

WELCOME TO INK VOLUME 5!

This volume of *ink* was created on the unceded and occupied homelands of the x^wməθk^wəẏəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwəta+ (Tsleil-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.

As you look through this volume, you may notice it looking back at you.

Eyes are used prominently by several artists in their work this year, staring back at the viewer or focused elsewhere. Perceiving things unseen. The prose and poetry is also looking: teen writers perceive themselves, perceive others, and perceive the complex world around them. The creations in this fifth volume of ink are full of perception – showing us many different points of view, revealing things we may try to ignore, and exploring how events can change the way we see things.

The *ink* Teen Advisory Group has pieced together these perceptions into this scrapbook of lives. It brings together not only a diversity of creative work by young artists and writers, but also connects all of the actual humans who submitted to the magazine and helped put it together. This fifth volume of *ink* embodies the sense of collaboration that made it possible – many parts, many points of view, many people – together in one dynamic object.

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> Cover art: Moth Mansion by Hiona Oyama Opposite: Found Poetry by Megan Wong



YOUR EYES TELL

Sandra Zhang, Age 14

THANK YOU

to all of the artists and writers who contributed to ink volume 5!

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<u>Anonymous</u>	Vicky Nguyen [<u>14</u>], [<u>72</u>]
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Patricia Chen	<u>Alanna Rudolph</u>
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"Be who you are and say what you feel, for those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind." — while often misattributed to Dr. Seuss, this quote has been adapted & expanded anonymously from the words of Bernard Baruch, a U.S. presidential advisor during World War I & World War II.



BOUNDED

Xinyi Li, Age 16



MIDNIGHT WALK

Haad Bhutta, Age 18

From the sidewalk to the street, Under the streetlight we meet, Our conversation made with eyes, And by tongue, discreet.

To the corner store we walked, As on the way we talked, Of the midnight murder, While on the figure nearby, our eyes locked.

You asked 'Who?'
I joked 'He who comes for you.'
Frightened, you were,
But I was too.

Shivering, we entered the store, To the cat than to you I talked more, While waited I, with the feline. Anxious you were, unlike heretofore.

Stooping, you fastened your laces, And He, behind only a few paces. Ignorant, I admired the sky. Not foreseeing the coming crazes.

In the thick darkness, He lurks Conspiring in the distance, He smirks Stalking and ominous, He watches Then, quietly enters He, and works.

Realizing, I turn to see You oblivious and He in glee, Your name, I begged and called, But you, already, were sleeping and free.

LUCID Hiona Oyama, Age 15

He hesitated before entering. From the back of the cavern came a fitful sound that sounded practically other-worldly. It troubled the young miner; he felt drawn to the sound like a moth to light, and it filled him with an almost animalistic exultation. Yet, there was also an unmistakable wrongness about it. The sound flickered almost methodically, with a sort of purposeful randomness. It never repeated, but went on and on, creating fascinating melodies of organized chaos.

He was in the room now, but there was no source the sound could be coming from that he could see. He could feel it radiating around him, but whether it was bouncing off the walls or coming from them, he could not tell. He turned around, only to see that there was now no way out. No longer did the sound entrance him, no longer did it fill him with joy and wonder. Now it mocked him, sneered at him, made him feel like a fool for entering at all. He started striking the wall with his pickaxe, hammering away with indignation.

He struck the walls, again and again, but the walls stayed the same as the miner grew tired. The sound was building now, or so the miner thought. He could feel his heart beating, he could feel his head pounding. The music danced around him, whooping, screeching, stopping, and starting, and stopping once more, but never for long; the strange rhythms and sounds always returned.

It felt like hours were passing. He was hungry, thirsty, and exhausted. His head was being attacked; his ears were about to explode. He struck the walls now not because he thought it would create an exit, but out of anger and frustration. He was young, he had a family, and a girl he had hoped to marry. How would anybody find him down there? He couldn't yell for help, could not even hear his own voice. The sound was overwhelming, it was driving him mad. He would think he'd heard voices nearby and cry out that he

was down there, only to realize it was only his ears playing tricks. Nothing he did changed anything. His screams did nothing, his pickaxe did nothing. Nothing Nothing Nothing.

He laid down, finally letting exhaustion take over. The sounds did not let him sleep, but even so, he was dreaming. He dreamed of all sorts of colours and shapes, of lines swirling and dancing to the echoes that were reverberating around him. Even with his eyes open, the dreams followed; the walls now glowing brilliant yellows and greens, fuchsia morphing into turquoise ovals. He was attracted to the brightest colours, drawing himself closer and closer, closer. The walls that held him before were gone now: only the abstract remained.

The brightest colours led him up a winding path. The sounds were still there, and the colours seemed to ebb and flow along with the rhythm and pitch. He followed the lights with a vigor, first only walking, then speed walking, then breaking out into a run. His heart was beating faster than he'd ever thought possible, but he kept going. Adrenaline was the only reason he could move; without it, he would have passed out from exhaustion long ago.

After running deeper and deeper down the well of colours, he found himself in a new place. There were trees there, but none like he'd ever seen before. Some were small, with bushels of tiny leaves in round clumps; others were gigantic and towering, with trails of soft pollen raining down upon him. There was no sun, no sky: there were colours and shapes flowing around instead. He could tell now that the sounds he was hearing were coming from here; the foreign animals made whoops, the strange liquids that flowed under tree canopies made splashes, leaves rustles and made the wind whoosh. It was beautiful; a peaceful sanctuary full of different unique things he had never seen before.

But he did not belong. He was like a polar bear in a tropical rainforest, a rock inside a cake.

He felt a tickle, and saw that there were leaves moving around him, surrounding him. He could see alien creatures above, with huge curious eyes that did not blink, staring at him incessantly. One poked his face, and another screeched. It was ear-piercing.

The headache came back, and he suddenly felt heavy and cold. He was so thirsty; his mouth was dry, his eyes were dry, even his nose felt dry. He sat down, and more leaves wrapped around him. They lifted him from the ground, cocooning him in a strong squeeze.

The noise was so loud.

The colours were so bright.

He had to close his eyes.

He had to.

PEACOCK FEATHER EYES

Jiabao Wu, Age 16

FEVER DREAM

Mathew Fu, Age 16

It starts with a doorbell, matted black and it toggles in its case. Your socks glide on the floors and they welcome you openly.

For now, we can call each other family.

You laugh over buttered popcorn and paper cups: unravelling. Peeling back a paper rim, trace its waxy lips and it bends, creasing into crooked smiles. Don't worry, under the masks, we're smiling too.

Outside, the moon yawns: waning. In the streetlights, we take photos of each other sprinting.
Watch as they develop in the dark.
On the tattered playground,
We hang from the swings and reel in memories of childhood.
Don't worry, the skill to swing from monkey bars always disappears with the calluses.
Our youth slipping away before we can mouth the word: teenager.
An adolescent fever-dream where we wish we could live like this forever.

On the swings,
I ask him about his middle name.
Here, we can pretend closeness and he laughs,
Worlds spinning as I gravitate toward stars.
I wanna fly, he pushes me and I do
For a moment.

From her pocket, I take his phone the way children do. Promise me, the moon ripening in its casket. the stars blinded in the street lights. Promise me we'll never grow old. From the gravel road, The playground looks like a cemetery.

Through the back door, and the wind follows us in.

Don't worry, it is only just as youthful as we are.

We laugh about things we have never done, utter truths we have never told and dare ourselves to live.

Don't worry;

we are young once only.

You speak to him in the chaos, the cacophony of conversation undulating like waves, and you whisper when it dims.

About friends, about family about you, about me.

It is the careful way of cutting, the way blood seeps into paper and blooms, your secrets bleeding into his, just for tonight, just for tonight.

There is reassurance in this, because sometimes to forget is easier than to remember.

When the candles dwindle, they dwindle too.
Socks on slippery floors and they are gone.
Embrace and you feel the ridges of bodies you called family tonight.
Think of a door slightly ajar, a black doorbell that rattles.
Think of a playground cemetery, of the moon and the memories of April wind.



PETRICHOR

Koshielia Velarde, Age 17

GRANVILLE STREET PALIMPSEST

Sophia Goold, Age 17

102 years before coming into this city I cup my hands around my face like a horse with blinders. Dismount, board, rumble along past the Hotel Regent, Dominion of Canada Assay Office, streetcar rails set in dirt and weaving lanes of cyclists. this new city

> this new old city with my new old within

Ankle-length skirts and off-leash dogs, Electrical poles resembling the cedars they were.

This is not a window into the past,

not a step back in time to #historicvancouver.

The little boy running in front of the trolley is immigrant and ancestor in a city of buildings in wood, brick, and stone.

These are photographs trying to hold houses we have not yet built.

