



*ink* Volume 06

Teen journal for writing and visual art  
VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY

# REWRITING A MYTH

*Mabel Xu, Age 17*



# WELCOME TO *INK* VOLUME 6!

This volume of *ink* was created on the unceded and occupied homelands of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓x̓ wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlil-wətał (Tseil-Waututh) peoples. It is on this stolen land that these words and works of art were written, drawn, painted, sculpted, photographed, submitted, selected, assembled, and printed.

When laying out the writing and art in this year's issue, members of the *ink* Teen Advisory Group wanted to take you on a journey: a trip through time, and a voyage through an emotional landscape. Volume 6 of *ink* begins in the past – rooted in memory and nostalgia – and moves the reader towards the future, a place of uncertainty, wonder, and hope. In the middle are all of the experiences of life – joy, laughter, loss, despair, and everything in between.

In his essay "Vanishing Points," Ojibway writer Richard Wagamese talks about the experiences of life as a series of seven hills: "Each represents a stage, a period, a time frame where you gather experience and add it to the pack you carry across the years ... Each hill is a vantage point for looking back, but not everyone takes time for reflection." The first hill he mentions is youth, and many of the young people in this issue are approaching the crest of that hill. Their creative work represents the things they have gathered on their journey so far – experiences that they will take with them through their whole lives and continue to look back on from new hills with new perspectives.

We hope that readers are inspired to reflect with us – as well as laugh with us, cry with us, and dream with us. We hope that as you journey through this issue, you will see the ways that we are connected through these shared experiences. We hope this journey inspires you to create. Reflecting on our past experiences helps us to grow, and then, to dream, and then, to create the path towards that next hill.

Huge thanks are due to Yuzuh Bishop, Alina Cheng, Alexandra Chow, Amelia Chu, Sheba Duan, Mathew Fu, Veronica Jiang, Xinyi Li, Esmé Mac, Daniel Marques, Hiona Oyama, Clara Wan, Megan Wong, Anne Zhang, and Erin Zhang for their work in selecting and arranging the work in *ink* Volume 6. Without them and the rest of the *ink* Teen Advisory Group, this magazine would not exist.

We are also grateful for the time and expertise shared by our selection mentors: Emily Pohl-Weary (prose), Karla Comanda (poetry), and Dawn Lo (art).

Thank you to the Diamond Foundation for promoting youth creativity and connection through their ongoing support of *ink*.

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Cover art: "The Big Bang and What Followed After"  
Imo Eidse, Age 15

# THANK YOU

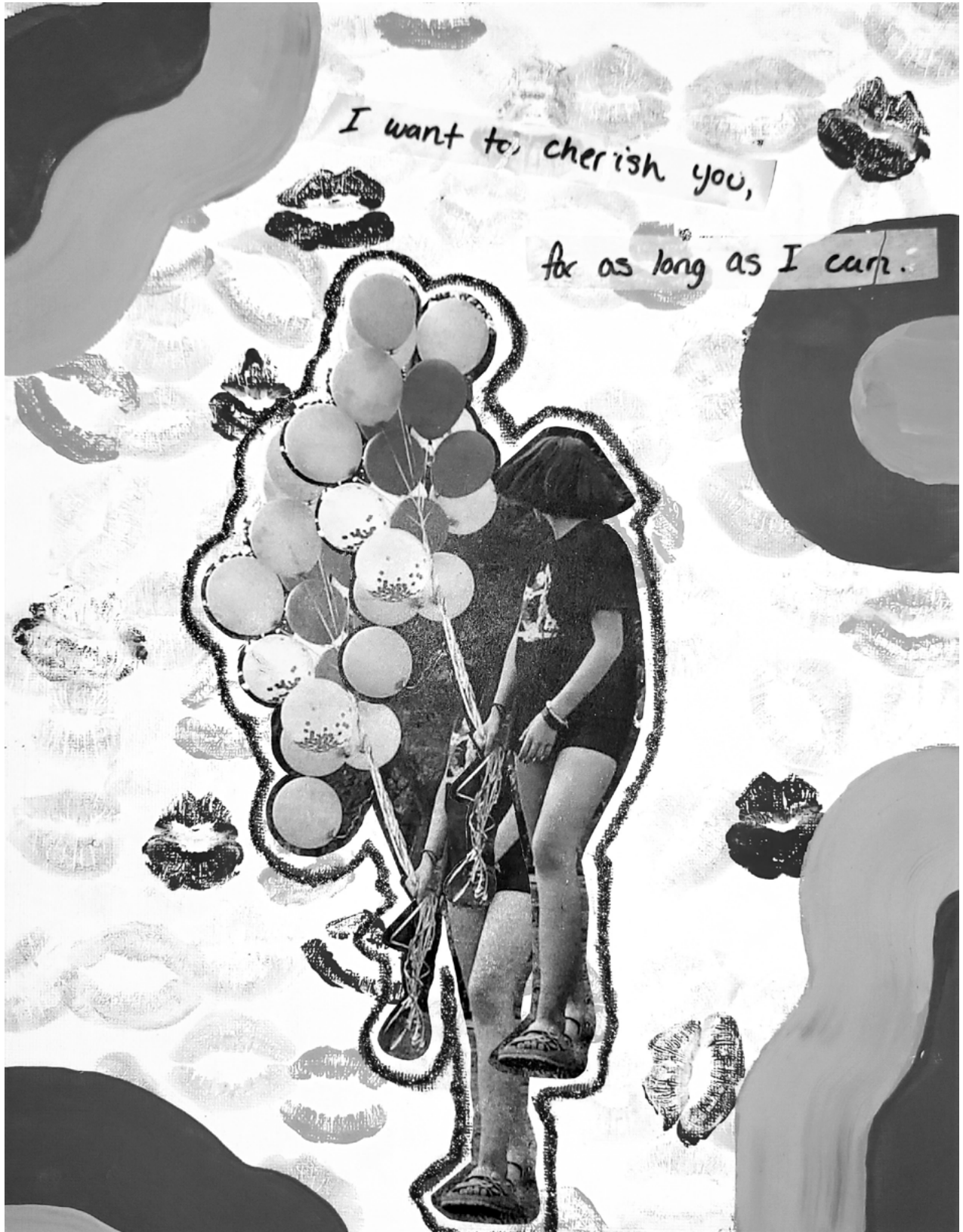
to all of the artists and writers who contributed to *ink* Volume 6!

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“Therefore the problem is not so much, to see what nobody has yet seen, but rather to think concerning that which everybody sees, what nobody has yet thought.” – Arthur Schopenhauer, German philosopher

# HER KISSES

L.S. Low, Age 15



# GRANDPA'S SLUMBER

*Vicky Nguyen, Age 17*

My grandpa sleeps on the ivory-colored couch  
After a long flight from Vietnam.

It's a summer midafternoon,  
The day is crisp-yellow, soaked with the honey sun through the emerald foliage.

Grandpa reclines on the backrest, where  
The creases of age reflect into his eyes.

His breathing becomes synchronized  
With the wavering of breezes and the rustle of the leaves.

Just as the pinkness of dusk is about to fade, when the cumulous clouds scatter  
Further than the withered rose petals on the front yard

Grandpa wakes up and beams, the crinkles in his eyes  
Shine as he contemplates

That he loves how the day here lasts longer,  
As if time rebounds forever.

I smile while scooping a spoonful of citron jam,  
Which shimmers like condensed sunlight

And put it in a steaming cup of tea  
Which Grandpa sips with glee.

# WATERMELON

*Aisha Hsu, Age 15*

We sit on the  
boardwalk, humming  
songs from the 90s,  
drinking drinks from  
the gas station,  
soft breezes of  
the evening blowing  
through our hair.

We smell the scent  
of the McDonald's  
behind us,  
hearing the laughter  
of children  
playing on the beach,  
waves crashing  
on the sand.

We see sailboats  
sailing away  
in the sunset,  
going to new places,  
learning new things,  
while the sweet taste of  
watermelon lingers  
on our tongues.

# BLANKIES

*Fiona Xing, Age 15*

In my arms I hold two blankies: time-worn memories, traces of childhood painted onto stained fabrics, and the aroma of artificial milk lingering. They're not fluffy or cosy; they're merely cheap bath towels—typically not something you'd soothe a weeping child with. Frayed loose threads cling to their edges with what semblance of vitality they have left. Each blankie has two sides, one of which is much rougher than the other, having been tattered by the endearment of a blissful child, while the softer sides are an off-white fabric stained with worn spots. The formerly delicate colours have faded over time, forever unable to regain their grandeur. Yet, I will always find solace when they tuck me in after an agonising night.

The eldest has been a companion since my birth. The baby blue textile is threadbare and adorned with an image of the character 美羊羊 (Měi Yángyáng-lovely sheep) from a show I indulged in my youth. My life is etched into each raw stitch and splotch of grime. Uneven crevices envelop the softer side, the result of unravelling the threads with precarious hands and tears. Habitual pulling has caused the white fabric to fade into a thin, see-through layer through which pink bows peek. The sheer fabric is cool to the touch, incapable of holding any heat longer than seven minutes, but the familiar scent is a perpetual constant. The fragrance doesn't have the sincerity of real milk, nor the vanilla sweet youth of baby formula. It's deceptive milk that has lived past the expiry date on the carton, but hasn't expired quite yet.

My pink blankie joined me three years and eight months after the first. It hasn't been ruined by the merciless touch of life and I can't see the faint outline of my hand seeping through the fabric. The loose threads aren't caused by the weeping of a child alone in the dark; it's caused by the wear of a washing machine, spinning and spinning. The thickness of the cotton lets it hold heat for at least thirteen minutes more than the blue blankie. It smells like delusive (yet delicious) milk, a scent that makes me question whether I should cherish or loathe it.

Even so, every night I continue to coddle my pink blankie, hoping the more I do it, the more it might remind me of the innocence I once held. My blue blankie only holds grievous memories of my youth, but maybe my pink blankie will remind me of a new yet familiar home.



# CROCHET OCTOPUS

*Alanna Rudolph, Age 18*



# THE PERFECT COOKIES

Randy Jang, Age 16

The sugar cookies don't taste right.

Maple Martin's memorial is in two hours, and despite spending far too much of his morning in the kitchen, Will is once again back to square one. He sighs, dumping the third batch of distorted treats into the waste bin. The sugar cookies were Maple's favourite; she had her own modified recipe that resulted in fantastic cookies.

Will had always enjoyed his sister's cookies, but for the life of him could never understand why he couldn't recreate them. His attempts in the kitchen always ended in smoke.

Will never did well in the kitchen, but it wouldn't be right to show up empty-handed today. Maple would never forgive him. Besides, this is keeping him busy. Keeping busy means he doesn't have time to think. Thinking will only haunt him with memories of his twin – every time they argued, played, laughed, smiled...

*"You'd think that such a big, strong man would at least be able to bake. This garbage looks like it was exposed to a nuclear blast,"* Maple had once teased him. *"You can always ask me for help. Just say the word and I'll be right there."*

She was always an annoying brat, he thought. He could see her, seventeen years ago, in the smoky kitchen of their tiny foster home. The two Martin siblings were turning ten, back when they were constantly laughing, arguing, teasing and just having fun. They had been so happy...

Of course, good things don't last forever. Of course, the two eventually had to grow up. The brother became a successful and satisfied systems support specialist. Meanwhile, the sister became one of the most popular and influential actresses in the world, starring in nine different movies and her world-famous television show *"Maple's Tree"*.

*"One of Canada's greatest actresses in the last decade!"* a famous report once stated.

*"Her ecstatic and charming personality is really something else,"* the director of *Maple's Tree* said in an interview.

Noting every tiny detail in the modified recipe, Will once again precisely measures each ingredient. This time, much to his surprise, he manages to add just enough flour and crack every single egg perfectly without tediously rechecking everything. Still, it takes some time before he begins mixing the batter.

Nothing he could ever do perfectly.

*Unlike...*

Will keeps his mouth in a straight line.

Will was genuinely happy about his twin sister's success. The two tried to meet up with each other whenever they could, which was exceptionally difficult considering Maple's career often took her a thousand miles away from Will. Even so, Will still loved and cared for his sister.

All of that ended five days ago, when the two siblings were turning twenty-eight.

The days following the tragedy are a blur to Will. They were filled with numbness, emptiness, and pain. Maple's friends came by to visit Will and offer condolences. They would've had better luck conversing with a buck.

Will doesn't blame anyone but himself.

Ten days ago, he noticed something different about Maple. She smiled and laughed a lot more but, somehow, it all seemed slightly fake. She told Will that she was going to visit their childhood hometown and would miss their twenty-eighth

birthday together. When she spoke, Will noticed something... off... about the sound of her voice and that strange yet tired and depressed look in her dark eyes. Yet, despite all of that, he had been ignorant enough to dismiss those warning signs.

That was the last day Will saw her alive and well.

The memorial service will burden him with a swarm of conflicting feelings, but when Will learned of the innumerable people who would attend, the most potent at the time was pure, unadulterated disgust. They didn't *know* Maple. They just came to pay their respects to the amazing, remarkable, one-of-a-kind actress who ended up becoming one of the most influential movie stars.

That's it. They didn't care for the beloved friend and sister. To them, she was just the star of *"Maple's Tree"*. Will liked and respected most of Maple's *real* friends, but he felt that even they wouldn't understand. Not like him. They never got to know her on a truly deep and personal level, never got to see her real smile or hear her authentic laughter at a joke...

But maybe he is a hypocrite. Maybe he is, because a real brother who genuinely loved and cared for Maple would have never let her...

Will tastes the batter and furrows his brow. It still isn't right. Something vital is missing. The texture is fine, but it tastes very bland...

Will slaps his forehead. He forgot the sugar.

Groaning, he gets the bag of sugar on the other side of the table. Leave it to Will Martin to turn something as simple as cookies into a heavens-forsaken nuclear disaster...

*"You'd think that such a big, strong man would at least be able to bake. This garbage looks like it was exposed to a nuclear blast."*

Will freezes, almost dropping the bag of sugar. Try as he might, the memories come rushing back, overflowing his mind. He clenches his teeth,

squeezes his eyes shut, recites "Español" in his mind, and does whatever he can do to stop thinking before he eventually yields. He takes a seat, accidentally knocking a vase of flowers onto the ground with his arm. Leaning back on the back of the chair with his arms dangling below him, he bows his head down with two tiny acidic tears streaking down his face, leaving twin trails of fire behind.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Maple was the kindest, bravest, happiest soul on the planet. The thought of this memorial ever happening never even crossed his mind until a few days ago.

Will painfully turns his head to an open cabinet, which holds an old and wrinkled *Alice in Wonderland* storybook, Maple's absolute favourite story when she was a child. She managed to scrounge enough money when she was a kid to purchase the book and was very overprotective of it, even as an adult. Uncannily enough, on the last day the two twins saw each other, she had given the book to him along with some other valuables with a smile and without hesitancy. Right now, Will's eyes and the book seem to be staring right through each other, burning a fiery hole within each other before Will glances back at the treats.

*"You can always ask me for help. Just say the word and I'll be right there."*

Maple had always been a bratty prankster. In their teenage years, she had once gone as far as to fill their foster parents' shampoo bottles with cheap glue for some evil giggles. Even now, Will expects his sister to burst through the front door, laughing her face off and exclaiming that this is all just some devilish joke while helping to fix up the disgusting excuses for sugar cookies.

The door stays closed.

# FROSTBITTEN HOME

*After 静夜思 by Li Bai*

*Mathew Fu, Age 17*

床前明月光

Moonlight falls before the bed

疑是地上霜

As frost on the frozen ground.

举头望明月

Look up at the shining moon,

低头思故乡。

Look down and think of home.

its fingers wedge between the window frame.  
shuttering.

a white hand reaching through the blinds.

the flip, the fracture, the flood.

here is the wound, the womb,

the birth canal,

here is light

and the room is drowned

in its snow.

the bedsheets - staunch white  
like the day i left.

a sacrilegious comfort -

*it is all white noise and white lies.*

fingernails pressed white

against wallpaper.

the floor: littered with fluorine bullets

and smiles.

little white smiles - *all those*

*clacking teeth.*

the fingers beckon - return to sender,  
recoil to mother.

a white bruise in the purple sky -

*don't tell me that isn't irony -*

glistening like silver.

a flawless bullet hole -

a cavity beaming and empty.

*this is the pain i want to be.*

the paper is still white.

the quills are still new.

the envelopes i brought -

folded neatly in their drawers.

*look down at your hands -*

uncallused, untouched

and whitening.

*don't be afraid:*

home is nothing

but walls that beg for a definition.

*don't worry:*

the paper is still white.

the quills are still new.

and you:

still looking for somewhere

called home.

*never quite there.*

*never quite gone.*

# SPRINGVALE

*Lucie Li, Age 17*



# QUEEN OF THE OCEAN

*Vivian Nguyen, Age 15*



# THE LAST DANCE

*Lily Baihe Tang, Age 15*

My ribbon exits its case with a swish. I curl my fingers around the matte grip; the rubber is sticky like drying honey from years of sweat and wear. Its ends are peeling away like old skin, yet it clings tightly to the glossy stick above. The light of the gymnasium glints off its exterior, making it look like a freshly painted white nail. Five meters of flowing fabric follow behind it, the weightless silk suspended in the air. The tenderly woven fibres drift the span of the carpet, glowing against the dull, monotone scenery around it. Its delicate colours bleed from pink to blue like a sunrise, ebullient with new life. I admire its energy, humming throughout the gym. The ribbon is ready and eager to dance.

Yet it is helpless on its own. It lies in my palm waiting for a command. I whip it through the air; I am the conductor and it is my baton. The music hums and I launch the ribbon into the air. It soars to the cavernous ceiling, invisible angel wings beating and propelling it until it creates a rainbow. I release my arm skywards, and it whizzes, sharp as a knife's edge, cutting through the air. Whipping above my head with a crack and then billowing down like the wind, its path arching gracefully like the sun setting over the horizon to land back in my hand. I spiral and snake the fabric, creating tornadoes of colour. It vigorously circles and dances to a crescendo, and then the storm clears and the ribbon sets. The elegant waves of rose and azure brush against my skin like water lapping at the edge of the sand. It tickles the tip of my nose, reminding me of the first time I picked up this precious fabric. I flutter my eyelashes, a light smile caressing my lips. The hand-dyed fabric still smells new, as morning dew. The music rushes to finish and the staccato notes vibrate through the gym. The ribbon follows in tandem, fighting for its *own* rhythm, desperate to push out its last spirals. Finally, the cacophony of noise and movement diminishes.

