I love it in this house.

Dinner is almost ready, so I quickly go upstairs. First to Auntie's old room where I hunt through her dresser, full of hair clips, makeup and earrings. I always like to rummage through Auntie's stuff - something new always seems to show up. This time I find a cute stationery box.

And then I go to Mommy's old room. She moved here from the Philippines in her teens, and I have always had a special connection with her room. There, as always, in a little wicker basket, were all of Mommy's stuffed animals - Pink Teddy, Aviator Bear, Pink Panther and Mrs. Chicken. Mommy's cherished collection of Little Golden Books sits on her bookshelf, waiting to be read again.

In the den, I flip through some weathered homemade scrapbooks of family pictures, so old that the pages are yellow and crinkly. Mommy had put them together for Ong and Ba before she left for college. I have fun looking at pictures of Mommy and Auntie at my age, on vacation with their cousins, who I know as my aunts and uncles. I also stumble upon pictures of my great grandfather (or *Cu* in Vietnamese), in front of his beloved pharmaceutical lab, which was among the top 10 largest in Vietnam. I know each picture by heart, living through my mother's life through dusty polaroids.

On the mantle in the landing is a display of framed vintage photos, an array of history. Ones of Mommy and Auntie with their cousins all together, one of Ong and Ba in Paris in the 70's, when Ba had just graduated from pharmacy school and Ong from business school. There are new pictures, too - of Sebbie and me, and of my little cousin Emilia, who is almost three years old. "Grandchildren bring magic to life," is etched on the gallery frame.

I hear Ba calling from the kitchen. It's time for our *Tet Trung Thu* feast. The table welcomes me with delicious aromas of spicy and mild, salty and sweet. Ba always knows how to flavor food just right, and create beautiful dishes garnished with traditional Vietnamese herbs, like cilantro and mint.

I don't wait to eat.

Before I know it, I'm feasting on dishes upon dishes of delicious *pho*, *bo luc lac*, summer rolls and cabbage. My family and I are laughing about something or another. Ong and Ba are 12 feet away, but we're all eating together. I can feel their presence.

This feels so good, after so many months of stretching to see Ong and Ba through our window, dropping off food from the Vietnamese market for Mommy. But now we are together. *Really* together.

I close my eyes for a moment. I experience the wonder of our voices, mingling over the smells of foods that I have yearned to taste, with the company that I have yearned to be with. A faint ringing comes from Ba's tablet. Auntie calls through FaceTime. We pick up right away. In front of the screen is sweet Emilia, happily singing and dancing.

“Emilia!” I cry. She’s my cousin, but really, like I said, she’s more like my little sister. It’s almost been a year since I saw her in person. “Hi Mimi! Happy *Tet Trung Thu*! Are you having a parade?”

In her toddler voice, Emilia says “Happpppppppyyyyyyyyy Tet Tung Toooooo!”

I smile at her. Auntie says “Emilia is having a lantern parade!”

Indeed she is - she is carrying two light up animal lanterns. Ong and Ba eagerly come over to see

their other granddaughter, giggling and chatting through the screen. Everyone's faces light up, all of us together alas.

Soon, it feels like old times. And then I know it's all going to be better. Not today, not tomorrow. But one day, I can feel it. We have each other to lean on. We always have, we always will. I sit on Mommy's lap. "Can we come back to Ong and Ba's? All the time?"

She smiles and hugs me tight. "I sure hope so Annabel, I really do."

Soon, Emilia has to take her bath. Before she hangs up, and to culminate the evening, I exclaim "I love you!" to Emilia, to Ong, to Ba, to Mommy, to Daddy, to Sebbie, and to the entire beautiful house that is my second home.

"Assassinate" by Priyam Joshi

A nice calm pleasant morning with the sun up high in the sky. Not too hot Jack thought.

"Good morning," said Jack Will, with a coffee mug in his hand.

"How are you?" says Mr. Huxley, in his medium-pitched voice. Pascual Huxley was a middle-aged man, almost old, and a wealthy businessman. Jack was a happy person who had everything but was not wealthy as Mr. Huxley. Jack had two sons, the elder one named Orion and the younger one named Ryland. Orion was 14 and Ryland was 12. Mr. Huxley was a kind person, but he liked to show off on the exclusive car collections he had. His sons were kind like him, but they never showed off like their father. Brendon and Kalen were twins when they were 13 years old and were sons of Mr. Huxley.

"Hey, Jack, want to see the new car that I got yesterday evening," in a bit of a taunting voice.

"Sure," said Jack. They went to Mr. Huxley's garage. "It is a great car," says Jack as soon as he sees the car.

"Thanks!" says Mr. Huxley. "Let's go in and have some tea or coffee," said Mr. Huxley generously. Jack felt welcome.

They go in and sit on the couch, "Big house" says Jack. Mr. Huxley's house was big with yellow lights all around the house.

"Hi," Jack says. "Hello", the twins say together. "What are your names?" asks Jack.

"Brendon," says Brendon. "And I'm Kalen," says Kalen. "I am going to my room to do my homework", says Brendon. Kalen goes to the kitchen to get something to eat.

"What is your occupation, Jack?" asks Mr. Huxley. "I am a police officer," says Jack. "What about you?" asks Jack. "I am a businessman," says Mr. Huxley. What about meeting at a golf course this Saturday?" asks Jack to Mr. Huxley. Sorry about that but I got a meeting with one of my clients on Saturday, says Mr. Huxley.

"Where?" Jack asks. "It is a rural area, on the outskirts of the city, somewhere at Bloods Point road," says Mr. Huxley in a careless voice.

When Mr. Huxley goes to the meeting with the client, he sees the big mansion; it was almost as big as a castle. There was grass on both sides of the driveway. As he drives, the light turns on. His mind was blown away by seeing the grandiose house. He entered the house "Oh my god, how big is this house!", Mr. Huxley muttered to himself. Then someone comes right in front of him. "Let me introduce myself. I am Felix and I work for Mr. Smith." Says Felix. Felix leads Mr. Huxley to the top floor of the mansion. "Felix, does this house have an elevator?" asks Mr. Huxley. "No, sir", says Felix. It takes them about 8 minutes to reach the top floor. Mr. Huxley was breathing heavily. and Mr. Smith talks about the business deal. After 2 hours, "Do we have ourselves a deal?" asks Mr. Huxley, "Deal" replies Mr. Smith. They both stood up to shake hands. Mr. Smith pulls out a knife from his pocket and stabs Mr. Huxley in the stomach and he falls and bleeds to his death.

Someone reported this case to the police. The phone call goes to the police station where Jack Will works. Jack hears the whole story, he leaves the police station with his men and goes to the house where Mr. Huxley was murdered. He and his team capture the criminal gang and take them to their custody. After a very deep investigation, they found out that Mr. Smith was someone else. He was a wanted criminal that was dangerous. His real name was Rowen Robert. That criminal gang was called the Bevers.

They also found out that they killed the real Mr. Smith and stole all his money and his identity. Jack asked the criminal how he found out that Mr. Huxley and Mr. Smith were going to meet at that house. "When you were asking him if you guys can play golf on Saturday, and he said no and you asked him what he was going to do on Saturday, I heard what he said to you and I made a plan to kill him," says Rowen. When Rowen finishes the sentence, he pulls out a knife and tries to stab Jack with it. Jack dodges it. Another guy tries to knock down Jack while a police officer shoots the person. Rowen broke out of the window.

It is a stormy night, lightning scares the birds, wind whistling. Rowen was breathing heavily, running to save his life. He got hurt when he broke the window and ran away. A bullet goes through his back and comes stomach. A silent death groan came out of his mouth and kept his right hand where the bullet went to stop bleeding. He runs unconsciously and lies down behind a big tree.

"Lovely Day"
by
Nisan Naz Kutlukaya

It was a lovely day. After working 30 hours nonstop, it was time for me to take a break. I walk down the path that is near the beautiful lake that shines like a diamond. After looking around a bit, I pick the perfect spot for sitting and I take out the nugget and mayonnaise sandwich, I made from my backpack. After enjoying a delicious bite from my sandwich, a duck from bushes jumps on me. Fighting me to death to stole my beloved nugget and mayonnaise sandwich. After tackling and biting me the duck won the war and run away with my beautiful nugget and mayonnaise sandwich. I chase the duck to the lake where the duck flew and make me tripped over a rock. After that, I bumped my elbow and fall to the lake. It took all day to climb back to the shore. When I finally come back to the shore I catch a cold. Again, it was a lovely day. (Achoo)

"When We Blink"
by Gwendolyn Goggin

Have you ever wondered what happens when we close the door
Turn our back
Or look down at the floor?
Or when we leave the room
Close our eyes
When we turn to watch a flower bloom
Or maybe when we blink?
What do you think happens when we do those things?
Maybe the stars come out for two seconds?
Maybe rocks turn into rings?
What do you think would happen if we could know?
Maybe magic swirls around us?
Maybe things turn into snow?
I guess We'll never know
What happens
When we blink.

"Dreary Summer Nights"
by Florence E. Schneider

On the last day of heat,
Gloominess looms over the street,
A young girl - coming by.

Head held down,
Wearing a frown,
She scribbles in her notebook swiftly.

In the side of her eye,
She spots the undercover spy,
Following her, almost unseen.

Her head snaps down,
Entering the town,
The town . . . of her dreams.

A juvenile boy
Recites the poem with joy,
The poem of the disastrous terrors.

He speaks loudly and clear,
Showing no fear,
As the poem grows darker and darker.

"The darkness surrounds,
Those who have found,
The loneliness within."

His voice booms,
With joy he glooms,
Continuing with triumph.

"It shatters their dreams,
And sets lonely schemes,
For those who used to be seen."

Not even a flinch,
a heart colder than the Grinch,
Smirk plastered across his face.

"Depression creeps along,
Even for those who were strong,
And for the ones, which were weak."

He pursues the dark thought,
The one, for many fought,
Not even struggling to maintain the glee.

"Destroying lives,
Divorcing wives,
Not allowing one to speak."

He does not realize,
How his poem jeopardizes,
The cluster of teens not too far away.

"The reality of life,
Like a sharp knife,
Waiting, to hurt thee."

He finishes in delight,
Not noticing her fright,
As the words continue in her head.

She glances around,
Jumps at the loud sound,
Her eyes darting aimlessly.

Hesitantly she looks at the ground,
Noticing the bloody wound,
Deep in her stomach's flesh.

Taking a shaky breath,
She contemplates chances of death,
Deciding to stumble upon the streets once more.

She is staggering over her own two feet,
Her headache starting to beat,
Before everything goes dark.

She lies there alone,
Her memory gone,
Only the whispers of the dead left behind.

"Don't fall for the trap,
It will make yourself snap",
They whisper, silently, in your ear.

“The Puppet-Maker”
by Triston Weber

I awoke in a strange room. It was a dimly lit workspace with strange woodworking tools. It had no windows and the room was heavily sealed, I also had this strange sense of unknowing yet knowing. The room seemed very familiar, yet I did not know why. The only thing I remembered was “Puppet-Maker” yet I did not know why I remembered this or how it related to me. I only knew that it gave me a feeling of dread, that word. “Puppet-Maker.” The only thing I could remember was this word I did not know the context of. However, one thing was obvious to me. I needed to get out of this room to get some answers about what was happening to me right now, so I started searching the room and looking for any sign of escape or clue as to who I am. I did not have much luck except for an old gas lantern and a sign on the door which read “Evan Lorraine.” There was also a strange tape and an old cassette player. I put the tape into the player, closed the lid, and pressed play. I heard something along the lines of:

Entry 11, John Benedict
“Evan!”

“This is Benedict”

“I have sent this tape to you in the hopes that you will hear what I have to say”

“I know what you're up to with your experiments Evan! And I have to tell you that your twisted experiments will no longer be tolerated!”

“You are playing with fire! Do not make me do the same!”

“This is your last warning Evan!”

It was very strange. Apparently, someone named “Benedict” does not tolerate whatever experiments someone else named “Evan” is performing. It was almost frustrating not knowing anything; is this Evan evil? Is this Benedict good? Who am I and where do I fit into this situation? These questions tormented me; it felt almost as if I were walking into a pitch hallway with no light. The name Evan felt somehow very familiar. It frightened me. I rolled the syllables around in my mind, dragging them out. “Eh-vaaaaan. Eeeeeeh-vanuh. Eeeee-vvaaaan.” The name felt strange in my mouth, but I couldn’t help but feel like it belonged there.

I set the matter aside for the moment, for now that was not important to this most dire situation. Whatever the answers were to these haunting questions, they were not answered and nor were they going to be answered anytime soon. In the meantime, I did manage to find an exit. It was a withered, creaky door that even when moved ever so slightly, made a blood curdling sound that was almost like the words of death himself. The old door led into a pitch hallway that I could not see much of from where I was standing. It was then that a drastically important decision had to be made, “do I explore the hallway? Or do I stay in the room and hope for another solution?” The decision weighed heavily on me, a part of me wanted to explore while another part wanted to stay and hope that an angel from heaven would come and rescue me from this haunting situation I was in. I waited for what seemed like an hour, though it was probably only a couple of minutes. I grew restless, and furthermore I started feeling hungry.

Oh! The hunger felt like a burning flame in my stomach. This must be the way that the wretched, starving peasant felt as he knelt at the feet of a fat king, sitting sleek and glossy on a high throne. I tried to get my brain to think about other subjects but my stomach grew ever more restless. It growled, and growled until eventually I could take it no more. I made the decision to take a lantern I had found in the room and wander the halls in search of desperately needed sustenance. I sniffed the air like a starving lion looking for the next meal. I caught the scent of something that smelled delicious, not food exactly, but it beckoned me.

As I headed in the direction of that irresistible smell, I noticed that there were several doors on each side of the hallway. The hall led into several other hallways, in what I now assumed was some kind of building. I continued to move in the direction of the smell and passed several doors, all boarded up and nailed shut. All of the doors that I discovered had names on them, or at least what I assumed were names. As I held the lantern up to each nameplate I passed, the letters were corroded so badly that you could barely see any letters at all. It was almost like walking through the ruins of an ancient city. Once again it felt almost familiar in a way, but I did not know why. The smell continued to grow stronger and I continued forward eagerly.

The hunger had migrated, it was no longer in my stomach but seemed to consume my entire being. I discovered that I felt desperate to reach the source of the scent. However this was not the weirdest thing I had discovered when traveling through the halls. As I turned the corner I immediately saw a sight that the devil himself created. The hall was filled with puppets, they lined the walls on either side of the passage. I was terrified. It almost felt like the puppets were placed there intentionally by something or someone, but despite seeing these strange puppets in the hall and being terrified, I also felt this strange feeling of recognition. I knew these puppets. Yes! The ventriloquist's puppet was named The Moose. And the blonde haired puppet was Daniel. I knew their names and it was very eerie. I also had this strange feeling of... Did I work with them? No, it was much greater than that; I *knew* these puppets. Knew them in a way that went beyond a mere understanding. I must have made them. But how could I have made them? And why was this the only thing I remembered?

The smell was driving me mad, my hunger was pushing me forward faster and faster. I sped up, something inside me was telling me that the aroma was coming from the other side of the door at the end of the passage. I just had to make it past the puppets. As soon as I thought about this, what sounded like a confused child's voice said "Evan?" I immediately turned around to find The Moose behind me. The puppet was lifeless but as I peered more closely at it, what sounded like wood shuffling came from behind me again and when I turned back around, all of the puppets were staring at me. They gazed with the most chilling stare, it looked like their eyes were black pits just staring at me. At this point I ran down the hall as fast as I could and their eyes followed me as I ran. I was so scared that I didn't even worry about the former questions anymore, I simply ran down the hall.

Somehow I knew that they were chasing me down the hall, it felt like an eternity of running down a pitch black hall with nothing but a lantern and puppets chasing me. I eventually was about to make it past that final door and into a light filled room, but as I entered this light filled room I could hear a voice. Yes, it was a deep, booming male's voice saying, "No! Stop Evan!" I wrote it off at first, but then another voice that sounded like a young child's voice rang out. This one screamed, "Evan no!! Don't do it!" That voice was quickly followed by a loud and concerned female's voice saying, "Evan what have you done?"

The voices clearly came from different people but they all echoed with heavy, oppressive terror. I tried to block them out but they felt like thunder inside my head. I collapsed against the door, sealing it shut. The puppets were barred on the other side but the voices echoed in my head and rang in my ears. Suddenly it was quiet, the voices stopped. It was an almost uncanny quiet, and then as I turned around the voices began to become louder than ever before. It was almost torturously loud. I began to question if I was really experiencing this event or if I was dreaming, but then I realized that it is not a dream, and it's not avoidable. But what? What could it be?

The smell! The smell was definitely coming from this room. I inhaled it like a man starved for air. I searched for the source, but strangely, the smell seemed to be coming from the light itself. Then, suddenly I remembered. I remembered why everything felt so familiar. I remembered who Benedict and Evan were, and I remembered what the puppets were... I was Evan, and I was the puppet-maker.

"Never Trust Her When She's Silent": Poems by Caroline McCann

Author's Forward:

The female (or female presenting) experience in this day in age can be very hard to understand for people who have never found themselves in the specific situations we face routinely. So, I decided to use the five senses, something almost everyone has at least one of, to portray struggles that I have seen or experienced in our world. I am a white, middle class girl, who was raised religious, and I understand that my struggles are different from other girl's and women's struggles out there. However, if the least I do with this work is to inspire someone else to write their story then my art has done its work. This collection includes a poem for the sixth sense, often known as a sense for danger. Many young girls and women develop this at a young age to stay safe in a largely male dominated world. Please reflect carefully on the struggle each poem represents, and enjoy.

Caroline McCann

"Never Trust Her When She's Silent" by Caroline McCann

She can shine a fake smile
and fake a love with all her soul,
but never trust her when she's silent,
for she's not pretending anymore;
She's lived through many a day
Where the shadows were her shield,
Where her hush hid the tears
that fell in whispers from her fears,
And
What you can't hear will hurt you,
So let's see you try it,
You'd better hope you're hungry,
For an open pot boils in the quiet
No, her silence is not her compliance
but the calm before the storm-
that moment you think it's over
before you find she's leveled the score,
the facing of the armies
handing your fate up to the lord;
So never trust her when she's quiet,
She hides a beast you'll never know,
it whispers in those moments
its words hum soft and slow;
she recalls each silence that gave her scars
they spell out 'no';
never trust her when she's silent.

"She who is invisible" by Caroline McCann

She who is invisible,
Whose heart lies inside her sleeve,
Who's so small you could look over her
If she didn't want to be seen.

Your eyes that have been trained
On a reality less than sweet,
Only cause you've looked over her
Does your image feel incomplete.

"Pins and needles"
by Caroline McCann

Why does god hate me?

Maybe?
Is my body really that sinful?

You need to pray
I wish I could just hide instead

Too late
Don't let it get to your head

Who knew this would be so hard

Seeped into her shoulders

Spread up her spindly arms

The shame started with her fingers

"The Kaleidoscope Breath"
by Caroline McCann

She breathed in the summer sunshine,
And absorbed the crisp fall breeze.
She let the spring rest on her tongue
And the winter air put her at ease.
She knew the world through a kaleidoscope;
She blew the flowers,
And smelled the leaves,
And yet her beauty was in the beauty
that such a strange perspective could be seen.
And yet,

Wrong

They told her.

You breathe in the breeze, you soak in the sunshine, spring air should put you at ease! A snowflake should rest on your tongue, you should smell flowers and blow leaves.

And in her attempt to be right,

"Taste of Glory" by Caroline McCann

What she wouldn't give
To fly above the sky,
But when you are walking on her head
She isn't left a piece of the pie.
The problem with the glass ceiling is that it's not meant to leak,
She'll never get that taste of glory when even she believes she's weak.
There's no ladder for her to climb, or not one that's held steady on the ground.
One misstep and it's over,
"She was always home-bound"
Well, did you think 82 cents was enough to keep her around?
Ha.
And while it may be see through, it's certainly quite hard,
Just like this is to swallow, but we've come this far.
The sour and the sweet make balance,
And, hey, she's both together
So pucker up and break the glass... Cause we can all be better.

"A Girl's Guide to the World, Don'ts and Do's" by Caroline McCann

"Pheew haha"

Keep it up and I'll give you something to whistle about

Keep walking

"Why don't you smile for me, darling"

Why would I?

Straight face

"Nice body"

You're the body

Cross the street

"Heytheresexy"

Hey there, drunk

Four right turns

"Hey man, check her out"

Why don't you check some morals out?

Call a friend

"The things I would do if you were 18"

Well thank god for the law

Go

"Come here"

NO

GO

"I think she must be confused officer"

No

GO

Too late

"You can go home sir."

no

"I Remain Silent"

by Ilona Agur

Ebb and flow of opinions
Come and go of decisions
Pushing me every which way
And not letting go; when will I
Be my own tide and break through the storm
Be my own shining knight in the war
And not ride on the back of a horse
Saved by a hero; a damsel in distress
Is who I am, but help
Never arrives.
I remain silent.

There is always only one side to choose
A battle raging; I have nothing to lose
And everything to gain, yet
As if a force is muffling my scream
A tight knot of ropes bursting at the seams
But still holding together; I cannot break free
Of the prison that is silence, that envelops me
I remain silent.

It is true that differences are unique,
If so, I am as bland as ever
The color in the background of a glorious painting
The person at the back of the stage in a film scene
I blend, I merge, into every crowd
And even if the people around me shout
I remain silent.

Each to their own, I suppose
That is the decision that society has made
Without me; because I lean
On every person that comes near me
They are the force that pushes me further.

I am but a floating piece of plastic
In the middle of the widest ocean; My destination
Is where the waves will take me to
And no protest from me will be heard
No try of my voice will turn
The tide, so I must
Remain silent.

I rely on not my thoughts, but that of others
Surrounding me, who empower me
To do more of what I already do
I give my work to them
With my name; what is mine
I do not claim

This is my voice
It was never lost and does not need to be found
Buried under layers of what only was myself
Pushing me down

I will not remain silent
I am my own voice that was destined
To break through the surface
And my voice
Clearly vibrates this room that I
Stand in; thoughts of gloom
Have floated behind me
A mist that faded
And the path before me
Lies, waiting
For that first footstep will echo generations
After; I lift my leg
And shout to the darkness stretching in front
I will not remain silent.

"Deeper Roots"

by Charlotte Anderson

"Born here, raised here." They say as
eyes turn to me

"Oh, um not I"

I reply cautiously

"Then where are you from?"

"Well I was born in California and I'm American

But some of my ancestors and relatives are from parts of Europe." I try, sounding enthusiastic

"So... you don't really know?"

They ask me judgingly with their curious eyes

"I do, I'm just not one 100% one thing."

Eyes turn away, and feet start towards the door

"Wait!" I cry out desperately

The heads slowly turn back around

"I know where I come from."

"I come from a family where every day is a new adventure,
where playing with siblings is never too young to do,
And where a laugh or smile interrupts every statement"

"I come from a house that lights up at night with the crackling wood sparks that fly out of our fireplace,
a house that's always cozy and warm even when filled with boxes, and a house full of my vivacious family."