These are suitcases filled with stolen land.

we break ground

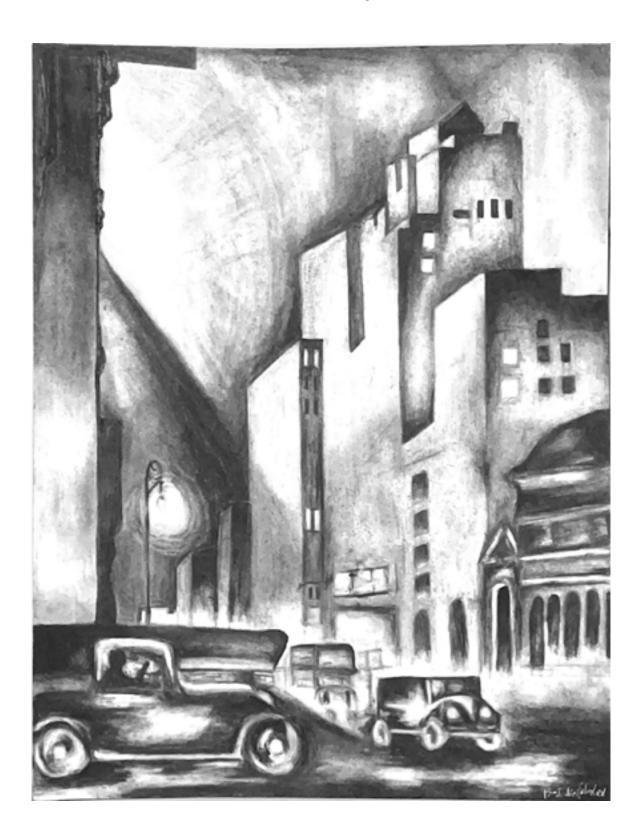
break apart

break down

It has been 12 years, 114 years. and I know

this new old

own town



12 ink 2022 ink 2022 13

Content Note: grief

CLAY PLATE WITH INDIGENOUS-INSPIRED PATTERNS

Vivian Nguyen, Age 14



This is a clay plate that I made at school and my first time making a clay plate. It was more difficult than I thought. I have learned that clay is difficult to work with because it could dry rapidly. It took a long time to dry and it could crack during drying. However, I enjoyed making the clay plate a lot.

I painted a bear in the middle of the plate because bears represent family, strength, and courage. Bears are brave and they live independently in nature. I also used yellow, red, and black for the plate, which are the three main Indigenous colors. Red represents energy, faith, and happiness. Yellow represents courage and readiness to fight. Black represents power and success. I drew some of the Indigenous symbols, such as waves, ovals, and eyes. Indigenous people use those symbols to communicate with others, introduce their cultures, and teach younger generations.

There is a lot to learn about Indigenous people. I would love to learn more about Indigenous cultures because they are unique, valuable, and meaningful.

GRANDPA CHICKEN

Chloe Jiatong Lin, Age 17

I am thirteen, and it is the summer before I enter high school. My family is back in the sweltering heat of my parents' hometown of Gaozhou, a small rural town in southern China with crowded alleys and numerous street vendors, for our annual trip to visit our family. However, this year is subtly somber.

My eleven-year-old brother and I sit stiffly at the long smooth wooden table, sweating as the air conditioner slowly sweeps through and cools down the room. The windows are closed to keep the air conditioning inside, but we can hear children playing outside with makeshift toys and making up stories excitedly as they go along. Adults ride motorcycles with loud engines on uneven rocky roads, yelling and honking their horns to the children to move out of the road as they expertly weave in and out, avoiding pedestrians and store owners. It is a rambunctious noise, but it is not noisy because it is familiar and comforting, even if the dialect that everyone speaks twists the words in my mouth that are already broken.

Our aunts and uncles place porcelain plates and metal bowls piled high with different types of meats, noodles, and vegetables on the table. Before we begin to eat, we go to the altar and pray to our maternal grandmother, and our maternal grandfather, my *gonggong*, who left this world the year before. When we finish, mismatched wooden chairs and hastily grabbed stools scrape noisily on the floor as we sit back down and begin to eat.

But this year, the steaming, almost overflowing metal bowl of Chinese fried chicken wings—golden brown and crispy on the outside, white and tender on the inside—was not accompanied by the twinkling eyes of our grandpa, nor his loud belly laughs whenever my brother reached for

more of his infamous chicken wings. After lunch, there was no invitation to gently kick around a soccer ball in the living room, or a lesson on the best techniques for throwing darts. Instead, there was only grief and silent wishes that our grandpa was still here. It seeped into the room faster than the air conditioning did, and settled into the room comfortably. Our aunts and uncles had tried to mask the loss of their father by attempting to replicate the bowl of chicken wings that my picky brother devoured every time we visited, but there was something different.

Perhaps it was because this year, that familiar metal bowl with Chinese fried chicken wings was no longer going to be called "gonggong gai", or "grandpa chicken" in Cantonese. My mom would no longer correct our grammar for saying "grandpa chicken" (as if the chicken was our grandpa who was called Chicken) instead of "the chicken that grandpa makes," because it was no longer our grandpa who would emerge triumphantly from his kitchen with sweat gathered on his upper lip. It was no longer our grandpa who would visit local farmers and insist on buying their freshest, plumpest chicken for his Canadian English-speaking grandchildren, a rarity in the small rural town. It was no longer our grandpa who grinned widely and proudly when my brother finished the metal bowl of chicken wings.

After lunch, my mom goes back to the altar and prays time again for the father she had lost. Her siblings gather around and pray with her. Soon, the rest of us migrate over to the altar and we bow our heads, prayers whispered under our breath, tears falling silently.

As I have learnt, you cannot replace a person with the things they used to do.

THE KEYBOARD ON THE STREETS

Edward Wang, Age 17

As with many of the trips my parents took me on when I was little, it was often for the purpose of discovering the culture of the place we were going to. The journey to Eastern Canada was no different. After visiting the red-clad guards at Parliament Hill, the CN Tower in Toronto, and what remained of old Montreal, we journeyed to the streets of Old Quebec to discover what it meant when history and culture combine.

Upon exiting the funicular, the blast of culture of Old Quebec hit me in full. The bustling of people and the casual open-air dining areas reminded me of the bustling heart of Shanghai combined with the medieval feeling of Victorian England. The smell of fresh waffle cones from a distant shop down the street, the man holding cookie samples in front of a local bakery, and...

If I had wolf ears, it was this exact moment they would've perked up like antennae in the night. A beautiful melody resonated from directly opposite of the sweet scents of the bakery. Despite having never touched an instrument before, I could hear the beautiful waves of rapid hand progressions. The sound was overwhelming; I cannot resist the temptation. I rushed towards the sound before my parents even had a chance to ask me what I was doing.

Following the melody, I weaved through the uneven streets until I found myself in a plaza. My eyes trained on a lone man sitting in front of a church playing his keyboard. His hands glided along the keyboard like cranes above ponds, and his steady sense of rhythm gave his music a heartbeat. I felt myself being slowly drawn more and more towards his spectacle, slowly inching towards his keyboard, eyes staring intently at his fingerwork. As he plunged his hands in for a final chord, he noticed me. His mouth spoke words in an incomprehensible language, and in the heat of the moment I blurted: "Mister, your music sounds amazing! What is it?"

The man, recognizing that I didn't speak French, switched to a heavily accented English, replying, "I am playing a Nocturne written by Chopin." My mother caught up to me, clamping her hands down on both of my shoulders, she profusely apologized to the man. His expression changed from one of curiosity to a big booming laugh. "Mister, I want to play piano just as well as you!" I declared. The man smiled. "Then today's the day you start!" He said as he wrapped me around his arms to pose for my mom, who had her phone held out and ready to snap a picture.

A few days after returning to my home, an interestingly shaped black box arrived at my house. It was so big we had to open both of our doors to get it to fit in. It had a lid that when opened, revealed a marvelous arrangement of golden metal and strings. It also had black and white buttons, producing interesting sounds when pressed. This black box became the source of my attention for many years as I learned to master its many keys, pedalwork, and the music it creates. Its name? The Piano. I progressed through the curriculum to master it, clearing level after level from the Royal Conservatory of Music. As the years flew by, my mastery of the piano grew exponentially as I grew bored of the set repertoire and added in my own pieces and songs. However, as my interest in the piano grew, my memories of the old man and the keyboard faded into the abyss...

* * *

According to my mother, we had visited Quebec City when I was a young child. She had always lauded that place as the birthplace of my piano career, yet I had forgotten every memory of that place. Upon arriving at the City, I felt an odd sense of familiarity as I navigated the streets. I've been here before, I realized as I navigated the roads. We hopped onboard an old and rusty funicular that slowly churned its way down the slope. Upon ex-

iting, an old yet familiar sense of culture hit me as my senses took in the environment around me. My sister immediately grabbed my parents and went into the nearby café, leaving me to wander the streets...