The music stops. The waves cease, the air stills, the ribbon drops - *silence*. The colours lie bright against the pale fawn carpet, the life seeps out of the ribbon as its end lands to rest beside the stick. Firmly clasped in my hand, it anticipates the next command, but none comes; the symphony is over. I solemnly lick my lips, salty and cracked from exertion. A metallic tang nibbles at the back of my throat as I hold in a breath. There's an ache, then a euphoric feeling as I let it escape my lungs through a sigh and my shoulders go slack. A tear of sweat drops onto the fabric, causing the colour to bleed, azure into pink then white. The ribbon lies limp; it knows that was its last dance.

**Content Note: grief**

## THE CANDY JAR

*Lily Zhang, Age 16*

**The Candy Jar** - died on May 4th, 2019. How funny: it was "May the force be with you" but all her force disappeared and she was gone too. My grandma bought unicorns, teddy bears, and rainbow hard candies in a glass jar for the price of 199 yuan back in 2014 for me just because I wouldn't move every single time I saw it. I was never her favourite kid though so a gift from her was rare. I stood in front of the shop that August, wondering what it was about the candy that had caught my attention. I thought about her words "少吃点。"\* I never had the chance to tell her that I spilled most of it. I was scared that she would be mad. The unicorns, teddy bears, and rainbows shattered instantly and were swiped into the gutters at the metro station, leaving just the empty jar. I should've filled it with Orbeez to keep it from being useless; I kept the empty jar like everything else. She used to tell me "你只是在收垃圾。"\* My excuse has always been "I'm a Taurus and I keep memories for later." She had a piece of grape candy and chicken wings from Costco the day Obi-wan's words failed. She kept the last few packets of ketchup, saying she'll eventually use it. She said "Yummy." I was asking her to teach me how to simplify an equation the moment before she coughed up blood. Like how I spilled the candies. The paramedic took off her ring and handed it to me. I dropped it in the jar to save it for later. But it doesn't need to come out anymore. When they're gone, they're gone. Except for the jar.

\* ("Don't eat too many sweets")

\* ("You're only keeping trash.")



# MOM'S SOUP

Harry Hong Yi Zhu, Age 16



# OLD MAP OF BEIJING

Waylon Shi, Age 14



## FROM **LOST WORD, LOST WORDS**

*Vicky Nguyen, Age 17*

I wake up with sweat trickling down my forehead. Any attempt to find the cooler side of the pillow is futile, now that the dream I've just had is all that occupies my mind. Every split-second of the scene in my head comes flashing back like zaps of lightning. A deafening cacophony bubble of exotic sounds keeps encircling, ready to burst out at any moment.

Suddenly, a sound – no, a syllable – jumps out of my mouth, as distant as a fragment drifted from a dusty civilization afar.

My heart leaps when my two roommates stir lightly on their beds and then return to their deep slumber. I can't imagine the consequences upon me if they heard me uttering a syllable excluded from the list of Permitted Syllables.

Still curled in the blanket, I'm mightily relieved it's Saturday. Though, even on the weekend, the thought of school sends a light zap down my spine.

School is where we learned how The Great Language came to be and its omnipotence in our life. We're taught to be grateful that everyone in the world now speaks one language, having attained the ultimate gain of humanity. Our history is stained with blood because of the bitter grievances of linguistic miscommunications: treaties unintentionally signed between settlers and original inhabitants, wartime accords misinterpreted between superpowers, an eye-for-eye brawl between longtime neighbours from just a misunderstanding of a word.

Thankfully, after the establishment of the New Order, this calamity ended. Or so I thought before the dream.

Dawn creeps through the window, painting the room in a golden palette. The neighborhood is buzzing with residents getting out to start their day. The hoarse voice of the milkman, the prattle of babies on their morning stroll, the hush-hush of the grumpy widow next door to the naughty cat that always turns her garbage can up. The familiar sounds of the tongue, all coming in a swirl, entrenched in the circle of life.

Since I learned how to read and speak, words have fluttered around me like feathers, falling onto the tip of my tongue and pronounced out loud faster than lightning after my thoughts. Still, there's always something that I long for. As much as my language ability allows, I can't just put it in words. A yearning for filling the void of unheard words.

# SHE LIVES INSIDE OF ME

*Georgia Wallace, Age 18*

i miss running barefoot through the grass  
as summer afternoons rolled into evening parties  
the rush of birds calling me  
waiting for them to wake me up  
the hard work i put in  
to poems and songs  
i'd hum along the sidewalk  
there were promises made  
and they stayed that way  
a simplicity to life  
that could never be the same  
the belonging that slowly died  
with growing up.  
but she lives inside of me  
because i miss you  
the person you were at seven  
i would do anything to say an extra word to you  
when we were close  
without the weight of our desires  
washed up inside of well wishes and distance.  
*where did we go?*  
yet while i'm here  
i can't breathe  
and hold on at the same time  
so i guess i'm no longer who i was  
that scares me – losing the only thing i ever had  
and nobody will ever know that as much as me.  
but there are flurries in february  
and i'm a decade past that growing  
running until i'm too far away  
to know the feeling of grass  
barefoot  
never wondering when everything disappeared so quickly.

# THE COLOUR BLUE

*Ella Chen, Age 13*

I looked over at the Play-Doh sets I was playing with last night. All the colours had mixed together again to create a ugly brown, greenish blue. That was exactly how I felt that day, overwhelmed and busy. Art teachers never told you if your drawing was too colourful, but in this case I'd created a hundred layers of oil paint.

I woke up to the hot weather of Taiwan, feeling numb and foggy. Not because of the heat, but because the thought of leaving made me so sick that every time I lay down, words and memories carved into my brain. Sleep was impossible.

Everything was happening so suddenly. Something I'd waited for my whole life felt too quick. I'd imagined what Canada would look like all my life. I had a whole slide show in my mind. Even though I'd been preparing for this, I wasn't ready.

I was allowed to bring a backpack with me on the plane, and of course I chose my favourite pink one. I packed all of my favorite items, memories packed away with them. I was a sensitive kid, too sentimental, everyone said. I was just so attached to everything I owned all of a sudden.

My grandpa was sitting at his usual spot, a sofa chair just right beside the dining table. He looked like one of those drooping, half-inflated Halloween decorations. His eyes were even puffier than usual. I could tell he'd been crying. Emotions were rarely talked about in our house. I wanted to tell him how much I loved him, that I couldn't imagine not seeing him anymore. But every time I tried to say the words, I felt foolish, like I didn't even know how to talk.

Growing up, I hated the clothes my grandma made for me, all the old-fashioned sad colours looked horrible, especially when they were sewn with funky buttons. Instead, I loved wearing puffy pink dresses that made me feel like a princess. Grandma sat on the living room sofa, and I hugged her

for the last time. She smelt like old lady perfume, a strong flowery detergent smell.

We had unofficial seating arrangements, because my grandparents always sat at the same spot, and almost always did the same thing. I'd come home seeing grandma hand-sewing things. It'd be hard to get used to not seeing them. This was my home, the place that I loved, despite the craziness and chaos.

"Don't be so sentimental, you'll fit right in there," my dad said.

The car ride was quiet, but I could still hear the loud street noise in the background. Talking was never my thing during a car ride, since that's when I do most of my thinking. How was I going to learn a completely new language, make new friends, or make a new life? The never-ending thoughts like dominos never stopped.

We arrived at the train station. It was one I'd been to before when we traveled, when we picked up dad from work, or when I accidentally hugged an old lady thinking it was my grandma. That place gave me a calm energy; every train station in Taiwan smelt the same no matter where you were. I got on the train and tried not to blink, because that was my way of drying out the tears. I waved out the window to my grandpa, even until I couldn't see him anymore. Then all I could do was to think ahead.

How do you know if the blue I see is the same blue you see?

"Where are we?" my little brother asked excitedly.

Well, that was our new blue. Blue that was no longer mixed play dough, just the bright blue sky. Our new blue house. Suddenly it was only blue, nothing more, nothing less. Just something new.

# ODE TO MY GIRLHOOD

*Emma Clinton, Age 16*

My girlhood, a pure, unbridled daydream  
Of indulgent play and bright rosy cheeks  
Braiding pigtails with a soft, youthful gleam  
Weaving birds' nests and playing in lush creeks

Laughing with blooming, berry-stained fingers  
A gapping smile, unabashedly naïve,  
Playful scrapes and scars whose pain lingers  
Starry-eyed dreams impossible to achieve

Delighting the world with a kindred spirit  
Sharing hearts, passions, yearnings, and joint woes  
For girlhood, you show no controlled limit  
Of the vicious and pure truths you expose

I learned the intensity of insecurity,  
Stuck inside a body too meek and distressed  
You stripped me of my blissful purity,  
Leaving the burden of maturity and regrets

You taught me of my inherent helplessness,  
But nonetheless of life's tremendous bliss

# PEARS AND PERFUME

Jenny Chi, Age 15



# MAVERICK

*Hiona Oyama, Age 16*

"You lure me too much, my love," Maverick proclaimed. "I am devoted to you like a clergyman is to God; my inability to keep away from you despite our incompatibility is my one and only vice. You are like a butterfly: beautiful, dainty, with an interesting tongue, whereas I am like an ostrich: large for my species, and with a habit of falling in love with humans."

"Oh, you bugger. I'm doing laundry, could you let me do this in silence, please?" I folded the same towel again, hoping that he would leave me alone if only for a few more minutes. He stood there for a long moment, staring with his eight emerald eyes that were glinting like the fireflies he eats. Exasperated, I asked, "What is it?"

"Well, you see..." he said, continuing to stare. "Well, I don't mean to be rash or anything, but I would just like to say that the joy present in my life has been augmented by your presence. I will be there when you need me, I will be there when you want me. I will even be there when you do not, as I cannot leave this house. I loathe the fact that I am pestering you with my incessant, boisterous-

"All right, all right, enough. Please."

When I first moved into this house, there was a large room predominantly filled with old books and mice traps. I thought the place was a steal; housing prices regularly had more digits than my phone number, but this house was heavily discounted because it was "marred." I, however, did not know that in that small room, there lived a larger than average, exceptionally lonely talking spider.

After cleaning up the dust and removing some mold, the house was turning into a home. I was pleased; that was, until I started hearing the spider. Although I have learned to deal with him, he

can get very annoying.

"I once again apologize for droning on," he announced. "But I see that you have completed the laundry. Well done! I do wish I could help, but unfortunately my arms are too thin, and my legs are too weak. Are there any other ways I can prove my devotion?"

"You know," I said, pausing for effect while moving to my room, Maverick following closely behind. "Something that would be super extra helpful, even more helpful than that washing machine was with cleaning my laundry, is if you would go up to the attic to see if you can find any bugs."

"Oh yes, of course madam! Anything for you madam! I shall remove the foul beasts that dare mar your beautiful abode."

He scampered off, and I savoured the cool silence of the room. To be frank, I don't hate living with Maverick. He is enthusiastic and encouraging and helps ward off loneliness, though he can be a bit intense at times. I'm not sure what the seller meant by "marred." The only thing marred about this house is the fact that I have Halloween decorations up all year. I could see that for arachnophobes, Maverick would be a deal-breaker, but I'm all right. He gave me a good deal on this beautiful house.

"I have returned, Annabelle! I did not find any insects under the bed, but I did find a sock! Unfortunately, it is now stuck to three of my legs. Will you aid me?"

"Oh! I was looking for this sock. Thanks, Maverick."

"Forever at your service! Whatever I can do to help shall be done."

"On that note..." I thought for a bit, thinking about



how to approach my question. "Do you know why this house was sold to me as being 'marred'?" I asked, hoping it wasn't because of him, and that he wouldn't hide behind the bookshelves to loudly recite depressing poems.

"Oh, yes. I do." He stared at me again; it may be because of his eight eyes, but he always seemed to be doing that.

I waited for him to continue, glad he wasn't offended. When he didn't, though, I asked, "Could you tell me the reason?"

"Oh! My apologies. Well, they say long ago, there was once a young poet who loved very strongly, felt with all his heart. He had visited this house to enjoy a grand fest, but when he overheard somebody insulting the woman he fancied, he just could not stand it. He hastily whipped out his pistol, waving it around recklessly as he challenged his foe to a duel. Stumbling over words, he raved ever so earnestly about his sweet love, trying to survive this battle so that they could grow old to-

gether. He had, O ever so unfortunately, lost, and his body... well, so they say, disappeared without a trace."

That was something I didn't hear when purchasing the house. I told Maverick as such, and he shrugged with all eight of his legs before scurrying off.

*Weird*, I thought. I'd never thought about the history of this house before, but of course there was one. I couldn't help but see some parallels between Maverick and the poet; though, there wasn't a whole lot to compare. He was a spider, not a poet, after all.

That night, I dreamed about the story Maverick told me, only the ending was different. This time, instead of the poet disappearing, he simply shrank. He shrank, smaller, smaller and smaller, until he turned into a dark, eight-legged creature with emerald eyes, peeking out from behind a not-yet-dusty bookshelf.

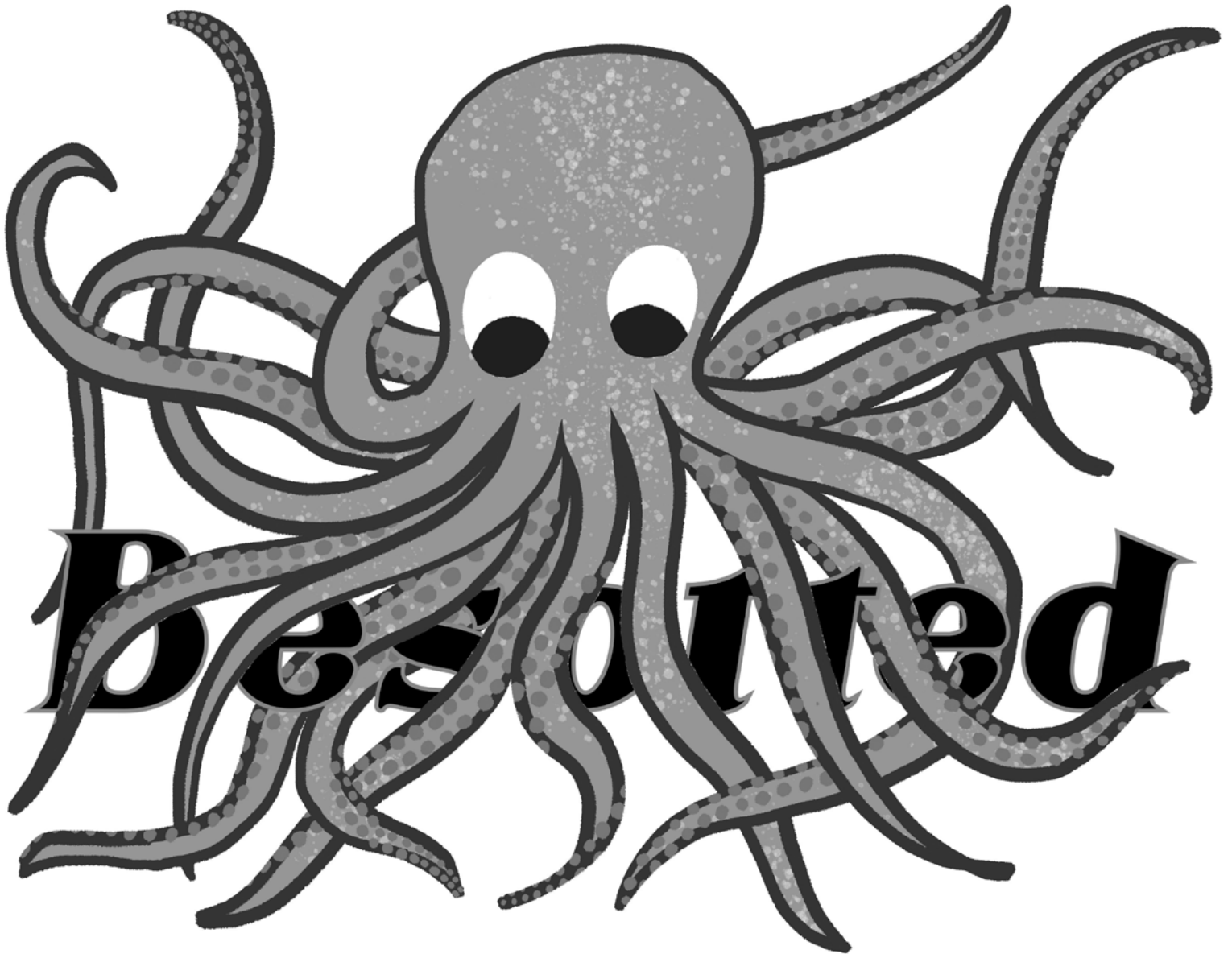
# CREATURE

*Robin Pechlaner-Kruk, Age 15*

Creature woke with glory and greed.  
Greed for love,  
For acceptance,  
For triumph.  
Creature wanted to feel!  
Feel the sun on his skin,  
Feel the love of his mother,  
To feel everything there was to be felt.  
And oh, did creature ever feel!  
Creature felt it all.  
Creature drowned in feeling.  
He drowned in his master's suppression,  
Agony, and  
Silence.  
And so, dear creature,  
I apologize.  
I apologize as you lay your head to rest.  
With half a heart and tired limbs,  
Weathered by disappointments.  
I apologize,  
That you did not get to  
Bask in the starry sky,  
Or beneath the trees.  
And now, dear creature,  
You may rest.  
Rest,  
In the glory of your unmet potential.

# BESOTTED

*Esmé Mac, Age 14*



# THE CHILDREN WERE HARASSED BY THE THAI GOVERNMENT

*Irine Benjamaporn Niwat, Age 18*



# DESIRE

*Tasfia Shashi, Age 15*

Nothing is absent,

In this perfect life.

I have money, fame, and power,

No reason for strife.

Yet I feel a deepened hunger,

A longing for more.