"I come from a neighborhood just up the road from my school, where bikes are ridden on even the hottest summer
days and
Where there are neighbors so close they walk up to your house just to pop in for a visit."

"I come from the memories that have been collecting in my brain over the years
That comes into thought every time decisions are made."

"I come from my family and I make my own roots."

“Error”
by Jamie Lozada-McBride

“Error.”

Jonah awoke. *What?*

“Error,” repeated the flat, lifeless voice. “Error.”

What is this? What’s going on?

“Error.”

Who am I? Where am I? How did I get here?

“Error.”

Jonah looked around. A white abyss stretched around him in every direction, except, as it turned out, down. *What is this place? What am I standing on?*

“Error.”

He glanced upwards. *No sun. No sky. No clouds. Just an empty white eternity.* He was confused by his thoughts. *What is the sun? What is the sky? What are clouds? Why did I think I would see them, up there?*

“Error.”

What is ‘seeing’? He looked at his hands. *Wait. Hands?* He shook them vigorously. *Yep, they’re mine.* He moved each finger, mystified by their compliance to his mental commands. *They do whatever I want them to do!* He tried to tell one to bend backwards, to no avail. *Hmm. Well, not everything.*

“Error.”

He looked down at his feet. *Feet. Yes, feet.* He started walking, keeping his gaze at his feet. They, too, obeyed his desires, but like his fingers, they had their limits.

Hmm. But I’m not just using my feet to walk. He looked down at his legs, which seemed to do most of the movement. He stopped walking, and his legs stopped. He started walking, and they moved once more.

“Error.”

He decided to get creative. He commanded his body to jump. His leg bent down at a joint - *knees*, he realized. His arms - *the things that move my hands!* - swung back, and swung forward and upwards again at the same time that his legs forcefully straightened and his feet pointed down, propelling his whole body into the air. He hung there, for some time, feeling powerful and majestic, before crashing down to the ground again.

A piercing sensation tore through his legs as they collided with infinity’s edge.

Jonas discovered two new things in the process. *When I jumped, I didn’t stay up. I...fell.* Yes, that was the word, he *fell*. But equally as strong as the feeling of discovery was his feeling of...*pain*. *That’s it, pain.* It felt really *bad* when he fell -no, it felt bad when he *stopped* falling. *That feeling must be pain!* Pain hurt.

“Error.”

Say, what is that sound? It seemed to be coming from everywhere, and yet nowhere at the same time. It had meaning, he was sure, but what did it mean? *Wait-it’s a word!* That was it, a word! And it meant “accident” or “mistake”. Though how he knew this, Jonah had no idea.

But a word spoken by...who? He listened for the sound, trying to pinpoint its location. It returned, many times, though each time left Jonas no closer to discovering the source of the empty voice.

“Error.”

“Error.”

“Error.”

Jonah began to feel irritated. *Why is the voice here? Why doesn’t it stop? Why don’t I know where it comes from? And why can’t I find the answers to any of these questions?* But the voice continued its unabated existence.

“Error.”

“Error.”

“Error.”

Suddenly, something else caught Jonah’s attention: A rectangular frame, standing a small distance from where he stood. *What is THAT?* Yet unlike the sound, it would be easy to find out; he was not too far away from it, and he could simply walk over and look at it more closely. Which is what he did. *A doorway!* That was it, a doorway! That was what it was!

Where does it lead? Jonah yearned to know. But again, the solution to that question was simple; he merely had to walk through. He tentatively took a step forward, and then another, and then he had stepped through.

The voice stopped.

"It's in My Blood"

by Ilona Agur

"It's in my blood."

Funny, that phrase: first of all,
If I may correct, there is no such thing.
But, then again, we will believe any calling,
Supposedly summoned by our hearts.

I come from a family of three cultures:
One Dutch, one Chinese, one Jewish; a sculpture
Made of many metals, uniquely modern
Art that people refuse to understand.

Now I sit, torn, between all three
Countries that I "belong" to;
Is there such thing? Come to think
Nations are merely chunks of land
Separated from other chunks of land
By imaginary lines.

We've declared ourselves to these chunks of land
The Netherlands, China, Israel
In a quest to find an answer that will never appear,
An answer to the question, "Who are we":
We are humans, we are creatures, objects of the planet Earth
We hold status, subjects to conquered land
Yet that isn't enough to satisfy our desire
Of knowing, truly, what we are.

I am Dutch, Chinese, Jewish, Human
These things do not tear me apart
Or stuff me in boxes that don't belong
These things are each a chunk of me
A puzzle piece
There meant to be
Now growing, showing, out of me.

After all, it's in my blood.

“A Background Sketch”

by Rosha Rizi

I wonder what it is like to be American
Not the way I am
Not with the history of Perisa
Flowing through my blood
But with a blank canvas
Where you paint your own picture

I wonder what it is like without a background on your painting
Without the map of Iran sketched out for you
Where your parents filled in the experience of Shiraz And Esvehan
And where I must sketch out the United States next to it.

I wonder why my friend thinks being American is boring
Why they don't enjoy the melting pot of culture
Which brought Hamid Rizi and Maryam Fadaei together
Which brought me and my brother to life

I wonder what it was like for my parents
When they flew on the plane
From their own home
To a house of freedom
What rush of fright
And tidal wave of joy
Washed over them when they landed

I wonder what it is like for others
When they hear the word “Iran”
Slip out of my mouth

I wonder why I always see
A look of confusion
Or surprise
When I answer the question
“Where are you from?”

I wonder what people do
When they don't have
A second language
Having another open door
In which you can communicate
With others

I wonder what people think of
When they eat the rich food
Of my father's *Moby Dick*
What kind of history they think of
When they taste the ostentatiously orange saffron
Which stain our replete plates of rice with flavor
Or the Sangak which is cooked on smoldering stones

I wonder what people hear
When they see the beautiful music
My mother plays on the
Ancient Santur
Or what they think
When they see her hit the Mezbab
Onto its gold and silver strings

I wonder what people do
When they learn about new culture
New experience
New life

I wonder why
In second grade
No one knew of my background
Not my class
Nor the first-grade class
Which we presented poems of our culture to

I wonder why
A Persian first grader
Was terrified
To say,
“Are you from Iran?”

I wonder why I can't say my friend's name like others do
Why I say it with an accent
Unlike everyone else

I wonder why I am still similar to so many others
Yet so different at the same time

By simply having a background
By having parts of my daily life
Sketched out

I wonder what my combined experience
In my unified life
Of the United States
And the ancient Iran
Can teach others

"Brazil and Me"

By Laura Marie Daniel

Back in Brazil, there is a part of me that I will never forget,
My family, my friends, and my culture
Back in Brazil, there are many types of music,
You feel the rhythm in your body as you listen to the story,
Back in Brazil, there is food that you grow up eating and craving,
You make memories while making and eating meals and desserts,
Back in Brazil, there are legendary people and animals in folklore stories
Most of the stories explain how things became or about morals like most
Back in Brazil, there are holidays that make you smile,
With bright and vivid colors that draw you into the celebration,
Back in Brazil and here too, I am and will always be

"Culture and the World" by David Moon

People from
different worlds.
From miles away
but still on Earth.
Different race
and different identity.
But does it matter?
But should it matter?

There is no question
for if you fit in
broken and repaired,
until you do.
Invisible to one's eyes
until we do
something they don't want us to do.

But diversity is key
for a better world.
Different people
from different worlds
joined together

for what comes next.

Immigrants and refugees,
other people too.
Seeking peace and chances,
a place to feel home.
These are who we are plus more.
For that we deserve respect.

Culture should be
who you are,
an unique characteristic
that makes us individual.
But culture determines
what is acceptable
or unacceptable in society.

Same people
under the same sun
under the same moon,
but treated differently
depending on identity.

Different views
on different people,
but it does matter,
but it should matter.
We should be proud of who we are,
we should be proud of our culture.

“Culture”
by Mahika Deshpande

What defines culture?
Some say
It's your religion
What you believe in
What you celebrate
But
To me
Culture is family
The food we cook up
Spicy and flavorful
Fried or syrupy
Messy but delicious
Like the jalebi we have on Diwali
Or the pani puri we make at home
It's the traditions we keep
How we enjoy holidays
Whether it be
Doing dandiya on Navratri
Or going to my cousin's house
On Christmas
It's in the folds of my colorful Indian dresses
Flashing with little mirrors
Or draped with tulle
In bold, pretty colors
The ones I wore
To my dance practices
When I was younger
And to many holiday gatherings
And to the one wedding
I have ever been to
Culture
To me
Is a thing too big for words
In all my experiences
Something that is unique to my family
With some things
My parents brought from India
Their childhood
And others
Traditions we created ourselves
That's what culture is to me

Just Like My Father
by Dinah Elias

Since I was a kid, I had always wanted to be just like my father. I wanted people to respect me like they did to him. I wanted them to laugh when I made a joke, but most importantly, I wanted to have the strength and bravery like my father. But I knew that life wasn't always easy for my father. There were times where I would hear him say, "Some folks just don't like our beauty." or to my mother, "Do we want our son to be treated like he is dirt? Is that what we want for our heaven-sent child?" But I always thought that my father was brave. Brave, braver, and the bravest. He always told me, "Don't be scared of them because they are scared of you." Being a person of color gave me a hard time. In an all-white school, I was always the outcast. My father taught me to read at the age of 4. Most average children started to read at age 5-7. Due to my early education, I didn't fit with the black kids at Martin Luther King Jr Elementary. I was then sent to Woodrow Wilson School. The kids there weren't mean, they just weren't open to me. Their parents would make them sanitize before touching anything of mine. Father says it's because they are not used to seeing beautiful people like us. The closest I got to a white folk was when I picked up Andrew Barber's pencil off the floor and handed it to him. He muttered, "Thanks" and shyly gave a little smile. But other than that, I was the invisible person, the gray sprinkle, the black sheep. But I intended to be brave and persistent. Show people "my beauty." Father always said that beauty isn't on the outside, but on the inside. On July 2nd 1850, my father was taken by a white man named Jack Zimmerman and his friends. They took my father far away—no one knows where. All I know is that a few days later my mother and I were informed that he had been killed by Jack and that Mr. Zimmerman was caught hiding my father's body. Jack went to court but was freed with all charges because he was a rich white man. Without my father, I lost a part of me. I lost my courage, pride, and my power. *~20 years later~* From time to time, I think about my father and how things could have been different. If we had watched him carefully that night or warned him of murder. But now I realize that there's nothing that could have been done. On my shelf sits a picture of him and I carrying crops towards the kitchen where mother would make corn pudding. Even though he has left this world, I will always remember him. I reflect on the times I would wish to be him. But I know that I have always been just like my father.

“Magic Chemical Reaction in Cultures”

by Bingrui Liu

Each country has its own culture and every culture is different, but cultures can learn from each other and improve together. Each culture has its shining side and characteristic. I have seen the interplay of cultures in my own family.

I have an uncle named Wang J, who has lived in the U.S. for more than twenty years. He has three children. The eldest boy is in high school, the eldest sister is in middle school, and the youngest girl is in Grade three. They were born in the U.S. and grew up there. I forgot to tell you that Uncle Wang's wife, Aunt Wang Y, has been here as long as Uncle Wang J has. But they were all born in China and went to college in China. So, the magic chemical reaction has been triggered by two different cultures in this family.

One day my uncle and my aunt invited some Chinese guests to visit their house. Just before the guests arrived, my aunt asked her children to help her host the guests and show them hospitality, but none of them bought her bill. The brother and sister said, “Sorry mum. They are your guests, not ours. We do not want to touch upon your business. In fact, we have no responsibility to treat those guys at all.” Finally, the children just said hello to the guests and then stole into their rooms. My uncle and aunt had to run back and forth. They were very tired and disappointed at these children's reaction. Finally, Aunt Wang decided to have a family meeting.

One afternoon, they convened a family meeting in their living room. They did not have a fierce argument but frank views exchanging. Uncle Wang and Aunt Wang emphasized the importance of etiquette and the union of the whole family. However, the children admitted it but argued that it was also critical to respect individual rights. Parents should let them know in advance to manage their calendars. All their arguments made sense. They tried their best to take the opposite position to consider this issue. Eventually, the whole family had a better understanding of individual and family in two cultures, American culture and Chinese culture. Actually, the root of the “collision” originated from two cultures against understanding the nature of individual and family. Better communication and better understanding help cultural integration to some extent.

My parents and I visited their house one month ago and we were treated by our relatives very well. Aunt Wang told me she had told the children and sought their cooperation two weeks earlier ... I was glad to see the harmonious family and look forward to hearing more stories of the perfect integration of various cultures.

Uncle Wang's family's story is fascinating and highlights a situation typical in the U.S.. It reflects one side of cultural differences and the way coexisting cultures can add more color to our lives and this earth village. The world is more exciting because of the diversity of culture.

“My Bat Mitzvah” by Alexandra Weinstein

It was time to do my daily chore, retrieving the mail. I opened the mailbox and took out all of the letters and packages. The driveway was damp because it had rained the day before. The smell of barbeque and freshly cut grass filled my nostrils. It was a stereotypical June evening. I opened the door and wiped my feet on the door mat. Suddenly something caught my eye. It was a letter addressed to me from Temple Sinai.

“Mom! I got a letter from the Temple,” I yelled down the hall. Mom pushed her glasses further up her nose and came swiftly into the mudroom with Dad. She looked at the letter with curiosity and then smiled and said, “I think I know what this is Annie you can open it.” I carefully opened the envelope and pulled out the neatly written letter. Almost immediately I knew what the letter was about. It was my Bat Mitzvah date, January 17 2021. On that day, I would be considered an adult in the Jewish community. I continued to read the letter and felt a wave of excitement until I read the last few sentences. Suddenly I felt sad and confused. It read,

“Unfortunately, because of high cases of Coronavirus, all services will be fully online or rescheduled. This is for everyone’s safety and comfort. We are as disappointed as you are, but hope that it does not stop you from making memories, signed; Rabbi Joseph,” I read those words over and over again. I saw this coming, everything has been online lately.

A b’nai mitzvah is about spirituality and I have to experience it online! For the past 4 years I’ve been attending weekly classes and spent hours and hours in tutoring preparing for this one day. Now, because of COVID this experience will be shared across a computer screen instead of in person! Many people might think this is my lucky break, that a laggy connection could mask mistakes. Yet for me a b’nai mitzvah meant lot! I hugged my parents and in a shaky voice said, “It is gonna be virtual,” Mom and Dad patted my back and soothed me with their gentle, soft voices.

Later that night, I tried to sleep but the thoughts of having one of the most important moments in my life online filled me with sorrow. *I mean, who knows if they will even join the video call. I know for a fact that Grandma can never log into anything online. Don’t even get me started with Uncle Wall. What about my party? Will people come to it, or are the Covid cases so bad that people won’t want to travel? Will we even have a form of celebration? A B’nai mitzvah is about community and getting together. How am I supposed to do that when I am doing my mitzvah online?*

Six months later the big day was here. I had practiced and studied so hard that I knew my Torah portion like the back of my hand. Even though it was just my family in our living room, Mom and I had chosen a beautiful dress that made me look like a winter fairy. I was so nervous that the sweat dripping down my forehead would not stop no matter how many times I wiped it. The tick of the clock was almost driving me insane as I waited for my time to start the zoom. Tick-Tick-Tick-Tick. “Deep breathes Annie,” I kept telling myself. Then the video call started and people began to join.

Aunt Bethy was unmuted and loudly eating crackers, my friend, June, looked so bored that she could fall asleep right then and there, and Grandpa’s camera was positioned on only his couch arm. I was about to cry as I started reciting my torah portion, then something amazing happened. I felt something change inside me. I began to feel more and more connected to all the little faces on the screen in front of me. They were there, listening and supporting me. I was welcomed into my community.

An hour later, we were towards the end of the service and it was time for my speech. I had written my speech many months ago with a different mindset but after this service I decided to do something unheard of. I made the decision right then and there to scrap my speech entirely and instead speak from my heart. When writing my speech, I had been so focused on how unfortunate I was to have my bat mitzvah online. But feeling this spark during the service ignited a flame in my heart, causing me to rethink how my bat mitzvah is not about whether it is virtual or in person but rather that the connection between God, my family and community can happen no matter what the obstacles may be.

My speech didn’t happen as planned, just like this virtual Bat Mitzvah. When I finished I could see everyone clapping and when the zoom ended Mom and Dad hugged me tight. A Covid bat mitzvah seemed horrible at first but now I know that either way I could feel connected to my community even on a screen.

"My Culture"
by Caroline McCann

Two s3lf h@rms and two \$u!c!d3s
That's just since December 1st..
You thought your
Teenage years were bad?
I promise, ours are worse.

Two s3lf h@rms and two \$u!c!d3s
Oh, What a tradition the free have
made!
Our kids know how to lie about
How they get through a day;

Two s3lf h@rms and two \$u!c!d3s,
Well at first glance she was 'fine'
But she was bl33d!ng on her test,
So I looked another time;

Two s3lf h@rms and two \$u!c!d3s,
We all knew she was... a mess.
But you didn't try,
You just told her to smile?
Now she can't wear a knee-length
dress;

Two s3lf h@rms and two \$u!c!d3s,
Now just look how far we've come!
He didn't d!e between 12 and 1
Because he couldn't find a gu#;

Two s3lf h@rms and two \$u!c!d3s,
She would joke and say 'f#ck life'
I didn't know how far she'd go
Until she pulled that kn!f3.

That's
Two s3lf h@rms and two \$u!c!d3s,
They needed more
than me those nights;
And each time you say
"It's just angst"
She ¢ut\$
another time;

Two s3lf h@rms and two \$u!c!d3s;
Their stories, are woven in mine;
A classmate, a friend,
A ghost, and a stranger;
Your \$t!gm@ is blaring in our
quiet.

"What's in a Name?"
by Samia Atallah

For as long as I can remember, I have always felt this way
What became of my name?
"The exalted one"

It is hard to feel exalted when it makes you feel infamous

Say my name

Samia

Not "Sum-la"

Not "Sa-Mia"

I could have been named Lilly

Lilly

Such a name you cannot mis-pronounce

How much I wish I was Lilly

Common, not infamous, common

I look around

Not one Samia

Alone, and feeling hatred towards being unique

How could such a powerful word, unique, mean so much to me

In a bad way

Samia means so much

To my family, myself

The anger that takes over me

When someone says it wrong

I just want to let them say it wrong

It's just easier

The anger of someone saying it at all

It just makes me feel alone

My name

How could it leave such a burden?

Some teachers, some students

Know me as "Su-mia"

Or even Sammy

The energy it brings me to say it correct out loud

Is not worth them saying it right at all

After 11 years

I have learned how to accept it

Samia is not the easiest name

Certainly not common

Most of my family has uncommon names

But it makes me special

I am Lebanese

I am not ashamed of that

In fact proud

I am not ashamed of my hair

Or my eyebrows

My skin

So why would I be ashamed of my name?

If you have a problem with my name

I am sorry

But that is your problem not mine

I am known for my achievements

I proved that Samia

Is more powerful than it might seem

Not infamous

Powerful

"Who Am I?"
by Avi Juneja

I am ...
I don't know
What am I?
I think I am Asian, Black, White, European, African-American, Mexican, and a lot more.
I think I am but I am not sure
I want to fit in
But no one will accept who I am
I don't know who I am
Everywhere I go
I think I Know
Who I am
Not knowing is my foe
My body is aching to know who I am
More my body aches longer I desperate to know who I am
Everywhere I go, everyone thinks
They know EVERYTHING about others.
Is it only me that is questioning,
Everywhere I walk people look at me with the EYES
the kind of EYES that you are given when someone is fed up with you but they have to deal with you.
how everyone knows EVERYTHING about others only by their appearances?
If I am black, they think that I don't work very hard all,
because someone else who was black didn't do their job properly.
A person is from an unknown race
Is like meeting an Alien
Aliens from another planet
I am ...
I don't know
What am I?
I would like to be Everything
But I don't think others are okay with me being Everything
I would like to be EVERYTHING because I can be everyone but be
MYSELF and have my own IDENTITY
I want to fit in
But no one will accept who I am
If no one will appreciate who I am then, be it.
No one should stop me from being myself
I will be whoever I want to be.
I will be MYSELF
It is perfectly fine to have no friends and not fake who you are,
Then, faking who you are and having many friends.
I...
I am ...
I am Everything ...
I am Everything that I want and choose to be.

“Journey of Friendship”

by Daniel Antsan Agur

Sets and sets flow on, go by
and sorry not knowing which to join
being as uncomfortable, just as shy
man, I wish I knew the metal of the social coin

For eternities, I have mined for it within myself
But what has value to me, to others has no meaning
But ooh! I found a manual on my bookshelf
On its knowledge, I will be leaning

Alas! like a fata morgana, it vanished
My coins keep coming out the vending machine
Now I'm left all alone, badly banished
with no one to share my thoughts or feelings, I'm unseen

But wait, does it have to be a set?
Can it not be just a singular person?
Chances are easier this way, I bet
This comes with better coin insertion

My social coin is one too unique
As though it was a toad among all the other frogs
I just have to keep on the seek
Maybe it could be dogs

“Carved Footsteps”

by Ilona Agur

You have left
Taken the shortcut
Instead of the scenic route.
Will you regret
Never looking behind
What would've this become?

A match that failed
To strike a flame
Is thrown away, I guess.
But afterward
Would burning fire
Leave bright spots in your eyes?

Here comes a knight
In shining armor
Come save the pretty damsel!
Face befallen,
When he realizes,
The damsel has left alone.

For long have you left
And it is guilt
The footsteps you've left behind.

“Sleeping Beauty”

by Charlotte Anderson

Prick a finger on a needle,
Fallen slumber, trees and *cheadle*,
Broken home and sour blood,
Beauty sleeps on roses bud
Take a mighty sword and hand
And slay the dragon,
Save the land
Wake the maiden
Fair and lit
Return the town to its fit
Lock away the spindle, grand
In the tower 'cross the land
World at peace once again,
Now that thy spindle's disruption's band.

"Glass"
by Alana Applebaum

Every day
I work till my feet are straining to support me
Till I'm burnt out and smoke trails behind me
Till my sighs just barely escape my lips
But hardly make a sound

Every day
I see so much sorrow and anguish
And try to take a stand
To find some of the good I know is there
But have to fight to be heard
Or get drowned in the endless other shouting voices

Every day
I work hard to relieve some of the pressure
To put some good into the world
But everyone looks right through me
Like I'm invisible
Made of glass

Every day
I search for someone, anyone
To see me
And all that I've worked to achieve
But no one ever does
Like I'm made of glass

Every day
I look at the numbers
Seven point nine billion people on our planet
Eight planets in our solar system
And an infinite amount of solar systems out there
I'm just one speck in the universe
One shard of glass
Like I'm invisible

“The Maiden of the Sea”
by Quinn Barnowski

The wind on the sea,
And the sound of her voice,
Are one,
One and the same.
Her dress is the foam,
That bubbles up,
Up upon the waves.
Her lips are coral.
Her skin,
Pale sand.
Her hair,
The darkest depths.
Her eyes are blue,
Like shallow seas.
Her temper,
Like the waves.
And she calls herself,
The maiden,
The maiden of the sea.