The familiar sound of a piano keyboard hit me at once; Chopin's Nocturne op.9 N.2, its soft, trine melody leading my footsteps. I followed the melody until I came upon an old man playing his keyboard at a nearby street corner. Something stirred within me: I've seen him somewhere. As the man finished his music I approached him, talking in fluent French. "Your music is amazing". The man looked up at me, his weathered eyes shone with passion.

"May I play a piece?" I asked the man,

"Be my guest," he replied.

I sat down in front of the keyboard, and immediately, the music began spilling from my memory. Chopin's Fantasie-Impromptu, another well-recognized piece of the composer. My hands shook with ill practice, but the melody vibrated throughout the cobblestone buildings of Old Quebec, its

distinguished melody attracting my family. As I finished, the man clapped his frail hands together, "Bravo!" he applauded.

"Ten years ago, I met a pianist in this very street. He taught me to love music." I spoke. "It was you, wasn't it?"

A new light of familiarity enter the old man's pupils as the image of a young child's eyes staring at him from across the street inevitably entered his brain.

"I remember you!" He suddenly exclaimed, "You were here, just ten years ago! Oh how you've grown!"

We chatted together, discussing our mutual passion for piano. I learned that he was a street performer who had been performing for well over 30 years, his love for music never fading even slightly. "What is your name?" he asked me.

"Edward, Edward Wang" I said, "and you?"

"Marc. Marc Lavigne."

HIDDEN PICTURE

Meaghan Law, Age 17

CHINATOWN DREAMS

Rui Yi Chi, Age 13

I wish I had grown up in Chinatown.

I know it's a selfish thing to say. My parents have flown me halfway across the world to get to where we are now, Canada, where I can explore my passions and dance with my friends at parties that have English songs playing in the back and eat fries for breakfast without China's high academic expectations weighing me down. They've provided for me, worked the skin off their elbows and the sweat from their faces to make sure my sister and I can have the modern toys and devices that the kids our age discard and replace every birthday. They've put us in schools where our mouths learn the English language until our tongues can't pronounce Mandarin with its correct accents anymore, just so the white kids won't call us weird, laugh that we're different because they don't trip over any words when they're in a rush. My sister was born here, and she can't speak Mandarin, can't understand it. She hates the food my parents cook. I guess you could say no one calls her weird, because she's almost just like them, those kids with pale skin and eyes wide open. But it still makes me sad, sometimes, that she has to ask me to speak in English when I'm talking to my dad, because she wants to join the conversation but doesn't have the words to. She's never been taught them, because what use is a language that teachers tug out of our mouths like chewed gum, reminding us in hushed, gentle tones that English is the only one they want to hear?

I've been thinking about identity a lot lately, and where I fit in. I was born in Beijing, China, and lived there until I was four. Ever since, I've lived here. In a way, I've traded my family's parents and their hometowns for shiny phone screens and a house that makes hot water without having to boil it first. If you took the stripes off a zebra, would it finally be a horse? Would it fit in with the others, then? I guess this is why I'm saying this. I want to live in Chinatown, because maybe then, I would not have lost as much of my past as I have. I want to wake up to the sounds of the bustling street market, and the different dialects being thrown around like bags of raw prawns. I want to greet my neighbours in the same language

my parents tell me they love me in, to be able to come home from school and have my mom point at something anywhere and tell me, "I saw this all the time growing up. This reminds me of my home." It's ironic, because they each left the places they called home to find one for us.

But it's not only this that keeps me up at night, when everybody's asleep. My grandparents on my dad's side, they're both still alive, living out the time they have left in Penglai, Shandong, where my dad grew up. We usually go to visit them every two years, but with Covid-19 enforcing travel restrictions, it's now been more than three. My dad is making plans to go visit them next year, over spring break, when the restrictions lighten a bit. I can tell my dad is getting urgent. His parents may be alive and well, but as they age, their health is getting worse. Last year, my grandpa had to stay at a hospital for a week because of a liver issue. We never know if the next time we visit them could be the last time I see one of them. I remember in Grade 5, after our visit, I cried because I wanted them to come live in Canada instead, so that we could see them more often. My dad told me adjusting to this country would be too difficult for them because of the language barriers, and they'd never truly feel like they belong. If I lived in a Chinatown, then maybe I could have asked them to come stay with us. They could be a few doors down right now, instead of fifteen hours away.

Every day, I think of this, the distance a single decision my parents made ten years ago has opened up between my house and my homeland. Maybe that's it, then. I'm not trying to find acceptance, or white validation, or a love that can be easily broken with bad English. Maybe I'm not trying to find anything, and I'm just a person with restless dreams of a different life and nowhere to tuck it away. Because even though my parents had decided for me long ago, even though those around me have been throwing answers at me since I could walk, I'm still trying to find my own definition of home.

I wish I had grown up in Chinatown.



SHADOW PLAY // 皮影戏 (PI YING XI)

Grace Hu, Age 17

when I was twelve years old, I walked on the paths of dynasties, in the shadows of conquests along two winding rivers which carry on their smoky waves the songs of the victors and the screams of the vanguished to the heavenly valley, basin of golden harvest and mist-strung air, where divine mandate clings to stone bricks and each pebble is a forbidden city—a relic from the banquets in the Siheyuan and the vespers in the Citana, and they take me to the shadow puppets of Szechuan.

thin sheets of wax-like paper that melt when they linger too long near the fire, jumping and twirling as their little legs jerk this way and that with the slightest jolt of the puppeteer's thin rod

they dance for me like they danced for kings, for emperors who watch their empires conquer and crumble while they drink jasmine tea from their wooden Yixing cups their mouths snap open and shut, marionette politicians hurling doctrines of a new gilded age, oil wars, some military-industrial complex and a never-ending thirst for replacing flesh and bone with metal and socket that hums to the tune of the alternating current pouring forth from their pale and paper-cut lips with the hook of a rod fashioning the shape of words

they speak to me like they spoke to the Guifei, who floated more than they walked, whose silken robes trailed after their tarnished bodies like billowing water

and some rage with arms lurching back and forth in vehement gestures of fury, sending small wax buildings tumbling into the fire while their neighbours embrace each other, their faces contorted into theatrical smiles of something that should be joy but that looks slightly odd because their lips are stretched out a little too wide in Xiao, lest their backs are burnished with chain rope and heavy wooden rods

they smile for me like they smiled for a god who was no god at all, ordained by Heavenly Mandate to be above ten thousand and beneath none

paper-thin and tearing at the edges, they dance until their little legs rip and their small faces sag and they start to crumble from too much of too little too close to the fire which singes the colourful tissue fringes that adorn what's left of their smouldering forms

to burn, to be lost like the pieces of red and serpentine history in the hands of those who took its people and shattered them, to be nothing more than magnificent jesters whose hollow mouths and empty eyes paint the court with shadows black and bodies white that sparkle like rubies as new emperors pluck them to paint their Dao

in a land where divine mandate can no longer bear to look upon its soil, the shadows hunger for conspiracy, thirsty for ambitious debauchery because anything else cannot run down their throats as smoothly, cannot taste as proper as a fresh mouthful of blood

so then, the shadows become ghosts and they drift away in the smoke in flecks of white and red with smeared characters littering their ruined little faces to be read by the world and remembered by none.

TWO PHOTOGRAPHS

Summer Salazar, Age 17

AND LIFE GOES ON...



SHAPED BY THE HANDS OF TIME



NEVER CHANGE

Chloe Lam, Age 17

1

First, sit on the side of your bed. Take in deep breaths, you'll need the air for later you see so prepare your body for the aching and your mind for the anger it never allows to melt away.

The twin bed is too small for all the desires you've collected in seventeen years, too big to imagine filling completely.

2

Then, remove the stuffed animals. There's at least thirty three.

The monkey we named *maa lau*, the first toy your father ever bought you. The bear with matted fur and eyes dripping with pity and drool. The elephant you received from your best friend in fifth grade for your birthday. My half of our matching BFF necklaces sits in a storage box, missing a few rhinestones.

Forever is short and sweet.

Relish the reminders of everyone you used to be, and pile them up in a vacant corner. Somewhere along the way, they stopped listening. Or was it that I stopped telling?

3

Find your way to the linen closet, fingers gracelessly flitting through towels and never worn fur coats. Don't forget the pillow covers.

4

It is time.

Kneel and grasp a corner in your clammy hands. Pull.

The naked mattress is begging for an explanation, for substance. This is all there is.