But how can things be better,

When nothing's left to score.

Everyday it gets colder,

And everyday it gets dark.

Yet I feel my desire,

Burning like a spark.

Alas! I've learned,

As the years went by.

It was freedom I desired,

And love that I eyed.

Yet I couldn't grasp it,

Nor bear in my head.

I realized too late,

And too late were tears shed.

No matter how far you look,

Or the price you pay.

No one can sell you freedom,

For neither can say.

That these things exist in this world today.

# PART-TIME OVERACHIEVER

*Jenny Chen, Age 15*

It's that time of year again. The dreaded report card season.

At school, everyone is restless, trying to chuck in the last of their late assessments, preparing for the disappointment of that one bad grade. But what fogs my mind the most is that suffocating fear of failure that lives in the shadow of the ideal student image others have somehow sculpted to resemble me.

Fear of failure often comes hand-in-hand with being an overachiever... but not for me! I'm more like the opposite of an overachiever. I have a bad habit of leaving my assignments to last minute and settling for "good enough" when something could be "great." I can't seem to figure out if that's good or bad. It prevents me from crossing the line to being an overbearing perfectionist, but leaves me in a constant loop of hoping that this pattern of: low effort → good results miraculously continues for the next assignment. And when it does, there's this imposter syndrome that sits in the back of my mind and whispers to me that my marks weren't deserved, that the teacher just likes me, that I just got lucky, or maybe my marks were mixed up with someone else's. There's no way that something I didn't put any thought into could ever be good enough.

On the other hand, when I don't get good results, I just tell myself, "Pshh! It's ok, it's just because I didn't put effort into this assignment. If I did put in the work, I would have totally gotten a good mark."

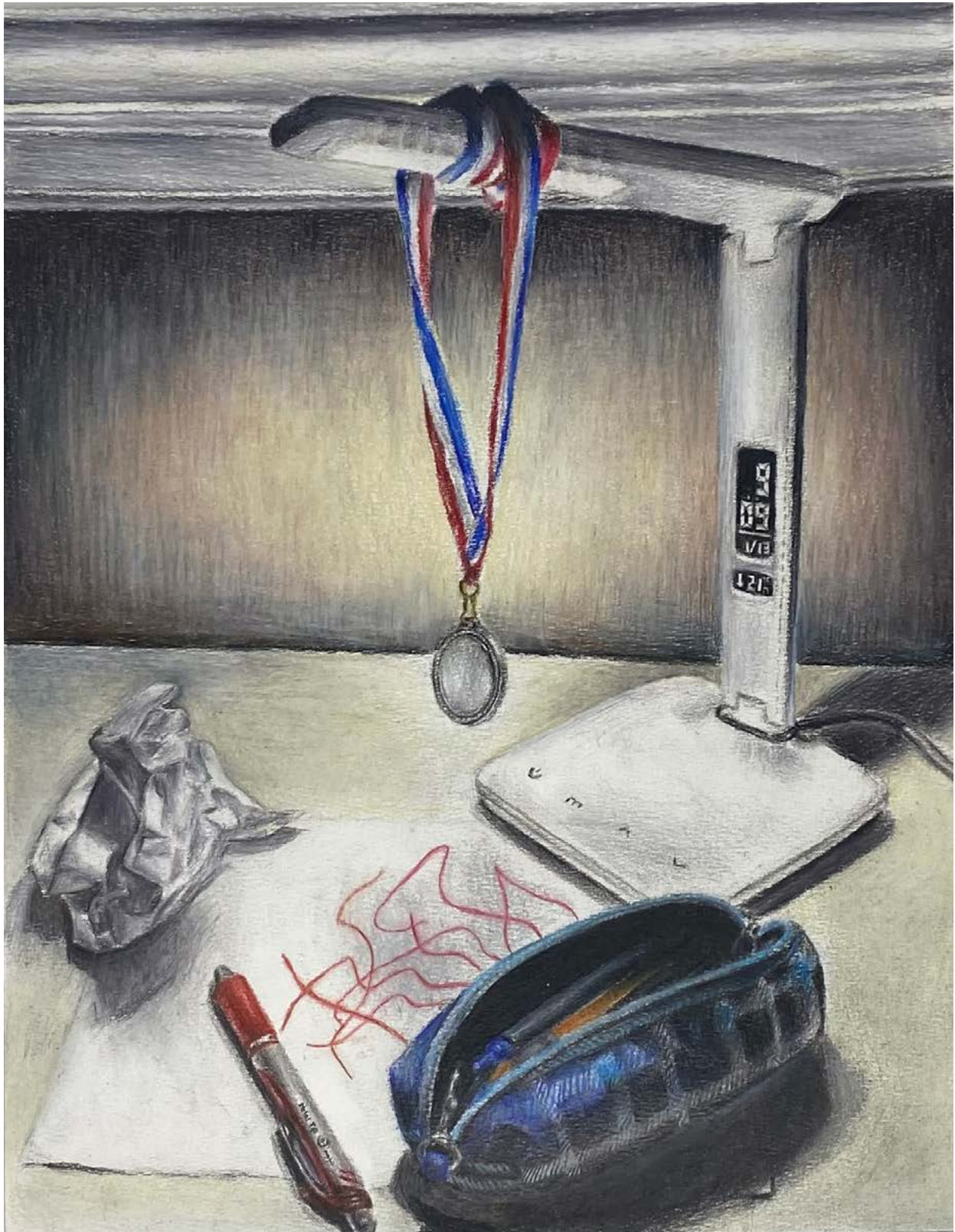
Sometimes I think, maybe I'm feeding myself lies to protect my fragile ego. Maybe the lack of effort in these assignments aren't as severe as I tell myself they are. Because even as I'm fumbling around my ideas, and making typos left and right just trying to have something to hand in, somewhere in the darkest corners of my mind, some part of me is putting in the effort to create something I think deserves good marks. And when I get marks back that aren't as good as I expected, under all that confidence that "I would have gotten a good mark with effort" there's a little part of me that feels like I really wouldn't have.

Maybe I don't leave everything for last minute just because I'm lazy. And maybe what I really fear is being average. I'm terrified that when I put in my best effort, nothing extraordinary will come out of it. That in the end, I'm not anything special, I'm just normal. So I never let myself see my full potential, because you don't have to be scared of what you don't know.

So perhaps I am a little bit of an overachiever. No, I think "overachiever" isn't the right word. I have a fear of failing when I put in 100%, so I limit myself to 50%. But, really, I'm just convincing myself so that when the marks come back bad I can say, "I barely put any effort into this" and when they come back good I can say, "I barely put any effort into this!"

# SILVER LINING

Mathew Fu, Age 17



# WAVING THROUGH A WINDOW

*Xinyi Li, Age 17*





# IDENTITY

*Fiona Xing, Age 15*

"#####, I haven't seen you in about three weeks. How are you feeling?"

"Okay."

"Your mother tells me that you're feeling better. What have you been up to lately? Anything new to update me on?"

"No."

"So... do you feel better?"

##### was at a loss as to why someone who specialised in helping people feel better would ask such a superficial question. To #####, the answer should've been completely obvious. Dr. Wong should have noticed that the shine in her slicked back hair wasn't gel, it was grease. Her eyelids weren't naturally monolids, but swollen from a wretched night. And she definitely wasn't wearing a hoodie on a twenty-eight degree day because she felt cold.

"Okay."

"What does 'okay' mean?"

Why did "okay" have to signify anything? Why couldn't she simply feel okay? Why does there always need to be a hidden meaning or something to be fixed? What if #####'s life had no meaning and she didn't want to be fixed? What was Dr. Wong implying? That she wasn't okay?

"It just means okay."

"Alright."

...

"Would you like to do some drawing?"

Dr. Wong handed her a pencil and a piece of lined paper. ##### wanted to do anything other than

drawing, but Dr. Wong would ask her why she didn't want to, and she wouldn't have an answer for him.

"Hm... How about you draw yourself?"

His words lingered in the air, staying still for thirteen seconds. ##### placed the tip of the pencil on the paper. She dragged the graphite lead in a circular motion, a line, two circles, two ovals, and four more lines. She looked down at her creation and a small breath escaped her pale lips.

"Can I get an eraser?"

"I'm sorry, can I offer you another piece of paper?"

"That's not what I asked for."

"What?"

##### didn't want another piece of paper. Her current piece of paper was fine. It was the stupid scribbles on the paper that weren't fine. The first circle was far too shaky, the line too faint. The second and third circles were uneven. The ovals were shaped too much like circles, and the other lines were just not right. Why couldn't Dr. Wong understand that? Why couldn't he listen?

"Never mind."

She started drawing again, beginning with a square. No, that wasn't right. A triangle? Nothing was right. ##### felt the classic symptoms, the emptying drop in the stomach, the throat tightly closing in, and the world starting to blur into spots of lifeless colour.

"Oh no, why are you sad?"

Crying did not mean ##### was filled with sadness or that she was depressed. She was mad and frustrated. Why couldn't anyone see that? Why couldn't anyone see the real her?

# A TRUE FRIENDSHIP

*Khaliya Rajan, Age 15*

"Psst. Come over here," whispered Olivia, the most popular girl in the class.

I walked over, wondering why she was calling to me, of all people. I was pretty shy and quiet. I had one friend named Karla. Teachers would say that we were inseparable and I couldn't disagree. We did everything together.

When I arrived at the corner where Olivia and her friends were, she pulled me beside her and hissed, "I heard Karla say that she hates you and thinks you're beneath her. She also said that you're weak and dumb."

"Dumb?" Ouch! That hit hard. I got surgery two years ago, in grade three, and had fallen behind and been bullied for being dumb. But I'd caught up, or so I thought. "What? When?"

"Yesterday after French class. I'm so sorry. I thought you should know."

The teacher came over, and we all had to take our seats. Mine was beside Karla, and I didn't talk to her for the rest of the day. I tried not to look at her. Olivia's words—"weak and dumb"—kept replaying in my mind.

How could Karla say that about me? Did she really think that? Had I done something to her to make her say that? I thought about every moment of the last two days. We hadn't fought. I had been nice to her and she had been nice to me.

Yesterday, we worked on our big art project, painting a mural for the school. The mural showed friendship and was colourful. We had a lot of fun.

The day before, we had talked and laughed at lunch, and I had helped her with math in class. We had also gone to the beach after school and built an enormous sandcastle with a moat around it. That evening, at home, I cried. I couldn't lose my best friend.

The next day, I continued to ignore Karla, and at lunch, Olivia invited me to sit with her and her friends. I accepted, even though I did not like talking about cool trends and knew that I would probably be left out. To my surprise, Olivia included me in the conversation, and we even chatted about art!

After school, I was speed-walking home when Karla caught up with me. Like me, she was out of breath. "Wait up," she said.

I ignored her, hearing Olivia's words again. *Weak and dumb*. I sped up even more, leaving Karla staring after me.

The next day, Karla and I had to work on the mural. There was no way to avoid it.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Why?"

I ignored her.

A few minutes later, she asked again. "Why?"

Once again, I ignored her, and continued this until she said, "Why?" for what felt like the thousandth time.

Fed up, I exploded, "Because you said I was weak and dumb. How could you?"

"What? I never said that. I would never say that. Who told you that I said that?"

"Olivia."

"And you believed her? You know that she's never liked me since I won the school talent show leaving her act to get second place and proving I was a better singer."

I did know that. I remembered that talent show like it was yesterday. Last year, Karla sang beautifully, and the judges unanimously decided she was the winner. Olivia had bragged about her singing ability beforehand and had gone all red when Karla won. She had been mad ever since.

I felt terrible. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking."

It was Karla's turn to ignore me.

"I really am sorry. It caught me off guard, which I know is no excuse. Oh Karla, please forgive me."

Karla sighed. "I forgive you. Just don't let this happen again. I couldn't afford to lose my best friend."

I promised her to think thoroughly before assuming, and we hugged. We finished painting our mural, and now we were talking and laughing. The

mural illustrated our true bond of friendship. Even though I had made a mistake that hurt Karla, I was able to admit it and apologize and she was able to forgive me.

I was furious at Olivia, though. When I saw her at lunch, I confronted her. My heart was pounding as I said, "You lied. Karla never said anything bad about me. You shouldn't spread rumours."

She seemed a little startled but held her ground. "I have no idea what you are talking about," she replied coolly and then walked away.

I shook my head, rolled my eyes, turned around, and walked back to Karla, who was waiting for me at our usual table. I was happy. Karla and I were best friends again, our friendship mural was stunning, and I had stood up to Olivia.

# NO DOG DAYS

Hiona Oyama, Age 16

"Your dog is weird," Joey chuckled lightly.

I stared fervently at him, attempting to process the harsh words. My feelings for him instantly blunted to a nub, to the ends of pencils and paper stubs, the remnants of my past life as an artist. I marvelled at his nerve. The unfiltered animosity that was radiating from him was nearly unbearable.

I came looking for love, but he came looking to fight. *Just my luck.*

Of course, it was oh-so typical for my first date to be ruined by another dog-hating, basement-dwelling, cat-sympathizing raccoon wannabe. My life is littered with loose ends from cut ties, people who tried to trick me with their lies, but I don't regret it. It is better to swiftly and efficiently remove these people from my life than to have their hands tugging at my strings until I snap. I can't be tentative or have any inhibitions when approaching these issues, or the stems will snap without the roots. We can't be having that.

My dog is my pride, my joy, and Joey was prejudiced. My life can not be a drama; there are far more efficient ways to live. Sometimes my mind wanders to what I could have become if I stayed on the dark and unpredictable path of art, and it terrifies me; would I be a flamboyant clown, selling my soul in vague attempts to gain recognition and a lacklustre banknote? But these things cannot be dwelled on for long. My time is limited, and there are far more efficient ways to utilize it.

I stared Joey in the eyes. Eye contact connotes social status and imminent aggression. Before he could say anything else, my fist whomped into his shoulder like a bass beat in a club. I had missed my intended target, his face, but its expression shifted rapidly into such a deformed figure, eyebrows lifted and pressed together, that I was satisfied with my work regardless.

"Let this be a warning," I articulated, low but clear, "to never insult my dog again."

I grabbed my things from the cold bench and hurried away in a tumult of emotions as cheerful as a concussed camel, ignoring Joey's pleading cries of confusion and requests for me to come back.

\*\*\*

Later that day, I scrolled through an abundance of adver-

tisements for other potential suitors, but they all invariably had flaws that detracted from their worthiness. I had to pick the right person; to dispense the love I'd tucked away for so many years would be too painful otherwise, I'd be left too vulnerable if it was tossed. Joey had seemed like the perfect option: kind, optimistic, and "loving," so he said, but he had to ruin it right at the end.

My love is an Exacto knife, forgotten in a drawer. The drawer stays closed, locked away, in the back of a beautiful art studio, dishevelled and dreary and dilapidated. The knife is sought by the artists in the studio; they want to find it, use it, dull it. The knife could cut its way to freedom, but it would hurt the drawer, where it stays protected, clean, unharmed, inexperienced. Other knives get used instead. Some will find clay, get stained and dirty but stay sharp. Others will find paper, and slowly grow dull until they're replaced. Lucky ones will get sharpened by artisans as they age, but others will be tossed to the trash to be trampled by tins and tangled wire. Some days the Exacto knife thinks about the different artists it could meet, the different pieces it could see, but the drawer reminds it to stay safe. I don't want my Exacto knife to be found. What will happen to the drawer once it's empty?

While scrolling on my phone, I received a message from Joey.

"Hey, look, I'm sorry I called your dog weird. He's cute and silly, that's what I should have said. I didn't think you'd take my words so seriously, though, and I don't think your reaction was warranted. If it were up to me, I'd leave your inbox empty, but you left your dog at the park? And I am not sure what you expect me to do."

I stared at the message, aghast, until the notification abruptly disappeared and was replaced by another.

"Do you want to meet up somewhere to come get him? I could also drop him off at your place if that's easier."

Incredible. Not only did he kidnap my dog, but he tried to use it as leverage to learn my home address. He might as well ask for my credit card information and a will stating he is the singular heir to my estate!

"Leave him tied to the birch tree at Simmons Park. Do not contact me again, I don't intermingle with rude donkeys," I texted back, satisfied with my word choice. Who cares for love anyways; dogs are far more efficient.

Still, I stared across the dark room, empty.