She watches the world,
As it passes her by,
The eternal maiden,
The maiden of the sea.
She commands her armies,
The dolphins and the fish.
They follow,
Without question,
The maiden of the sea.

She brings down boats,
But lets the sailors reach the shore.
She floods towns,
With her tsunamis,
But gives warning.
Always caring,
The maiden of the sea.

She is changing,
Always shaping,
Into something new.
She is the riptide,
Come to take you,

Drag you out to sea.
She is the waves,
That wash the wrecked survivors safely home.
She is the maiden,
The maiden of the sea.

"Confession Balloon"

by Matthew Chang

Intro

My inside trickles,
my foot wobbles,
I dance across the planes
I make history,
I remember legacies,
But I cannot relieve the pain
Ever so tired,
I still carry on,
I have never been like this before
For every small inch,
Every hair of movement,
I get crippled even more.
I make my mark,
Loft myself,
And dance to my master's will
But alas,
What he doesn't know,
Who he is going to kill...

My soul,
Sucked out onto the surface,
Makes me grow weaker
My mind,
Laid out under me,
Always is the painful procedure
My heart,
Black from feelings of stress,
Can barely beat any more
My organs,
Tired of constant dancing,
Is fighting a brutal war...

Love letter/confession balloon

I have always seen you constantly singing,
With no feelings of stress
I notice the great joy you keep bringing,
And the feelings you express
I always listen to the playful dancing,
Which is part of your success
I close my eyes and feel the ringing,
The great charm you possess
I hear your ballad, I hear your scherzo,
I drown the stage with my tears

I hear your redemption of Schubert's Elfking
And go with my greatest fears
I hear your nocturne, I hear your prelude,
In a minute I'm fast asleep
I hear your waltz, enjoy your mazurka,
And my tired muscles still want to leap
I hear your etudes, I hear your polonaises,
And the virtuosic hall fills with fashion
I hear your sonatas, I hear your concertos
And my heart boils with passion
I listen to your redemption of 'four seasons,'
And I imagine the peaceful, starry view
I hear your minuets, I hear your barcarolle,
And ever so much I want to be with you.

I am tired of what results I am getting,
As anyone can guess
Little by little, step by step,
Something I must confess...

You are the reason why I am alive,
Why my life has been going on
I will do anything just to thrive,
To hear your singing response
You are the reason why I dance it through,
Why I pour out my hopeless soul
I am constantly thinking about you,
And my feelings always get out of control
You are the reason why I express my feelings,
And why I think meeting you takes a toll
I am not able to change the past,
And I am growing old...

Complaint balloon

I am tired of always being crippled,
I am tired of lonely dancing
I am done with using my insides,
Just to keep a memory
I am tired of being alone,
I am tired of collapsing
I am done with using my foot,
Just to make a documentary
I am tired of being bored,
I am tired of keeping tallies
I am done listening to you sing,
And hear the loud clapping
I am tired of getting ordered,

I am tired of just waiting
I am done with using my head,
To drain away my energy

I will not stay here,
I will not dance alone,
I am finally coming to you
For all the time,
I have not been with you,
My feelings could not be subdued
I will join your lovely voice,
And we will sing together,
And we can explore the unknown
I will dance with you,
We will emulate the ocean floor,
Our voices will be of rejoice
We will make music together,
Music filled with night and fog,
The sound drawn about the world
The drowsy lights,
Along with the starry notes,
Are dim, musical, and pearled.

I know that I will join your ardor
And the highest peaks we will explore
All my afflictions I can finally ignore
And we will try every possible door

For I know that, the most beautiful thing
in the world,
Is you, my beloved. You.

“Monday Morning”
by Kyle Chen

The alarm goes off at 4:00 a.m. –
like an air-raid siren shattering my peaceful world.
Startled, I slam the snooze button.
Basking in the warmth of my bed under two soft, cozy blankets,
I struggle to bring myself back to reality.
My mother walks in. “Get up, get up!” she says.
As she flips on my blinding light,
which seems to burn brighter than the sun,
I mumble, “I’m up . . . I’m up.”
I slump out of bed with a long sigh and a great big yawn.
Half asleep, eyes still closed,
I slog through the pitch-black path to the bathroom.
I know every turn, every wall, every board that creaks.
I know this route like the back of my hand.
I reach my black Speedo—almost invisible in the dark, still air.
Still damp from last night’s practice, my suit feels like an icicle against my skin.
I pull on my sweats and T-shirt, slip my hoodie over my head,
grab the wooden railing, and walk down the stairs in the predawn darkness.
My feet hit the ice-cold floor, where the only sound is the creaking of floorboards.
A lone light in the kitchen guides me to the pantry
for a peanut-butter Larabar.
I wash it down with a glass of vanilla soy milk.
Eat, drink, yawn—
I see the headlights of the Murphy’s minivan in the driveway.
I put my milk glass in the sink,
sling my mesh bag over my shoulder,
slide on my navy blue crocs,
and hop into the back seat.
Taiyo and his mom sit in front,
but nobody chats; we’re too sleepy.
As we zoom through empty streets to the pool,
the warm backseat and the peaceful silence soothe me.
We hit green light after green light on quiet streets and arrive by 4:40.
If I’m not early, I’m late.
Other swimmers and I usually get there before our coach,
so we wait in the van until we see him.
I have time to anticipate my long week ahead.
Band test, Spanish final, math homework all run through my head.
But first, I swim.

"A Contest"

by Ahmet Kerem Demirkan

You must go forth on a quest.
It will be a hard race, a contest.
Will you dare to face the challenge?
In which you might become a savage.
Oh yes, this is a great big test.

If you win, you claim a trophy.
To enter, you will have to pay no fee.
There will be others who also compete.
Will you be the first to complete?
Or will you be beaten by Loki?

You will travel across the world.
Will you sit there and be furred?
There are shortcuts on the road.
But you will need to know a passcode.
The world will rapidly be twirled.

You all start at the same time
In Maryland is the start & finish line.
The contest will have obstacles.
Thanos might snap, turning you into particles.
If you destroy anything on the way you will get a fine.

You will have to stand there, in the center.
Do not worry, you will have a mentor
Go get in that line, to sign up.
Then relax, and drink water from that cup.
So after you hear this will you enter?

"The Waste Blob"

by Bonita Elizabeth Eckford

There must be a light at the end of this waste-filled
tunnel.
Someday where we might win.
Because this rotten mound just won't stop spreading,
We need to fight and find our courage within.

This spreading disease costs the lives of animals,
that have done no harm.
But when it costs the lives of us - is that what will
sound the alarm.
Oceans rising, forests burning, species extinct.
The jetsam of our lives ignored,
We sit in aircon boxes and hide behind closed doors.

For now, it does not hurt us,
Yet we know we need to stop.
For now we ignore the fermenting rot, but someday
we must not.

The expanding putrid mass could make us fall,
As through the oceans and bodies it will crawl.
We feed it with the waste
From the consumption that holds us enthralled

So shall we stand tall and fight?
Save this planet that gave us day and night,
Gave us a life that we may throw away.
Shall we change ourselves, so to pursue another day?

“The Colonial Ransack”

by Omar Fida

There once was a man named Alexander
His people called him the Great
He conquered vast lands from Macedonia to Iran
But he stopped at India's gates
His men, conquerors of lands, were afraid
Of a kingdom vast and prosperous
Of a realm on the banks of 700 rivers
In its army were 300 war elephants
This kingdom was called Gangaridai
But now it is called Bangladesh
It was stripped of its wealth by the colonizer's iron grip
And now it must start afresh
Indeed, our people had our golden age
But after the light comes the dark
When the Englishmen came with their flag red, white,
and blue,
They left an irremovable mark
This land was once prosperous
So powerful it cowed empires
So rich, all eyes turned to it
But famine struck, and the situation became dire
Now Bangladesh is rising again
Its memories, a wind at its back
Our people may forgive, but we do not forget
The colonial ransack

“Balance”

by Adrian Font

Life is about balance
Integrate the compensation
Don't fall off the balance scale,
or what will happen we shall not tell
If you do too much of something,
You lose the opportunities of doing something else
Hence, opening your eyes
Because your life was in disguise
Blinding you from the life that makes you wise
Whether it's too much play
Or working all day
Challenging choices will make you go berserk
Diversify your life, and you'll earn some mighty perks
Look outside your window, intake the outdoors
The place where our ancestors used to indulge in much more
The more advanced we become
The more choices we get
And the better chances that we will fail at decision making
Too much of something will never be good
and once you will see that after you have matured.
Balance has helped me and I'm sure it will help you
Balance concerns things such as games, work, and food.
If you eat too much food that will lead to getting fat
But not eating at all well we don't want none of that
Balance keeps the earth turning,
It keeps organisms' hearts beating
Balance sustains what we call creation
And maintains greatness in what is this nation
So, I will tell you once again,
Implant your feet upon the scale
And you will find yourself with the Holy Grail
That will lead you to mightily prevail

"Never Knew"
by Gabriella Ghany

What do you notice?
What do you wonder?
Can you hear the cascades of thunder?
Do you feel the autumn breeze blow?
Can you see the spring flowers grow?
As they bloom, so do you,
Step into a world you never knew,
One day you might look back,
To set your course on another track,
Should you ever be able to jump into the future,
Or blast back to the past,
Be sure to remember the moments that will always last.

"The Garden Under the Mountain"
by Emilia Gonzalez

There where the moments pass by as light,
Where every minute is printed in your mind,
There where the trees sprout in a blink of an eye.

The place where years of life are spent,
And it will have a place for you till its end.

The ones whom you hold on to from the bottom of your
heart,
Will welcome from the glorious dawn to the humble dark,
The familiar gate to the land,
Where grass spans from end to end.
The freedom to wander and to wonder,
To live without being bound to the earth yet still enjoying the
pleasures it provides.

This is the Garden under the mountain.
The factory of dreams that holds mysteries.
It holds my youth and my memories,
My joy and my misery.
My heart lies in this home,
Where no one shall ever be alone.

"Self- Esteem"

by Abby Hu

Gosh, I wish my self-esteem was there sometimes...
Those times when I wish my self-esteem was there...

For you.

But- never in my mind, I thought it would be...

For you.

Like you even notice me, hah!

Like you even care...

No matter what they say about you...

My heart will never move on...

I never moved on...

GOSH! WHY MUST YOU PRETEND I DON'T EXIST?!

It's because of you and your self-esteem...

I know, I wish I never met him...

I wish I had self-esteem...

But I don't.

But I can't.

Wishing I was released from my cage...

I never did.

I never could have even if I tried.

I wish... no

I wish my self-esteem was there.

For you.

But it's not.

I lost it because of you.

"A Bee's Life"

by Nicholas Murray

I work for the hive
A miraculous sight
For the blossom I dive
In the lovely spring night

I rush for the flower
A sweet delight
To devour the nectar
In the lovely spring night

The stars welcome me
Like warm candle light
I feel free
In the lovely spring night

“A Natural Reflection”

by Claire Lee

Today the day the dawn came bright and clear,
The start of the most wonderful day of the year.
A valley lies, between two mountainous plains,
A place of beauty and wonder, impossible to explain.

The day in this valley is coming to an end,
But the magic of night is about to begin.
The birds tweet their calls for the promise of tomorrow,
The joy, and the laughter, and the bittersweet sorrow.

The landscape quiets awaiting the night,
And looking to tomorrow with a fresh new sight.
I sit upon a high risen stone,
And enjoy the peace of being alone.

The light grows dim as night comes near,
And the stars are due to soon appear.
The mountains gleam in the sunset glow,
And sunset is the most magical time, you know.

I watch the horizon as the sun dips low,
Beyond the mountains, and the trees below.
As the brook bubbles and my worries fade,
I grin at the wonder of this beautiful glade.

As the flowers dance in the last light of day,
The sun drops fully and fades away.
Now night has come and the stars are to be seen,
The moonlight casts a beautiful gleam.

The grasses sway in the cool night wind,
The branches of the trees slightly rustle and bend.
Fireflies dance in the enchanting sky,
An owl hoots, as it glides by.

And in this place, I sit alone,
Feeling within it the comforts of home.
Being one with nature, the land and the sky,
I let my heart take flight, and fly.

"Guardians"

by Sophie Levine

Page 13, And There Was Evening
And There Was Morning.

A tale by
Harriet Cohen Helfand and
Ellen Kahan Zager.
A book sent
From PJ Library.
From my childhood.
Not very interesting to me
Then.

I liked
The story books.
Ones that usually,
Didn't have much to do
With the Torah.
Usually just people
Going through life.
And they were Jewish.

Page 13, And There Was Evening
And There Was Morning.

"For taking good care of this wonderful plan,
God spoke the words that made woman and man
To watch over all beings who live in the sky,
The sea and the land, and all you can spy."

Then.
I never knew
What a passion I would have
To fight for the
Environment.
To have love
For the nature.
To be ashamed
For what we humans
Have done.

picture:
The haze filled skies,
The albatross on
Midway Island.

Their death

From ingesting plastic.
Or the infinite rows
Of animals.
Their names in black
On the IUCN red list
Extinct.

I understand that it's
Just a tale.
Just one of likely hundreds,
People seeking an answer to their question:
Why are we here?
How did we get here?
What is our purpose?

And yet I wonder...
Maybe I'm not supposed to
Maybe I'm supposed to just accept it
Perhaps I should listen to the voices
Who discourage
"Don't question it,
There is nothing you can do,
It's just the way things are"

But still I wonder...
How much farther from the truth,
How much more distant from reality,
Could that passage,
That line from And There Was Evening
And There Was Morning,
How much farther could it be?

"In Their Arms"

by Helen Liang

They brought you into the world
Gave you good health and kept you alive
These caregivers would hug you, kiss you, and send you to education.
When you came home, you would hug in their arms.

Whenever you felt hungry, sick, or tired,
Whenever you had a secret to tell,
Whenever you wanted to cuddle,
You could always hug in their arms.

They want best for you in this cruel gambling game of life
They want you to find your spark of joy
When they come home from hard labor, you are always their greatest achievement.
When they come home, you could always hug them in their arms.

Whenever they got joint pains and cramps,
Whenever they got large projects ahead,
Whenever they felt the need for a stress reliever,
You could always hug them in their arms.

In their arms, you could cry in front of them and spill out your sorrows.
They would comfort you and shroud you in their protective aura.
In their old age, they would teach you their life experience and let you recover,
Whenever you would cry in their arms.

Whenever you had a loss and could not stand,
Whenever you had a knot in your throat you could not untie,
Whenever you had a fear for the unknown,
You could always hug
In their arms.

"Michael Phelps at the Block" (based on "Casey at the Bat")
by Ashley Liu

Michael Phelps's future didn't look so good,
Coming in 16th at qualifiers, in last place he stood.
Germany's Paul Biderman swam and finished first,
For Phelps, the 2009 Rome Championships seemed cursed.

Some left the natatorium, dejected. Those who remained
Believed he'd trained;
They believed "If Michael gets a good rest-
For sure he'll beat the test."

However, Paul had a new, better high-tech suit,
A sleek and human orca in gold medal pursuit
In the natatorium the disbelief settled in,
For there seemed little chance of a Michael Phelps win.

Phelps let out burst, to the relief of them all,
Paul Biderman, to their surprise, was first to hit the wall,
when the board lit up, and the crowd saw what had transpired
Phelps at 2nd and Paul at first left the crowd inspired.

From ten thousand fans came loud resounding cries;
shaking the ground and reaching the skies;
breaking through sound barriers and bouncing and dancing
Phelps, mighty Phelps, to the finals was advancing.

Looking at the clear blue 50-meter pool, Michel walked confidently under the gaze of a ton;
There was intimidation in Michael's building when he took off his blue parka in the scorching sun.
The crowd cheered as they watched him like a hawk,
No one would doubt that Michel was at the block.

Twenty thousand eyes were on him as he put on his united states bearing goggle and cap;
Ten thousand hands clapped when he swung his arms, almost like he wanted his arm to snap;
As the official took his place at the microphone ready to start the race,
Concentration filled his eyes, a scowl on his face.

Now the swimmers were on the blocks, for all, the chances of winning were minute,
Paul Biderman stood with his new tech suit.
The officials stepped up to the pool 2 meters deep-
"Take your marks," said the official. "BEEP."

A boisterous scream came from the natatorium, packed full of color that were bright,
Like a lion roaring in the midst of a fight;
"Go! You can do it Phelps! Shouted someone from the stands;
Most likely the cheers kept Phelps going as he sprinted down the pool like a kid late to school.

With each long stroke Phelps took his grace shone, many watched in yearn;
He had finished the first fifty meters and was heading in for the turn, ;
Paul was right before Phelps as they sped by like a shark hunting prey;
The officials leaned over, watching the turn as the water sprayed.

"C'mon Phelps! Go USA!" the deafening voice of ten thousand screamed,
With each stroke, the crowd cheered, waiting for Phelps' reputation to be redeemed.
They watched Phelps and Biderman went in for the next turn, water flowing against their skin,
Everyone knew that both were giving it their all to win.

As the last fifty meters neared, the crowd was tense but kept its cool,
Paul in his new suit racing down the pool;
Phelps close at his feet, neither backing down,
Now the water didn't ripple, at least not in this town.

somewhere in the world, there was a happy soul, and children dancing,
The national anthem playing somewhere, and people singing;
Somewhere there was laughter, and somewhere people cheered,
There was no joy in the Us, the result was what they'd feared.

"To Stay Together"

by J William Meek

As the earth shines its heavenly gift of life to us,
I find it quite hard not to look at it and wonder, why are some of us so tough?
Is it because when they were growing up they were treated so rough?
Or is it the opposite, were they good as a kid?

Now as a teenager I wish I could understand what aging will do, is doing, and did.
We grow and grow and grow, forgetting the past over time and yet still in our right minds
There lies the bonds between people our minds remember, that if we wish to be safe, those people we must stay with,
together.

May god, or whoever is up there let us know when they'll go
But for now my love, we may cuddle in the snow although vicious and cold,
Wet and uncomfortable for our bodies to lie
We're together and our love is too bold to ever give into the cold and die.

And we can only wish that everything we love lasts forever.
Let us remember, that if we wish to be safe,
those people we must stay with, together.

"An Ode to the People Behind the Bedroom Doors"

by Caroline McCann

An Ode to the people locked behind the bedroom doors
who get their interaction from a screen
and their exercise from a floor.
Who read and write and live in their own chosen world,
Who know they should go outside,
but know how reality hurts.

They wish they had thick skin
And eyes with a magical glint
They wish they could laugh, cry, love
and be brave enough to take some hits.

They dream of an adventure,
To be a wizard's favorite apprentice,
To have the wisdom of an old centaur,
To win the crown of a powerful princess.

They may not know what to say or when, but their imagination knows no limits
And they may live with their head in the clouds, though that's nobody's business.

They make marks on the page,
Clean lines cut the deepest.
And from in front of that door,
Nobody would believe it,

But you can make a solemn wish
That they didn't have to escape,
And alas, they'd still be their own captive,
They can't help but disassociate.
You could say their condition's bad luck,
Maybe a sick twist of fate?
Perhaps it's love, a search for the lost?
Let's be honest, it's likely hate.

And it's all wrapped up in that feeling that keeps them
awake.

Cause when you're stuck in a world called yours, but which is clearly not your own,
One can start feeling so very, very, very
alone.
So, an ode,
to people left behind the bedroom doors;
Who close their eyes to become...
Supermundanae,
Something more.

“What Am I To You?”

by Anna Murray

What am I to you?
What are all of us to you?
I sit here crammed in a box,
While you poke and pull at my skin,
Testing to see if you can get that highlight to glow just a bit brighter,
To see if you can make that lipstick last just a bit longer,
To see if you can create a concealer to hide a bit more of your age,
And your cruelty
And after you violate me,
Pouring fluids in my eyes,
That burn, that sting,
While I’m crying for help,
Screaming for something to change,
For someone to help,
While the same is happening to every other animal in your white room,
With your white lab coats,
And your masks,
We can’t even look you in the eye,
You must feel something.
What am I to you?
You must feel something?
Right?
You torture me and take me from my home,
You don’t stop,
You don’t feel anything,
As long as you get your money at the end of the day,
And by the end of that day
You decide you don’t need me,
Well not alive,
I am better off to you,
In little pieces.
Dissected.
I can’t protest now,
I can’t cry out,
I hope you hear our cries in your dreams,
I hope it stays with you until your last breath,
I hope you feel something.
Anything.
But at least,
At the very least,
You can look just a bit better for your Friday night date.

“Lavender and the Sun”

by Tobi Raofield

Lavender

The color of his eyes

The creases of her skin

When she smiles

The Sun

The brightness of their gaze

When she looks at me

Why do they look at me?

Look at me

I’m not worth anything

Yet here we are

Here they are

They are

Amazing and wonderful

And I am

Just the opposite

Lavender

The flowers that

Make me think of him

And his lovely kindness

The Sun

The reason I

Keep going

Because of her

Lavender

They mean everything to me

The Sun

They are worth everything

Lavender

The sound of her footsteps

The Sun

The warmth of him

You are

Lavender and the Sun

And you make me feel the same

“Hello Hope, Goodbye Home”

by Remy R. Shaw

We fly so high

So we cannot fall

As we say goodbye

To earth our home

A new journey

and destination

We stow memory

Of our round nation

For our troubles and our strife

You gave us the gift of life

Goodbye valleys oh so green

Hello stars that twinkle and gleam

Goodbye oceans so great and blue

Hello new hope, I journey to you

Goodbye Earth Land of glory

Hello Stars may you champion a new story

But as we venture into the unknown

We know we are not alone

For we remember you,

Earth our home

“Open Your Eyes”

by Lila Robinson

The long lands free untouched now a place where people combust
cutting the beautiful trees to please their daily needs
The miss-please as we make the world bleed,
the smoke that makes our air choke,
and were just watching, botching the forests and treating the world at its poorest.
The forest fires, performance tires oh! the number of cars polluting the air.
Animals trying to survive as we as people are striving off their skin and bones
Bones that we sell to now create our home.
Homes that need space to embrace the land that they have taken,
That they've bargained for just for that daily need that please
Please know how we're seizing the world as our own now knowing
how we are spreading this disease of destruction and displeasure to our world
With that corruption, abruptness as we dysfunction our world
open your eyes and see the pleas of the world as it departs
And what can we do?

“Ocean Song”

by Mira Sofia Vaidya

The salty breeze ruffles my hair, and the misty spray peppers my face. Listening to that ocean song. The splashing waves shield the wonders below. They all love that ocean song. It feeds their souls and protects them from the world above. Some may not appreciate the gentle rhythm of the waves and the melodious swaying of the depths below. But I'll always love that ocean song. The one that ruffles my hair and mists my face.