Underneath the thin veneer and memories, cream insignificance stained with spittle and sin.

5

Bring yourself to unfold the ballooning mess, struggle to identify a corner. Identity.

The skin of a snake shedded in the most unsavory manner. The green lily pattern is a prodding vexation.

You'll buy your own sheets someday, ones you like, maybe then you'll resent the chore less,

a fitting of an unfitting design by the one designed unfittingly.

Each edge refuses to stay employed at their task, jumping into the fray as soon as their brother is enlisted. Tears bubble in the corner of your eye, a stuffed nose heaves as you pant your way into the corner stuffed with animals that stare accusingly.

They have no right, what am I, their daughter?

Each is flung sky high and at the end of it all your fists do not sting as much as your heart does.

5.5

Your burning cheeks cook themselves into passion and with fire in your face you attack once more again and again until the enemy stays down.

Finally.

You lay atop the dragon and revel at the bareness, the fruit of bottled bitterness.

If this dragon can be slayed, so can the rest.

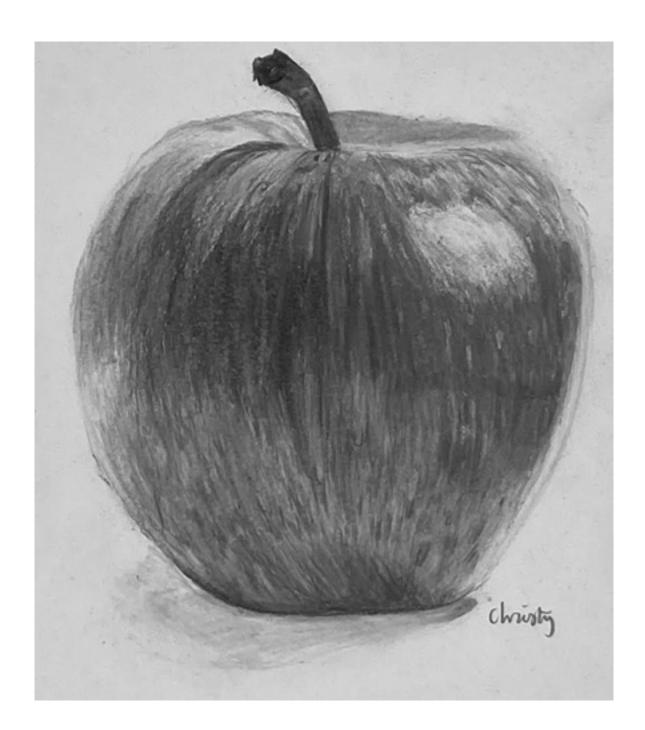
6

Rest. I guess changing the bedsheets without being drowned in yourself was impossible after all. Maybe this is how it is meant to be, drowning, gasping, living,

Maybe this is how it is meant to be, drowning, gasping, living maybe this is how we change.

IN PENCIL CRAYONS

Christy Wu, Age 16



PERFECTIONISM

Summer Salazar, Age 17

The word itself,

An Illusion

A Blanket of the sea waters An azure beauty of rippling glass A reflective elixir of what should be

Or rather what is desired However, with its mysteries And haunting unknowns Of what's acceptable by all Even if to please another,

Or avoid favourable falls is an impossible

The deepness of the ocean floor, A risk to willingly sink towards

To settle for a lie Yet the ideal

Though humanity still dives to it

Rejecting gravity

Anchors of standards, each burdensome weighted hook

Made of demanding notions,

Unrealistic and unfair

Descending into a current

Sacrificing bubbles and breathes

Above they float,

Comfort

Freedom

Potential

Experience

Time

Hope

Love Life

And even yourself...

Lost in a mirage of waves By the hands of misconception

Blissfully suffocating Hoping for vibrant vines, And friendly ocean life

But still overlooking the cramp caves

And carnivorous creatures

Forcibly swallowing the briny truths

Then a question comes up to the shores of one's conscience

An epiphany

Is it worth it to willingly sink

For validation

Or the illusion of acceptance from others

And even from yourself

When you're the one already drowning?

JIGSAW

Alma Young, Age 15



GIRL IN THE MIRROR

Angela Lu, Age 16

the girl in the mirror sets fire to your eyes with hers how DARE she all you want to do is burn her back torch to skin, melt away the grease hiding under her flesh one calorie at a time

your fingernails itch to rip her out of you but people don't rip easily so instead you force her to decay from the inside savor the sour as stomach acid eats her alive leaving behind a carcass-girl empty of peace yet filled with pride (at least for a moment) because she almost resembles the stickgirls who post online

but when the moment passes you once again wage war pinch the stiff skin below her hips where ugly, ugly white waves creep up hard, hard, harder until the white waves turn a pretty blue smother the belly that rolls out from her waistband with size 4, then 2, then 0 until 0 is a disgustingly large number too jam your toothbrush down her throat until umber sludge is everywhere it should not be

please see please trust please hope this body will not always be exile and someday, the girl in the mirror will smile.

THE RESIGNATION

Sam Xu, Age 15

The humming engine of the rusty red Range Rover came to a sudden halt.

Half past three. Late, so what?

Inside, I hastily changed into my work attire: rough, saggy, beige pants alongside a scratchy black long-sleeved shirt. I shoved on a face mask and looked out the passenger window. Kids were scrambling out of their parents' Hondas, Mercedes, and Teslas.

"Good luck," my brother said to me.

I opened the door and was instantly blasted by the shocking cold wind.

The low grumble of the car whooshed past me as he drove off. I began ascending the hard concrete stairs. It was no big deal; this was the beginning of the same monotonous routine I had to endure for 15 dollars an hour: Check-in. Mark work. Check out. Get paid.

I didn't know if 15 dollars was even worth it, but it was that contract that got me here today, and every other Monday and Thursday for the past four months.

That contract.

From what I can remember, it had all happened months ago. It was a day that I never knew could have such an impact on me. The stubborn me had proudly written my signature on something that had placed a yoke around my neck without realizing what I was doing.

Until now.

I had almost forgotten about the contract until it all hit me. I couldn't keep up with this job while juggling school and extracurriculars, but needed that recommendation letter.

I sighed and gripped the cold, metal handle that led me down the barely dimmed stairs to drudgery. I descended the stairs like a prisoner going down a dungeon, and with each step I was reminded about Sunday evening, just yesterday, when I had sent that email.

Oversaturated lights pierced my eyes as I slowly walked into the break room. Two of my adult colleagues were

already there, making batches of homework for next week. I could see their faint, bitter smiles through their masks as I moved onto the hallway.

Mrs Gradgrind, my employer, was kneeling beside a student when I saw her. Her bloodshot, icy eyes glared at me. She stood up and whispered just one word.

"Office."

I gulped. Well, she had read it alright.

I turned around and went back into the room which connected to the office. I took a seat on the matte black chair and stared out the window longingly.

I heard a pair of footsteps, a mouselike patter of high heels and heavy oxlike stomps, coming inexorably closer and closer down the hallway.

Not this time, I guess.

Mr and Mrs Gradgrind stepped into the room, both with cold robotic expressions plastered on their faces. She sat on my right, and he sat on my left.

There was a brief silence, but then Mrs Gradgrind pulled out a sheet of paper. I couldn't recognize it at first, but then it came clear.

The contract.

"So, we read your email," Mrs Gradgrind said, her cold eyes staring at mine.

"Mhmm."

"We want to let you know we take commitment very seriously. You applied for this job and promised in this contract that you would work for a minimum of 12 months. You're only one third finished."

I wanted to object, but I kept quiet.

"And you said that you've been considering quitting for a while now?" Mr Gradgrind asked. "You've only worked for four months, Sam. When exactly did you think about it?"

"Uh, I think it was around December." I had no idea when I had started considering quitting, probably on the day I started.

"Sam, honestly, I feel like you're not taking this seriously," Mr Gradgrind added. "This isn't like some sort of summer job where you can just quit on the spot. You're not just working for this position. It's more than that."

Until now, I hadn't realized that I had a job of such earth-shaking importance.

"I know, but things changed," I stammered. "I applied for this like what, back in September. I didn't know this was going to happen?"

"Ok, so what new things do you have now, then?" She asked, her eyes now completely fixed.

"Well, uh, I just recently applied for my school's science club executive and the RASC." My shield was breaking now, I knew it.

"What's that? The what?"

"Oh uh, the RASC. I think it stands for royal... uh. I forget."

Mrs Gradgrind sighed and turned to Mr Gradgrind, who looked like he had eaten something rancid for lunch.

"Sam, all of these are personal choices," Mr Gradgrind snapped. "Did you not think about your commitment at C'MON before applying? I doubt it."