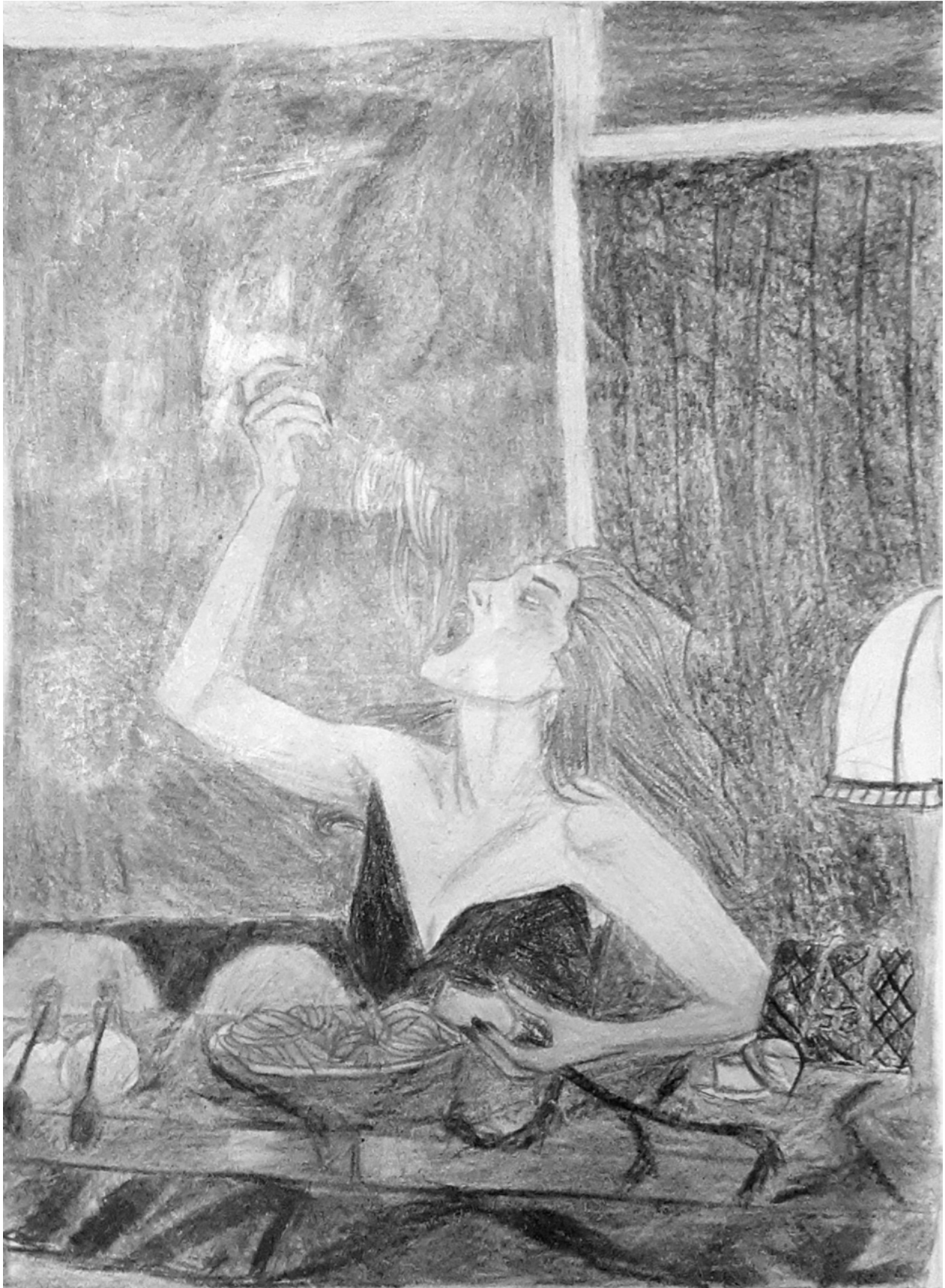
# AXOLOTL FASHION

*Peanutfrog, Age 16*



# PASTA LADY

*Megan Wong, Age 16*



# UNDER THE SKIN

*Claire Zhong, Age 16*

Auntie Ping lives on the sixth floor of a tall, gray building, above the tea shop and the stationery shop and the parking lot across from the elementary school. From here she looks down on the busy world below her. She isn't very tall, and dislikes having to look up to speak to people, so she mostly doesn't speak to people at all. Instead, she speaks at people. She likes it better that way, though other people don't. This means she is alone most of the time – at least, she used to be.

Approaching 60, her age seeps onward like spilled wine ready to stain the carpet. She never married, never had children, and “spoke off” any friends she used to have, thus it fell to her to care for her mother, who is the embodiment of a figurative and literal leaky teapot. Mother and daughter have always been rather solitary figures, but like two buoys in the same swell, they're bound by a steady rhythm of caretaking: boiling meat whipped to a toothlessly comestible pulp, bathing ridges and valleys of bone and skin with a rusting shower head, fastening buttons from top to bottom on that navy corduroy coat.

If Auntie Ping didn't have to do this, she wouldn't. She has tried hiring nannies, but they never stay; she speaks at them until they leave. Almost everyone leaves Auntie Ping eventually, but what doesn't leave are her houses. She has six, five of which are empty. She loves her houses because they never leave her, and she makes sure to remind us of this whenever she calls my mom. They holler at each other over WeChat in Shanghang Hakka dialect; a vocabulary that's jagged and hard, where the odd word from Auntie Ping flakes off like flint, thin and sharp enough to burrow itself right under my skin.

My skin is thin like the petals of a greenhouse flower, so the Chinese idiom goes. Auntie Ping has the concrete skin of a concrete woman living in a concrete world. An expression of liberty for me is another fly to swat for Auntie Ping. “Democracy is useless,” she speaks at me from my mother's phone screen: “Now the dragon has awoken to dominate the world.”

I would never buy into that kind of thing, because in school they've promised me that I'll grow up in the freedom of democracy and become a strong independent woman and become educated and become successful and wealthy, and then I'll solve world hunger. I'll drink my Peruvian blueberry and organic kale smoothie with a metal straw to save the turtles, tack a “live laugh love” poster to my bedroom door, and start a nonprofit to make music education more accessible.

Auntie Ping tells me that I'll have no trouble not making a profit with music.

“That's not true,” I retort. “Music is priceless. Plus, many people donate to support the cause – think of all the children who smile because of the music we bring to them!”

Auntie Ping says we shouldn't infect other people with our worthless music by “begging for money,” and isn't this such a great example of why you should start a business or study neuroscience or become a lawyer instead – better yet, throw away the trappings of capitalism and be a farmer with a sizeable brood of children? But this just shows the limits of her imagination because I'm going to make music and study neuroscience and become a mother and grow vegetables and publish a book before I turn thirty; I listen to a podcast that tells me how.

Look, Auntie Ping can keep driving her steam locomotive backwards, but I'm going to shake off the shackles of patriarchy and board a bullet train headed squarely un-backwards. Watch me, riding the bandwagon of optimistic progress with I'm-going-to-make-an-impact enthusiasm, 'going' 'til we're gone like McDonald's fries, 'making an impact' like the Manhattan Project, driving faster than dad's Honda minivan when he's late for work. Auntie Ping's golden dragon may devour the sun, but I'll get there first.

# ADVENTURES OF PEPPER: THE BATTLE WITH A CAT

Clara Wan, Age 13

*BEEEE! BEEEE!* I awakened to the piercing alarm. My grey and white dog fur stood on end. When I prepared for a walk, adrenaline filled my nose. I leapt up and followed my ancestors' rule of running zigzag to confuse predators. Then, we left the house. Adventures were usually awesome. Would this one be?

Minutes later, we arrived at a giant place with very confusing smells. Apparently, based on a former conversation between my ma and her parents, this was an airport. We were to be welcomed quite warmly into something called an airplane. What was this puzzling thing? Smells from other places miles away met my nose. I was let into a place where other dogs had been but I didn't need to go to the bathroom! Didn't my ma know that?

During a break, I munched anxiously on a piece of bacon that had been fed to me. Where was this place that smelled faraway? How many dogs have stood where I now sit in my box? Do my humans plan to leave me here? No! They better not.

At some point in time, we were off again, into what looked like a huge metal tin can. Then, my sniffer was confused as I realized *this* was the airplane my family was talking about. It looked like a tiny flying building. The ground beneath us started to rumble and the noise got louder. My ears felt like they were stuffed with dozens of cotton balls, and don't get me wrong, I thought my ma was smart, but she wasn't letting me out! She knew I was there, as she pet me. Eventually, I snoozed.

I swore I would never go on an airplane again. When we landed, everything was just as bad. My sound drowned out while I whined.

After what seemed like *hours* of whining and my ma carrying me uncomfortably in my box, we

were outside again! Still, something told that me this was not Canada. It was America.

We entered a new-smelling car and then arrived at a house. Afterwards, we went to yet another house. As soon as I got there, I was greeted by more family. What a pleasant bunch! Always petting me and calling me a cutie pie, although some automatically assumed I was a lady dog because I was so beautiful.

However, something was wrong. I smelled... A MALE CAT! I knew this smell. Cats were the feared enemy. I looked around, flinching whenever I saw something that looked like a cat.

I met new people—three female humans and a young man. They all had cat smells on them. No! They should have *my* smell on them instead! Just that first night, there was a huge feast, and I got ready and stretched, forgetting about the cat and prepared to have a gigantic meal. But before I could put a tooth on a chicken wing, I met him.

*"HISSS! Who is this?"*

I whipped around, seeing the cat's eyes. Since I knew he thought I was invading his territory, I tried to take advantage of that.

*"Woof! Hello there,"* I responded. *"That's Pepper the King to you. Your name is...?"*

*"EUUWH! Peasant little puppy. Are you even potty trained yet?"* The cat hissed his evil, menacing laugh and moved closer.

Nervousness suddenly enveloped me. *"Well—"*

*"Sh! No one talks over me. Your breath has such a stench that I want to throw up. Your fur is dirty. Are*



you from underground or do you herd sheep?" At this, the cat chuckled again. "Do you know how to brush? DO YOU? Do you even know what a brush is?"

"Well! You're a petty housecat! My humans brush me, while you brush yourself with the thing that you eat with!" I lost my temper. "Bet *you* don't know what a mountain is. *I* come from Vancouver. Do you even know what snow is? Have you put your groomed paw in that?"

"I don't need to go *hunting* for my food. HAHHAHA! My humans feed me. Do you get scraps poor little puppy?"

"My humans feed me too!"

The cat looked annoyed. "I'm Mr. Fluffles. If you want to pick a bone with me, make sure you aren't going to chew it! Remember this!" Suddenly, he swatted and chased me.

I fled, trying to get to my real family. "MA! MA!"

When I got to her and she picked me up, the cat was nowhere to be seen. This was so suspicious! What a cousin! When we got back to our new home, I plotted against the cat and then slept a restless nightmare where my ancestors were fighting the cats.

The next day, I felt confident when I arrived at the house. When I saw the cat again, we spoke.

"MEOW! You!" he hissed. "Why are you back, little nonentity! Do you even know what that word means?"

"Bark! Okay, mister fancy paws kitty!"

"Excuse me?"

We parted with cold stares, and I spent the evening with my ma, growling whenever I saw that kitty. Later, I would execute my plan.

My ma was playing the piano when I attacked. The cat saw me and swatted with his sharp claws. Definitely not a piano player! I dodged the hit. I saw anger in his eyes as he was locked up by other humans, but I might have seen some respect in those eyes too. Maybe I didn't see well.

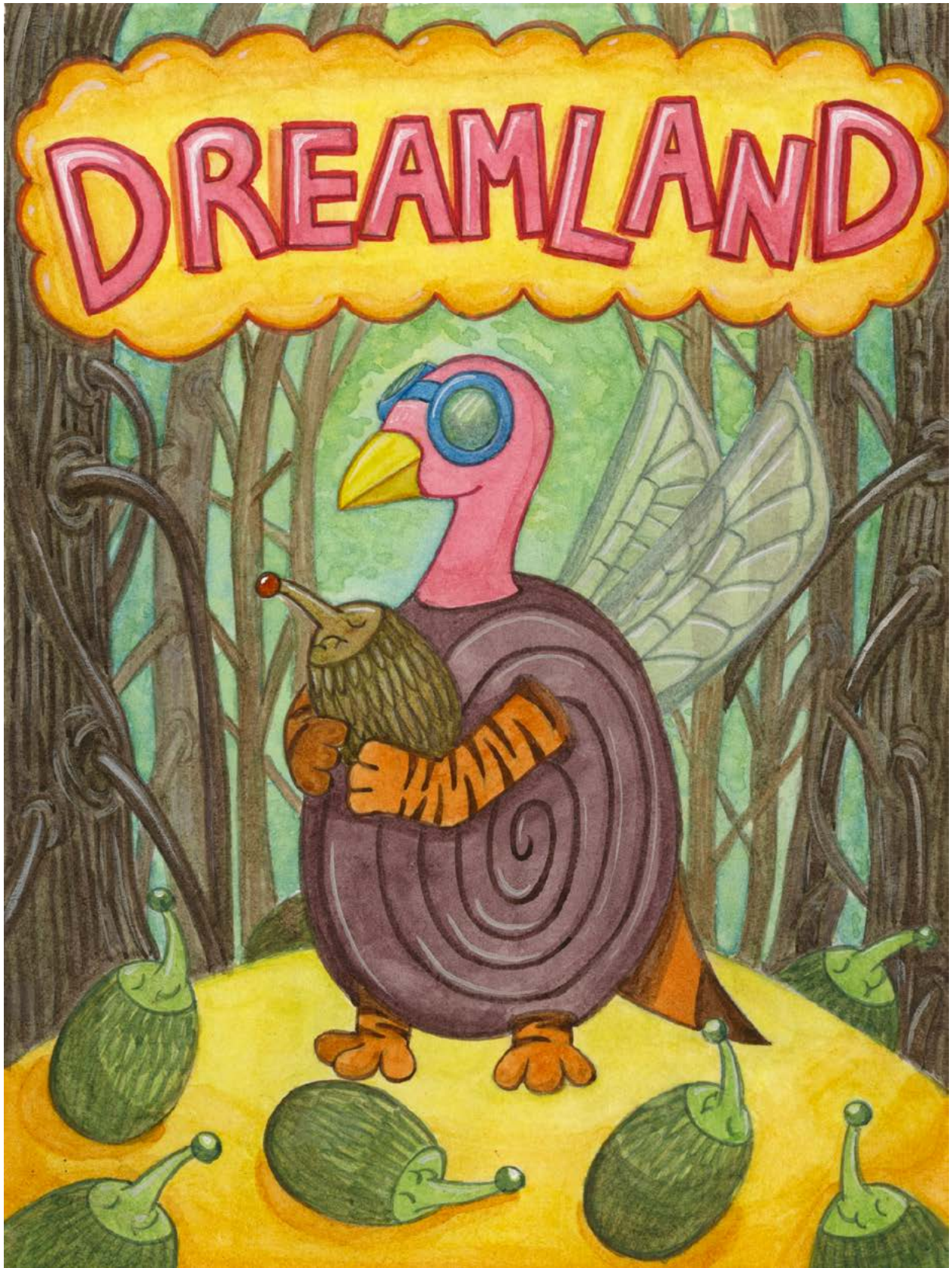
When we went back home to Canada, we took the airplane again. I tried to stay calm, and the flight seemed shorter this time! Finally, when I was resting at home, I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking about my adventure. Sure, it was hard, but in the end, I had learned quite a lot.

1. Cats can be as strong as dogs. (Sometimes.)
2. My ancestors' methods work really well!
3. I would like to do it again.

**LE FIN**

# DREAMLAND

Candyce Gao, Age 17



# AGAPE

Yuzuh Bishop, Age 16

*agape (a: 'ga:pei,): selfless, sacrificial, and unconditional love.*

I don't have a friend who I can be vulnerable and honest with. I can't tell them my deepest thoughts without feeling ashamed. I wish I had a friend who I could lean on and they in return would lean on me the same way I did on them—not feeling ashamed or guilty when my words have spiralled out of control into a glacier of ice, frozen to the bottom with ugly objects set in frame. I wish my thoughts were soft, round curves, warm to touch, smooth to listen to like a cozy blanket wrapped around my shoulder on a cold day when icy jutting thoughts keep me up cold in nights of misery.

I just want peace. My mind asks me, *what peace?* I don't know. What I know is that I don't have peace.

I want a friend.

I want a friend who gives me peace. Who can rescue me from my dark thoughts. Who can teach me to walk in light. Who can teach me not to let my thoughts destroy me.

But I can't find one. I've searched the deepest seas. I've walked the jagged roads. I've run the steepest slope. I've swum the roughest seas. I've read the great poems. I've become one with the world. I've done everything I can, but I still can't find a friend.

I want a friend.

Maybe I already have one. Gentle, quiet and trustworthy. A friend all along, right beside me: walking, carrying, embracing me. He was there all along. All I had to do was close my eyes, shut the world out, open my bleeding heart and reach out to this friend of mine. He was always there and is there and will forever be next to me, even beyond death.

My friend.

Agape.

# UNTITLED

Angel Zhao, Age 15

She likes to forget the girl she's already forgotten in repetition

She likes to call her beautiful, to recall her birth year, to spoon the salt into the stew in repetition.

*To spoon the sal // // t // to the stew in repetition.*

*To spoon the s // // alt // stew in repetition.*

*To spoon the pepper th //*

*// e stew in repeat.*

*To spoon th //*

*// e sal // // tew.*

*// epper into the s //*

Her brain thinks like a blank page.

the

The *rat-a-rats* of congenital heart disease or boiling bone marrow soup, stockpot

splaying

burrowed in her torso under her tangerine-porous skin

If you were to undress her you would find her form half-citrus half-salt hands swollen  
ripened-plums eyes half-washed-over sitting by a piano too-big, body humming notes  
too-dissonant