"A State of Mind"

by Annabel Taylor

On a humid August morning
Just 30 minutes to noon
I was born at NYU hospital
Taken home in a swaddle

In those early years
Our nanny took us in our twin stroller around Gramercy Park
But mostly,
We played in our little apartment
With matchbox cars
And cloth dolls
I remember
Afternoons spent at the Union Square playground with my nursery friends
While our parents picnicked and chatted
My old doorman who gave me the warmest bear hugs
The National Arts Club and the annual holiday parties
And I suppose my memories are also stories
From my brother and my mom and my dad
The memories are
Woven pieces that come from summer days in the park
Autumn evenings dining at the trattoria on our block
And it all sort of comes together

There's this picture on my desk of me as a baby
My dad props me up with one hand
And takes the photo with a polaroid in the other
I'm sitting on the windowsill of our favorite cafe
And in that picture,
You can kind of see everything
The people rushing off to work in the background
The people sipping coffee on brownstone stoops
It's a picture that sort of speaks for itself

When I go back to the Big Apple
I'm stepping back into time
We say hi to my old hairdresser
And the friendly doorman
New York may be big
It's a city of over 8 million after all
And all those people
Are just like me
They come from everywhere
And their culture travels with them
But today, they are New Yorkers

I could never forget this place
And it won't forget me
Because when I return,
My own little world will still be there
My apartment with the creaky hardwood floors
The laundromat
The deli
The grocery store
The corner pharmacy
The toy store
The park
All within a couple of blocks

The Empire City never fails to amaze me
Because people always
Come together
Come closer
Rely on thy neighbor
In times of need
"For on that clear September morning of 2001
Yes, there was tragedy
But in the aftermath, the world saw hope in the solidarity
And the strength of New Yorkers,"
My parents tell me
In mid March 2020
And during the many months that followed
The world saw New York shut down
The city that never sleeps
Took a little nap
But then awoke
Fresher than ever

New York is culture
It's cuisine
And little ethnic enclaves
Where you can find your people
Everyone here comes from different walks of life
The streets sing a song of a thousand languages
And the delis and little corner cafes smell like heaven
With every step
Chinatown is full of trinket stores and poultry markets
Further north, the confectionary shops in Little Italy sell perfectly packaged panettone
That my mom and I adore browsing
during the holidays
And for a late brunch, Balthazar is just around the corner in Soho
And though the wait is a few hours long
It is always worth it

To take me back to a beloved brasserie in Paris near my mom's childhood flat
And when I walk by Hanoi House in the East Village
I catch a waft of the simmering pho broth
And it brings me back to my Ba's kitchen
In Little India, I can smell the sizzling naan
That sputters in underground kitchens
Then, there's my favorite kawaii minimarts in Koreatown
That I go to while my brother grabs boba with my dad
After a quick ride on the NR train, my nanny Lolita will greet us
With a casserole of her famous Filipino chicken adobo
At her home in Queens
In New York, you always find snippets of where you're from
Wherever you go

New York isn't something I could just tell someone about
It's a feeling
Like Billie Joel says in that song
It's a New York state of mind

"Radiating Smiles"
by Natasha E. Williams

You close your eyes and see nothing but darkness,
The darkness holds a subtle hint of calmness,
As you open your eyes you see a wave of color,
Color of spirits gliding through the air,
No sense of direction although they still move,
Carrying waves of color and a sort of happy radiation with them.

As you go about your day the radiation continues to move about the air,
As spirits collide with the living beings around them,
The radiation seems to rub onto them,
The happy radiation caused laughing,
Smiling,
Singing,
And dancing to,
We cause the radiation to spread to others around,
Who then becomes happy as well.

No matter the day,
The week,
The month,
Even the year,
They're always around,
Causing smiles upon the faces of those they are near.

"The Sidewalk"

by Azra Williams

Never have you felt true bravery,
Until you have coward,
And cried-
Till your eyes bled red.
Until you have scraped your knees on the pavement.
After face planting on the sidewalk.
When you fall,
You are given a chance
A *hope* to rise up.
Every wound turns into a callus after it heals-
Stronger.
To be strong you must know,
What it is to be weak.
You must live as a mouse,
To learn the way of the lion.
You must walk down the sidewalk first,
To know when the sidewalk looks up.
And soar down a rollercoaster,
To race up.
Towards the sky.
And past the stars.
But I am scared.
Of heights,
As the stars reach high.
Travel that far?
And for what?
Bravery?
For the chance to stand up and speak what you *really* believe.
Would you travel that far?
For the chance to wear the costume of a lion.
How far would you travel?
How much would you risk?
How much would you laugh,
When you realize you *need* bravery...
To be brave.
After falling on the sidewalk,
You need bravery to stand back up.
Knowing that it is possible you might fall again.
Knowing that you *will* fall again,
But standing anyway.
And you might fear that bravery.
Because you know what it means.
You know the blood running down your leg from scraping your knee on the sidewalk.
You know the cost,
But you've *seen* what bravery looks like.
And you want it.
You want to look at yourself,
Deep inside your eyes,

To find strength.
You want to look into the mirror,
To find a lion staring deep into your soul.
But have you looked in the eyes of a lion?
Have you seen the sad expression written upon its face?
They too have walked the sidewalk.
They too will continue walking the sidewalk.
With every great reward,
Comes great consequence,
As the sidewalk has chips and cracks,
But will never end.

“Steve Harmon”
by Victoria English
Steve

I should not have gone to the store that day
I should not have gone that way home
I should have walked away that day at the park

I am scared
Imprisoned I feel, imprisoned I am
I cannot scream
I cannot yell
Otherwise I'll be the one outside of the cells
Getting punched, kicked, where no one can help me

I feel so alone
Like I'm the only one here
The guards don't care if one is screaming
As long as no one escapes

I feel like no one believes me
When I say I wasn't wrong
But that doesn't matter much
Cause I know what I know
And I know I'm innocent

Everyday I fall asleep to muffled screams,
Cries, people getting beaten up outside
But here I am,
All alone,
Where no one believes me

I should not have gone to the store that day
I should not have gone that way home
I should have walked away that day at the park
This is not home

Harmon

“Take Shelter, Mariupol”
by Ilona Agur

“The Russians have now attacked the civilian city of Mariupol. So far, there have only been ten deaths from an apartment building crash, and 30 injuries, but no major damage is being done. We expect the Russians to continue bombing until this city surrenders.”

It had been one day since the first attack, while I was at school. After my mom picked me up, we turned on the news and we never turned it off since.

I was currently lying on the couch, eating a bowl of soup, flipping and turning over the events of the bombing yesterday, when a vibration came from under me. Then it came again, more violent this time. It was clear my family members Granny, Papa, Mama, Jimmy, and Rose the Golden Retriever felt it too, since they all came out into the living room.

“Mamy,” my little brother Jimmy muttered. “Is that a dinosaur?”

“No honey,” was all Mama said.

A piercing screech came from the ceiling. It filled the whole apartment building, or so it seemed. That same piercing sound happened at school, when the bombs first fell.

Rose began howling, dashing around the room and barking at the noise. Meanwhile, 4 year old Jimmy started crying. Granny bent down and covered her ears.

“Down to the bunker!” Papa shouted over the noise. As he said this, the whole room began shaking even more violently, plaster falling off in chunks from the roof. Mama ushered Jimmy and I out of the room, arms around us like a mother chicken protecting its chicks. We dashed down the stairs in frantic panic, with the ceiling collapsing in on us, and the noise of everything bursting our eardrums. Dirt and pieces of floor and ceiling rained on us as we neared the bunker, covering our vision. As we reached the basement, a chunk of marble fell off the ceiling, and I heard a distant scream far off. Mama grabbed the doorknob and swung it wide open, quickly shoving the two of us in.

We squeezed our way through the crowd of injured families. The odor of sweat and blood was thick, and reeked in the whole room. I could see a toddler with his shirt torn off, revealing a flowing gash in his left side, pouring out blood from within, and I quickly turned away.

It was a few minutes of pure relief that we survived, before I realized what was off. “Where are Papa and Granny?” I shouted. All of us turned around in unison, searching the room for any sign of the two. We found nothing.

“Papa...Gran...” Jimmy sniffled.

I started panicking, even more than I was before. Where were they? Did they make it? They had to. They just *had* to.

Jimmy began crying again. Mama’s brave face that she wore throughout every day began to fade. It was almost as if years of suffering were etched into her face, her eyes brimming with water.

I, too, was crumbling inside. Minutes, hours passed. No sign of Papa or Granny, even though we searched the entire room multiple times. The suffering of families was thick in the air, and it was clear we weren’t the only ones who couldn’t find our loved ones. The stench of blood was present also, and I couldn’t help thinking of that toddler with the gash in his side, and the pain on his face.

“R--renia? Jimmy? Is that you?” A voice came from behind us.

We all turned around swiftly. There, standing in front of us, was Papa!

Jimmy and I crushed him in a bear hug. I was so relieved to finally be in his arms again, with all the tears and sweat we shed waiting for him.

His face was covered in dirt and grime, and there were a number of cuts dripping blood on his side, which Mama proceeded to patch up with some bandages stored in the bunker first-aid kit.

“Where *were* you?” I cried. “We were so worried.”

His face darkened into a grim and sorrowful expression. “Granny...she was too tired to move. Her legs were too slow, she had a bad back..she couldn’t make it on her own. I had to help her.”

“Where is Granny, then?” Jimmy said.

Papa knelt down on one knee. “Kids...I’m sorry. Even with my help...Granny didn’t make it.”

Granny. Granny was gone. I couldn’t believe it. One or two hours ago, Granny was making pickles and talking to me about the food shortage. Now, there was no more Granny.

Jimmy clearly didn’t understand what that meant. “Wait...gone? Was she eaten by the dinosaur?”

Papa looked at Mama, unsure of what to do. Mama shook her head, indicating that she did not want Jimmy to know what happened to Granny. "Granny is not here right now," Papa said quietly. "That's all."

I wanted so badly to go into my room, curl up, and cry myself to sleep. But right now, I had to persevere. Bombs were shelling my home, and with no home left, I had to stick with my family. It was clear that Papa and Ma-ma were thinking the same thing.

We would mourn later. Now, we had to stay alive.

"A Twins Treasured Tale"
by Charlotte Anderson and Taylor Emonson Clyde

Chapter One (The Flash Back)

"Mom! Quinn is in my room again!" Alana yelled as she gave Quinn a shove.

"No, she was touching my stuff. I was just giving her a taste of her own medicine!" Quinn yelled back.

"Stop bickering. I know you're both mad, but please, there is no need to wake the baby. Why don't you two go play outside? Your father is practicing some magic out there, maybe you should join him." Their mother said in her soothing voice as she swept into the room with her long wings trailing behind her.

"Fine." Both grumbled, as they left the room.

While the twins were outside, their mother went to calm the baby who had already been awakened by the noise.

"Shh shh shh. It will be alright." Their mother told Chris, as she rocked him in her arms. She spun him around and carefully looked for a trace of wings or magic. "Oh no. Not another one like Alana." She said quietly, in case Alana was in earshot. "The poor girl has upside magic. I really didn't think you would either." She said disappointedly as she placed Chris back in his crib. Suddenly, a small halo flashed above Chris's head. "Oh, thank goodness!" Mother exclaimed, as she went to go get her husband.

"Honey! Chris has our gift!" Mother yelled. The twins immediately came running.

"He has the power of an angel too!?" Both shouted, out of breath. Their mother nodded. The twins were excited for Chris, but deep-down Alana was disappointed and had hoped there would be another misfit like herself. However, she didn't let her thoughts ruin her family's excitement and continued on like she was excited too. That night was full of fun and games as it had been when mother and father had found out that Quinn had the gift of an angel too. To their parents, it didn't look like Alana had a gift and so the night the family found out about Quinn they just assumed Alana was powerless. Alana knew she had some kind of power, and was eager for her 13th birthday to come when she would grow her wings and truly find out. While the family was eating a messenger came and knocked on the door. The children stayed seated while mother and father talked to the man outside. When they came back into the cottage they had worried expressions on their faces.

"What was that all about?" Quinn asked curiously.

"Um... Nothing at all. Now let's get back to the celebrations." Mother said as she forced a smile.

The family continued on but the twins were suspicious. After they were sent to bed, they overheard their mother and father's conversation.

"I'm worried, Eric. What if what the messenger said was true?" Mother asked father.

"I don't know. We should sleep in the twins' room tonight just in case. If there really is a man hunting them we need to be prepared." Father said worriedly as he and mother went to get pillows from their rooms.

"Hunting us!?" Alana whispered loudly.

Quinn gave her a worried look. "I think so." He said quietly.

"What if they hurt mum and dad?! Or Chris! Or us?" Alana replied.

Quinn was quiet for a while. Finally, he said "You're right. They are in danger. We are too. The only thing I can think to do is..." Quinn said hesitantly.

"What!?" Alana asked impatiently.

"I think we need to run away. Before you freak out, I think you should know it's the best thing for the family. The man is only coming here for us so if we leave he won't want to come to the cottage and hurt mum or dad. We just need to find some place to hide out while he is looking for us. And then we can come back home. Simple." Quinn said as he began to grab his compass.

"But we can't leave!" Alana protested.

Quinn just gave her a sad look. Alana knew she needed to if she wanted to keep her family safe. That night the two set out with enough supplies to hopefully last and with hope that they could return to their family in only a few days. Little did they know that their journey would last almost a decade and that running from this man wouldn't be enough.

Chapter Two

It had been four years since they had to leave their family, and they were now fifteen. Quinn had shown signs of angel magic but did not grow angel wings. Instead he grew into a dragon. Alana had no magic, but never lost hope in getting hers. "Any day now Quinn." She would say. But it never happened. She started to lose hope in getting her wings. Quinn grew more powerful.

While treading through bushes and trees, something suddenly scratched Alana. As she rang out in pain Quinn's wings flared out in alarm. Big golden wings and straight, rough, black horns. Ran over to his sister. Her arm started bleeding rapidly. Using the last of their bandages (that he took before running away, yes, they lasted four years). While wrapping the wound Alana pulled away from her twin.

"Alana we need to wrap the wound up or it'll get infected." He said, chasing after her. Alana started stumbling and tripping as she walked along. "I'm... Fiinee." She said then turned and ran into a pine tree knocking herself out. After a while dusk fell upon them Alana was still asleep. They had to do it. They had to go back. They were counted missing and everyone will be looking for them, but Alana was getting worse by the minute. Quinn scooped his sister into his hands and used his wings for the first time in months. The air was cold and moist and the moon shone bright. The town's lights were on and lighting up the air. Then he spotted it. Their old cottage at the edge of the forest, and their mother and father sitting on the porch watching the forest for any signs of life. Then he did it. He swooped down and landed behind the cottage. Hurried footsteps came from the side of their house. "QUINN!" A female voice yelled. It was their mother. "Where is Alana, is she ok?" Quinn shook his head no.

Chapter Three

"They found them. THEY FOUND THEM!" Everyone in town was yelling. The news was out. The hunter will come again. Alana and Quinn only had a little time.

"Alana needs help!" Quinn yelled to his mother as he rushed into the cottage with Alana in his arms.

"What happened!?" Mother and father asked.

"She scraped her arm and wouldn't let me bandage it. It's infected." Quinn told them. He placed his twin down on the clear dining room table.

"Quinn! Quinn!" Chris yelled in excitement as he tried to give him a hug.

"I missed you too buddy. But go upstairs. Now is NOT the time." Quinn said halfheartedly as he tried to tend to his sister. Mother brought Chris to his room. After bandaging Alana's arm and putting on a coating of Neosporin, mother made her special healing soup. Slowly, Alana's eyes opened.

"What happened?" She asked sleepily.

Quinn cheered and gave his sister a hug. Once Alana was back on her feet she stumbled over once again. "Not now." His mother exclaimed. Quinn shot her a look.

"The hunter will be coming again. We must leave." Quinn told her as he walked Alana over to the door.

"But Alana is not well! Besides, you can't run from this man your whole life. Do you know how upset your father and I were when we found out you ran away? Please, you can't leave us again. You can't live in fear your whole life." Mother told him as a tear ran down her cheek. Quinn stopped in his tracks. He knew his mother was right and he had secretly missed her too. He knew what he had to do.

"Stay with Alana. I will defeat this hunter. That way we can live together again. As a family." Quinn told his mother and father as he placed Alana back on the table. He then swiftly left the room and flew up and out of the cottage. His parents had no time to argue. They only hoped he would be able to defeat this man on his own.

Chapter Four

When Quinn arrived at this hunter's house he was surprised to see him sitting on the step awaiting his arrival.

"I can feel your strong magic. My oh my. You've gotten quite big too. For a while I was worried I would never find you." The hunter said maliciously. "The names Vendin. I suppose you're here to 'defeat me.' Well let me just tell you now, that's not going to happen." Vendin said as he rose from his seat. Suddenly, two large dragon-like wings appeared and where his feet were he now had talons the size of Quinn's head.

"You're part dragon too!" Quinn said, stunned.

"That's right. Now why don't you just give up now. It seems your sister is defective anyways so I can just take you." Vendin retorted as he hovered over Quinn. Quickly, Quinn jumped back and flew up. He raised his hands and was almost ready to strike when suddenly Vendin caught hold of his leg. "You're not going anywhere now." He said as he wrapped his talons around Quinn's thin body. Quinn let out a faint cry and fell to the ground.

Back at the cottage Alana suddenly sat up straight. She had felt the pain from her twin. "Is everything alright?" Her parents asked worriedly. Suddenly, Alana's wings began to grow. But unlike her family's angel wings, her wings were bright blue and blue dust circled around her. Her parents sat there, stunned.

"Quinn is in trouble." Alana said quickly and pushed her feet off the ground. She then shape-shifted into a giant blue bird and began to fly across the sky."

"Quinn, Quinn!" She called as she searched the ground. Her vision had seemed to enhance and she could now see everything perfectly clearly. She dove down once she had spotted him. With one powerful strike she knocked Vendin off his feet and freed her brother. "Ha the defective one, finally Alana." Vendin leapt off the ground from where he lay surprised at her power and snatched her up from where she was standing.

"Alana..." Quinn managed to say before he passed out. A muffled voice came faintly through the blackness. It was Alana! Or so he thought. The mirage slowly faded away. He was devastated to see nothing above him either. He tried to stand but his side stung where he was thrown to ground from, but that got him thinking was that Alana the bluebird?

Chapter Five

He hobbled back to the house and collapsed on his bed, looking up and seeing a note strapped to the bottom of the bunk. Quinn. It was written in Alana's handwriting! He ripped it open and found a neatly folded note with tear marks smudging a little of the ink, but he could still read it. It read,

Quinn my dear twin.
When you find this I won't be there.
Don't come looking for me.
He has always been looking for me.
Keep Mother and Father safe and give Chris big hugs for me every night.
I am with the hunter.
I was the bluebird.
I have a curse.
Dark magic.
Goodluck Quinn, your Sister, Alana.

Now it was his turn to cry. Where was she? He couldn't let Vendin hurt Alana; he had to help. That meant running away again.

"See you again soon my family." He was off to get his twin back.

"Every Little Move"

by Whitney Durham

Chapter One: How the Tables Have Turned

"I'm gonna win!" Haley yelled.

"Not on my watch!" Millie yelled back.

Haley and Amelia, or Millie as everyone calls her, were in a basement playing a video game racing down the racetrack of the game world called 60, it's the game where you have to fight for your life in order to survive and win the game. It came out just this month October, 2009 and as a gift, Millie's parents gave it to her. Let's just say Millie was a little rich and Haley was a little richer. Haley turned her elbows to the left making her catch up to Millie. Upstairs, Haley could hear her parents fighting, and just as always, she heard her mother stomp out of the house. Her parents used to love it here and love everything about their life, until this year, the year Haley turned 12 years old. Millie seemed to notice the small frown on Haley's face when her mom slammed the door. She decided to try to get her out of her mind.

"Why don't we do something else, maybe go to the park?" Millie said, stopping the game.

"Nah, I'm good," Haley said, shrugging it off lightly. She got up, washed the face of disappointment off just as quickly as she put it on, and went to the mini fridge and got a soda. She had on the long shorts that go to your knees and an AC DC tee shirt. It made her look very masculine.

"You know what?" Haley said, opening the soda and falling onto the couch. "When I get older, I'm gonna get a big mansion, as big as the hotel in *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* and then we're gonna have to sleep over whenever we want," She said, painting the image in the air with her hands.

"Uh huh, sure and the actual possibility of that happening is what? 1 to 100?" Millie stated sarcastically. "I'll come visit you," Millie lightly laughed, pushing up her glasses so they wouldn't fall. But Millie realized this was just an act of sadness toward her parents getting into all these fights, Millie's face changed from sarcastic to understanding.

"They'll stop fighting eventually you know. It's only a matter of time." she said putting her game control on the coffee table.

"This isn't about them, this is about us, I wanna hang out with you every day and not have to ever do another sheet of pre-algebra again! You're my best friend, and you're all I've got," She said with content. "Even better idea! We could live in the game. I wish we could live in the game and not hav-" She was cut off. Dark. Blank. Nothingness.

Chapter 2: The Ending at only the Beginning

14 years. 14 years they have been stuck in the game 60. And 29 levels and 9 lives later they are tired of this game and ready to go home.

"Don't move." She told the security guard, pointing the blade at him. Right now they were in a bank vault because they had to steal money - that was the object of the level. Level 29. They stole the money and they just had to get the security guard to shut up.

"Okay let's go," Millie said, running out of the room and up the stairs to the doors. And after another glance at the officer, she followed her. When Haley opened the door, she didn't see anything but the parking lot and a black SUV pulling off. She didn't think anything of it. Sometimes when they do the level Millie goes home without notice. It was easier in case someone saw them, only one of them might get caught. She walked out into

the lot and took off her black ski mask she hid her face from and got in the new red sports car she, not surprisingly, stole. After a while of aimlessly driving around the town it was dark and she drove to her apartment. She walked up the three floors and stopped at the dark blue door. She got her keys from her pocket accidentally touching her switchblade. She opened the squeaky door, but there wasn't just her unmade bed and very dirty kitchen but two men in black holding Millie by the arms. She was squealing and trying to get out.

"Millie! Oh my god w- what's going on!?" Haley reached out to touch but pulled back knowing she could make one of the guards mad.

"Haley Hundley," One of the men said slowly. "We have your friend here."

"You don't say," She said sarcastically but she looked at Millie's face and it clearly wasn't a good time to do that, she was petrified.

"I walked out of the bank, about to go to the car but they saw me. Haley, they got me. They're gonna take me back to stage 1!" Millie said, trying not to let a tear fall.

"You can't do this!" Haley yelled. "Who's making you do this!" She screamed. You could practically see the steam coming out of her ears.

"Unfortunately, you can't do anything about it." One of the men in black took out a silver taser and zapped Millie. She writhed in pain and fell limp in the man's arms.

"NOOO!" Haley said. "Hey stop! Stop, I'll do anything!" Haley yelled in attempted to get them to stop. The man zapped again and became nothing but a cloud of smoke disintegrating her only friend back to stage 1. It was too late. Millie was gone, and a gust of wind blew the last of the girl into oblivion.