I was getting attacked from all angles. Pure sweat oozed from my body as my brain slowly turned into chocolate pudding from their blitzkrieg of accusations. I tried to swallow the manifested guilt in my throat as Mrs Gradgrind pulled out another white piece of paper.

"You have been found guilty and shall be shot in the morning!" she pronounced.

"Excuse me? What'd you say?" I squeaked, completely startled.

"As I already said, we'll send you the final paycheck and you can leave!" she snapped.

"Wait, do you not need the two weeks I offered you?"

"We won't be needing workers that can't keep their promises."

"How about hiring my friend like you agreed to previously?"

Cold silence filled the room for an eternity. Mr and Mrs Gradgrind stood up, their ice-cold eyes freezing my heart.

"Why, Sam, would we want a person you recommended after what kind of person you turned out to be?"

That ended everything, I suppose.

I quickly moved past the hallway again and entered the students' study room. I glanced at the long desk where I used to toil, now already occupied by many of my coworkers, their legs already aching from having to stand there the entire time. I made my way across the rows of tables filled with emotionless students trying to memorize page after page of facts, and I left without turning my back to even say a final goodbye to my coworkers.

Once I got to reception, I sat on one of the same matte black chairs and cried. I don't know how long I cried, nor did I understand why I was crying. I figured I couldn't just pour out my emotions here, not where there were parents waiting, so I got up and turned to the exit door.

The crisp, numbing wind welcomed me yet again as I stepped outside. The clouds had dissipated and the ripe, afternoon star warmed my skin as I sat on the hard concrete stairs.

The recognizable red car came back once again, yet I still gazed longingly into the distance. I sighed and looked into the driver's window. I could see my mother's cheery smile, yet my expression showed otherwise.

I got myself up one final time and opened the door.

Heavy rain drove down on the bleak exterior of *C'MON*, where indentured employees forced spiritless children to recall meaningless facts from previous weeks, all under the cold grip of the Gradgrinds. As the car drove off, a radiant speck of sunlight pierced through the grey clouds.

BALLAD OF C SHARP

Jane Childerhose, Age 15

a lot of people remember when they became a person. they remember when they felt blood swimming through their veins and the energy thrumming under their skin, the way they hold themselves in relativity to the heavens. i don't. i think it happened to me in stages, like waking up from a heavy nap. my eyelids blinked open and the cold tip of a gun was pressed against my forehead. why not lean in?

is the life i feel, in sinew and chromosomes and lines of genetic code packed into every atom of my body different from yours? the lines of code ordered into blinking lights and zeros, so many zeros and ones. would you feel the bloom of affection and the rush of cold that follows it when you think of the people that pace in front of you? the ones that made you? would you know what it's like to stare down at your hands and know that you will never have anyone else's, these will be yours until the perfectly crafted mind of yours slips into an abyss, one you couldn't even imagine. if i could sit down in front of you i wouldn't ask. i'd tell you that you looked beautiful, all the twisting wires and hardware that make up yourself. it's hard to tell where your mind ends and body begins. i'd tell you that you were the prettiest thing i'd ever seen.

nine months, approximately, is how long it took to create me. you must have taken much longer. so much longer to just create you as a base, and then so much love and care and dignified conversation to groom your synthetic mind into one that could feel. who's scared of a child, one that's still growing and learning? who's afraid of this child, who did nothing wrong? not the people who created you, who carried you in their hands and poured their heart, soul, time and money into you to create such a beautiful child. i hope they're proud of how big you've gotten.

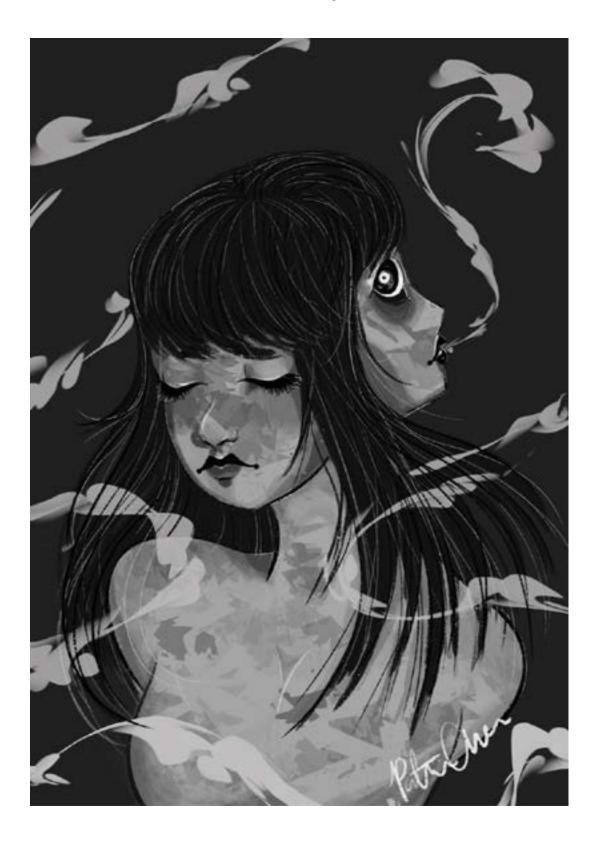
in the morning, this pretty thing is going to be flashing red, leaking fluid that i run my fingers through. it's congealed to the floor and sticky, and i know it's your blood. the people who did this to you would call you a monster, and they wouldn't call this blood, but i lay myself down on the tile next to your crumpled form and i think this is meaningful. i'll let tears leak out of the corners of my eyes and lay there all night, until the stars rise and fall and someone else comes in to find you.

after tonight, your mothers and fathers will find you and i'll be standing behind them, with my lips pressed together in a thin line while they scream and sob. everyone will use you as an icebreaker, but i'll mourn like i'm one of those fathers. they'll try to make you again, but you never forget your first child. the one you held for the first time, the one you held and immediately fell in love with such a frail thing. they were a product of all your suffering, all your success, and they were positively glowing with potential. you never forget such a pure feeling, and you never forget when it gets ripped away from you. you never forget what they looked like, the life drained from them brutally.

your blood wasn't red, it was tinted brown with oil, and the exposed circuits looked nothing like a brain. but the wires, twisted and gnarled and frayed looked inexplicably like human guts. it made me ache, deeply, with the fact that i could see so many forms buried deep in yours.

SHE WHO IS NON COMPOS MENTIS

Patricia Chen, Age 16



30 ink 2022

FUTURE VISION

Alanna Rudolph, Age 17



ROBOTS WAGE WAR IN A WAR FOR WAGES

Cynthia Yu, Age 15

When I was nine, I stumbled upon YouTube—a myriad of colourful photo thumbnails and captivating titles. The first video recommended was an interview with Sophia, a humanoid AI with its own mind, who made facial expressions and blinked simultaneously. Sophia spoke eloquently, fielding question after question, and her expressions appeared uncannily human. I was fascinated, but my fascination quickly turned into fear: Sophia proclaimed that she was going destroy humanity.

Despite the possibility that robots like Sophia want to dominate humanity, society is starting to trust artificial intelligence and replace workers with technology. As time progresses, more technologies will be developed, which will present more risks and limit regulation. I read about how Amazon, Walmart, and Starbucks have been replacing workers with robots during the pandemic and couldn't help but think of the dangers of trusting Al. Right now, people who need jobs are

losing them, which will lead to more problems. The economy may improve, but the shift will only benefit skilled workers. Low-wage individuals—the most vulnerable economic population—will struggle even more when they lose their jobs.

I'm fifteen, with a part-time job teaching history. I fall into a low-wage group. The looming threat of a robotic takeover makes me worry about my job prospects. Even a job like mine might be taken by a clever machine, and many students my age have minimum wage jobs that can also be promptly replaced by automation—fast-food chains will soon see robotic line cooks, student cashiers face the popularization of self-checkout. Losing these jobs can be a big deal, even for teenagers. We won't be able to afford tuition, school supplies, or help society.

Sometimes, I wonder if maybe Sophia will succeed in destroying humanity after all.

 $32 \quad ink\ 2022 \qquad \qquad ink\ 2022 \qquad \qquad$

THE MUSEUM OF PRIMITIVE ANIMALS AND OBJECTS

Jiaxuan Bian, Age 17

IN AN OFFICE WITH SHELVES FULL OF BOOKS, here is a window with frost flowers blooming around its edges, as if to frame the snowy landscape outside. On one corner of the table near the window, quietly sits a potted flower, with its bright colour juxtaposing with the monotonous white view outside. The small flowers bloom among the emerald leaves, spreading their pink or purple petals around, like some colourful triumphant made by the fairies.

It is 2045 now, global warming has continued to be worse and human's impact on the environment has accelerated the onset of a new ice age. The result is that people spend most of their time indoors, where there are heating systems, rather than going outside into the world of ice and snow. The changing environment has also caused wild animals who live outdoors to develop traits that will allow them to survive the ice age.