She has forgotten that she has forgotten

My, she's  
forgotten

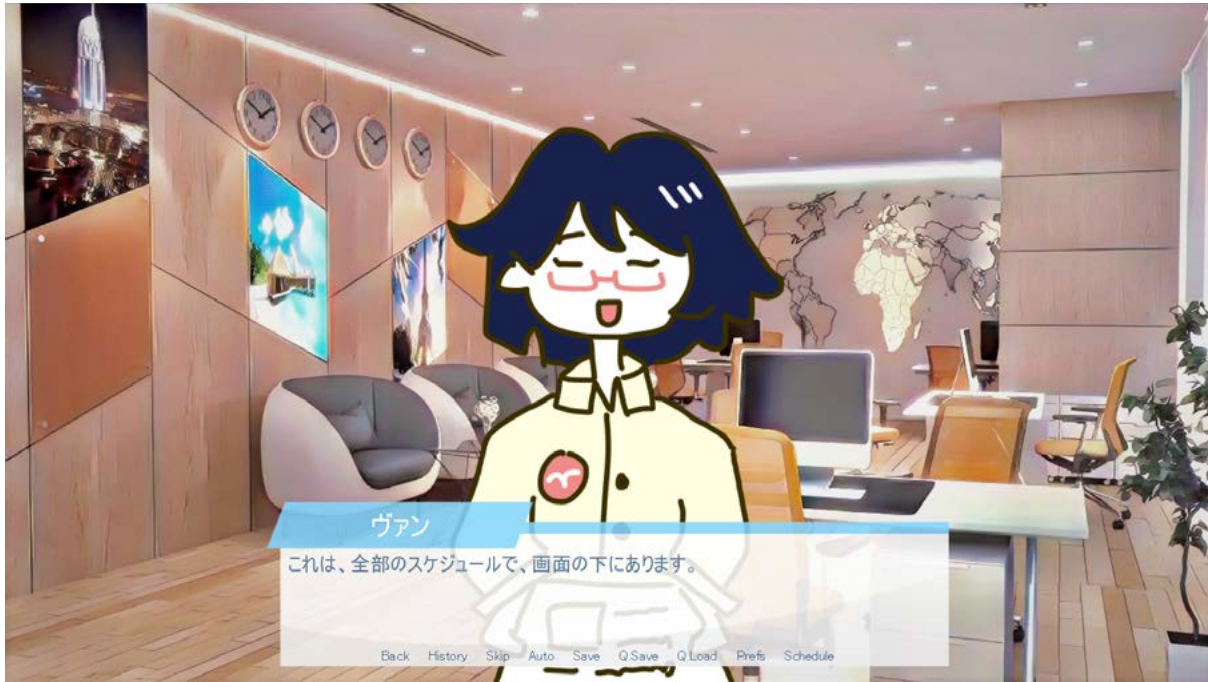
that

forgot

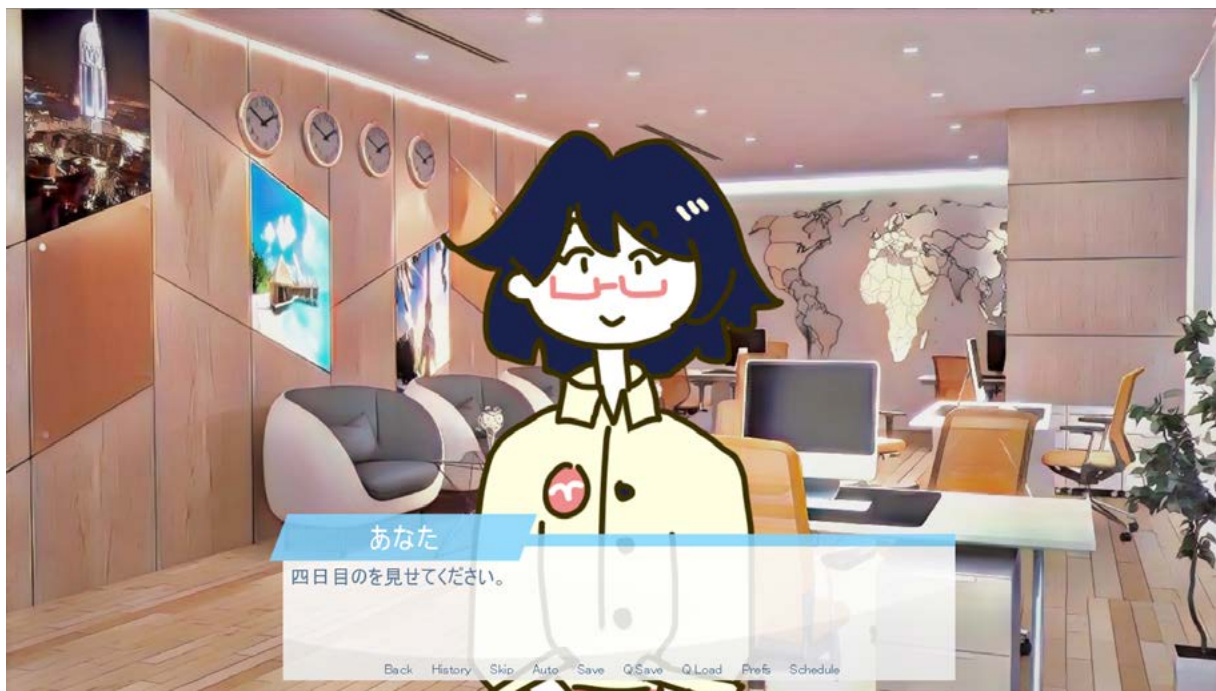
# MY YOUNGER SELF WOULD BE PROUD

Van Duong, Age 16

Not exactly video games, and not exactly books in the traditional sense: visual novels! My younger self adored Japanese media, and for my Japanese language class, I wanted to pay homage to that love. Instead of doing a PowerPoint, I thought it would be fitting to explore a medium that actually originated from the country itself.



Van: This is the entire schedule! It'll be at the bottom of your screen



You (Player): "Please show me the fourth day's schedule."

**Content Note: body horror**

## **BIG CHOMP**

*Alexa Thistle, Age 17*

I want to eat the fire that eats my home  
Take the sweltering heat down my throat and cough up ash  
I'm just so tired and so bored and so hurt and so hungry  
Taking my first fist of fire, the red burns my hands, melting flesh down  
My skin is dripping. I open my mouth and swallow  
I use my left hand so my right can still write  
I eat so much and so quickly I have heartburn  
It hurts and I want it to hurt more  
I take more fire into my mouth. And it's still not enough  
I take more.  
And more.  
And more.  
And more.  
And more  
The fire I've eaten does not burn brighter than my inner candle  
After I vomit up ash, I lie on the cool ground. Letting my blistering hand heal, only for a moment  
There is little fire left, if I push, I can stop the burn. I can stop this ache where my chest used to be whole  
So I take another bite.  
The building doesn't even need water to extinguish it  
I have taken the pain from my home. My former ruins  
I think I have turned to ash. But it's alright. It's all alright

# A MILLION TINY FRAGMENTS

*Joy Ling, Age 15*

Benjamin scampers down the cobblestone path leading back to his childhood home with a briefcase in hand. The houses here are held together by thin layers of mud and wooden planks stacked on top of each other. All the roofs in this neighbourhood are curved up to ward off evil spirits. Sometimes rats crawl through the crevices of splintered wood and take bits of food left out. There's often chickens wandering around the village courtyard and children climbing trees. He sees the mossy well that he and his sister used to gather water from, and the flowerbed his mother tended to every morning. The short, succinct tap of his leather shoes draws excessive attention from the village people despite the colourful cacophony of fireworks and red lanterns hanging off the edge of pagoda roofs. When he reaches the door, he straightens his navy blue fitted tie and runs his fingers through his thick hair.

The wooden door creaks open before he gets a chance to knock. His mother's wrinkly face and dimpled smile greets him.

"Er zi, You've come home!"

He takes a step back before she can pull him into a hug. "I'm moving to America."

Ah Ma's lips immediately drag downwards, and the wrinkles on her forehead crease like a hapazardly discarded dress shirt. After a moment, she says, "This is the first time you've been back in three weeks."

His heart races, and the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Benjamin looks to the side and his ears feel like they're on fire under the scrutinizing gaze of Ah Ma.

"I got a job offer in New York. It pays very well."

Ah Ma stands up straighter, and he imagines her back cracking ever since the scoliosis shoved a cane into her hand. From the way she looms, it almost feels like he is ten years old again, getting reprimanded for tugging on a classmate's pigtails.

"Benjamin Chong," she says. "Your daughter is barely three years old."

He nods, imagines his wife's lovely face and how poverty stole the vivaciousness out of her soul, and the hurt and confusion his daughter will feel because daddy is no longer around to play. Benjamin knows he should be thankful that the company considered him. The day he got the call was the day that he vowed that he'd make them happy.

Ah Ma takes a few steps back from the door, a firm line set along her mouth. Her jaw clenches tightly and her eyes lack the warmth that initially greeted him.

"Don't visit next year," she says.

"Ma," he says.

"Your daughter will not forget this."

He looks at his Ah Ma, half expecting her to be joking but when she remains silent, he knows she isn't.

"You are a disgrace," she says and closes the door.

Scarlet and ember fireworks erupt into the sky, the beat of the explosions and his heart synchronize, bursting into a million tiny fragments.

# MY SECRET GARDEN

*Milian Chen, Age 16*

I'm a little stone statue with cupped hands  
Surrounded by miles and miles of hedge  
Flowering ivy and sprouting roses  
Welcome to my secret garden  
There's moss that grows on my shoulders,  
Providing me with warmth  
And small critters that offer me company  
Butterflies that fly in my heart  
Clear spring water pours down my arms,  
And I kiss winter goodbye  
Where once was ice is now a pond  
With frolicking tadpoles and lilies to hop  
Toadstools to climb and tree hollows to nest  
Everything flutters with sweet delight  
The wooden swing hangs onto my branches  
Bringing with every blossom a joy  
A welcome with open arms, into the warmth  
Everywhere sunbeams shine into my garden  
Nibble a biscuit, stay a while  
Relax a bit, enjoy your tea  
Unlock and lock me at your command  
Cross the threshold and under the arch  
You're always welcomed here  
If birds chirp at the entrance, and you see a glimmer  
You're always safe and sound  
Enter the garden, everything you've found  
Explore our nooks, snuggle close  
Lay down on our greens and free your toes  
Go on barefoot upon our grounds  
Feel the prickly dew and soft petals  
As you walk on past  
Pick a flower, stroke a stone  
Trace your initials in the stream  
Watch as the ripples run away,  
Then come back one by one  
Learn what it's like to be me  
Relish in the freedom of my garden  
Stay as long as you need



# BLOOMING INTO EXISTENCE

Aksaya Yogendran, Age 18



## A HUG

*Qinxin Xu, Age 17*

"Passengers of train 95, all aboard!" The loud-speaker blared monotonously through the bustling waiting room. "Passengers of train 102, your train is leaving in 15 minutes!"

Finding myself a comfortable space among the rows of dull gray chairs, I heaved my belongings from the cart (a suitcase of clothes and textbooks, a bag of snacks and a box of vitamins for my parents). It was still early. The iridescent blue-lit sky peeked out from looming clouds. I took out my Kindle and some snacks to pass this tedious time.

I fanned myself and fumbled with the collar of my shirt in a vain attempt to combat the sweltering heat. There were people everywhere: a woman racing to the door as she waved a ticket frantically in her hand; a group of students holding each other tightly as they clumsily navigated the crowded space; a young couple breathlessly pulling their luggage behind them as beads of sweat covered their foreheads.

A teenage boy stood across from me, completely mesmerized by his phone. He seemed a rather lonely figure being swarmed by piles of bags. I could see that he was playing the game "Fruit Ninja."

Not far behind the boy, an aging married couple ambled forward, almost carrying one another as they walked. They seemed rather frail, as if a strong gust of wind could whisk them up at any moment. As they came closer, I saw their thinning silver hair spilled onto their foreheads above tufts of greying eyebrows. I was wondering about their ages when they sat down next to me.

The old lady must have been telling a joke because her husband laughed. His front teeth were crooked and the lower ones slanted back, making his smile feel pure and genuine, like the smile of a young child. Their voices were loud. It was clear that the old man could not hear very well.

Her sentences cut off suddenly as her eyes caught sight of the young boy. She dropped into a whisper, almost pressing her lips to her husband's ear: "Don't they look similar, Zi-Yan? So similar."

He nodded in agreement. A limitless lament hid under his words: "They do, Yun-Nuo. They do."

The woman's eyes were fixed on the boy, but her husband awkwardly averted his gaze. Meanwhile, the boy continued to tap aggressively and trace his screen, oblivious to their conversation.

He was about sixteen or seventeen. A plain oversized hoodie draped over his black sweatpants, and there was a blue Jansport bag slung across his shoulders. Leaning against the wall, he brushed the hair out of his eyes and returned to his game.

The old lady covered her mouth and laughed crisply; her husband smiled along. Still, the young man remained undisturbed.

"Why don't we go talk to him?" the woman asked, nudging the man.

"You go. It's embarrassing for me," the old man answered meekly.

The woman stood up as she heaved a sigh. Turning to her husband, she threw up her hands and grinned: "Always make me go to the front, don't you?"

She walked over, saying: "Excuse me, sorry to disturb you!"

The boy politely put down his phone. He raised his eyebrows and stood a little taller. His eyes belied a kind of uncertainty towards the woman in front of him – maybe he was worried that he was about to get in trouble. Still, he asked, "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Oh no, we just wanted to talk to you because you look exactly like our son," she said, taking out her phone to show a picture.

The boy's eyes grew wide, and he couldn't help but exclaim, "We totally look alike! How is that possible?"

I looked at Zi-Yan. There were some emotions in his soft eyes that I couldn't quite describe. Recognition? Or was it nostalgia?

"What was your son's name?" the boy wondered.

"His name was Yun-Chen," Yun-Nuo answered.

The boy nodded, still looking at the dated photo.

"Is it possible to take a picture with you? Would you mind?" Yun-Nuo clenched her shaking hands.

"Oh. Um, sure." He replied.

Zi-Yan turned and asked me, "Would you take a photo for us?" I nodded and he handed the phone. The couple clustered around the boy, centring him in the middle, their expressions pleasant and serene. I took a few shots and passed the phone back to Yun-Nuo.

Just then, the voice on the loudspeaker called again: "Passengers of Train 102! Please come to the front!"

The boy threw his bag over his shoulders and waved.

"Well, gotta go. See you guys! I hope Yun-Chen finds this as funny as I do."

The old couple's smile faltered. Yun-Nuo laughed awkwardly.

"Well, you see. Yun-Chen is dead."

The young boy stopped. His face turned red, and he stammered: "I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to say that. Oh god, I'm so..."

"No, it's ok," Yun-Nuo comforted him. "It's been a long time since he died from the car crash. We are...getting over it."

Zi-Yan nodded. "It's like he came to the world for 17 years, decided he didn't like it, and went back." He smiled. "Hopefully he went to a better place, maybe a place with lots of fried chicken with barbeque sauce! And maybe Fruit Ninja. That was his favourite game too."

And that's when the young boy came back, his bag thumping against his back. Gradually, he reached out his arms and embraced Zi-Yan tightly. Tears lit the turbid pupils of the man's aged eyes, and he stepped forward. His hands trembled around the boy's shoulders.

That's when I noticed: the boy was crying too.

**Content Note: death**

# 1935

*Angel Zhao, Age 15*

1935 //

The theatre is a vessel of disarray

form amorphous // set under the lights // aurify //

dead men walking                      dead girl acting                      opening house doors

puppets on string vignettes and spinning off their horizontal

clinging and collocated // to each other

civilians strategically placed // limbs diaphanous //

fingertips

torching gilded ceilings until hacking // dead men with grenades

their bodies fighting for sustenance // miscreants taking the cab home as

applause tilts and whistles through velveteen chairs

//

travels through woodwinds

finds home underneath his sternum // knocks the wind out in rapid exhalation //

star bodies leave letters in the dressing rooms

kisses the mirrors with ashfall

opens the house doors.

from the two-way radio:

*\$50 per ticket please // head tax necessary // railroads unbuilt*

# LIFE BALANCE

Candyce Gao, Age 17



# SCAREDY CAT

*Sophia Chen, Age 13*

I couldn't move. I could only imagine.

The four of us were hungry after sitting through the movie, but Brielle knew the perfect place to go.

"Do you guys still remember the house-market that was on 18th Street? The one that opened several years ago. It sold all the house goods? They make the BEST egg fried rice. We should totally go."

Jamie and I were hesitant, as we knew the place was abandoned long ago.

"Didn't the old man that owned the place die years ago?" Jamie pondered aloud.

"Even if he did, I'm sure his food is still there," Brielle said nonchalantly. Brielle really made no sense sometimes. I wondered how she managed to live until now, considering she was 15 and barely knew what five times five was.

It was pitch dark outside and there was a snowfall warning. It was supposed to start in an hour.

"Are you sure you want to go to the house-market?" I mumbled. Anxiety was bubbling through my body.

Brielle groaned. "Yes! I'm hungry!"

After a lot of arguing, we agreed on a compromise. We would go and observe if the house market was still open. But if it looked abandoned, we would leave immediately.

We went to wake up Harley, who had fallen asleep during the movie.

The four of us huddled into the car just as the snow started to fall. Tiny snowflakes glittered through the pitch-dark sky, and I looked in awe.

No one, other than Brielle, said a word. She continued to ramble about all the food we'd find at the market. Harley continued to sleep, and Jamie gazed out the window while I drove. Brielle simply couldn't close her mouth, as though there was a string attached to the inside of her, dragging each word out.

Half-asleep, Harley yelled, "Can you just shut up!"

Although clearly offended, Brielle closed her mouth. A lengthy groan was dragged out in the process. But before she knew it, we had arrived at our destination.

The snow gradually turned into hail, each piece the size of a golf ball. Thankfully, my car had bulletproof glass, which saved it from shattering into a billion pieces. Sadly, the gloom outside said otherwise. "Pessimism," it whispered loudly.

I parked on the street next to the house market. Indeed, it was abandoned. Grass overgrew wildly and moss filled the gutters and covered the entire top of the house. The door that once had a happy OPEN sign had become run-down and cracked. The stairs that led up to the door were covered in random weeds, which only proved that the place had been left to fester for a long time.

"We're here!" Brielle said excitedly.

Before anyone could even react, Brielle had already jumped out of the car and ran onto the dilapidated property.

"What is she even doing," Harley muttered.

Driving the car forward, Harley, Jamie and I stared at Brielle, who was now knocking on the door eagerly. Like a kid in a candy store, she jumped up and down, knocking incessantly. That was until the door opened.

A creepy old man with a long beard and wearing a

dark cloak appeared. He grabbed her wrist. "What do you want, young lady?"

Brielle squirmed. "I was just wondering if you still sold egg fried rice."

The old man's face became devilish. His eyes were as dark as the black hole, which formed a straight line. But in the blink of an eye, his attitude was gone, replaced by a slimy grin. "Oh, for sure. Come on in."

The three of us braced ourselves for the worst. What if Brielle went in? Anything could happen to our poor, oblivious friend. But at the last second, as though a screw was finally put into its place, Brielle ran. She ran for the car, barely fast enough for the old man to send forward a litter of kittens.

"GO!" he screamed. Brielle shrieked but didn't stop running. I started the car. The engine rumbled to life.

Brielle ripped open the door and jumped in. Little kittens that should have looked so harmless spit out their sharp teeth and thick claws.

"Go, Marley! Drive faster!"

I hit the gas, but at that very moment, I realized something terrible.

Gas was low.

"Alright," I said. "There are four of us. We can either split up or stay together but that increases the risks of getting caught."

The number of cats behind us was unbelievable. The old man was sitting on what looked like Santa's sleigh, but instead of reindeer, felines were moving the sleigh rapidly forward.

As the amount of gas continued to go down, Brielle piped up, "Let's just run and throw things at the cats!"

"No, that won't work," Harley said. "Drive into the forest and we'll figure it out in there."

I slammed my foot into the gas pedal and sped forward at record pace.

The forest was dark and the ground was uneven.

Just as the gas was about to run out, one of the wheels got caught in a thick root of a tree. The rest of the car was spinning out of control, going in crazy circles. Brielle shouted more bad ideas at me, making my mind want to explode. She was driving all of us insane, with stupid remarks and nonsense. I was seriously contemplating throwing her out of the car, so the felines could deal with her instead of chasing us.