"You have 2 options, you can either come with us and go to stage 1 and help your friend or keep on going with the game and leave. I'll give you a hint. There are only 30 levels to the game." Then the man snapped his fingers and disappeared leaving Haley worried, confused and heartbroken. She had a choice: leave her best friend or leave this stupid game. But she knew the right decision. The one she never thought in a million years that it would happen. She had to leave her. Of course, all the people she loved had let her go and didn't love her anymore. Her mom, her dad, she had to leave Millie. It would only be a matter of time before she would forget about her. She had to leave her behind.

Chapter 3: Leaving it all Behind

The last level. The last level until she gets out. The last level and she leaves her best friend behind. The last level and she gets to see actual humans. The last level. And she.... was ready as heck.

She walked toward her front door, she didn't know where she was going but she knew she needed to go somewhere. She opened the door but the hallway was replaced by a black room, and she was in the middle of it. She wasn't scared. Or confused. She knew that leaving Millie was a choice she could never take back. But she was ready, she had her switchblade and knives, her suit and her hope. The lights were suddenly on.

"So, are you here to leave the game?" A manly voice said. It was coming from everywhere.

"YES!" Haley said, yelling with not a doubt in mind.

"Okay," The voice paused for a second, "Then let's play a game, what about... ghosts in the graveyard," The male voice said. Graves started to form around her.

"You must find me or... then you shall breathe one's last. Remember you have 1 life left, you used 9 already. Your choice. The odds are in your favor." The voice went away. Haley got into a fighting stance. The one she had when she and Millie would play capture the flag. She was going to miss that.

"I *want* to go home," The middle-aged woman said, coming from behind her. "I *want* to go home to my kids and my husband," she said in the dimly lit room, she started crying. "I have to find him."

"I want my mommy!" A little boy said, crying. "I *have* to find him!" She kept seeing them everywhere she looked. She could only see people crying, yelling 'I need to find him.' and 'I wanna go home.' But she knew it was fake. She had to find him in order to get home. Trickster. This was it. I have to trust my gut. She thought. She let herself lead the way. She dogged every person and swerved. Until she came across a door. It looked like it was locked. It was intriguing. She always had a bobby pin in her hair so she let down her raven locks, she dyed it to be harder to see here in the game, she got it out and pushed it into the door lock. She twisted it for a moment and it popped. She was in. She paused. Was she ready to meet the person that put her here? Was she ready to meet the trickster? But nevertheless, she proceeded. There in the middle of the room she saw a dark shape. It was a chair.

"The odds were never in my favor!" Haley said, bursting through the door. "You will not stop me from going home! Take me home!" She said, turning the chair around in fury. But what she didn't expect was her. What? It was the 12-year-old version of Haley. The small little girl that got sucked into this game all those years ago.

"But they are," The younger version of Haley dismayed her. "I need you to wake up. You did this!?" The little voice asked. Younger Haley was crying while Haley was too confused to cry. What was happening?

"I did this?" She asked, now she was crying, "I put myself here?" She asked despondently. A thin layer of tears over filling her eyes.

"We've been trapped in here and only you can help us! Wake up Haley. Come on I need you to wake up!" She felt a hand on her shoulder and when she looked up she was in a chair, it was bright and beautiful. She was in a home library. It was present day and a lady was shaking her shoulder. The woman had dyed reddish purple hair and thick eyeliner. She was pretty. Haley sat up. She was on a couch and it looked like she had been sleeping.

"I thought you left me girl." She said with a chuckle. Everything came back to her. This was her girlfriend, the woman who was shaking her. But then this.... This hit her like a train.

Millie died years ago.

Of course! All these years she had caused so much pain to herself she just hadn't let go of Millie. She had PTSD because of Millie's car crash and all this time in the game she had trapped herself in her head. Not wanting to reveal the truth. Creating a fake reality because the thought of leaving Millie, was hard to think about. But she had to.

Chapter 4: Trails

Three Months Later:

Now 24, Haley's hair was back to the same dirty blonde she had before the game and her green eyes were still brighter than ever. She was back to her normal self. She knows everything that happened. She had been trapped in her mind and she got out as if nothing happened. She was on the trail that she and Millie used to go on all the time. The hiking trail. It had been the 14-year anniversary of Millie's death. And the 3 months since Haley woke up in that chair.

"I miss her Fay," She said to her girlfriend, Fay, tearing up next to her.

"I know," she said as Haley put her head on her shoulder. They looked at the picture of her and Millie when they were 12. The one who thought out of the box. And the one who could solve any math problem in a matter of seconds. The one who died on her way back from gymnastics one night. When she was 12. That's too young, much too young, she couldn't have gone that soon.... but she was. A single tear fell from her eyes.

"Love you Mills." She whispered, looking up.

“The Wind the Mountain and Me”

by Konrad Filbeck

My name is Dante. When I was two years old, my Mom and Dad put me on skis. “Why can’t I go on the lift?” I asked. My mom would always say, “Because you are too small to ski onto that big seat.” So, I just kept my mouth shut, because I knew I would be big enough one day. Nine years later, I now have the courage to get on the lift, the grit to deal with hard falls and the kindness to care for people who do take a hard fall. I think of the moment when I did not have these traits and smile.

Going up I feel a sense of awareness as I ponder which slope I will come down on. The ride up could be long or short. Although not for me, because it always feels like the same amount of time. It is like another dimension, with dubiously plain gray sky and hectic seas of white below. As I take a closer look at the sky I see that it is moving. Far off in the distance, grey specters float around like the wind. I am startled by one flurry flying right below me. I clip it with my ski and it gives me a knowing look. I only see flashes of this world that take me away from the real world. Like a dream but it stays with you after you wake up. This is what changes my perception of time on the lift. The flashes take me in and out, I try to follow the specter with my eyes. I yell “wai-!”

“Dante!” “Dante!” “Dante!” my brother yells. Dante, we are going down this run, Okay? Okay!?” “Just leave me alone right now Justin.” Up up up up up up.

Sometimes we look at the map, if there is one. The way up is a time to think of your plan. Your plan to go down in search of the bottom. Going up I feel cold, but the ice serves as armor. A protective shell, and yet, I feel confined. As we go up one of my skis clips a tree. As we ascend I think, “I could have had my leg ripped off if I was a few inches closer.” But the moment passes. As we go up farther into the cold my mom says that it is getting a little chilly and my vision flashes. The same ghost I saw before flies next to me. All of a sudden it turns blue and icy. I just wave it off as I come back. As we get closer to the top my toes start to freeze up and my icy shell gets harder.

We are getting off the lift now and that is all I should be focusing on but I get distracted by the ice. It is so cold. It feels like a person trying to be your friend just for their own selfish evil gain. The ice gets stronger as we get closer to the top. I get scared that it will not break. I panic and.. . We get off and the icy armour shatters, leaving me free but fragile. As I glide across the snow to my destination. I watch my brother. He often falls behind or is too far ahead. He can never really keep a good pace going so I always watch him and make sure he stays on track. It is like we are tethered together by an invisible string that shields us from dangers of the adventure. He looks out for me to. In his own ways. And sometimes he does not even know it. He sees something that will happen before it happens, and when he tells me I listen. I listen because he is always right.

As my dad falls behind we all turn around and wait for him. It turns out he stopped to take a photo. I stand next to my mom and brother posing for the picture. My dad takes it. He put the phone back in the bag and smiles as he says, “If it’s not good we’ll come back up and take another one.” My brother and I groan but keep on moving. My dad has always had a bad sense of humor. I guess that was the only funny thing about his jokes.

As we near our run I feel hope. Hope that I will get to ski, hope that I will feel the wind in my face. The wind is a friend. A friend to the mountain. A friend to me. A friend saying, “G-o-o-o, I am here with you.” But I am not a friend of the mountain, nor is it a foe. The mountain is a wild beast waiting to be tamed. A stray with a collar and I have the leash. My leash are my skis and I use it well. Confidence is most of it. Confidence is your grip on the leash. As it is with all new things, and also ancient things. As we come to the slope, the dull blue square does not give me a challenge to overcome. So, I say to my parents, “Hey guys,” could I go on the double black while you guys go on the blue?” My parents exchanged looks of concern. “I don’t know Dante,” said my dad. But my mom stepped in, “Can we trust you to meet us at the lift?” she asked. I hold the leash in my hand and consider whether I should step toward the stray or back away, afraid of the bite. I step forward.

As I near my run the two black diamonds turn into an arrow, pointing me in the right direction. The slope is steep and forbidding but I go on. As soon as my skis touch the icy snow I stop. I think, “Am I really doing this? And the wind says, “You have done this before. Spread the butter and ski.” So, I ski. The mountain becomes steep and forbidding, and for a second, I want to hide in the icy shell of the lift again. But I go on. I am careful not to go too fast or too

slow, I all of a sudden take a wrong turn! My skis cross over each other and I spin out of control. The wind is not strong enough to protect me from myself. I fall, my skis come off, and the feeling of loneliness pounds down on me. I start to cry. There is no one on the run to help me. I push through though. I get up. My skis roll over to me as a giant gust of the wind comes through. I wipe the tears out of my eyes, put my goggles on and leash the mountain.

I realize that the wind and the mountain are all just there to teach me something. Each run, each, each mountain, each slope, every time they teach me something new. Except for now, it only tells me, stripping me of my ability to write it down. It tells me so I can hear it, but never completely understand. They tell me, "The amount of you in everything." For a moment I understand it. I understand that just because the world is so big and you are so small does not mean that you do not matter. It just means that everybody matters. A flash of light, a clap of sound and it vanishes, leaving only a trace of there ever being a voice in my head. But I hold onto that trace. Because it is a clue. A clue to a much bigger puzzle. But now that I see the box, I know what the puzzle looks like. I just have to figure out how to solve it. As I get to the bottom I can see my brother, way ahead of the group. I wonder if he learned something too.

"Castleborn"
by Isaac Harder

Once upon a time, there was a boy named James who lived in a castle in the middle of the ocean. Sometimes the castle would float just above the surface of the water, and other days it would sink down and settle itself at the bottom of the sea.

James was born of the castle. He remembered no father or mother, only the castle he had never left in his entire life. He could not float, since his body had a mineral quality that came from being castleborn.

Every night before bed, he would take a deep, deep breath and hold it, just in case the castle sank beneath the waves while he was sleeping. Because he was part castle, he could hold his breath for hours at a time. There was no way to breathe in the water, so whatever oxygen he held in his lungs would be the only breath that he could use for the entire next day if the castle was underwater.

One night, he forgot to hold his breath.

He woke up in the silt-filled darkness, gasping for air that had long since left his lungs. Tearing free of the covers, he swam up as fast as he could, reaching in vain for the light above.

It was impossible. No matter how hard he kicked, James couldn't rise through the water to reach the surface. His muscles screamed for the sweet oxygen that couldn't be found and his vision turned deep gray. Gasping in pain, James accepted the end of his story and closed his eyes. He drifted down, down into the depths of the indigo sea.

But even as he sank back to the sea floor, collapsing spread-eagled in the sand, his mind stayed half-alive. Partly unconscious, James willed the pain to leave his mind, wishing for his suffering to end. Still nothing changed. Even with no air, he stayed alive.

Why me? he begged silently to no one. *I never wanted this.*

Nothing happened, so James pulled himself off the ground and began to walk aimlessly. He didn't know where he was going and didn't even care anymore, but he needed something to change.

James came upon two sea nymphs sitting and giggling together.

"Help me," James pleaded with his lips. "I must breathe."

The nymphs simply shrugged. "James, do you truly think you are the first to come to us?" one asked him. They laughed at him, their taunting chortles like the peals of bells.

"There have been many others before you," the other nymph remarked. "We helped none of them. Why should we help you?"

James could think of no reason, and so he left the nymphs. Their giggles haunted his mind for hours.

A deep, rich noise filled his head, and he turned in the direction from which it came, pulled by the powerful music. After a long time, he saw several whales swimming together. Every few minutes, one would

break from the pod at the bottom of the sea and rise to the surface, breaching the waves far away, so small that even those massive creatures were barely specks swimming miles away.

James tentatively approached the largest whale. The whale turned to stare at him as it continued to sing balefully.

James' silent voice seemed even weaker in comparison to the whale, with its sounds so tremendous that James' brain ached from the noise. "I want to get to the surface. Would you please bring me there, great whale?"

The whale ignored him and turned away again. Its threatening sounds led James away from the whales, downcast from another failure.

With no air to breathe from, James' mind faded darker and darker as he continued to walk across the sea floor, with incessant swells and currents making him wish he could follow them to the surface.

As night approached, James came to the edge of a thick forest of seaweed. Turning his face to the distant surface, he noticed one stalk far higher than the rest. A single shadow rested at the top.

James needed any help he could get, and so he began to climb.

By this time, he was more than half unconscious; he was near death. So James walked the tightrope between life and death as he slowly ascended the seaweed stalk, always watching up at the ocean surface and never looking down at all that was beneath him.

After what felt like lifetimes, he reached the top of the seaweed and found there an ancient, wizened dolphin.

The dolphin smiled at him and James counted the dolphin's three old, brown teeth. James heard nothing, but a pulse that seemed to emit from the dolphin entered his mind and sent him words. "I am the Wise Dolphin Star. Why have you come here?"

James mouthed, "I am only a boy, and I need air. I have come to you because I am nearly dead. Can you help me?"

The dolphin's wrinkles deepened as he closed his eyes. "All I can tell you is that the end is within reach, one way or another. You have asked others to help you, but you must first be able to help yourself."

James' brow furrowed and he grew angry. "I know I am almost dead, of course the end is almost here! I have helped myself. You do not know the miles I've walked and climbed just to get to—"

He stopped. A familiar shadow graced the ocean surface that glistened above him.

The Wise Dolphin Star smiled again. "Tell me, James, what is it that you see above you?"

James realized wordlessly, "My castle."

"Yes. And only you know how to get there."

Something whispered inside of James' mind. Something that only James knows. Something that only James will ever know. And whatever it was allowed James to leave the seaweed forest and glide in the open ocean. Then the castleborn boy kicked through the water and propelled himself to the surface.

"Must've Been a Miracle"

by Luciana Leyton

The town was called Miracle Town since it seems that every visitor receives a miracle when they go, causing the town to be so widely overpopulated. The miracles would have a wide array of options, and a visitor would never know what they get. The one guarantee was that your miracle would cause eternal joy and it was often your deepest, truest wish being granted.

That was the case for all, except, of course, Corby Grayson. Poor old Corby, the one citizen who was never rewarded with a miracle, who had been living in Miracle Town all his life solely to be met with disappointment and misfortune. Some citizens would laugh at him, but most felt a sympathy so deep that they'd try to help him out, only for their plans to backfire.

Who could ever forget when Farah Wright spent hours adding details to a fruit cake for Corby, with every new addition making it even more perfect than it was before, only for Corby to eat it with joy and find out he had massive allergies to dried fruit? He spent about a week in the hospital then, already familiar with all the workers after consistent visits to the Miracle Town Hospital, a place that was only kept open for him.

Corby was a vast 67 years old, having lived in Miracle Town for all his life, in hopes of a miracle (Though another reason he may not have left was because he couldn't drive a car. His license got taken when he continually crashed into *everything*, stop signs, trash cans, buildings, and other cars. No damage

was ever done to anyone except him...) to finally hit him, yet having given up on taking any risks years ago, he refused to poke his head out the window in case the miracle knocked him dead. Corby had always wanted a miracle that would help him become a basketball star as he always wanted, yet after breaking multiple bones playing basketball, he gave up on that dream. Though he used to get a bit envious, Corby learned to accept the fact that everyone's lives would be better than his, and the citizens accepted it, too, quite easily in fact, knowing that they would always be happy.

That was, of course, until Farah Wright, the same citizen who had made Corby a cake, had made a cake that was absolutely disgusting. Farah had dreamed of being a chef all her life, and with a quick visit to Miracle Town, she was able to make the most appetizing cakes. You could imagine the complete and utter surprise of all the citizens when Farah Wright threw up after a quick bite of her cake. The only other time that's ever happened was with Corby.

The surprise only grew when Jalea Rose, a woman who ran the widest lengths in the fastest times, was late to a meeting. She took about two hours to run the six miles from her home to her workplace, when it would usually only take her two minutes.

The biggest surprise, however, was when gymnast Brian was showing his double backflip to young children, only to fall on top of a child, and for the first time, the hospital beds were starting to be occupied by more than just Corby. Citizens and previous visitors were panicking as they realized none of their gifts were working anymore. Corby wasn't quite calm either, despite having nothing to lose.

One gray and cloudy day, the sky seemed to collapse upon itself, striking lightning upon the center of the town, soaking all Miracle Town citizens and visitors as they covered their ears from the deafening noise of thunder. It never seemed to rain in Miracle Town, especially not with lightning and thunder. It seemed to be too much of an inconvenience, therefore not even Corby had seen lightning before (except maybe in his nightmares which seem to happen every night). Corby was not outside when this happened, of course. He was much too afraid of taking the risk of going outside, who knows what unfortunate event could happen to him? However, the risk of danger didn't scare nor stop Corby when he heard a solemn and singular knock on the door.

Carefully opening the door, Corby looked around to see no one there, but as he looked down before closing the door, he saw a letter addressed to his name. There was no return address nor a sender name. He picked up the dark gray envelope and tried to ignore the pain from his papercut as he opened the envelope.

The paper inside was completely black, aside from the writing in white letters. The handwriting may have been almost illegible, but as Corby squinted, he could make out the words. "*Lighting Strike in Town Hall. Tomorrow. 12:00 PM. Be there. - CG*". Just below the words was a faint fingerprint in a dark red dried out ink. It was almost impossible to see due to the dark color on the dark paper, but Corby recognized it, and almost as immediately as he recognized it, he then saw that the fingerprint was not made of dark red ink, rather of blood, most likely the blood of this mysterious *CG* who wrote the letter in the first place.

Unless, of course, it wasn't, which was always a chance. For all Corby knew, this *CG* was a killer, quite rare in Miracle Town, but it wouldn't be a total surprise for Corby to be the first victim. Immediately he knew that he couldn't go. Of course life was misfortunate, yet it didn't need to end. As he was about to toss the letter, all of a sudden, more writing appeared in the bright white ink. "*Take that risk, Corby.*" and though Corby was confused, the internal debate in his head of whether he should or shouldn't go was resolved.

The next day came and citizens avoided the burnt down town hall like it was a plague, some still freaking out, some trying their best to keep their calm. Corby anxiously waited for the clock to strike 12:30 to meet *CG*. He was sitting on the one part that wasn't burnt down- a bench dedicated to...

A bench dedicated to a certain *CG* for "acts of bravery". It was strange, Corby thought, to see another *CG* right where *CG* asked to meet. It was most likely a coincidence though, right? (Though Corby knew there were no coincidences in Miracle Town). Suddenly, the long arm on his pocket watch hit the 6 on the bottom of the watch, the shorter arm still resting on the 12. Corby looked around and there was nothing. No one.

Of course. *It must've been yet another prank on poor, old, unlucky Corby Grayson.* And though that was what he wished to believe, nothing could shake that he did see the writing move when he tossed the paper. *It must've been a miracle.* He started to walk off, but felt a sharp pain from his heel. Of course

he stepped on glass, or more specifically, a broken mirror. Corby vowed to not take risks anymore, this would happen. Yet, as he was about to dismiss the broken mirror to go home and attempt to heal his heel, he saw something strange...

The mirror was moving. Not in the way it should, no, this mirror, this version of Corby himself was staring up at him with a calm expression which greatly contrasted with the current Corby's freaked out face. The man in the mirror looked at Corby with a gentle smile and repeated what was said in the letter, *"Take that risk, Corby."* and something softly hit his somehow healed heel. It was a basketball. Corby turned around to see a basketball hoop. He looked back at the mirror, shocked. Was this finally his miracle?

He grabbed the basketball and placed it upon his hands as he taught himself to do. Wincing at the thought of when he broke multiple of his bones, he decided to ignore all doubts and shoot. The basketball flew through the air. Did Corby shoot too hard? Too softly? What would happen? Was he getting his hopes up all for an illusion? Was this just another dream made of envy that would haunt him?

Yet the basketball made it into the hoop and Corby didn't wake up. The town hall was slowly put back together, almost like magic, almost like a *miracle*. Corby heard cheering as people realized they had gotten their miracles back, and Corby knew deep down that this must've been his miracle. He knew what he had to do.

He ran back to the mirror, a smile set on his face. As he looked at himself, the mirror started talking once again.

"Corby. If you do this, you will forever lose your miracle. You will be stuck as a dissatisfied child, known as poor unfortunate Corby. Are you sure? You would be the first of all citizens to give up their miracle."

Corby nodded, unsure of what he was even going to do, but he still somehow managed to do it. Sticking a shaky hand into the mirror, he seemed to be in a new yet familiar world. There was Corby with a mirror still in his hands, yet a younger version of himself. The mirror still showed this smiling Corby and though this younger version may not have this miracle of basketball, that doesn't mean he couldn't learn. Young Corby picked up the basketball still next to him and shot at the hoop.

He missed.

Oh poor, unfortunate Corby. Yet with a smile on his face he shot again. And again. And again. He missed every shot. Corby knew his destiny would be to grow and to teach himself this lesson once again. After all, his name was Corby Grayson. He was the inspiring CG. Yet... that didn't mean he couldn't teach himself at this very moment how to accomplish his very dream.

Citizens passed by, eyeing Corby as he missed every shot. Corby continued and played with only himself and his questions.

"Why did that happen? Why me?"

And deep down, he knew. And he knew that he knew.

It must've been a miracle.

"Dust and Puddles"

by Jamie Lozada-McBride

Henry looked out the window. Through the broken glass, he saw the same sight that he had seen yesterday, and the day before, and as far back as he could remember. He was gazing upon the place he lived, a place that, to his knowledge, was completely empty except for him.

Well, it wasn't really empty. It was full of things, like a cracked and uneven road, with vibrant plants peeking out from the crevasses. It had cars that were strewn across the road in strange places, and houses and buildings that were covered in ivy and moss. All except his, of course. It was a strange yet somehow pretty sight, like scattered puzzle pieces waiting to be made into something beautiful.

It was Tuesday, which was Shopping Day. The nine-year-old sighed and rolled out of his bed, staring at the old clock by his bed. It said that it was 11:27 and 33 seconds, but then again, it had always said that it was 11:27 and 33 seconds. He took off his pajamas and got dressed for the day, donning clothes that were mostly too small for him by now. Maybe he could find new clothes today. He went downstairs and ate his breakfast of long-expired cereal, which, come to think of it, tasted exactly the same as fresh cereal. Then he picked up his bag, opened the door, and

walked outside.

He cheerfully skipped across the broken streets. Sometimes, when it had rained, there were puddles near the cracks in the road. He longed to find one and jump in it, but alas, no puddles today. He searched for a store, looking for bright signs, as stores were usually near bright signs. Or at least signs that used to be bright; most of them had long since faded or become obstructed by dirt and dust.

Then he found one! Henry hoped there were still things there; many of the stores had been empty for a long time.