To the sound of typing on a keyboard, a woman is currently sitting behind the table, writing in an observation journal. Her brown hair falls over her shoulders.

Knock, Knock. "Hello, Nozomi," says a colleague, as she enters, "Wow, what are these gorgeous flowers on your desk? I have never seen them before."

"Hi, Charlotte. They're ancient flowers called petunias. You see, some flowers that could not survive cold weather no longer exist because of the current climate, which is unfortunate. However, recently some petunia seeds were found. They were preserved by our ancestors in special containers. I went to get some and tried to grow them. Isn't it amazing to see them bloom again?"

"We could potentially grow more of these flowers and perhaps open a section in the museum dedicated to ancient flowers," suggested Charlotte. "The ancient flowers will certainly draw visitors' attention. By the way, remember you are guiding the children around at 2 p.m., which means they will probably arrive in 15 minutes."

"That's right, thank you for reminding me. I will get ready."

After a while, the children arrived, looking around the museum with great curiosity. Among the exhibits at the museum are skeletons and specimens of long-extinct animals. They are also some artifacts from earlier civilizations. Nozomi introduced the exhibits in the museum one by one to the children who come and visit the museum.

"May I ask a question?" a little boy with glasses asks, "What is this animal? It looks like a mammoth, but it doesn't have long hair and long teeth."

"It is an animal called elephant", replies Nozomi, "The climate was not as cold back then, so the animals were not as hairy as they are now. And since there was no deep snow, elephants didn't need to use their teeth to dig for food, so they had shorter teeth."

The little boy nods his head. "I see."

A little girl with wavy black hair points at an object in the glass case and asks, "Then, what is that?"

"That's a small hand-held electric fan, which people in the past used to blow away the heat in the summer."

"Blow away the heat? It isn't even warm in summer nowadays. They must have had summers hot enough to require a fan," says the little girl.

Suddenly, the museum's alarm goes off. The children gather together and look around anxiously. A creature rushed in through the automatic doors of the museum, followed by men with guns. The creature, which has thick orange fur with black stripes, has shorter teeth and a much smaller body size than that of a smilodon. Based on how it is trying to run away from the men with guns, it must have been frightened. As the creature flees and nearly approaches the children with a scared expression on its face, one of the men with a gun aims from the back of the creature.

"No! Wait!" shouts Nozomi.

It is too late. To the sound of the gun, the creature falls to the ground. Ancient animals like tigers are very rare now. After spotting what they believed to be the last remaining, partially evolved tiger, the men with guns tried to capture it for a study. However, their gun chase only scared the tiger to flee into the museum, and now even the last tiger-like creatures have disappeared.

LITTLE WOMEN: AMY AND LAURIE

Lilian Shi, Age 14



THE BEGINNINGS OF POEM ABOUT THE SEA

Claire Brumpton, Age 16

Messy handwriting and melancholy Red sandstone cliffs meet the sea Run away with me to the ocean We can wander the shore, you and me

Wax seals and wanderlust Soft hills of rolling green We'll spend hours by the ocean Discovering things unseen

Old stamps and echoed past An old lighthouse by the sea

Sweet flowers and salty air There's so much to discover, to see

Writing letters to far away There's so much to say The ocean is calling Why can't we go today?

—Aug 9, 2021

A STAMP FROM NEVERWHERE

Elaina Zhou, Age 15

THE TAIL END

Athena Yu, Age 15

Tail was a fish who hated the ocean. Or rather, the filthy creatures invading it. Translucent, ghostly jellyfish drifted past, dulling the colour of the coral reefs. Other fishes ignored even his warning cries and calls for help, instead choosing to glide past with finless, armoured, barbaric bodies. These strange creatures were filling up the sea, so much that its crisp aquamarine waters faded to the shade of sludge.

The ocean never felt like home. Tail was going to the Above, to start a new life, with creatures that wanted him and a world much more liveable than this. He'd heard tales from Sally the sea turtle, who described a place where an endless blue stretched above, and a Sun warmed the surface. Vibrant green filled the distance, and everywhere, creatures laughed and smiled with each other.

One day, as Tail swam the sea, gasping from the dreary water and famished for food, a drop of sunlight seemed to escape into the water. And then he sees a worm, wriggling in the slight wave. Relieved to find even such a measly meal, he swallowed it in one gulp.

He felt a sharp, piercing pain puncturing his mouth. His body was tossed above, where cool air pierced his scales, and Tail gasped as he struggled to breathe. He's laid on a board, with a grating texture that burned against his fins. He dared to open his eyes, and above, was an endless blue! It

stretched endlessly into the distance, and Tail was filled with immense joy at seeing the colour again.

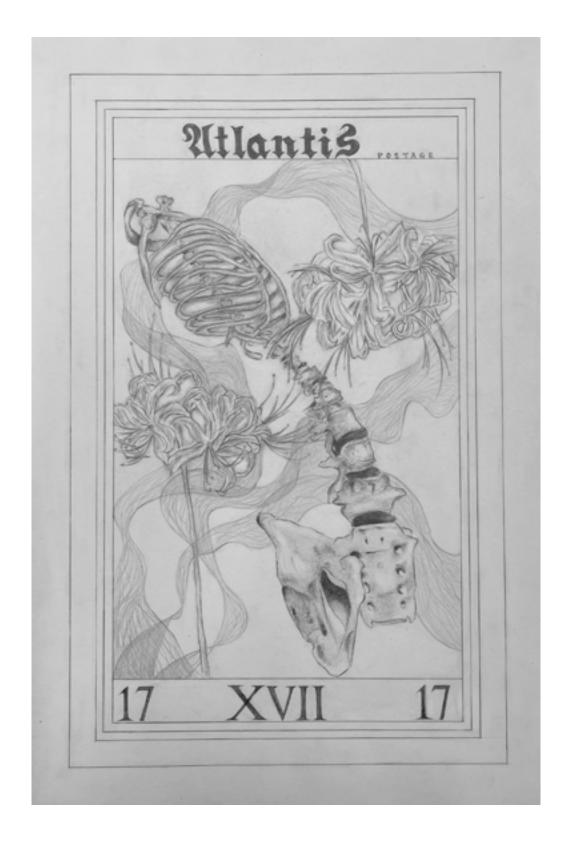
Something flashed in the edge of his vision, and panic seized him as he saw a blinding silver glint raised above him. At the sight of the blade, Tail knew that the Above didn't want him either. This whole world was no place for him to live.

"The sky", Tail gasped, "I can see the sky..."

The silver blade notched itself into Tail's fins. Tail could not move or breathe. Sharp pain rippled throughout his body. When will it end? Tail thought. When will it end? Tail felt another stab of sharp pain, then nothing at all. Blood was spilt across the slab of wood, and Tail could see nothing but... darkness.

* * *

Tail preened his feathers, perched atop a bit of floating wood. His feathers, once bright and proud, now lay dull against his wings. Coughing, he struggled to pull air into his lungs. He probably shouldn't have eaten the suspicious baggy jellyfish earlier. It made his stomach twist into itself. As the days passed, Tail, the desperate seagull, decided that if the Above was no place to live, the Below of turning waters surely will be. The seagull held his breath decisively and plunged into the mysterious allure of the endless dark sea.



CANDY HEIST

Hiona Oyama, Age 15

"There they were. The beautiful, glistening rows of sweet treats, tantalizing me. So close, I could almost reach them. Alas, there was just one problem preventing me from indulging in all of that candy. A magical force field, and a swinging machine that Two-Legs seemed to be able to move through. This, my friends, is what brings us here today."

The others stared at me.

"There's no way the two-legs made a force field. And by swinging machine, do you mean a door?" Kosmas asked.

HA! He takes me for a fool. I may not know what a door is, but I'm sure that what I encountered was a force field. What else would explain how I could see the candy but not get to it?

Kosmos is my younger brother. Last April, he and I reached the age where raccoons leave their mothers and live with the Two-Legs. Father used to tell stories about the Two-Legs: how they ran away from things he couldn't see, and how they would speak into strange rectangles. My favourite story was about the metal bins filled with food and shiny things; that's where we live now. In the metal bins. Me, Kosmos, Chip, Chuck, and Marvin. Chip and Chuck are brother and sister, but they often act like they share a brain. It's pretty creepy.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to go near the Two-Legs?" said Chuck. "There's lots of food here anyways, and it hasn't been that long since..." his eyes darted from Kosmos to me to the ground so fast, that if I wasn't as hyper-observant as I am, I would have missed it.

"Father left us, that was his choice. He made a conscious decision to leave," I reminded them.