As our car spun in circles, the aggressive cats started to crash into one another. Perhaps they were getting dizzy.

The old man cursed loudly as the sleigh began to spin in unhinged loops. Then he crashed into a thick tree.

"Phew! We made it out of there alive!" Brielle said naively.

"Barely," Harley muttered, still trying to recover from the shock.

\*\*\*

"MARLEY!" a panicked voice screamed. "Wake up!"

I felt a violent shaking before I opened my eyes. No more scary cats.

## **A (NOT SO) LOVE LETTER**

*Anonymous, Age 15*

My dearest, Adam,

"I love you to the moon and back." A cliché, but I meant it. I saw your name written in the stars, your face imprinted in my dreams. In your voice I heard angels. They sang me sweet songs of soft summer suns that melted into warm winter nights. And you could take over my body by just looking at me. I could never meet your gaze, because if I did, all I saw were those blue eyes. Those eyes were a pool and I jumped into the deep end. I was drowning and I could never seem to find my way out, no matter how hard I tried.

I wrote you paragraphs on paragraphs. Conveying my love for you, page after page. My hands stained with ink from all those letters. The letters still sit on my desk to this day. The love I had for you was undeniable. My heart ached for you. My skin craved your touch. I wanted you to be mine. I thought you were mine. Until she came along. I had never seen her before. I had never seen that long blond hair. That slim yet curvy body that you could never get your hands off of. It made me want to vomit. Why couldn't you touch me like that?

I know you know what happened, and I'm sorry, but I just couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't stand to see the way she would run her fingers through your hair and whisper those stupid little secrets in your ear. I never meant for it to turn out like this. She was such a pretty girl, but rules are rules: finders keepers, and I found you first.

Then again, you knew how I felt, so why is it that you chose her? Was I too much for you? Was my love for you too stifling? So suffocating that you felt the need to erase me from your already empty life?

You can tell me if I was, I won't be mad. But don't try to hide from the truth that we both know. We would have been perfect together. Just imagine it. You and I, living in our adorable little house with our amazing family. I already had it all planned out, but now it's too late.

My plan for our love story did not prosper, it died and you were the one to kill it. You hurt me in a way I could never hurt you. I am a pane of glass and you shattered me into a million pieces and left the shards laying there with no one to pick them up, because why would they? Why would anyone touch broken glass? I know you wouldn't. If you did then maybe we could still be together. Maybe she would have been easier to get rid of, and maybe she wouldn't be dead. This could have been so much simpler if you just listened. But still, you wonder why I did what I did.

Didn't you know? I loved you to the moon and back.

Yours forever and always,

Rose



# A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE

*Veronica Jiang, Age 13*



# HOME

*Sana Seraj, Age 14*

I used to wish on shooting stars  
That you would come back  
And fix my scars, take me home, but then I realized  
I have a home, it just feels so empty without you.  
Drifting from house to house  
Never once has one ever lasted  
The one I wished to go back to, you made me leave years ago.  
I realized  
I don't wish to return  
The past is past  
Not made to last  
Now I can only drift  
Pretend that all is okay  
When every night and every day  
I wish on shooting stars  
For something near, yet so far  
Life passes, never waiting once  
People are always around me, I'm never lonely  
But it's hard, to not feel alone,  
When I lost one of my only safe places.  
Yet I wish the world would stop  
For a second  
So I could return  
Pretend I finally  
Have a home  
A place that's complete  
For home isn't a place,  
It's a person,  
And you haven't been home in ages.

**Content Note: horror, murder**

# THE LOST GIRL

*Beatrix Wong, Age 13*

It was approaching midnight as Olivia drove back toward her neighbourhood, and there was a dense blanket of mist spreading across the land. She rubbed her eyes, which felt heavy after six hours of studying at the library, like small rusty chains were pulling them down.

Arriving at the parking lot outside her apartment complex, she stepped out of the car and immediately strange things began to happen. The fluorescent lights above started to flicker, and out of the corner of her eye, there was a momentary flash of something. She craned her neck to see but whatever it was, it was gone.

“Must be my mind playing tricks on me. I should get some sleep,” she thought to herself.

As she walked across the black asphalt, her footsteps echoed through the vast, empty car park with a hollow sound. The air was musty and chilly. All of a sudden, the lights went out and a shiver spread up her spine. Olivia reached into her pockets, scrambling for her phone, but at that moment the lights came back on and she could see again.

Standing in front of her was a ghost with a crimson skeletal face and long black hair, holding a jagged knife that was dripping with a slaughterous red. It was coming toward Olivia with an otherworldly movement, trailing the knife in its hand. Olivia’s legs attempted to carry her away despite their numbness and her fingers tried to call her mother. Screaming like a banshee, the ghost drew closer and closer. Olivia was close to the parking lot’s exit, just a few more steps and... yes! She reached the door and hurried through, slamming it shut behind her. Through the glass window, she could no longer see the ghost. Where did it go? Perhaps it was just a nightmare?

Olivia felt a wave of relief wash over her like a waterfall. She laughed. Looking at her phone, she saw missed calls from her mother and father. She put the phone to her ear and began to call them back. There was no response.

She pressed the elevator button, stepped inside, and the sliding doors closed. Suddenly, the lights flickered again, then the small room turned pitch black. There was a mysterious tap on her shoulder and an eerie, blood-curdling whisper in her ear. She could feel the ghost’s presence, but this time she couldn’t escape. She was locked in with it. She screamed for help, but nobody heard her.

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Priya was getting really worried about her friend Olivia. She decided to call and see if she got home safely. A strange and threatening voice answered Olivia’s phone, telling Priya not to say anything to Olivia’s parents. Little did Priya know, she was about to be the next victim.

## ACCEPTANCE NOT INCLUDED

*Freddie Zhang, Age 13*

Perusing the pages of the Vancouver Sun,  
I chance upon a narrative,  
that Canada falls for  
China's "accusations of anti-Chinese racism".

"Mr. Chew, does TikTok  
access the home  
Wi-Fi network?"  
says Congress,  
perking at the opportunity  
to target the Orient, the "adversaries",  
neglecting the  
FAANGed monopolies back home.

Ching chong,  
schools oppressing  
beautiful Chinese language, children  
ashamed of their heritage.  
In the library, students  
seeking refuge  
from endless comments on their  
"foreign" accents worsened by  
their "nerdy" demeanor.

Meme culture in  
the West, laced with  
microaggression upon microaggression  
Low quality, cheap?  
Must be made in China,  
place of the dog-eaters.  
Evolving technology can't catch up with  
growing normalized racism  
enforced by antiquated stereotypes.

Society arises from the "lunchbox movement", with  
Korean kimchi, bimbap,  
Japanese sushi, ramen,  
welcomed, appreciated, even romanticized  
But left behind,  
beautiful Chinese food.  
Dumplings and dim sum,  
integral components to a  
"smelly lunchbox".

At Davie and Granville,  
a women spit on,  
called a "Chinese pig".

In Stanley Park,  
a cyclist braces from pelting rocks,  
words of the attacker underscored  
"Go back to China".

Since the pandemic, 204 attacks,  
as the Vancouver Sun reports that  
"hate spreads like a virus",  
suggesting anti-Asian sentiment  
"disturbing and disheartening".

# GROUP PROJECT

*Noelle Fung, Age 14*

**A rose that captures the spotlight  
we water, give sun, and nutrients  
in the presence of unity.**

Two wander the passageways that pass time, an escape from responsibility  
One is invested in the successes and losses of irrelevant others, and forgets about his own  
Another suffers from a fracture in time like a dinner for lunch  
And the last fails to bring them together

**And so we water and give sun.**

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.  
Linear.  
We are still at zero.

**And so we water.**

One leaves the school of fish  
One fish carried the burden of four more, producing product like female aphids  
As responsibility is surrendered,  
Responsibility is picked up with enervation, a pile only growing towards the symbol of strength in  
the sky

...

**And so a wilted flora takes the place of a once breathtaking rose  
in the absence of unity.**

## A PAINTING

*L.S. Low, Age 15*

"What have I done?" I asked myself, looking down at the now-ruined painting. Nothing had ever been so awfully conveyed; it was a brutal message that I could not take back.

It started this morning, when the wind was cold and the air was dry. The breeze pushed and prodded at my clothing, which ultimately slowed down my mission: to confront Austin Nerezza. He was the man who blew my life apart, scattered the pieces too far to find, and left without a word.

We had an improbable encounter almost a decade ago. It was unlikely and wouldn't have happened if it weren't for my ignorance. I had walked in on my father's meeting, the meeting that I had been warned to stay away from. I wanted to be more involved in my family's business, but as a young woman it was difficult to prove myself. My existence was revealed to those we planned to ally with, but after seeing me, they backed out of the deal. My stupidity had almost ended the entire Donatello name. So I, Allegra Donatello, vowed to restore everything I'd lost.

Tomorrow will be ten years since I promised to obliterate Nerezza's life in worse ways than revenge. Killing would've been too merciful for a man like him; he wouldn't have shown anyone mercy. He wouldn't have allowed mercy. He didn't for my brother, even when I cried, screamed, and pleaded for him to show some form of emotion, even if it were rage.

My recollection of Nerezza was the most detailed memory I would ever have. He lived in my nightmares and slept in the back of my mind. He followed me, but it was never him. The thought of him didn't make me shudder with goosebumps the way it used to. Austin Nerezza was like a storm in the summertime: it destroys everything around you and after it passes, nothing would be as bad as seeing it again.

"Save yourself, little sister," were the last words that my brother managed to choke out in the stifling air. After the second bomb had gone off, parts of the ceiling had fallen, trapping my brother. I chose to leave my family, and if I didn't get rid of the Nerezzas, everything I worked for in the last decade would be for nothing.

Austin Nerezza may have prospered and he may have thrived, but he couldn't have planned for what he had coming. He had entered his elephantine mansion and gone straight to his office, which took almost ten minutes because of how excessively large the home was. It was an oddly shaped house, but it was filled with pristine furniture. He would sit at the large office desk doing unnecessary paperwork for a few hours each day: the perfect coverup for his dirty business. Nerezza was a dangerous man, more perceptive than most; but he believed I had died along with my brother ten years ago. This time, I had the upper hand.

I had sat, perched on the window ledge next to his office, and waited for his night guards to arrive for their shift change. The knives tucked into my belts and straps would be more than enough to kill both the guards and Nerezza. Over the decade, it was plausible that I had saved him more times than his own men. They were below useless and I was above effective. I never helped him; I just extended his life enough to be sure that my face would be the last he ever saw.

I had waited until just after dusk, still perched upon the window's ledge, and able to peer into his space without being noticed. I may have spent ten years planning Nerezza's end, but I'd never actually touched the man, let alone been in the same room as him. My time was a river, limitless, but there was still an end. I needed to be certain that his end came before mine.

I had slipped through the window of the room next to his office. My shoes were made for these types of missions: quiet, but comfortable. The men outside his office came into the room after hearing the window shut, as planned. Knives to their throats. Silent, but deadly. I slumped their bodies against the wall as if it would buy me extra time. In approximately fifteen minutes, the guards in the house would rotate, meaning that I had less than fifteen minutes to kill Austin Nerezza.

I opened his office door. His hand immediately started to drift towards the panic button just beneath his desk. I knew him as well as he knew himself, if not better. The two knives flew from my hands automatically, pinning both of his to the dark, polished wood.

"How long did this take you?" Nerezza asked manically, like he was hoping for this. I memorized every mark and line that drew together that hideous

smirk. It was oppressively cold, so cold, that he shouldn't have a soul. My hate for him was palpable, yet he acted as if it didn't bother him.

"Why does it matter how long it took me if you don't have very long left?" I replied.

"And why might that be?"

"You killed my family."

I watched him, I followed him, I killed him. I was a fragment of his plans, but he was the entirety of mine and now he lay silent, my favourite weapon planted in his chest.

"What have I done?" I whispered again, staring at my bloodstained hands in awe.

# THE WICKED EAST

*Daniel Marques, Age 13*





**Content Note: war; animal death**

# THE DEAD DOVE

*Riley Tam, Age 15*

With the pull of a trigger,  
One quick steel bullet can kill the dove instantly.  
Soon letters are sent, parents trembling to their knees.  
Blood of soldiers watering the flowers.  
Their soul and spirit left on the petals.  
Turning daisies into poppies.  
Others vanish with no traces, they turn to ghosts.

Soldiers, seeing you as monsters,  
Everyone has hatred for you.  
Seeing you as cold murderers.  
But you are just a scared child on the inside,  
Being brainwashed by mad leaders,  
Forced into fighting against other children.  
To them you're nothing, just ants on the ground

Screams of parents.  
Gunshots blasting and echoing.  
Bomb explosions erupting in a fiery blast  
Debris burying soldiers and the innocent in the ground,  
As if they were already corpses.

Overwhelmed with emotions, you are a lost soldier,  
Frozen on the battlefield.  
A comrade whispers last words and dies in your arms,  
You feel as helpless as the bombings of Pearl Harbour  
A thundering gunshot comes with waves of anxiety,  
You just want to go home.  
When the dust finally settles,  
Survivors are relieved but broken.  
There is never a winner.  
Another dove is born and flies high.  
But beautiful things never last.

The dove will fall to the ground again.

## NEVER ENOUGH

Lily Baihe Tang, Age 15

I lift my chin, meeting my own eyes in the mirror: two emerald pools stare back at me. My thick brows furrow as I trace my figure in the mirror for the fifth time today; it is only 8 AM. I start from my boulder-like shoulders, then go down to my pudgy stomach. I pause. Sucking in a breath, I examine the results; my ribs stick out like jagged rocks, stretching the skin. *It isn't good enough.* I pout my lips, eyeing the swell of my hips down to my X-ing knees and bare pink toenails, which I bury stiffly in the thick fluff of the carpet. My face contorts. *It's not good enough.* Sighing, I pull on a grey hoodie. It fits like a dress, engulfing me in its lint-covered fabric. *At least my legs look skinnier this way!*

"Anaïs, I'm leaving soon," the shrill voice of my mother calls from downstairs. "You coming?"

"Yes, I'll be down in a second." *I have to go.* I bend over to pull on a pair of wool socks then stand up again. Suddenly my world is muffled by cotton and clouds. The air is thick and tangible, and my surroundings blend together like watercolour. Is this heaven? 4th of July fireworks dance in front of my eyes and tickle my temples. *I'm floating...* but then I'm not. The ground is suddenly under my feet and my right-hand catches on the banister, nails digging into the wood, and my left presses into the wall with a smack.

My mother's petite figure pokes out from the hall below. "Are you alright?"

"Yea, I just stood up too quickly."

"Oh, okay." She continues to put on her ruby stud earrings.

*Yea... just stood up too quickly, that's all.*

A few minutes later, I meet her in the car.

"Why are you wearing so much? You'll be hot. Plus, that outfit really doesn't bring out your figure, sweetie." My mom pouts her lips and dips those perfect eyebrows of hers, looking at me in the rear-view mirror.

I shrug, looking out the window. "I'm cold and we're just going to the grocery store."

My mother just sighs and starts the engine.

My stomach rumbles with it.

"Oh, honey, you haven't had breakfast. You hungry?"

"No, mom, I'm fine," I reply, clutching my stomach as it attempts to protest.

"Okay then, but if you want something, there are some low-cal bars in the back. Sandra recommended them to me and they are SOOO GOOD. Made without sugar, gluten, and dairy!" I nod. *Sounds like a meal.*

Our car pulls into Costco and soon we are walking through the magical isles of bulk-packaged foods and samples. The first sample stand I spot is handing out Cheerios, and my feet seem to automatically carry me over. I grab one and thank the lady. Clutching the paper cup in my hand, I hesitate. *I really shouldn't.* I peek over my shoulder at my mother, who is eyeing the back of an almond package. *I really shouldn't.*

In one movement, I dump the cheerios into my mouth, feeling the mini-donuts simultaneously crunching and melting. The sugary coating is all I taste, running along the roof of my mouth

and down my throat - the Costco lights seem to brighten and the colours pulse in my peripheral vision. My chest fills with molten lava, spreading to my fingers and toes. The heat embraces me and the corners of my lips turn up. *Now, this is heaven.* I swallow. And I'm back on earth. My senses dull and everything shrinks; the aisles look 2D and the lights dim. I stand there, my arms limp at my sides; everything is silent. *I shouldn't have done that. There must have been so much sugar in those. It's too much. I... I shouldn't have.* I pivot on my heel and race to join my mother, tossing the cup into the trash, the sugary coating still clinging to my teeth.

The next few minutes tick by as I tick off the calories: *the oatmeal yesterday was 209, the tuna sandwich with way too much sauce was 357, the chicken and rice were 302 and I had that slice of cake. Shoot, that slice of cake, plus the cheerios, it must be like 500 cals. That's too many. I really shouldn't have.*

A chill air brushes my cheeks as we enter the frozen foods aisle. Stacks of sugary frozen water and tubs of ice cream sit patiently awaiting their next victim. My eyes dart from compartment to compartment, scanning the vibrantly illustrated boxes. I pull open the freezer door and am met with another puff of cool air. My fingers reach out to stroke the frosty packages. Picking up a pack of twelve popsicles, I turn it over in my hand. My eyes glide over the description and the flavours to find their target; the nutrition label. *130 calories per popsicle, 3g fat, 15g sugar, and 1g protein. No.* I pick up the box beside it and repeat the process. *No.* My eyes land on a box labelled Sugar-Free Fudge Ice Pops. *Yes.* I bring it over to the cart.

"How many calories do those have? They don't look so healthy," my mother squeaks, eyeing the box.

"35 per serving and they're sugar-free!" I say, dropping it into the cart. *I didn't even have to check, heh.*

"Fine, but I'm also gonna get some celery for you to snack on. It's better for you than that is." She waggles her eyebrows at me. I smile and nod, my eyes fixing on a pack of yogurt in the cart. *100 cals per ¾ cup and no fat. Good.*

We check out in silence and head home.