Fortunately, this one wasn't empty. Amid the overturned shelves and broken tiles on the floor, there were a few brightly colored boxes. Food! Henry dashed through the open doorway, careful not to step on any glass shards.

He had long since outgrown his shoes, so his feet were not safe from the perils on the ground. While his soles had toughened from years of walking barefoot, Henry would occasionally step on something sharp and then have to get home without using his injured foot. Whenever he got home after this, he would bandage the foot and rest for a few days, waiting for it to heal. Once his foot had recovered completely, he would celebrate by rewarding himself in some way, usually by going to one store filled with boxes and boxes of toys. Henry only ever took one box per visit, though, and tried to keep his visits infrequent, so as to not quickly run out of toys. Sometimes, when he was bored with a toy, he might even put it back, wait for it to accumulate novelty, and then take it out again.

Henry walked out of the food store with two boxes of tasty things called "Granola Bars". He only ever took as much as he needed, in case anyone else needed any. He hadn't seen anyone else in years, of course, but he liked to imagine that somewhere, out there, there was someone like him, someone who also lived by themselves and liked to walk around and find things. He wished he could meet them, ask them how they were doing, talk to them about the world. Every so often, he would practice for the day he would meet that person, rehearse what he would say, set aside certain toys or books as gifts for that person. But it had been a while, and that person hadn't come yet, so Henry sometimes took out the presents every now and then. He tried to stop, but the temptation proved too much, and he would pull the gifts out anyway, play with them and read them, and finally put them back neatly in their boxes. He wanted them to be just like new when he gave them to the person.

Boxes in tow, Henry walked home.

He was just a few blocks away from his house when his ears were seized by a sudden observation. He thought he heard...a rustling sound. No, a padding, crunching sound—Footsteps! Henry whirled around, dropped the boxes of granola bars, and ran towards the sound. He thought he saw something, someone, in the distance, and

The gifts! In his excitement, he had nearly forgotten about the gifts he had ready for the person. After a moment's hesitation, he turned back to his house and dashed towards it, flying through the front door and dashing upstairs. Most of the important rooms were upstairs. One was his bedroom. One was his reading room, full of books and magazines he had collected from libraries and stores. Another room was the room he played in, littered with his toys. And the last room down the hall was full of the gifts he had collected and preserved for the person he would meet. He barreled into the room, staring at the vast array of books, toys, and assorted odds and ends that Henry happened to find interesting. Knowing that he couldn't carry them all at once, he decided to take one book that he liked a lot to the person. *I'll give them the rest later*, he decided.

He ran back out the house and towards the place he had been when he heard the rustling sound. Even though it was a short distance, he was out of breath by the time he arrived. The divine power he obtained while retrieving the book had all but left him now, displaced with transient exhaustion.

He couldn't see anyone, though. He heard the crunchy rustle again, and a small animal emerged from a bush, looked around, and scurried away.

For a second, Henry was distracted by the animal. Then he looked down and laughed, because he had just realized that he had left his boxes of granola bars right there in the road. He glanced up from the boxes and looked around again. Still nobody.

He suddenly felt sad. *I must have scared the person away by running towards them!* Of course! They probably weren't used to people, not any more than he was. He considered calling out to the person, but realized that that would just frighten them more. *Maybe I should just wait for them to come.* Yes, that was what he would do.

So Henry patiently sat down and stayed where he was. He opened one box of granola bars, unwrapped a bar, and began munching on it as he opened up the book. Nobody was coming yet, but that was okay. He had plenty of time to wait.

“This Isn’t Goodbye Forever, Only For Now”

by Josie Mayo

At the moment, I’m half sure that I live in a fairy tale. Objects swirl into view and blur out again as my eyes adjust to the lighting around me. I sit up in bed, dizzy and fighting the temptation to close my eyes and lie back down. Instead, I frown, deciding that I must face reality, and step onto the old, worn carpet framing my bedroom floor. From the foot of my bed, I hear a light purr.

“Come on, Fidem,” I whisper gently as I rub the belly of my sleepy calico. How I love to replay the day that I found her over and over again in my head. There she was, sitting in a wrecked cardboard box on the sidewalk near the bus stop by my foster house. Wrapped in a raggedy blanket, she looked up at me with eyes that bore straight down into my heart. I just knew I had to keep her as mine. When I took her back to the house, my foster mother, Sarah, asked me if I would be able to take care of her. Now, thinking back on this moment, I roll my eyes at the thought of what she said to me.

“Alexia, don’t you think that it might be too big of a responsibility for you to take care of this kitten?” she smirked. “After all, you’re only a foster kid. I wouldn’t want to offend you, but you’ll be moving around a lot as you don’t have a family of your own, and I for one certainly don’t want to be stuck watching this sad ball of fur when you’re gone.”

Her words left my insides spinning. Sarah isn’t what I would call a generous foster mother. I mean, so far she hasn’t forced me into a basement to sleep or done anything to hurt me physically but, she also hasn’t offered me affection. And she hasn’t ever been kind to me when I make one mistake. The truth is, I’m pretty sure that Sarah only fosters kids like me for the money. She probably uses a lot of that state budget as cash for her enjoyment, especially as she fosters five of us. Ironical that she thinks I can’t take care of a cat when I have four biological siblings that I look after. With nearly every foster family we’ve been to, I’ve been left in charge of my siblings. My younger sister Sadie is only a baby. She’s never even met my biological father. He left before she was born in the hospital, leaving my birth mother with five young kids. That’s probably part of the reason that we’re abandoned now. My sister Ellie is two. She and my three year old brother Peyton are always together. They’re the mischievous ones in our family, and it gets us into trouble with our foster families. My other sister is Presley. She’s eight, which is two years younger than me, but we still look identical. Our short brown hair and blue eyes are unique from the rest of our siblings. In fact, Presley and I are so similar that we even both battle with anxiety. We used to go to a therapist about it, but Sarah says that the state budget doesn’t cover mental health services anymore.

“Hey, Alexia? You up?” whispered Presley from her spot staring out the dusty window.

“Sure I’m up. You wouldn’t see me if I wasn’t!” I joked, tiptoeing over to join Presley.

“Do you really think that Sarah is going to make us move again?” Presley asked quietly, stress easily noticed in her voice. My anxiety clenched tight at my stomach, but I didn’t care. I had to be there for my sister. “I don’t know, Presley. But I wouldn’t worry about it either. The adults working in the foster care system always make sure that we have somewhere to stay,” I answered. “I know,” Presley mumbled, “but I wish we were with a family who actually cared about us.”

All I could do was nod.

The social worker stared empathetically at me from across the desk. “You know this isn’t the ideal situation, but Sarah expressed that she will not be able to foster children anymore and it’s difficult to place all five of you in the same home,” she quietly stated. “I know, it’s just...” I hurriedly try to explain. She cut me off before I could plead anymore. “I’m sorry, Alexia, but it’s not a possibility anymore. We’ve confirmed your new living situation, and you need to be moved immediately,” the social worker said firmly.

I stared down at my feet and tried to hold back any tears from dripping down my face.

"I understand, ma'am," I answered, losing all hope that our family could stick together.

"Good. Now, if we could just go out to the hallway, I'll be able to let you know of your new families and we'll check to make sure that you have all your belongings," she responded swiftly.

As I stepped out of the empty office space, my eyes met Presley's from her spot crouched on a chair in the waiting room. I walked over, my eyes staring blankly ahead. Tears started rolling down Presley's cheeks. "They're separating us, aren't they?" she whispered, giving into the sadness and emptiness that had been waiting for us all day long.

I couldn't contain my emotions anymore. A heart wrenching pull started near my gut and worked its way up towards my stomach as I nodded slowly. I sank to the floor, burying my face in my hands, hoping that a few moments of lonely silence would cure the sharp pain in my mind and heart. I felt that the state of despair that I had just sank into was one that was irreversible. The social worker, who I only now noticed was wearing a nametag that said 'Ms. Karina,' motioned for us to stand up and wait by the door to the office building with her.

"We'd better get you children along to your new family assignments," she said.

A knock sounded on the door to the office waiting room, and Ms. Karina opened it and gestured for an average looking woman to come inside. She was medium height, with curly orange hair, dark freckles, and a mix of bright green and hazel colored eyes.

"Hello!" The woman smiled, looking directly at us. "I'm Mrs. Anderson, but you can call me Andrea if you'd prefer." I made a mental note to roll my eyes when I had privacy later that night. This phony lady looked like she could belong on a soap detergent commercial.

"Children," Ms. Karina said, "meet Mrs. Anderson. You know, she's very kind and you'd be very lucky to have the opportunity to live with her." At the word kind, she gave us that look that meant 'behave yourselves and be nice because this is your last chance.' I glared at my hands crossed on my chest. Ms. Karina spoke again, "Mrs. Anderson is already the mother of two 6-year-old boys, so she is very qualified to take care of you!" I rolled my eyes. Twice.

Ms. Karina ignored me and started to do formal introductions. "This is Saidie. She's seven months old. And over here are these two little mischief makers. They seem to always stick together. This is Ellie, and she's two, and then this is Peyton who is three. And, finally, the older two. There's Presley, who's eight, and Alexia, who's ten would be the one who you've already met. Oh, and over there is the cat. The children simply couldn't be separated from her- I think the name is Fidem."

"Nice to meet you all." Mrs. Anderson smiled widely.

Ms. Karina smiled at her. "We have another couple coming right now to meet the kids as well." She opened the door again to welcome a sandy blond couple with matching tie-dye t-shirts. "Welcome in, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson." The couple waved to us shyly. Suddenly, a phone rang, buzzing through the pocket of Mrs. Anderson's jeans. She quickly answered her phone and moved away to the back of the room. When she returned, she briefly spoke to Ms. Karina who said, "I don't mean to speed up the process, but Mrs. Anderson must get going and I have other matters to attend to in a short while."

"Oh, yes, of course," Mr. Johnson nodded as he looked towards Mrs. Anderson.

"Presley, why don't you go grab your things and head over to the Johnsons. Mr. Johnson, Saidie is over there in the car seat if you want to grab her. I think her luggage is already in Presley's bag," Ms. Karina instructed. Mrs. Anderson approached Ellie, Peyton, and I and motioned us toward her.

"Let's go, kids. We need to be on the road so that we're not late to get to the twins basketball game tonight," she explained. I rolled my eyes for the third time this afternoon. Great. I was stuck with this phony weirdo. I sighed and decided I would save my snarky thoughts for another time as I grabbed my belongings. I stared down at the small cat carrier and was glad for the fact that at least Fidem would

be staying with me. That's about when I realized something terrible. She said my name, yes, but not Presley's. I turned in shock to look at my younger sister, and saw her dismal face as I watched her follow the Johnsons towards the door.

"Oh, Presley," I whispered as I ran towards her to catch her before she left without me. "I didn't think that we would be separated!" she cried as she turned to look at me desperately. My heart felt empty as I imagined a day without my best friend and sister. "I don't want to leave you," Presley whispered sadly into my ear. Lily burst out crying, obviously noticing the somber mood. "Hush, don't cry," I said gently to her. She scooted closer to me.

We all huddled like that, together, for a long time.

Ms. Karina broke the silence, "Children, you really must go." I made a brave face as I decided that I would be strong for our family. "I know that none of us are good at goodbyes. So, let's not remember this moment as a goodbye forever. Let's instead remember it as a goodbye for now. Because I'll see you again soon. You're always and forever my family."

"The Kingfisher and the Crane"

by Zoey Emma Rees

In the pale light of early morning, Crane was looking for food, poking its long beak around in the tall grasses clustered with a group of flies, until it came across Kingfisher's nest. In Kingfisher's nest, Crane found Kingfisher and her eggs sleeping peacefully. The Crane tried to stealthily eat the eggs without disturbing the Kingfisher.

Sensing the commotion, the Kingfisher woke up. "Hey!, what do you think you're doing here!" the Kingfisher said frantically, scrambling and trying to protect its eggs from the Crane's beak.

"Why just trying to get my breakfast, I'll take an egg if you please," said Crane hungrily eyeing the gleaming white eggs.

"If I please!" the Kingfisher chirped angrily, now trying to hide its eggs in the mud. "You think I'm going to give up my eggs with a please?"

"I asked very nicely, besides its only one egg," said Crane, looking affronted.

"One egg, another egg, another, and then ME! Besides, isn't eating an egg cannibalism? I would never resort to something so low," the Kingfisher exclaimed huffily yet proud as if she had achieved a great feat.

"Cannibalism! What is the difference between eating a fish and cannibalism? Food is food after all, does it really matter if it's the same species? If anything the wrongdoing would be killing," said the outraged Crane.

"Killing!... but everybody kills, it's just what happens," the Kingfisher started looking unsure, cocking its head side to side and pulling its feathers.

"I can agree that killing is a thing that happens but not everybody does it," said Crane trying to poke their beak behind the ranting Kingfisher.

"I am positive that everybody kills, especially the lowly Crayfish, for their scales are ever so dull," snorted the Kingfisher as she regained her confidence.

"Then let us interview the Crayfish," the Crane said with a gleam in their eyes and a devious expression.

"Yes, let's," the Kingfisher prodded Cranes' beak away from her nest.

Together Crane and Kingfisher went off past the swampy reeds to the muddy banks where the Crayfish lived.

"Crayfish, Crayfish!" squawked the Kingfisher, dropping stones into the creek. All was silent for a second, a minute, ten minutes, by this point even Crane was staring at the water as if to summon the Crayfish. After what seemed like hours a lump rose from the muddy water showing an exhausted Crayfish with scales red and gray.

"What is it, Kingfisher?" said Crayfish in a bored voice.

"I was wondering -" Kingfisher started.

"-**We** were wondering," interrupted Crane, taking a step closer to Crayfish.

"Yes, **we** were wondering whether you kill the creatures here in the wetland?" "Well I do eat some of the frogs and fish so yes I suppose that I do kill creatures ."

An expression of victory showed on Kingfisher's face and turning to Crane she said "Aha! It seems that I was right, after all, everyone kills and I am still better than you!"

The Kingfisher proudly puffed her chest and spread her wings, showing her gold and blue plumage. Crane looked bemused by the Kingfisher's statement, saying "Well, Kingfisher you can't just interview one creature you have to interview at least some more first, say why don't we interview Frog before you come leaping to conclusions."

The Kingfisher turned around to Crayfish, who was slowly retreating into the water and asked for directions to Frog's home. Crayfish replied, "Just over the east brambles, into the stream, by the great willow tree.

The great willow tree was widely known for its size as it was tall and ancient, it made the other sparse trees in the wetland pale in comparison.

Crane and Kingfisher went over the eastward brambles and found the willow tree residing by the murky spring. Hopping to the banks' Kingfisher promptly went on to a lily pad and called to Frog. A few minutes later, a dark lump from the water glided to the lily pad which Kingfisher resided on. The swamp green frog dully glistened in the now gold penny sun, looking expectantly at Kingfisher. "What is it Kingfisher?" Frog said, looking annoyed.

"Well, Frog we were wondering whether you kill animals or not?" Frog pondered this for a moment and then asked, "Do flies count as animals?"

The Kingfisher replied, "I do not think they do. But whether they do or not, the point is, do you eat them?" the Kingfisher said this very irritably, wanting to go to her eggs and rest in her nest of reeds and mud.

"I do eat flies, and that's very well, but I am expected elsewhere and have to go." With this, the frog leaped into the water swimming out of reach of Kingfisher.

"Once again I have proved that all of the wetland creatures kill. This evidence clearly shows that I am still superior to you," the Kingfisher started going to its nest satisfied and triumphant.

"But wait! do not be so hasty, let us interview one more creature, say how about the flies?" The Crane says this with foxish eyes as it layed the words that set its trap.

"The flies? Well, I suppose that we could ask the flies, why I know of some that live right by my nest, pesky things they are." The Kingfisher continued her grumbling about the flies until they arrived at her nest.

Snapping at the flies, the Kingfisher asked whether they killed any creatures. "We would never!" The flies buzzed looking hurt that the Kingfisher would suggest such a thing.

"Never? Not once ever?" the Kingfisher inquired. "Now that is just a plain lie. Why yesterday I saw you attacking a mouse."

"We did not kill the mouse Kingfisher! We just scavenged the remains after some creature killed it."

How disgusting! Kingfisher thought. Slowly turning around she resentfully decided to tell Crane they were

"The Swamps of Sopher" by Quinn Shields

To the north of Vermont, where roads wound between pine wood, there was a path. The small dirt road forked from the asphalt streets in such a discreet manner that few noticed its existence, and of those who did few cared. But for the most adventurous of travelers, who followed the trail, a long journey awaited. For miles and miles, it twisted and turned, to north, to south, to east, and west. The pine wood slowly turned to marshland as the path continued along. By the time the woods were gone the enlightened navigator couldn't tell if they were in Miami or Moscow, and no two compasses would display the same direction. In the midst of this dreary swamp the path opened into a large crater-like pit in which the town of Sopher lay. Walls of dirt and mud bordered the pit and kept the waters of the marsh at bay. The town was almost always in the midst of clouds of fog, and on the few occasions the fog subsided clouds blotted out the sun.

I traveled this road only once, as I was hired to be the town doctor. I finished my business on the outside about a week early, so I departed and arrived on such a schedule. I remember I was cheerfully greeted by the townsfolk, who were surprised by my arrival. I don't remember many of the details, but they gave me a tour of the

town. What happened three days later I will never forget.

George T Corenwook was late to supper. He was supposed to arrive at his home on the outskirts of town three hours earlier, yet failed to do so. The Corenwook family organized a search party, and by nine o'clock twenty-three people, including I, were scouring the swamp.

The winter weather had frozen over the ice, and mister Corenwook had gone out to do some ice fishing. However, he had failed to relay details of where he would go. So into the marsh the group trekked. No moonlight seeped through the thick swamp trees, and clouds of fog limited vision to but a few feet.

I shivered in the cold as the eyes of night watched from every angle. In the back of the group the ice broke. The Corenwook's daughter, Nancy, fell through the gap and into the freezing liquid. She screamed before she sank under the waters, her hands frantically grasping for the surface of the ice. Mrs. Corenwook pushed through the stunned group and grabbed Nancy's hand right before it slipped off the frozen surface. She tried to pull Nancy out, though it was like the waters pulled back. Using all the strength she could muster, Mrs. Corenwook succeeded in rescuing Nancy. Nancy's eyes were wide with terror and she breathed sharp breaths. The stunned group had turned their flashlights towards the ice. A dark shadow could be spotted under the ice, fluttering away at increasing velocity. We lost sight of it after but a second.

The wood of the trees was cold and wet, and therefore couldn't be used for fire. Nancy was sent home with two others from the party. The rest continued their search.

Through hours and hours of scouring the dense bog little was found. At one in the morning the party stumbled upon what must have been the spot where George had gone to fish. His rod lay next to an open tackle box, and his unused saw was nearby as well. The party searched yet found nothing. As they were about to call it a night, Mrs. Corenwook felt a thump at her feet. Down she looked, and screamed in terror. Trapped under six inches of ice, Mr. Corenwook pounded on the frozen substance. He shivered in the freezing waters. Bubbles escaped his nose and spread across the underside of the sheet of ice. I ran to grab the ice saw, and the rest of the group abandoned their flashlights and tried to break the ice with their bare hands. Mr. Corenwook's eyes widened, and he looked down towards the murky depths of the marsh. He looked up towards the ice again and proceeded to pound his fists harder, with faster intensity. Wisps of blood could be seen surrounding his hands. He looked pleadingly into his wife's eyes, his own full of true terror. His pounding on the ice slowed, eventually ceasing. He closed his eyes one last time and his limp corpse sank to the depths. We failed to find so much as a single crack in the ice.

Two days later the Corenwook family packed their bags and left town. They could no longer stomach living in the place where Mr. Corenwook died.

It was a week after the ice melted that I decided to locate the body. The sun was covered by the clouds, but there was little fog. I knew it would be the best opportunity. Early in the morning I left my house. The townsfolk were not yet awake, but the recovery of the body would not be a quick process, and I wanted to be finished before evening. I set off into the swamp with the little equipment I would need to recover the body, a large hook, swimming gear, and a variety of other useful devices stored in a red box I brought with me. The mud pulled at my boots with each step. The tree and cloud cover blocked almost all light from reaching my eyes. I arrived at the spot where Corenwook died. The murky waters were eerily warm compared to the slightly chilled air. I couldn't feel anything under the waters with my hook, so donned my swimming gear and dove in. The mud I kicked up covered the surface of the pond. The waters of this part of the swamp were much deeper than the others. About ten feet down there was no sign of any floor to the bog. A momentary lapse in cloud cover caused a single ray of sunlight to enter the waters. That single ray illuminated the depths, showing what my eyes could not see. A dark stone sat on the floor of the swamp. It was made of some rock I'd never seen before and haven't seen again. There was no doubt in my mind that Corenwook's body was gone. It had eaten him.

The creature curled around the boulder. It looked like a tangled mass of dead hair, like the kind that clogs a drain. Tentacular limbs sprouted from the beast, each with a slimy smooth texture. The creature had no face, instead it had the maw of an octopus and jagged yellow teeth.

I swam up and away from the thing as fast as I could, but somehow the beast sensed my presence. It moved as though it was a living liquid, changing shape to avoid any obstacle in its way. Its limbs attempted to grab my legs, but failed to do so. I gasped as I exited the waters, barely managing to reach land. I ran straight for the town without my gear or my attire, pure terror and adrenaline fueling me.

When I reached town I got the sensation that the creature had ceased to chase me. The townsfolk had

awoken recently, and were on their way to work just as I arrived. I ran into town square waving my arms in the air, shouting for their attention. In the center of the town I stood, faces watching me.

I shouted, "There's something under the waters in the swamp, something that will kill us all. It consumed the body of George Corenwook. We must leave, now!"

The townsfolk looked at each other, whispering in words I could not make out. Suddenly two of them grabbed my arms, entrapping me with surprising strength. One stepped up from the crowd, and with a grin on her face replied "We know."

I struggled to be free of my captors. They held me back as the statue in town center crumbled to dust, and the ground beneath it opened. In the center of the newly formed pit was the maw of the beast. The thing radiated darkness, the same way candles radiate light. The beast made rumbling noises, as though it were hungry enough to eat a whole feast of human flesh. As I was pushed towards the monstrosity my captors stepped away, to keep their distance from the beast. But the monster was able to sense this. It was now awoken. It would no longer be satisfied with a single morsel.

The thing screeched, and began to move. It spread its tentacles up, under the ground and towards the swamp. The startled guards loosened their grip enough for me to pry their hands off my limbs. I ran for the hills, the cultists (for I know now they must have been) chasing after me. As I reached the cliffside the marsh waters began to overflow. From all sides the crater flooded. The waters ran through the town, washing all loose objects into the maw of the beast, both poultry and people. I clambered up the hill, grasping loose handholds as the waters turned the wall to mud. A line of red fluid trickled down the crater. I looked up to the top, realizing it was blood. The waters consumed by the beast in the center of the crater were pumped back up to the swamp, including the blood of the dead. The handholds along the cliff could barely be seen, as the hillside was shrouded by the red liquid. But I pressed forward. I clambered up the cliff as the cultists screamed behind me. I escaped where they didn't.