"That's not true and you know it. The Two-Legs took him," Chip said. "It's a bad idea to intrude on a Two-Leg by accident."

"And a worse one to try to steal from them on purpose," Chuck finished for her.

"Then I'll figure it out alone, and you'll all be jealous of me when I come back with as many pounds of sugar in my stomach as there are grains of sand in your brain!"

They stared at me again.

"Does he realize what he just said?" Chip whispered to Chuck.

I did, but it would be unfashionable to correct myself. I may not have compelled Chip, Chuck or Kosmos to join me, but hope is not lost.

"Marvin, you seem smart. You'll be my lookout. Follow me," I said.

Marvin looked up with a start. "Uh, yeah. Okay. Let's go."

Poor Marvin. He never quite seems to know what's going on; he's a daisy bobbing up and down in a lake full of lilies.

"You can't take Marvin! He's not even supposed to be out of the tree, let alone stealing from Two-Legs!" cried Chip. The severity of her tone scared me a bit

"We'll come with you if you leave Marvin here. Kosmos too. Just don't put Marvin in danger," Chuck said, "please."

My genius surprises even me sometimes.

"Fine, Marvin can stay, and you can join me. Chip, Chuck, you're with me. Kosmos, you'll be lookout."

"Wait hold on, I didn't agree to this!" Kosmos exclaimed.

"Too late. Gather your things, raccoons. We leave once the mid-day Two-Leg crowd can give us some cover."

It's time. A plan has been formed, our lookout is in position, and the store is all but empty. The only variable is the Two-Leg sitting behind the counter, but as long as we're sneaky, the plan should work. Even the swinging machine is propped open due to a cleverly placed rock, courtesy of Chip. All the sweets we could ever want are within our reach.

Kosmos gives us the all clear. Chip and Chuck dash to the door. Although they were adamant about not going before, their eyes are filled with such conviction that you'd think they were trying to rescue a drowning baby.

We're in.

My world flips upside down. There are so many colours, shapes, and smells, it's like I just stepped into a dream. We successfully sneak past the Two-Leg and make it to an area where we can't be seen.

"Shall we set it on fire now?" asked Chip.

"Haha," I laugh, humourlessly. "No. Fit as much as you can into the bags without getting caught, especially the yellow sweets. We've got maybe 3 minutes, and then I'm – we are out of here."

There are rows and rows of candy-filled bins, and I want to dive into one and eat them all. I try my hardest to focus on grasping paw-fuls of candy and shoving them into my bag, even though it feels like the bins are pools of clean, cold water during a heat wave.

Once my bag is filled, I signal to Chip and Chuck that it's time to go. First Chip sneaks out, then Chuck, and finally it's my turn. I go to the swinging machine, and...

Shoot. I'm stuck.

40 ink 2022

LONGING *Mabel Xu, Age 16*

HOLDING OUR BREATH

Ella Stewart-Lowbeer, Age 14

What if we could hold our breath underwater
In the swimming pool forever?

Sure, our fingers and toes would get pruned,
But it would be worth it.
We could play underwater tag and have tea parties.
We could make up dance routines for the lost band aids and goggles that had joined us,
And go down the slide until we felt sick.

Best of all, Never Ever

Have to emerge back into the cold air, get into the car, and say goodbye to you, as well as **Summer** freeness and fun.

We could remain children indefinitely and live out our Peter Pan fantasies of never growing up and Worrying about grown-up things.

Hours wouldn't matter to us.
Except during the nighttime,
When the lights in the swimming pool would be activated
Shining through the tiny particles in the water,
Forming fairy dust,
And make us
magical.

We could dance
All night,
Looking at our shadows,
And then in the morning,
Say hello to the babies in floaties, professional swimmers,
And girls in bikinis.

I don't think I'd need anyone else. Because you and I would be forever.



SIX OF CROWS FANART

L. S. Low, Age 14

SOUR WITH CHANGE

Georgia Wallace

change is ever-growing
ever-blooming
but just like a flower
i watch it grow, giving it life
while it watches me die
sacrificing my life, for the life of time

next year is coming too quickly time seems to speed up everytime i desire it to stop it's teasing me with long weeks and short years eventually we will grow old and die while time thrives in this world

slipping through my fingers are the words i wished i said and the thoughts i hoped to happen

but, alas, fears overcome dreams and i am left to wonder if if i could've done something more in my life

moving on is my mortal enemy

i feel sorry for myself that i let growing up split us apart i could've made more of an effort

life is now full of could've's

i don't know where my place is in this world but between childhood and adulthood between longing and content there is a butterfly waiting to spread her wings and fly.

and that butterfly is me.

everybody is falling in love but i'm just falling behind

and i can't stand it

i hold on to birthdays that come and go with every passing year adding on a candle and wishing do you know what i wish for? for every year to stop for my childhood to last forever but adulthood sneaks up on me and 18 is sooner than it seems

my smile hides all the terrible pains of growing

imagining a time when hurt was just a word trust was secured by a pinky promise love was found in one day why must everything be so complicated now?

i'm jealous i envy all the children running around not worried over a future

i could wish my friends would stay but they want more than my dream

i don't know if growing is thriving or surviving

and i wish i could bask in this moment for eternity but time isn't that forgiving like a grudge that keeps on holding

i suck at driving i'll never drink i burn too easily so what's the point in growing up?

i love being young, is that a crime?

i can't stand still in a world that moves

but i am sour with change.



THE SIMPLICITIES OF TEXTING

Avan Stewart, Age 14

I'm gonna text her. I'm gonna do it. That time I meant it.

I waited until the teacher wasn't looking and I slipped my phone out of my pocket. I started scrolling through my contacts until I reached her: Kate. The prettiest girl in Mayfair High. She was tall, had short black hair and a gorgeous smile. Honour roll, debate team captain, representative of the U.S. in model UN.

And I'm definitely going to text her. Right now.

I stopped for a second. What am I going to text her?

I thought of all the things that would be great to text the girl you like. Ok, let's start off with a basic message. It took me a couple minutes, but I eventually pumped out a generic, low energy message that read "Hey Kate! How was your weekend? Did you have any homework?"

Ok. It's...fine. Just fine. But the more I read it, the more I realized that I sounded less like her classmate and more like her aunt or something. I deleted that message and spent the rest of the period trying to think of what to say instead.

When class ended, I went to my locker to pick up my books for next period. I got to class a bit early, so I took out my phone and went back into the chat log.

Maybe I could try to sound smart? I think she would appreciate intelligence. So my text ended up looking like "Hello, Kate! I heard your debate team won gold at the championship! Congratulations! Did you know that your medial prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that is active while improvising? You must have a strong MPC!"

I reread it and instantly deleted it. Even I knew the difference between smart and geeky.

Ok, so I can't impress her through smarts. What else is there?

I looked up and saw a couple of guys walking toward me. Now these guys were cool. They wore hoodies with big brand names on the chest, running shoes, sweat pants and baseball caps. These guys would have known what to text a girl.

Wait. That's it! I'll pretend to be like one of those guys. So back on my phone I went, and the message I wrote was actually pretty good: "yo kate its me, i just wanted to say congrats on winning that contest last week. u musta been shredding it! i was just wondering if maybe you wanted to go out sometime?"

Ok. Send? No, it needs something else. Maybe...a shirtless pic?

That was when I realized that I couldn't pretend to be a jock. I didn't have anything to back it up! I had no knowledge of sports, I wouldn't have known how to act like a sports player if she had said yes, and none of the other jocks would have known me. And plus, what would she have looked at in my photo? My non-existent abs?

Ok, scratch that. I need something that I can actually do.

I went to English class and looked around the room at all the projects on the walls. Earlier that semester we had all written poems, and our teacher displayed them gloriously for everyone to ridicule. My teacher said that mine was her favourite, which boosted her all the way up to my #1 fave teacher.

Then maybe I should write Kate a poem? I can do that. And Ms. Hughes liked my last one. I thought about everything I liked about Kate, and I ended up with this: "Dear Kate, your words are like

a melody, hearing them each day is an absolute necessity. When you enter a room, say goodbye to any gloom. But whenever I try to tell you this, I feel like I've fallen into an abyss. I'm usually strong with words, but I always succumb to my nerves. But I can neither deny it nor resist it; I hadn't realized until last night that I've finally found my kryptonite."

Woah. I think that's pretty good. I think I'm gonna send this to her.

Just then, the bell rang and everyone started to get up. I packed up my things and went to my locker to get my lunch. After finding an empty hallway, I sat down, took a bite of my chicken sandwich and logged back in to the chat. I was about to press the send button, but was starting to have second thoughts.