I shut the door to my room and plop down on the floor staring up at the ceiling. I take in a shaky breath and suck on my front teeth. The residue sugar embeds itself onto my tongue. *I have to make up for what I did.* I exhale and lie down, enjoying my last moment of ease. Then I start. I clench my stomach and pull at my neck to sit up, then collapse and repeat. *1, 2, ..., 24, ..., 57, ..., 82, ..., 100.* My back aches and my forehead is shiny with sweat. The floor cuts between my shoulder blades and pushes me to rise.

Slowly, I stand and make my way in front of the mirror. I trace my figure for the 6th time. I lift my hoodie to peek at my ribs, still poking at my skin. *It's not enough.* My head is throbbing; it feels like I'm deep underwater.

I shut my eyes and walk downstairs, wobbling on the last step. *You're weak.* The fridge is cool and I rest my forehead against it before pulling open the newly stocked freezer. The fudge pops sit on the top, calling to me. I slam the door and pull the fridge open to grab some celery instead. The green stalks stand bright and fresh in my hand.

I press my lips together as I reluctantly bring one to my mouth. It crunches under my teeth *just like the Cheerios.*

**Content Note: body horror**

## **ROT**

*Alexa Thistle, Age 17*

Leave me here to rot  
Let me lay in bed forever  
Without a caring thought

Let my house fall victim to decay  
Let vines climb inside and be cut by broken glass  
My flesh and bone will melt or stay

Let sunlight peek silently onto sullen sequence  
Let my posters become dust on the floor  
Let my room be a graffiti artist's preference

Let my tendons become a feast  
Let my guts be splayed, open ribs for critters  
Let families of raccoons lay in my arms and grow into deceased

Let dark orange wrap  
around the jewelry on my neck  
Let my location fall off the map

And when I've finally had enough, I'll rise  
Shake off the sleep  
and rub my tired eyes

The human race will probably be gone  
I'll look at rust set in on door knobs  
and forget I ever was someone

# THEY SAY BEDROOMS SPEAK LIKE PEOPLE

*Lina Hirai, Age 15*



## **STARS IN THE SKY**

*Adana Bhattarai, Age 16*

The knife made quick, sharp sounds as it repeatedly hit the chopping board. My eyes trailed over to Max, who was sitting on the living room floor with his legs crossed like I taught him. I didn't quite trust him on the brand-new couch, especially considering his love of ketchup and tendency to wipe his fingers on the first thing he sees.

At the moment, his eyes were fixed on a TV show involving small cartoon robots. He ate his fish fingers absentmindedly, smearing ketchup on his face as he attempted to shove them in his mouth.

I smiled at the five-year-old. He was my sister's child, but when she passed last year, I took him in. He was much too young to realise what I meant when I told him his mom left to go live amongst the stars. He started calling me *momma*, and occasionally referred to my sister as *'mommy'*. I never had the heart to correct him.

I continued chopping vegetables, when I heard barking outside.

"Max, did you forget to open the back door for Roxy?"

Roxy was our greyhound, and Max's favourite thing in the world. His head whipped towards me, guilt plastered across his face.

I sighed. "Go let her in, honey."

He jumped up and began making his way to the back porch.

I chopped up the last of the vegetables, sliding them off the chopping board and into the boiling pot of chicken broth. Slowly stirring the soup, I let the warmth of the steam hit my face and inhaled deeply. I decided today would be a good dinner.

"Momma?" Max peeked his head out from the

back door and Roxy's barking grew louder. "Come look at the sky! It's awesome!"

I exhaled, sighing as I turned the heat off and followed Max out to the back porch. "What do you mean the sky is—" The words caught in my throat. I stared at the sky, eyes wide.

Something was terribly wrong. Glowing red dots were scattered across the sky, varying in size. They looked like balls of fire. What the hell were they?

"The stars look cool, don't they *momma*? Is that big one *mommy's* star?" Max pointed to a glowing red dot in the sky far off to my right.

My heart was racing. "Those aren't stars, Max."

He frowned. "Why is it getting bigger?"

I squinted. He was right, the red dots were growing. My heart dropped. Whatever they were, they were moving closer and closer to Earth. I grabbed Max's arm and ran inside the house, whistling at Roxy to follow us.

I grabbed the TV remote and pressed 713, the screen switching over to the global news channel. My eyes darted over to the breaking news title, which spelled out the words "Global Catastrophe: NASA Finally Reveals Information Regarding Meteors Predicted to Enter Earth's Surface And Destroy Our Planet Within The Next Half Hour". I had to read it twice before realising it wasn't a mistake. I began shaking. No, no, no, no, no. This can't be happening. I glanced out the window. They were getting closer. My chest tightened, terror washing over me. I thought I had forgotten how to breathe when I felt a small hand grab onto my finger. Max.

I looked down at the toddler. His eyes were filled with concern, his eyebrows furrowed. "Momma? What's wrong?"

I fought off tears and picked him up, carrying him over to the couch and placing him on my lap. "Nothing, Max. Nothing. We're okay. We're gonna sit here on the couch okay?" My voice shook.

Roxy hopped up beside us. I hadn't noticed when she stopped barking. My trembling hand reached over to gently scratch Roxy's ears. She looked up at me, and for a second I almost thought I saw her give me a knowing look.

"We're gonna play a game, okay Max?" I said, willing my voice not to break. That seemed to calm him down.

"What kind of game?" He smiled, revealing his dimples.

Tears streamed down my face, I couldn't hold them in anymore. The thought of never being able to see this beautiful child grow up or watch him reach milestones in his life my sister could only dream to see broke me from the inside out. Pull yourself together. For him. I swallowed. "This is a game about following instructions. When I count us down, you have to shut your eyes and not open them until I say so, okay?"

Max nodded. "I'm really good at following instructions, momma. My teacher said so."

I laughed, but it hurt. "I know Max, I know."

The ground started to shake so subtly I had to wonder if I felt it at all. My tears started falling, faster and faster. I wrapped my arms around Max and buried his face in my shoulder. "Three..."

I felt Roxy's head rest on my thigh. I thought about everything I never got to do. Help Max understand where his mom really went, and share with him everything I know about her. Get my master's degree, move to the city. Travel the world, at least as much as I can. Give Max girl advice, take him to Disney World. I would miss his first crush, his first stressful exam, his first heartbreak, his first car, his graduation, his wedding-- It was all too late now.

"Two..." We'd get to see his mom now. My sister. He could get to know her himself. I pressed my lips to his forehead. "I love you Max." I whispered. Before he could respond, I counted down to the last number. "One..."

Max shut his eyes tightly and I did the same, awaiting the end.

# HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE

*Elaine Wang, Age 14*





# A CANVAS OF DREAMS

*Fraser Wallace, Age 15*

On a canvas of dreams,  
Brushstrokes of color gleam.  
A world of wonder and delight,  
In a canvas painted with light.

A splash of red, a streak of blue,  
Colors dance, a vibrant hue.  
A symphony of shades and tones,  
In a canvas that speaks, and moans.

A story told in every stroke,  
Of love, of hope, of joy, bespoke.  
Each image holds a tale so true,  
In a canvas that comes to life anew.

So let us paint, with heart and soul,  
A masterpiece that makes us whole.  
For in art, we find our voice,  
A canvas of dreams, our ultimate choice.

# FOR THIS WEEK'S FORECAST

*Nicole Ng, Age 14*

The storm's coming back  
A swirl that repeats over and over  
Of emotions and mixed feelings  
There's a 90% chance of denial  
Followed by numbness and the other stages of grief  
It'll go on for a month  
And then there will be a sunny break  
Before the storm comes back  
So stay inside folks  
Isolate yourself from your friends and family  
Go into a downward spiral  
In an attempt to hide from the storm  
But it never works  
Since every time you think it can't rain harder  
This ache in your heart won't get more intense  
And you learn to cope with it  
To stand in the lightning and welcome the downpour  
If it means you can get to acceptance  
The light after the storm  
It gets worse  
Your safe haven in your mind floods  
You can't feel again  
The impending doom races towards you  
Once you flinch, it slows down  
To relish the image of you paralyzed in fear  
To etch that feeling deep into your mind  
So next time  
You'll flinch even harder  
Acceptance isn't the light after the storm  
It's an umbrella and a poncho with some lemon yellow rain boots  
To help you through those torrential feelings  
They still come, surrounding you  
But they don't drench you to your core  
And our meteorologist predicts a drizzle of depression for tomorrow  
So make sure to bring your rain gear

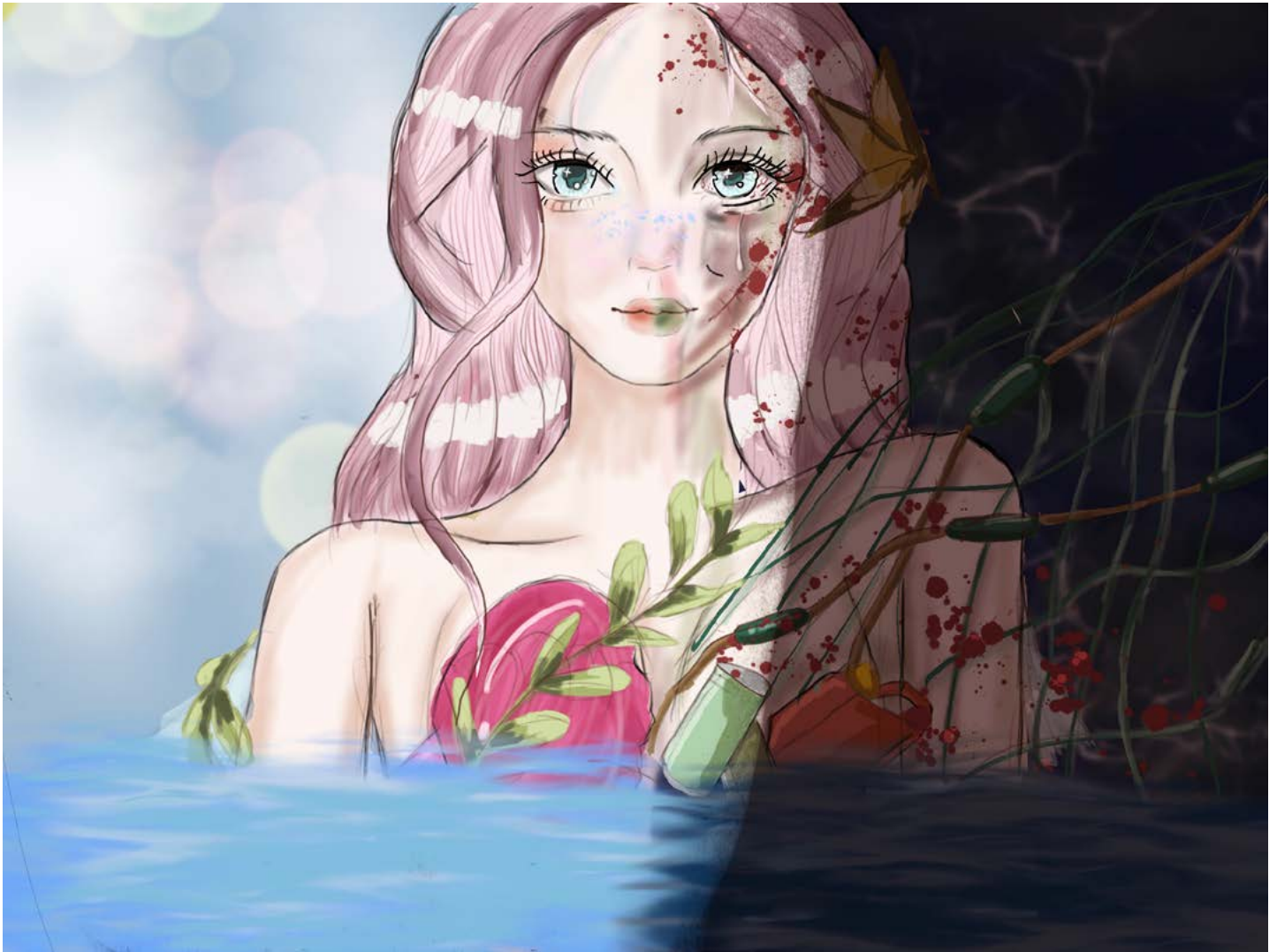
# STILL SUBMERGED IN LONELINESS

Meaghan Law, Age 17



# THE UNKNOWN SIDE

*Jerry Feng, Age 15*



**Content Note: body horror**

# HEROES

*Amy He, Age 16*

The world is always in need of heroes.  
In every book you've read, every movie you've watched, every story told,  
there is always that shining figure that saves the day, no matter the circumstances.

But heroes are never heroes by choice.  
The day you step out of the known world,  
you are pulled out of your story and crammed into someone else's.  
The red string of fate, knotted, twisted, snipped, and stretched into a cat's cradle.  
Fingers grab and pull, pinch and fold until you become what they want in an immortal game to pass the time.

At first, you were happy to play their game, eager to do what others wanted.  
Of course, I can be anything you want, do anything you need.  
I can be your Prince Charming, your Achilles, your honorary knight.  
I can break your curse, fight your wars, free your people.

In response, the people are grateful for your help. They swarm around you, like stray dogs begging for a morsel of kindness from a helping hand.

But the cost of helping others is more than you expected. You waste time, break bones, spill blood, lose sleep, lose hope, lose friends.

They repay your endeavors of blood and labour with gratitude and gold, filling your pockets, draping you in finery, appreciation flowing from their mouths like water from a well.  
But soon the well dries, and so does their kindness. And all you have left is a heavy purse and a heavy heart, as if silver buy back wasted time and gold can replace the dead.

They tell you: just one more! Please just one more dear hero, and we will help you just like you have helped us. One more princess rescued from her tower, one more nation saved from a tyrant, one more dragon slain by your hand.

It's exhausting.

Because every princess rescued does nothing but blow sloppy kisses, every nation saved eats you alive like a swarm of flies and every dragon killed drowns you in its goopy, sticky poisonous blood, filling up your lungs, pumping through your heart until you reek of the same stench and the dark miasma that had inflicted the vile creature lying lifeless on the stone floor starts to follow you everywhere.

One more, one more, they beg, just one more dear hero. But you're so tired of extending, stretching until your bones crack, tearing your joints out of their sockets, pulled so thin that just an inch more will rip you into pieces, holes blooming on your skin until you are as hollow as a spider web. And still the people clutch onto the leftover strands of what you used to be, pleading for assistance, for money, for glory, but never for forgiveness.

# RICHIE SHAFFER

Nevin Tsui, Age 17



# INDECISION

*Situ Li, Age 14*

is it safer to leap for a horizon never guaranteed,  
offer yourself to the ocean's depths and risk drowning  
in what you thought was crystal clear?  
or play it safe and begin a perpetual descent down the same stretch of land

either way, you must choose  
I know it is better to fall than to be clinging to the cliffside of your indecision  
fingers raw  
brain cycling through a million regrets and aspirations at once

don't worry  
when you can't pull yourself up anymore  
you can still find solace

you are not Icarus, and the ocean does not care  
it does not live to devour your mortal carcass on the day you fall  
fact: the waves roar on without you

# I WISH

*Nafisa Nishi, Age 15*

I wish to keep our memories on my desk

In thick inches of frame

Behind a transparent glass

And in due time,

We will make more

Once I am with you

Forevermore



# THORN TO MY ROSE

Yvette Chen, Age 15



@YVEXART

# REFLECT

*Pari Goyal, Age 17*



# MIDNIGHT BREEZE

Claire Zhong, Age 16

in the same manner in which you tempt  
the tender boughs of willows  
to tease the surface of many a lake,  
let the tresses of my hair caress my visage as I sit  
in the liberty of solitude, resting in your kind embrace.

*This bus is so loud. I want to be far,  
far away from this place, anywhere but  
here on this empty road, passing farms that  
reek of manure in the humid air.*

through your gentle whispers and softest sighs,  
tell me tales, in all their banality,  
of the leaves on the trees, the deepest seas,  
and of the beings in deep slumber which  
you passed by as you shall pass by me.

*God it smells in here. Quit blowing  
the scent of teenagers who forgot  
deodorant into my nose – what kind of crazy person  
am I, talking to the wind?*

I bid you, come take the inspirations  
of my wandering mind, the  
remnants of my joys and sorrows, my heart's contempt;  
blow forth the new day  
to take their place in my consciousness.

*I hate people. Please... no one wants  
to hear about Joan's cousin's  
best friend's stubbed toe, at midnight,  
on this roaring lion of a bus.*

let these reflections slip into your grasp  
out of mine. take them with you,  
enveloped in that sweet scent  
born only of the night;  
I am bound to forget these musings by morning light.

*I wonder what it would be like if  
I was a goose. a loud, honking  
goose. With sharp teeth.  
I've really gone mad.*

though I may be the first to hear them,  
you shall forever remain  
keeper  
of my silent thoughts.  
you steal away, a wraith.

# BLUE

*Amelia Chu, Age 14*

I watch the deep blue I can drown within,  
Its waves passing by  
like the small ripples in my bed sheet.  
The sweet and sour scent of blue raspberry syrup  
staining the snowcones  
like an ink spreading to reach every corner of a paper,  
wafts through from my open window.  
Reminding me of the summer festival,  
when our tongues were coloured cobalt blue.  
Behind our overexcited mothers taking photos of us,  
I catch a glimpse of beautiful baby blue eyes,  
Delicate and precious,  
Hanging on for their lives, headstrong against the wind  
just like people that are blue.  
They come to the beach to gaze at the dark blue night sky.  
While I stare at the sea,  
The touch of the water makes my body curl like an armadillo.  
Is the water colourless like me, or blue?

# RAIN AND SHINE

*Anna Kirkby, Age 17*



# AN ODE TO LIFE AND BOGS

*Mel Hartnett, Age 18*

We say we cannot take it anymore as we  
Trudge through another day of mind mud  
One step, two step, one step more  
Up some stairs, down some others  
A fog of false obsession and fanaticism  
covered by an opaque cloud...  
It dampens the dirt, turns it to mud  
As one walks, unaware, their feet sink into  
The exhaustion quicksand;  
Not noticing everyone passing by...  
Muscles continue their journey,  
One step more, one at a time  
Panic won't seep into pores,  
Pores clogged with clammy old  
Sweat from last week's promenade  
Because panic is always there,  
Forcing them to choke on nightmares,  
One at a time.

First feet, then legs – still trudging on...