After weeks of trekking through forest and swamp I found society. I told my story, but they called me mad. They imprisoned me. Let this remain as my last confession, as my last written truth. The tale of the Swamps of Sopher.

"The Luck of a Raven"
by Annabel Taylor

At the crest of a willow forest in the South of England there was a small village called Stonywood. But any stranger to this place would see that the village was clearly divided into two parts - the Witch Side and the Human Side.

The Human Side was full of overgrown ivy homes with cobblestone streets and dreamy walkways. The Witch Side was a different story.

It was in the depths of the willow forest, that the sky above was as dark as pen ink. There were small stone huts around the forest, old as time. Anyone who wandered the Witch Side knew that there was some sort of unexplainable magic in the air. There were many witches on this side of Stonywood. Different kinds of witches, in fact. Crystal witches and nature witches and cosmo witches all walked through the willow forest.

However, this story is about a very special witch. And a very young one, at that. Ravyn Starr had dark hair, the color of, well, a raven. She was tall and confident, and always wore ebony colored robes. But everyone in the village knew that Ravyn's best trait was her smile. It was as bright as the moon on a murky night. But once upon a gray Sunday evening in Stonywood, Ravyn was not smiling. Not at all. In fact, she was frowning quite profusely.

"Beatrix, look," Ravyn said. "The ravens have not flown over yet. And it's almost past sundown."

Ravyn's sister, Beatrix, rolled her eyes. "Just because those ravens don't come, doesn't mean the world is doomed. You're too superstitious for your own good." Beatrix threw turmeric and a box of crow feathers into the healing potion she was mixing. A bubbling noise sounded from the cauldron.

"But the only time they haven't passed our sky was the night Auntie died," Ravyn said, frowning.

Beatrix froze, ignoring her words. "Go find something to do. Why don't you go bottle some graveyard

fog. We need it for Mum's potion. You can take the pathway through the forest."

"Fine," Ravyn muttered. She knew Beatrix just wanted to change the subject. They were both very close to their Aunt Evanora, who had died the year before from an attack by the humans. Ever since, Ravyn's mum had banned her and Beatrix from ever crossing the boundary between the Witch Side and Human Side.

Ravyn grabbed her wand from the windowsill and walked out the door in her ebony robe and a navy-blue witch's hat. She didn't quite feel like bottling graveyard smoke. Instead, she wanted to find the ravens.

Before Ravyn knew how to talk, she knew that ravens were sacred in her community. They were considered such good luck that Ravyn's mother had decided to name her after them. If the ravens flew overhead before sundown, it brought good luck for the coming evening. If the ravens did not fly overhead before sundown, well, in simple terms, all would be doomed.

Ravyn trudged through the forest, wand at her side. She cast a lux spell, which brought light to the tip of her wand in the dark forest. She trudged through the eerie silence.

A strange noise sounded from ahead. Ravyn strayed behind. "Hello? Who's there?"

She heard a little squealing sound. A girl, about her age, appeared from behind a tree. "WITCH! Please don't hurt me. Please. I'm innocent! I'm a very good girl. I'll do anything!"

Ravyn laughed. Human girls weren't as scary as her mother made them out to be. In fact, *they* were scared of *her*. "It's alright. I promise I won't hurt you. But why are you here? At this hour? Haven't your parents warned you about the 'evils' that lurk in this part of Stonywood?"

"How do I know I can trust you?" said the girl.

"How do I know I can trust *you*? Your kind have been warring against mine for centuries. We'd need to have a defense mechanism if we were to protect ourselves."

"Okay. I'm Janie."

"Nice to meet you, Janie. I'm Ravyn," Ravyn noticed Janie's scared expression. "So, tell me, what are you doing here?"

"I came to warn you and the other witches. The humans have made a plan to c-c-come and b-b-burn your village," Janie stuttered.

"Of course. Now I know why the ravens didn't fly over."

"What do you mean?" Janie asked, perplexed.

Ravyn told Janie about the ravens. "Oh dear. Oh, this can't be good. What should we do?"

"I have an idea. But it could take some work." Ravyn was everything that a good witch should be - confident, fierce, stubborn and certainly a force to be reckoned with. But Ravyn was also everything a witch shouldn't be. She was kind hearted and curious and hopeful - and she was determined to make peace between the humans and the witches.

Janie shook her head. "I can handle work. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

And so, Ravyn told Janie her plan, and together, they collected almost a thousand witch robes and hats from the storage house. Ravyn told Janie to pass them out to every house on the human side of Stonywood, with about a thousand notes that read: "*This is protective gear against the witches. Please wear it tonight and meet at the edge of the forest.*"

Meanwhile, Ravyn had her own work cut out. After she said goodbye to Janie, she ran home and told Beatrix to tell all the witches to meet on the edge of the forest.

"Why?" Beatrix asked, naturally.

Ravyn smiled. "You'll see."

While Beatrix was out of the house, Ravyn poured a bag of powdered sugar, cornstarch, and dried mandarin slices into a boiling cauldron. The mixture turned into a liquid syrup, which she poured into small molds that were typically used for bread. Then she let it cool and waited.

She looked out the frosted window. Today was the last day of October, the last day of crinkling leaves and sunkissed days. There was something beautiful and sad about Autumn. It was the start of everything but also the end.

A new moon looked down on her. She opened the door and walked out with her hardened syrup snacks, the cold air shocking her skin. Ravyn hurried down the forest path, where all the witches, including Beatrix and

her mum, were waiting, the ends of their wands glowing in the darkness.

"Well?" Ravyn's mum said. "What are we waiting for?"

Ravyn handed out her syrup snacks to every witch and warlock, and said "Just hold these and wait."

"What's going on, Ravyn?" Beatrix asked.

"Just trust me," she said with a smile.

The witches heard a sound from behind the bend. Ravyn's mum froze. "I know that sound! It's human footsteps!"

In technical terms, Ravyn's mum was right. But when the people around the bend stood in front of the witches, it seemed that...they were witches too.

The humans were all dressed in dark robes and witch hats and nobody could tell who was who.

A witch (or a human) said "Where are the witches?"

A witch (or a human) responded "They've tricked us! Now we can't tell who's who!"

Someone else said, "How do I know *you're* not a witch?"

"I'm not! I promise!"

"So, you say."

The chaos continued as people tried to tell each other apart, but it was no use. Ravyn found Janie and took her to the front of the crowd. "QUIET!" she yelled.

The crowd turned silent.

"Now, you don't know whether I'm a human or a witch, but I can tell you that I planned this."

The crowd booed.

"Who does she think she is?" said one, "What is she doing?" another asked.

"I think it's time we make peace. We've been at war long enough, and honestly, it's quite exhausting. Why can't we live in harmony? Why can't we move forward and learn from the mistakes of the past? The witches have never harmed the humans. Yes, they have broomsticks and wands and cauldrons, but you all have the wrong message. And witches, humans are just like us, but without the magic part. So, let's not try to differentiate who's a witch and who isn't. Tonight, everyone is a witch. Please, come into our homes - we have delicious syrup snacks!"

At first, the crowd was silent, and Ravyn thought that the chaos would continue, but a ripple of agreement began to sound through the crowd. The two girls looked at each other. Ravyn gave Janie a hug. "I couldn't have done it without you. I think maybe you and I have had the first friendship between a witch and a human in all of history."

Janie smiled. "You said it yourself. Tonight, everyone's a witch."

That evening, the witches opened their homes - but in a way, they also opened their hearts. They handed out syrup snacks - as promised - which are now called candy. To this day, children still go from house to house, asking for candy dressed as witches on the last day of October. And every night since then, the ravens flew overhead before dawn.

"The Clock"

by Alexandra Weinstein

My days are numbered, I know it. There is never silence, always a little tick, tick, tick in my brain. We live in a utopia now so I should not be worrying about death, at least that is what Mayor Shunda had told me. We now live in a world without death of any kind and the perfect well... everything. I want to run away from Harpston. There must be something else out there, a place where people do not grow to be in their 500s and a place where every day is not a loop of the day before it. Every day starts the same, ends the same and stays the same. I hate it.

I started my morning like every other, waking up to birds chirping lullabies. This time it was "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Then I got up and stretched, telling myself "today will be different," even though it always stays the same. I then went to the dining room and ate the breakfast that magically appeared on our table. My dad, mom, and little brother were there too. During breakfast they say the same 3 things. They talk about how nice the weather is, telling me not to go to the edge of the beach, and that today will be great. I had not told them about the clock

in my brain yet. It has happened ever since I turned 13. Normally it is quiet but still very noticeable. About the beach, it is one of the 2 laws to never go to the edge of the beach. They claim that is where all the human eating fish are but I have ridden my bike past there many times and never saw a single animal. I then got up and changed into my uniform. Everyone is given a uniform that they must wear every day. That is the second law. Always wear your uniform, there is no fighting it. Girls wear white or blue shirts, gray skirts that cannot go above your knee, hair either in a ponytail, pigtails, braids or down, Mary Jane shoes, and socks that go to the knee or higher. For the boys, they have to wear the same thing except their hair always has to be down and they wear gray pants instead of a skirt, they also have to wear dress shoes instead of Mary Jane's. I then continued my day by grabbing my bag and rode my bike to my best friend, Henry's house. My bag had plenty of different materials in it that I used for investigating. Ever since I started to hear the ticking, I knew that the government was hiding something from us. As I passed the little prairie, the ticking got louder and louder. Every time I pass it my body begins to shake and the ticking gets as loud as a scream. As I got further from the prairie the ticking got quieter and then I had made it to Henry's little yellow house. I opened the door and Henry was waiting for me on his fuzzy white sofa. Henry is the only person who understands how I feel. We spend all day looking for clues. He has a box under his bed, hidden from his parents, that is filled with things we found underground or materials. It has coins from the 2000s, a telephone, stuffed animals and a remote. Each item has a purpose.

"Wanna get a snack?" Henry asked. His green eyes shimmered as the sun made a streak of light through the window.

"Sure," I said as I put my denim tote bag down at the door. He pulled out a big box of crackers and we had the same conversation as always

"How was your day?"

"Fine, thank you. And you?"

Tick tick tick tick

"A'right,"

Tick tick tick tick tick

"What do you think we will find today?"

"I don't know, hopefully something new,"

Tick tick tick

"These crackers are good,"

"Yeah"

Tick tick tick tick

We then put away the rest of the food and went outside to go and find some hidden treasure. We pulled out our metal detector and started scanning the ground. Then, something different happened. I remembered this morning, and the many before that, when I said "today will be different."

The only way I can make it different is if I do it myself, I cannot keep waiting for it to happen itself. It has been 13 years, and there has been nothing different. I need to take action! I then turned off my metal detector and told Henry, "let's go to the prairie," I stopped to think, "Better yet... The beach!"

Henry looked skeptical but I told him that if we get punished then I will take all the blame. We started toward the beach, through the prairie and onto the beach. The ticking was as loud as a concert. And I thought the prairie was bad. I covered my ears and turned on the metal detector. Right when I turned it on, it went ballistic and Henry and I started digging through the rough sand. Almost immediately a big piece of reflective metal appeared and we kept digging and digging until it was clear what was hidden under the sand. It was a nuclear bomb. It was too big and heavy to lift out of the pit it was hidden in but then it all clicked. I told Henry to watch the bomb while I go and get something. I grabbed the box from under Henry's bed and ran back to the beach. I put the box down on the sand and started looking around to find the materials I was looking for. It all made sense. All of it! As I put all the pieces together Henry gave me a look he never gave me before. Confusion.

"Henry, don't you see! These items were not buried for no reason. They were hidden. Mayor Shunda has not turned this world into a utopia. She has been planning to blow up the entire world. She gained everyone's trust and made this place seem great and pure but they just want us all to suffer. You know I have told her many times about my ticking and that I knew I would die but she just said I was insane and that I am good. Oh, my she

said I was 'the bomb' maybe she said that as a joke. The ticking was not a clock. It is the bomb," I said as everything came together.

"This is why we are not allowed here! They were scared someone would find the bomb,"

"But they cannot kill us. We all are immune, right," Henry said as he sat down next to me.

"We are, maybe so we suffer forever! This will be our first-time feeling pain," I grabbed the remote and placed a thing of batteries in the open area. Then I noticed a missing button and the old coin fit perfectly in the slot. It glowed red and lastly the stuffed animal. What would the stuffed animal do. I then realized that we found it with the metal detector so I tore it open and inside was a cover for the batteries. I connected it and I realized. I had all the control over the bomb.

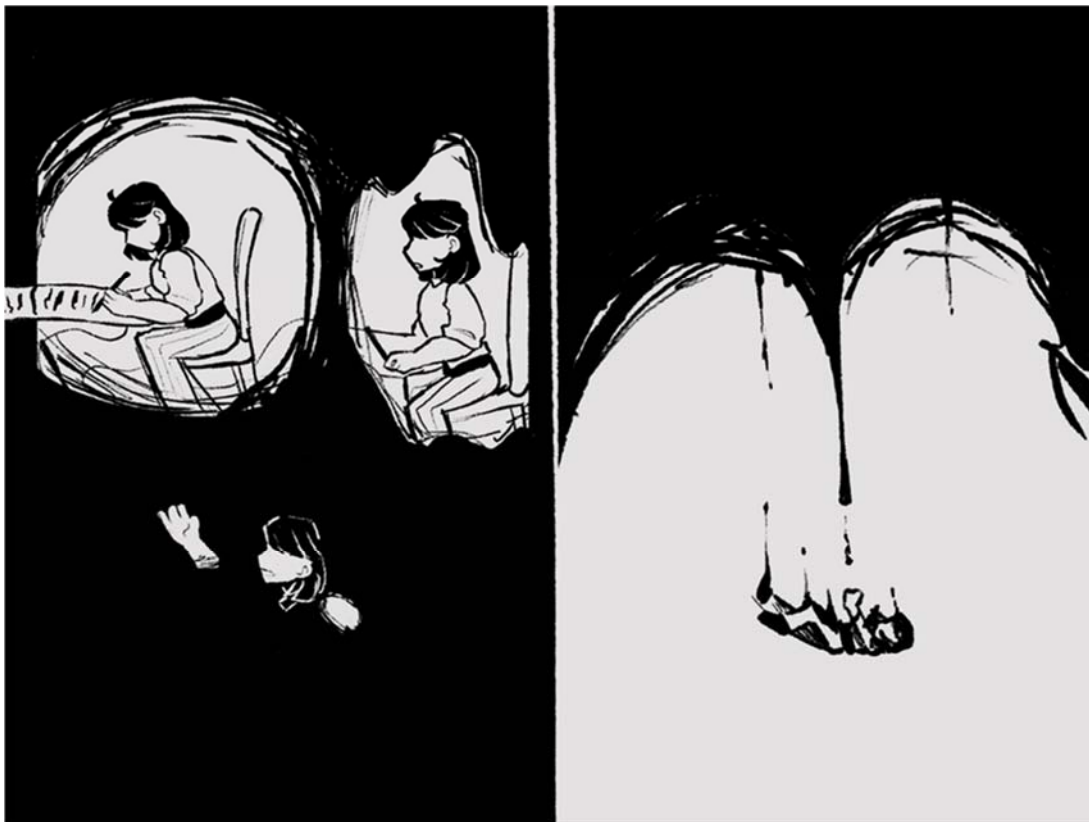
"Hey! Get outta here! It is against the law!" yelled Mayor Shunda

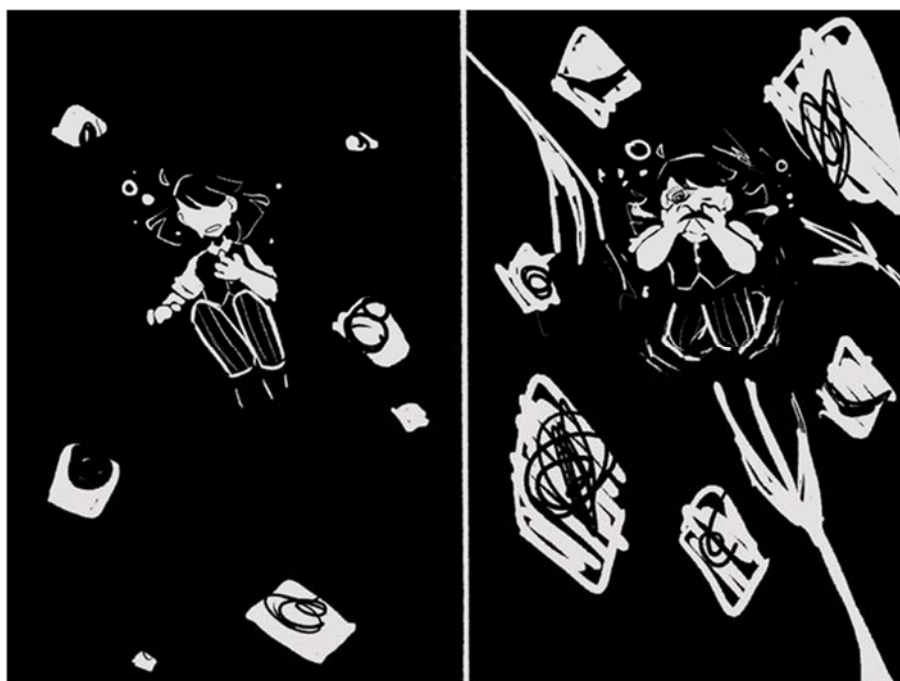
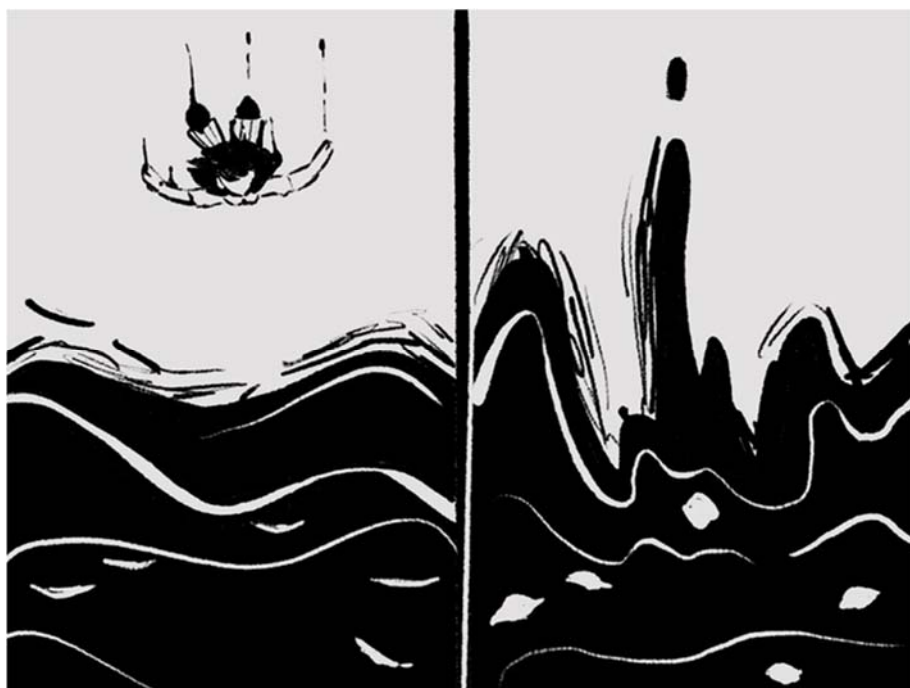
"We already saw everything, mayor!" I said as Henry held me back, afraid I would strike.

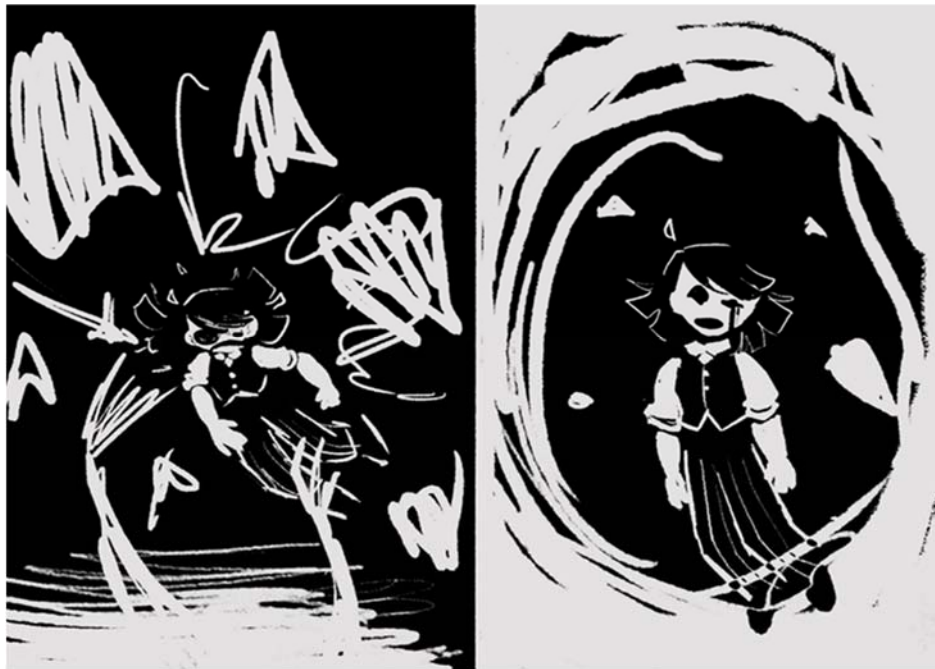
"You are under arrest for breaking law number 1, never go to the edge of the beach," screeched Mayor Shunda. She signaled for her bodyguards who shoved Henry and held him down. He started screaming, a sound I have never heard before. Henry was being beat up and another guard was heading my way. I knew the only way I could escape him is if I started the bomb. I pressed the glowing coin and I heard a little sizzle and BOOM! Within seconds everything I knew and loved was... nothing. We were floating in a pit of black. I was in so much pain, I guess this is what pain feels like. I was not dead but definitely not alive. I was not asleep nor awake. I could think, but not move. I could not open my eyes but I saw the people around me. My ticking was gone, it was replaced with a high-pitched sound that I cannot explain. Then everything was light. I could not think, see, move, or anything. Now I am just... gone. I am just dust, and Harpston is now a pit of nothing.

"Burnout"

by Reila Flowers





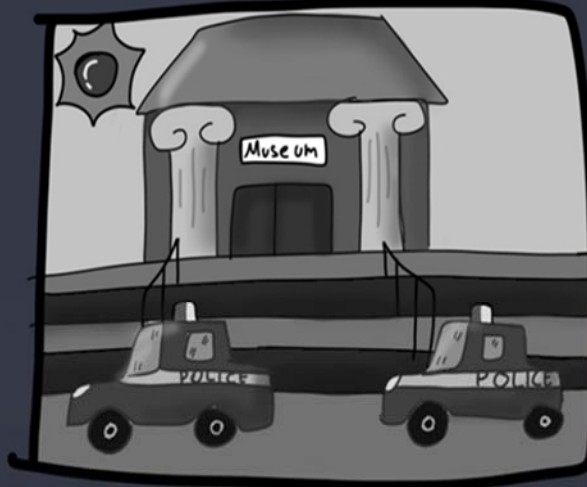


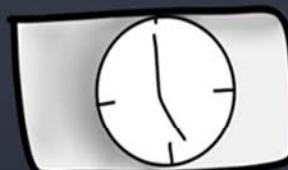
“Detective Bugar”

by Nisan Naz Kutlukaya







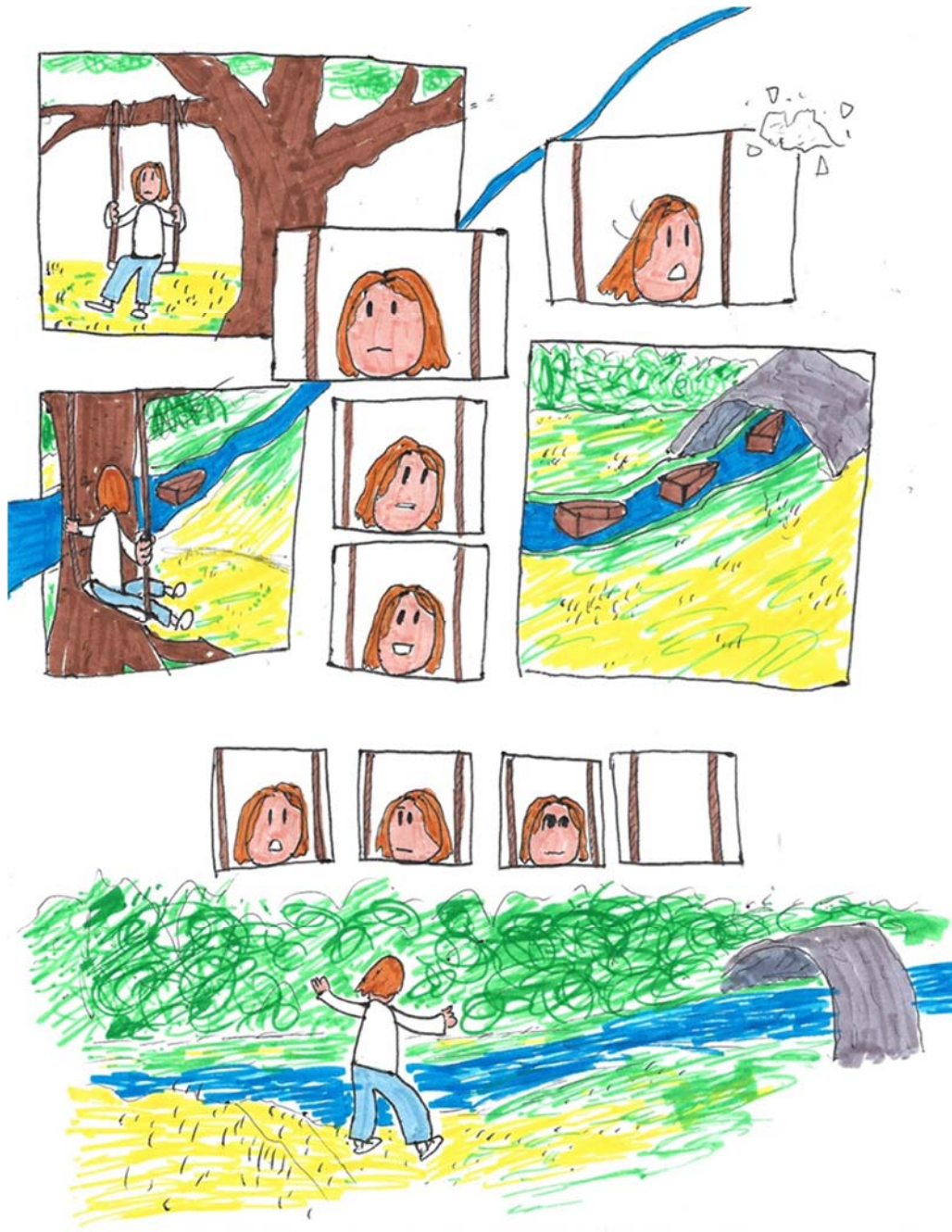


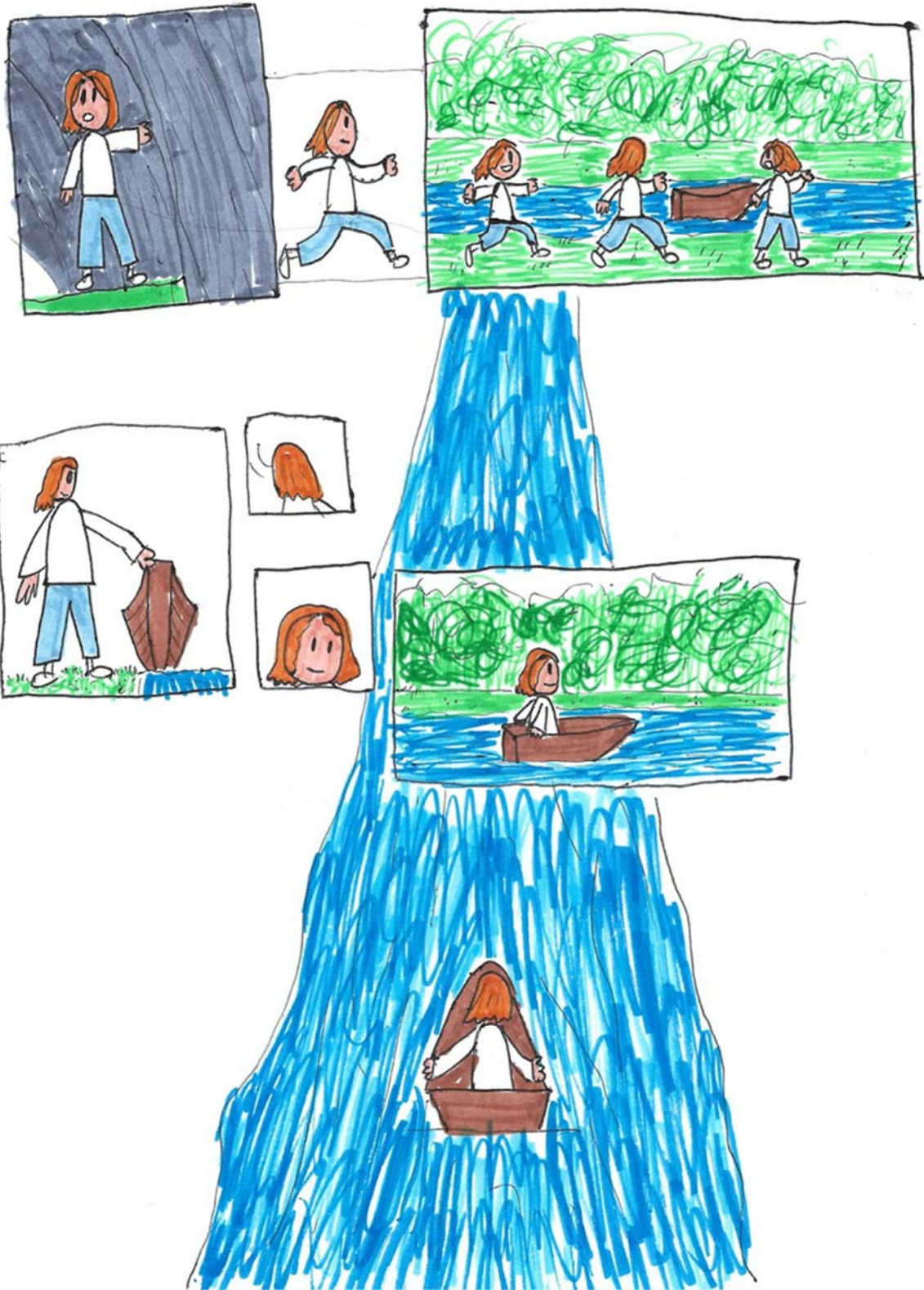


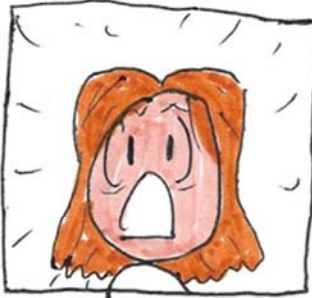
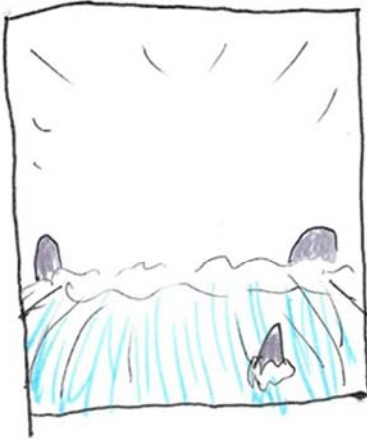
Detective Burg(l)ar!

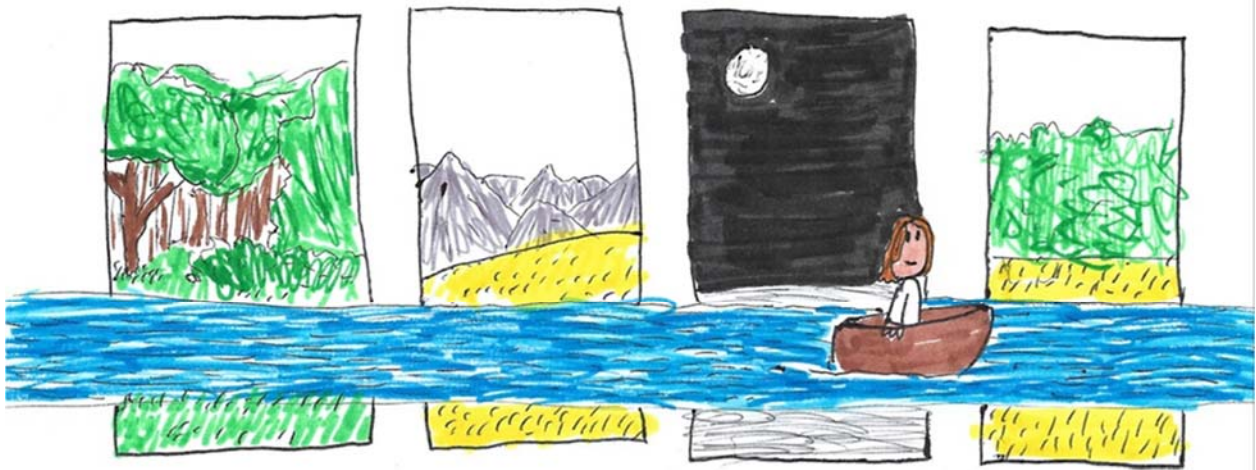
"Gently Down the Stream"

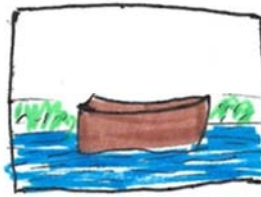
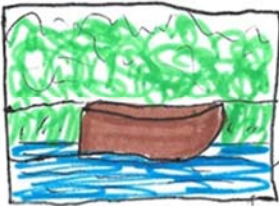
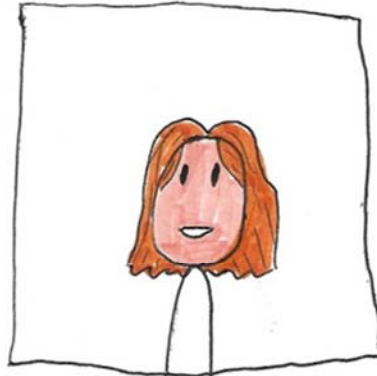
by Jamie Lozada-McBride











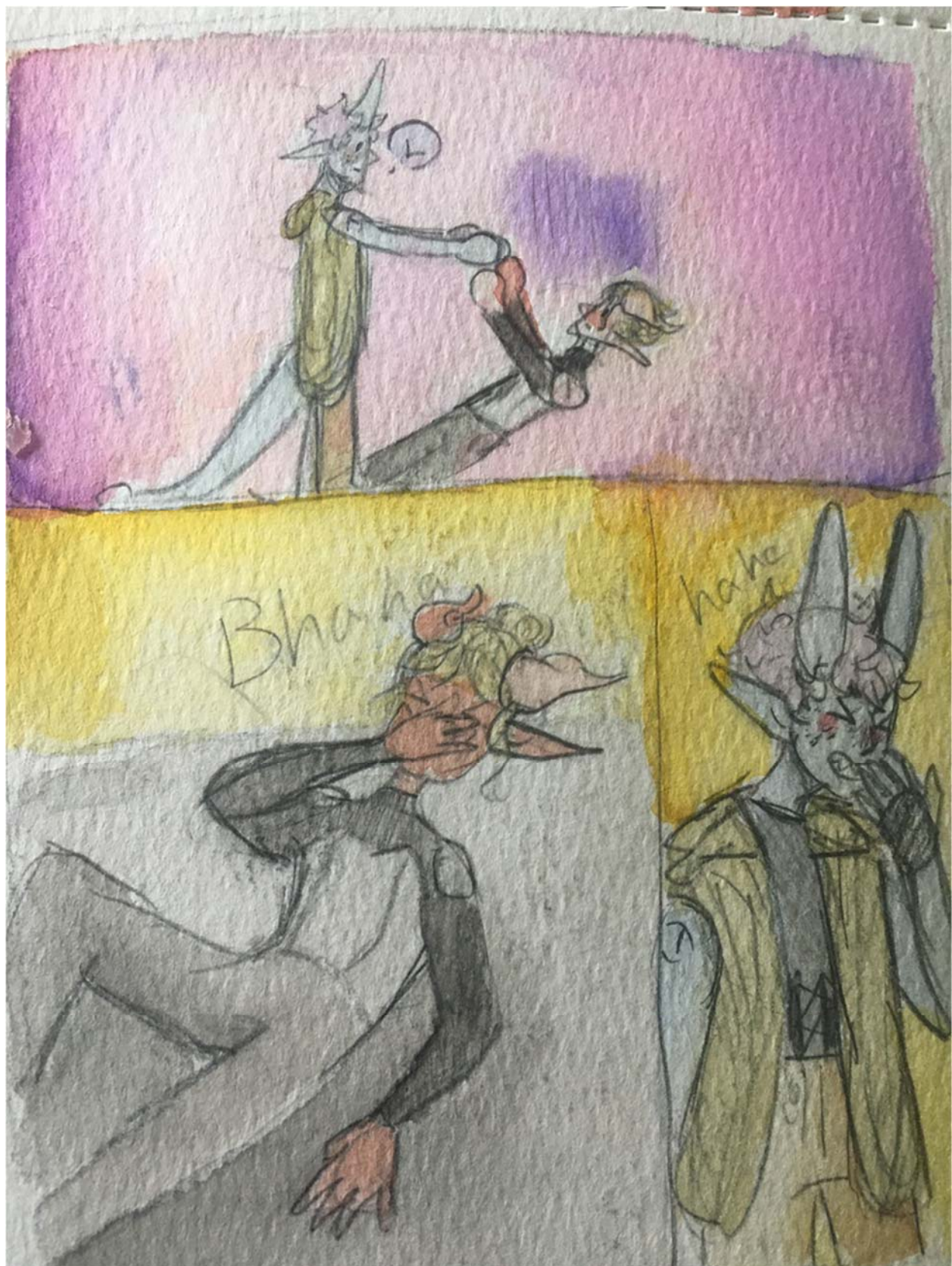
"The Throne"
by Kiran A. Schott









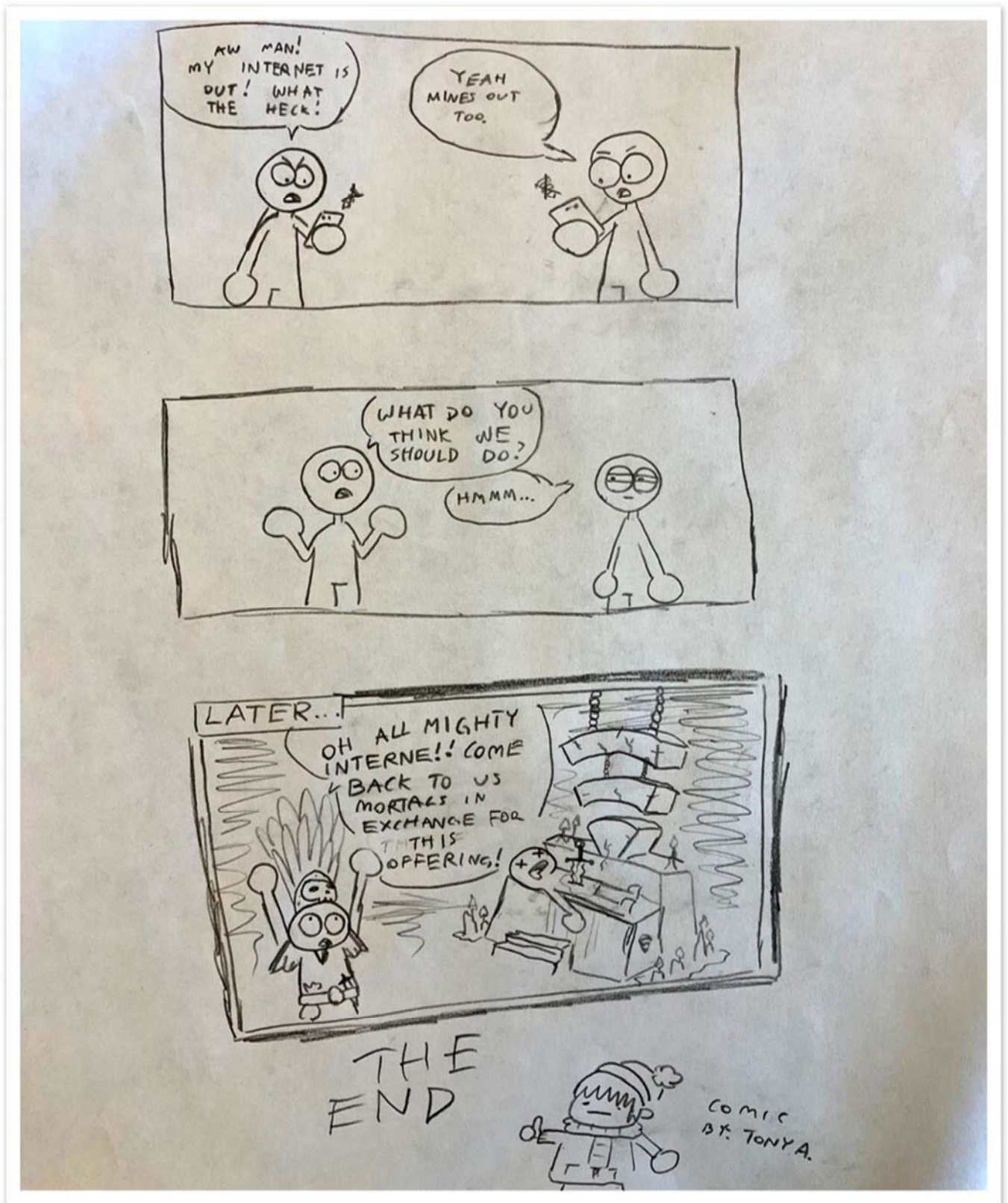








"The Internet" by Tony Abgarowicz



"School Lunch" by Gwendolyn Goggin



“Not Even for a Second”

by Caroline McCann

This is a message to that kid has five best friends
To the person on whom everybody will always depend,
To the toddler who still loves getting their favorite bedtime story read,
And the enby from next door changing their room from pink to red.
To that big new influencer who’s setting a big new trend,
And the straight-A student that studies in her bed.
Can’t forget the rootless flight attendant with a plane at 5 am,
And that depressed teenager who’s just starting to get out of his head.
And this is to those two that are on the kind of date they never want to end,
This is to the anxious actor. All you have to do is click send.
And the boy that fell asleep, still on the floor by his desk,
And the girl that kneels silently, just praying for the best.
To the activist who resolves to never waver,
To never bend,
To the gifted child puzzling in her room, when,
Her grandmother, full of hope for her future, comes to tuck her in.
To the one with their head in the clouds, and who pays no attention,
To the hero who never wanted, nor got an honorable mention.
This is to the curious scholar, now on research hour seven.
And that one young man who’s just now eating dinner at 11.
To the poet who says they’ll sleep when they’re dead,
and then writes their way to heaven,
Dear dreamers never doubt, not even for a second.

“Life”

By David Gong

Life is a game
You evade dangers and learn stuff
You also get rewards
Each time you attempt to complete a mission
You either succeed or fail
Failure at some point in your life is acceptable,
But giving up means game over for you

"Silent"
by Charlotte Anderson

I sit in the back,
My chin in my hand
And listen to the people talk
They go on and on
But I don't mind it

Being silent,
As a matter of fact
I don't mind it at all

I am a listener
And I speak when I feel
The time is right

But they don't seem to understand

They say I'm humble

That I don't speak my own mind

Well what if my unspoken words made a statement of my own
What if my countless trials to keep peace
Was a way of shouting out what I believed?

If people looked closer maybe they would see

But alas, I should have stayed silent
Because this piece, could have been a tribute to my integrity

"Why Do I Walk Alone"

by Josie Mayo

I walk beside them
And yet I feel alone.
It is not a physical matter that
Makes me regret
All the decisions I've made.
All the times I've been turned
To and yet I have
Never responded to their pleas.
Only what I feel inside,
This pulling, tugging,
Unbearable empty feeling
That breaks me apart.
Why do I stand
Alone, you ask?
It is because my whole
Life I have longed to be beside
Somebody.
And every time
When I thought I wasn't alone,
I was.
Sure, it hurts a little to
Walk by myself, day after day.
Honestly, it hurts a lot
Because even when I
Open my eyes to
Try and be beside them,
Whoever they are,
They push me away.
I walk next to many
People now,
But here is the thing.
I will never, ever, actually walk
Beside somebody again.
Not in my heart.
Because nobody understands this pulling, tugging
Unbearable empty feeling that
I have grown
To love.
Nobody understands
That this is why
I walk alone.

"Shadow"

by Ilona Agur

A book, written in the Dark Ages
Burning the witches
Then applauding the knights.
Ride in your shining armor,
Come pick me up and toss me onto your horse
Please?
My body remains your shadow
Trailing you around,
Growing longer as the sun comes out
Only to shrink again.
Because I am merely a damsel,
No one tells me I am great
No one shows me I am strong
Guess I'll never be you,
Only a shadow,
With the fate of a witch...

"A Force"

by Mira Vaidya

There is a force that can shape rock and fill craters.
It can whether the hands of the living and change their
perspectives.
This is the force that will one day
turn my hair silvery-gray,
wrinkle my face and
bestow wisdom upon me.
Some may try to fight or reverse its effects,
but they are destined to failure.
You can run,
but you may never hide
from time.



Kiran Schott



Melissa Solomon