The forever phantom, the involuntary reaction of a  
dead nervous system,  
a non-comprehending biological machine

Next, hips and belly sink under

It hurts to laugh with every dainty  
Laugh and guttural splutter  
The whistle of wheezing lungs twinkles  
In the air, cascading and ripping  
Out over the unnoticed doom

Up, past the armpits and above the shoulders,

Sinking...

Not quite as deep the ending of peat,  
But still,

Sinking.

The shocking cold brings tears, the first reaction.  
The first time feeling, showing human emotion.

Seeing that hellscape, what reaction can be better than tears?  
To mourn loss of time enjoying reality?  
Crying for not "Using your time wisely"  
For "Sleeping too much"  
For "Procrastinating too much"  
Can't you hear the screams ripping from their throat, your throat?  
Will you not understand the pain and suffering until they turn hoarse?  
You can't hear the ghosts, so listen to the living.

As their head goes under,

They enter into the bog beneath  
They will never die as they live on in us,  
In our hearts and minds and houses.  
In ten-thousand years, their story will  
Be found again and dragged out of the bog  
Dissected and then rejoiced as an artefact  
The future will pick at clothes, and pull hair,  
And sever a toe to study this phenomenon  
Of what we called 'accomplishments'

# CO2

Xinyi Li, Age 17



# LADYBUG

Lok Yiu, Age 15

She always knew she was different.

From the moment she began elementary, she knew. Within a week at school, the ladybug in the classroom taunted her daily. The ladybug, a flat mat creature she was required to sit on.

She heard the hushed conversations between the teachers and her parents about how she was “*special*”. On how she was “*different*”. Different from the other children whom she longed to fit in with.

No matter how hard she tried, she still sat on that creature. It was *her* mat, something *only* she needed. She was reminded daily of how she couldn’t be still like other children, be *normal* like the others. The teacher explained that it was her *special* mat, meant to still her, meant to be a motivator to stop her irregular movements. But she did not want to be *special*. Because being special meant a spotlight followed her. Each time she sat on the creature, everyone could see her sitting on it. And that meant everybody knew. The entire class knew about her flaw and knew that she was *different* from them.

And if that wasn’t enough, she had even more *problems*. Not only could she not sit properly, but she was also told she could not speak properly too. She grew accustomed to the screams of her parents, asking why she could not do such a simple task. Because in terms of speaking, she was *meant* to be different. Being in an international school in Hong Kong meant that she had a skill that not all Hong Kong citizens possessed. And it was true. The English Language had always made sense to her, a lot more than Cantonese ever did. It was not understanding the language that was the problem. The issue was the *way* she spoke the language.

She would get pulled from her lessons, another reminder of her abnormality. In a secured room,

the teacher would place flashcard after flashcard in front of her, instructing her to read word after word. Her mother called those sessions “Speech Therapy,” and said it was meant to *fix* her problems. So she obediently read word after word, with the teacher instructing her to just sound out the words she couldn’t seem to pronounce. But sounds were near impossible for her.

Her teachers grew agitated, not knowing why such simple sounds seemed like rocket science to the young, troubled girl.

On top of not being able to pronounce things *normally*, she had yet another *problem*. Maybe it stemmed from the judgmental looks she received, or maybe it was simply because something was *wrong with her*. But as much as she willed herself to, she could not glance at people when she spoke. Her eyes always averted elsewhere, earning angry glances from her parents.

But by some miracle, things changed when she reached third grade. Her parents proudly stated that she had *outgrown* her problems. Whatever they were, they were now gone. Sure, she still stumbled over certain words and she still struggled to meet other people’s eyes. But her frequent movements lowered to a slight fidget, meaning that the ladybug was no longer hers. For the first time in her life, she was able to sit just like the other children, was able to be *normal*.

And being *normal* meant that for the first time in her life, she had people whom she called friends. Although she was still not the most well-liked among her peers, her days of sitting alone in playgrounds filled with joyful laughter, longing for friendship and acceptance, were now behind her. Years of pent-up quietness meant that she suddenly had more than she was able to say. Her parents gushed over her newfound confidence, how much happier and how much more talkative she



had become. Amongst her small group of friends, she was no longer *different* or *special*. She was simply the joyful *chatterbox*.

But the story did not end there. When she entered high school she discovered that she had another flaw. She continued her loud mannerisms, beaming with pride when her teachers told her parents of her constant class participation. Her ideas and answers earned her kind smiles and praises from her teachers.

But she began to notice the hushed whispers, the judgmental glances, the sly snickers and all the things that brought her back to her days with the ladybug. Now she was *too loud* and *too annoying*. And once again, she felt isolated, without the safety of her elementary school friends. And she hated that. Hated her new loneliness, hated her inability to stop words from flowing out of her mouth.

2020 was the year that she decided to change. With the COVID-19 virus conquering the entire world, she was able to simply “mute” her voice on her online lessons, preventing the world from hearing her *loudness*. And when she saw her classmates typing away on Zoom chat, she did not respond. She feared that even her written messages would be *too much*, would be *too annoying*.

As this story draws to a close, you may have already pieced together that the protagonist is the author herself. I would like to say that the problems of my youth did not create lasting scars, but that would be a lie. Because now I find myself carefully weighing out *what* I say, *how much* I speak. And in my attempt to be *liked*, I learned. Learned to bite back my tongue when I wanted to speak, even if it meant blood on my teeth. Learned to be kind to others, even if they did not reciprocate. But for me, it was all worthwhile. Because the words *annoying* and *loud* were replaced with the words *quiet* and *nice*. And most importantly, I no longer feel like the girl who sat on the ladybug.

# THE BAR AT ALEXANDRA BOOKSTORE

*Leena, Age 16*

Andrassy Avenue was home to the thick grooved columns of pristine white buildings. Intricate carved designs of horses and wings decorated the curves of the walls. The ground floor housed large luxury stores, each more expensive than the last. At the top of each store, big glowing letters of various fonts and colors could be seen: *Chanel, Harry Winston, Hermes* in glittering gold and glossy black.

Inside, the chilly blast of the over-used air conditioner and the bright, shining, yellow-tinted lights illuminated the marble displays, where glossy, gem-studded purses sat encased in glass boxes. The shimmering walls and floors, and the poshly dressed customers—some flanked by bodyguards—were common sights in most of the shops. A row of sleek, shiny cars could be found parked in the \$30 per hour metered spots along the right side of the street.

On the second-floor wall, to the right of the elevator, read the words *Alexandra Bookstore* in thin gold letters. Behind the copper-rimmed glass doors were stairs that led to a large, royal ballroom, filled with tables and bookshelves. On one side of the room there was a large gold painting. It depicted a man in white robes perched on a chariot pulled by two horses. Below that painting was a bar, where Sania had worked for the last two years.

The bookstore was more of a mix between a cafe and a library. Patrons could read and eat while listening to the live classical music performed by Barney, the resident pianist. Barney looked as if he were as old as the building itself. However, as Sania observed, there were rarely people who came here to read. Most came to eat with friends and family, or to rest after a long and expensive shopping spree at the stores below.

The bar opened at 6pm and only then would Sania start serving drinks. She served customers wearing exorbitantly priced fabrics, who were wanted in other countries for tax fraud and white-collar crimes. Seated next to them were lawyers, who had probably committed some of the same crimes that their services offered to defend. She served all types of people from all places of the world. The customers had different stories to share, but most shared one thing in common: they had more money than Sania could earn in five lifetimes.

Sania remembered what it felt like when she first started working here. She was in awe of the place, its lavish furniture and huge bookshelves. When she looked up, she admired the dome shaped ceiling, completely covered in Renaissance art of half-naked gods and flying babies. After years of working here, the place lost its charm. What kept her coming back were the stories of the people she served, which never failed to entertain her. This was one of the best aspects of being a bartender—aside from the generous tips from her wealthier patrons.

# CARPE LIBRUM

*Alma Young, Age 16*



# GAZE OF THE FUTURE

*Meaghan Law, Age 17*



## THERE'S NO HIDING

*Alexandra Chow, Age 17*

We have fallen so far. Not only have we plummeted away from perfection, past the spectrum of “good” and “satisfactory,” we are dipping into the realm of “irreversible chaos.” For animals, plants, and humans, the future is fading into nonexistence like the Javan rhinos.

We claim to care for the environment, having scientific evidence about climate change for decades, but do we actually? Just because we use the word ‘sustainable,’ do we even care about upholding its true meaning? If so, then why are we allowing fast fashion, overpackaged one-day deliveries, and plastic utensils to be called sustainable? We have this age-old act of pretending we’re environmentally friendly, with recycling triangles galore and ambitiously unachievable climate targets, but genuinely caring for the Earth and recognizing its value is an entirely different lifestyle that we have yet to adopt.

On the global level, this would look like a circular green economy, using entirely renewable energy and abandoning our waste culture to move past carbon neutral to carbon negative. Additionally, the colonial systems that have caused so much unmeasured oppression need to be dismantled. Our communities need to be transformed so that they are tighter and prepared for the worst. Individually, we need to accept that our lives will be different, likely radically different, but overall changed for the better. We would be using active transportation and repurposing cars, embracing minimalist lifestyles with more upcycling instead of recycling, and building stronger, tighter communities. Instead of reflecting on our choices to imagine what the future looks like, the vision of a thriving future will guide our decisions.

But all this... is it just a utopian illusion of a Disney ending, or could it actually be what we see in the coming decades? That’s up to you; the choice is yours.

## NO PLACE LIKE HOME

*Alexandra Chow, Age 17*

“I would like to go to Papua New Guinea sometime,” Alexa declared. “But what is it like there?”

“Papua New Guinea is extremely hot and humid,” her friend replied. “There is an average of 3,000 millimetres of rain annually.”

“Then perhaps I would not like it there; I am not used to extreme weather. No clothes fit me well, and umbrellas do not work for me.”

“Alexa, you have too many demands. Will you ever find somewhere suitable to go?”

“I do not think so. But I truly love my current job: helping Amazon customers fulfil their daily needs.”

# WORLDS LIKE OURS

*Waylon Shi, Age 14*

In the crystal clear darkness, look up at the glimmering stars.  
As if, I saw Tatooine, Kashyyyk, Kamino, Coruscant,  
Connected by fleets of Star Destroyers,  
As if, I saw the Force Ghost of Luke Skywalker,  
With his blue lightsaber in his hand,  
People living in harmony with others of unknown kinds,  
In red, blue, green, all originating from different worlds,  
The spark of imagination, blazing its way into an unstoppable fire.  
Is anyone out there, what do they look like? Can we be friends with them?  
Only time will tell, if there are worlds like ours.

Turning on my laptop, clicking open webpages,  
I embark on a journey, to remote galaxies.  
Through the 4 portals, on science, language, social structures, and technology, I search for answers,  
From NASA, Wikipedia.com to Mindmatters.ai,  
Aiming for the light at the end of the tunnel,  
Always keep searching, for worlds like ours.

Sailing with the solar winds, surfing the waves of meteor showers,  
I arrive, on an icy world of Europa.  
Shaded by a hostile gas giant, far away from the center of our celestial community,  
An unlivable, freezing desolation.  
Bombarded by ionizing radiation, surrounded by an oxygen atmosphere far too thin,  
Seemingly an uninhabitable world.

But that was not all this huge scoop of ice cream had to offer,  
Deep under the ice, a huge ocean awaited.  
Near the hydrothermal vents, bubbling water was brewing,  
A spectacle of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and heat interacting together,  
Created the first otherworldly life.  
Just a cell at first, evolving and adapting through the eras,  
Came the intelligent life of Europa.  
Looking just like us, with a big head and round eyes,  
A display of wisdom and honesty,  
Also as aquatic, with webbed limbs and a long tail fin,  
Cruising their way through the abyss,  
With lungs and gills,  
Breathing underwater and on land,  
With a blue bioluminescent glow,  
Igniting the spark of life.  
Luckily, on a radioactive snowball, I have found, a world like ours.

As silent as a calm sea, as blind as a moonless night,  
Could they talk? Could they see? How would they communicate in a way?  
Deep in the dark waters, sweet melody sang out of tune, beautiful colour painted in faded tone.

But, in the blink of an eye,  
Out sent an electrical pulse, en route to a far-away guy,  
Bursting in the current, carried an encrypted code of enchantment,  
By changing its durations, conveyed different interpretations,  
It's a language that I cannot speak, a text that I cannot read,  
But here I have found, a world like ours.

As lonely as a solitary tiger, patrolling it's territory?  
As sociable as a pride of lions, with a strong hierarchy?  
Living in equality and harmony,  
United as one nation, they supported, they shared, the Europeans thrived.  
Each life voted, to determine their fate,  
Each life administrated, to maintain responsibility and freedom,  
A highly direct democracy, and an independent autonomy,  
I have found a world like ours.

In the universe, heat, the sole source of life.  
On Europa, hydrothermal vents, the origin of the Europeans.  
Not sustained forever. One day, exhausted.  
As resilient as the strong ocean tides, they didn't stand down,  
With innovation and intelligence, they broke through,  
To harvest ionizing radiation, transferring into heat.  
Sustainable energy forever,  
Prospering life for eternity.  
I have found a world like ours.

Closing all the windows, shutting down my laptop,  
Still, my mind is voyaging among the constellations.  
Not far away from Earth,  
On an icy moon of Jupiter,  
Life is flourishing down in the deep.  
Harmonious, intelligent, democratic.  
The Force is strong there,  
That is Europa, the world like us.

# DREAM

Mabel Xu, Age 17





# YOU, ME, AND US

*Anne Zhang, Age 15*

Why have I chosen you, you  
Of all things  
To fall in love with.  
You, who captivate my mind  
So that I can think  
Of nothing else  
But to fill my empty heart  
With empty words  
Whispers of promise,  
Of completion.

My hand aches  
As I put down  
My thoughts, my dreams, my passions  
You are them and they are you  
Because we are I  
And there is nothing more

I wonder if there are  
Some that come before me  
Those that were unable  
To love you  
To devote themselves to you  
Wholly and completely

Or am I the first  
That has fallen  
For your allure  
The evanescence of your warmth  
That took mine  
As it left

Because, as a writer  
who has fallen in love with writing  
My purpose  
Has, and will  
Serve for nothing  
But this esoteric feeling  
Of us.



# CALLING TEEN WRITERS & ARTISTS!

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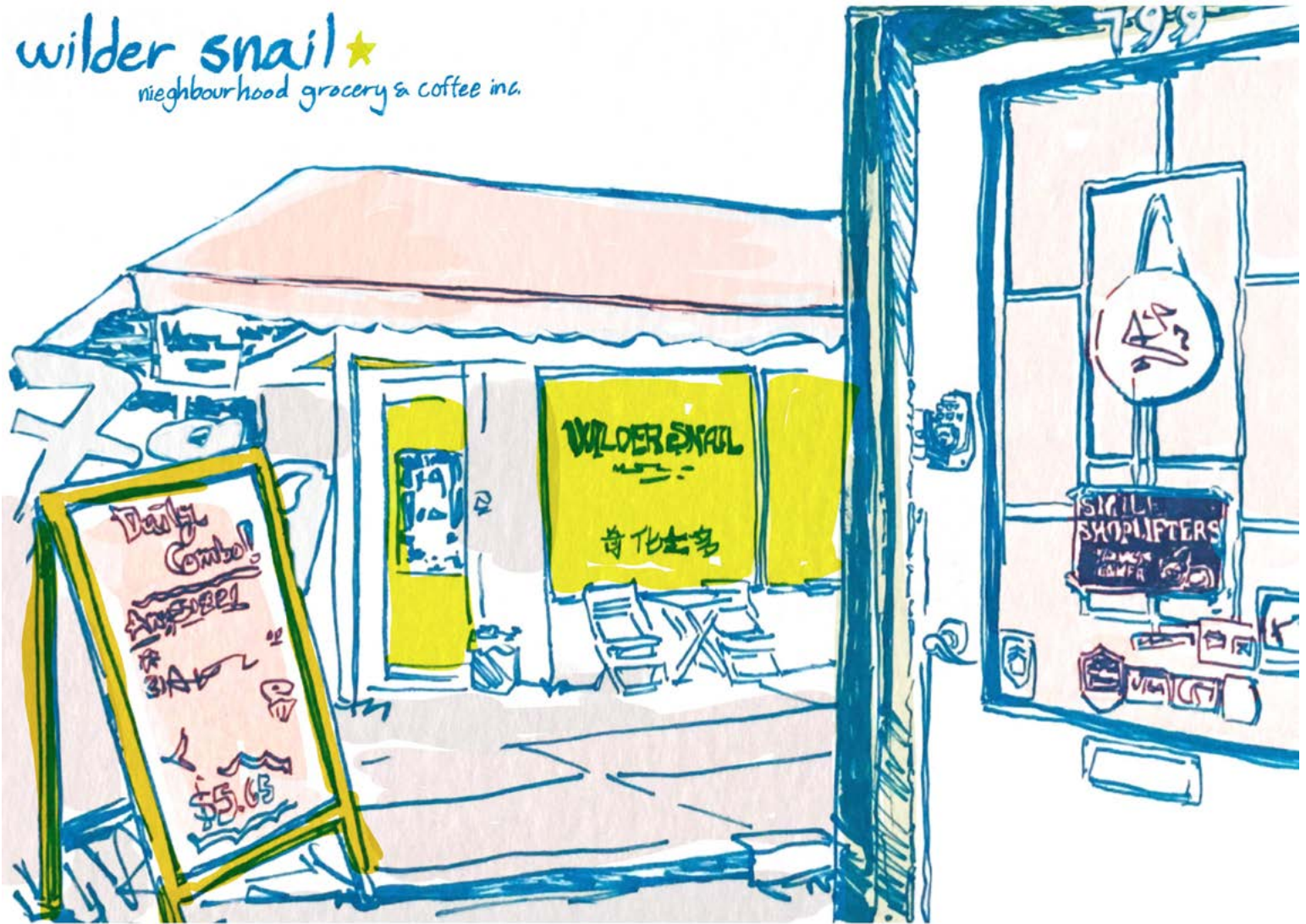
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## A WALK IN STRATHCONA

Jenny Chi, Age 15



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**INTO THE MIDST OF SUNSET**

Christy Wu, Age 16



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