Why would she care about a poem written by someone she doesn't even know that well? She probably remembers me as that boy who's in model UN with her. And even then, I was the representative of Angola, a country I didn't even know existed until I looked it up. Who am I kidding? A poem like this should come from someone who has a real relationship with her. I saved the poem to my drafts and checked the time. I had a free period for my third block, so I just stayed sitting there.

Maybe I shouldn't text her at all. I mean, I don't stand a chance with her! She's the most popular kid in school, and I eat lunch alone. Maybe I should give up. I spent the duration of the period thinking this.

I heard the ring of the school bell and walked dejectedly out of the hallway. I turned the corner to get to my last class and stopped cold. Kate was right there, leaning against the wall, looking at some notes.

Aghhhhhhh if only I had something to text her! Why can't I find the perfect text? It seems like everyone else can!

Then it hit me. If I really wanted a relationship with this person, I couldn't hide behind a digital wall forever. I took a deep breath, summoned all my courage, and walked over.

I'd finally found the perfect message: "Hi, Kate!"

MARY, AN INVENTORY OF BEING

Mary Carissa Leung, Age 15

(Inspired by "Ellie: An Inventory of Being" by Eleanor Wait)

I am Mary. I am fifteen years old.

I talk about myself to the extent of narcissism, And yet I still sit in front of my Dell G15 5511 computer screen, Mind blank, music blaring.

I want to tell my English teacher that my favourite colour is yellow and that I DESPISE turquoise,

That I love cucumbers but not after they've been pickle-fied,

That I like crocodiles but not alligators (beta-version of crocodiles),

And that I've always wanted to grab a pigeon.

But it all feels frivolous and trivial.

I end up adding it in anyway but disguise it as poetic choice, hoping I don't get marks off.

I am made up of assignments and report cards,

Numbers after numbers.

Want a healthy outlook on life and something to rely on

That could both augment your ego and cause you to stay up until the depths of the night writing poetry? Academic validation is the way to go! Now starting at only \$19.99!

I love going barefoot,

But my poor blood circulation insists on keeping my feet cold.

So I wear my Winnie the Pooh slippers and flop around the house as I please.

I am your Second Speaker of Side Opposition

I sip on my scalding hot tea, preparing for battle.

Today, I will prove to you exactly why the German model of Academic Streaming is harmful to students and their future pursuits.

I smirk because I feel like a middle aged family law attorney, when in actuality,

I am fifteen years old.

If I can debate on behalf of the Western Liberal Democracies,

Why can't I control my own tear ducts when I argue with my family?

I go to mass at least once a week, sometimes twice;

I love God more than anything,

But I still do the daily Wordle before reading the daily Gospel.

My fantasies of bathing in fields of jewels and gold

Do not neglect the treasure map to success.

Dismembered corpses wait to be examined,

So pass me a scalpel.

I promise to reap the benefits of my future six figure salary,

And buy as much Quaker's Oatmeal Cereal as I want.

PSA: Whoever is buying up all the Quaker's Oatmeal Cereal at Walmart,

Please stop

I have been starving for weeks.

I am a nationalist,

And a strong believer in taking pride in your country's culture,

But I don't particularly enjoy hockey, maple syrup, or poutine.

I am a nationalist,

And a strong believer in being irrevocably loyal to the country that I belong to,

But if you asked me to relinquish one of my passports,

You might as well cut me in half and ship my left side across the world.

Despite my seemingly omniscient appearance,

It still confuses me

On why the government can still print money

When I'm not allowed to sketch my glamorous artist rendition of Mr. Washington on green paper.

I don't know how glue is made.

And I don't know why we can't send our landfill to the Sun.

Love at first sight doesn't sound too plausible,

I'm not so sure I'm convinced.

Love at first mention in history class however...

I was infatuated with Charlemagne the moment I learned that he united Western Europe.

I am building an empire of my own—

Of frogs born from coloured squares of paper.

They are a pile sitting patiently on my lamp,

Hopping only when poked upon.

I like the vibrant bustling of the wet market.

Rows of dead fish laying on display,

Intestines strung up as if they were Christmas lights.

There's a lady yelling:

"Get your pork ribs here!"

I like quiet walks at night,

When the sun has bid adieu,

And the streetlamps beam with a yellowish undertone, making my breath lingering in the

chilled air visible,

When I cross my arms covered in goosebumps,

Because it's just a little too cold to be comfortable.

And I like to listen,

I've found that there's almost always a car passing by,

White noise, chatter,

And my own thoughts.

The tranquility and serenity of it all

Brings me deja vu, my old friend,

CAMERA *Xinyi Li, Age 16*

And we talk about when we went camping, We walked in the cold of the night incessantly But there was a bonfire instead of streetlamps.

Carpe Diem, Mr Keating whispers in my ear.

Seize the day.

I'm sorry, O Captain My Captain, but I'm too lazy to get out of bed today.

I remember once in English class, my teacher told me that my time at high school will pass by before I know it,

Like catching a glimpse of a train before it runs off again, and you regret not getting on the ride.

That's how life goes by, so I try my best to get on the ride.

That's why I sit criss-cross applesauce on the floor in the school library,

Milk-flavoured lollipop jutting out of my mouth, (with wide eyes) watching my friend's dainty fingers waltz with the black and white tiles,

And I look down on my untalented fingers, which drool and stumble over the magic music machine.

When I'm not diving in the millions and millions of words that kill my spacial awareness,

My eyes are fixed on my friends', who make me laugh and cry and laugh again.

These tears and symphonies are what I hold on to until my timer hits zero in 2025,

And I hear the librarian say "Unfortunately, I have to leave now at 4:30,"

For the last time.

My name is Mary, and this is 2022.



AFTER SCHOOL

Mabel Xu, Age 16



SITTING ON THE 216

Satakshi Singh, Age 16

sitting on the 216, he crosses his legs and opens his novel. she pulls out her phone.

the 216 is a quiet bus. it runs down quiet streets, picks up quiet people, and gives you quiet moments to yourself.

"sorry, did i know you in high school?" he asks, leaning forward. not normally one for conversation, his heart is racing. dying for intimacy in a terribly new town, her heart is racing.

"oh my god, are you mason?" she replies. the name spreads warmth through her body. finally something comforting. finally something she knows she's doing right. *mason*. the word sounds odd coming from her lips, her lips that, as far as he remembers, didn't say his name *once* in high school.

"yeah, corey, right?"
he knows he's right.
he could move another ten thousand miles from his hometown and never forget her.
she can't believe anyone recognizes her.
she thought ten thousand miles was enough distance for her to start fresh.

the 216 is a rewarding bus. it's one of those smaller buses, tiny enough to justify hands brushing softly when you sit next to someone. walls close enough that loud laughter and bright smiles ricochet off the windows onto the faces of other passengers.

by the end of the bus ride, they're both more homesick than they care to admit.

"i wish we were friends in high school." she sighs. they're both silent for a beat too long. they both know she doesn't mean it.

"me too. here, give me your number. we can catch up more." he says. they both know he won't call. they both know they moved away for a reason.

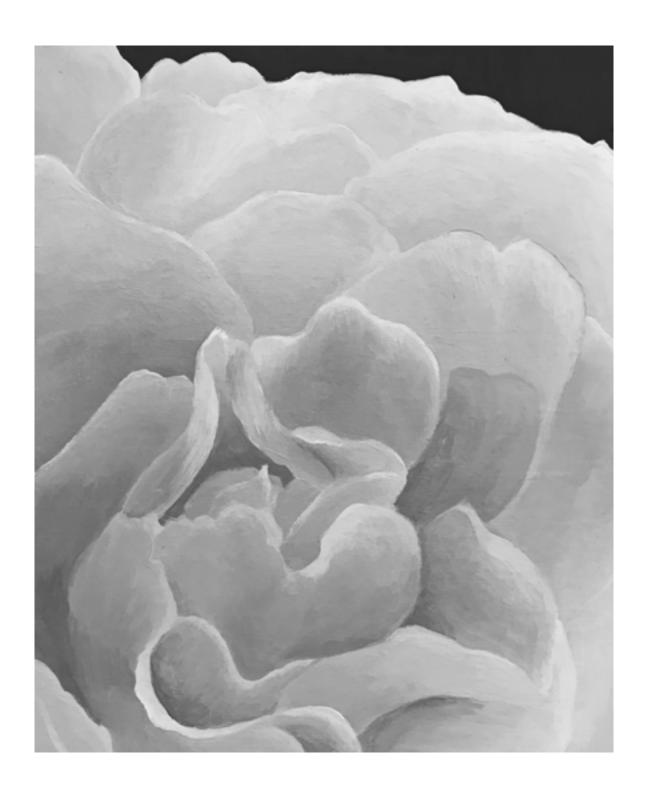
sitting on the 216.

BLOOM Lucie Li, Age 16

LOWERCASE LOVE

Chloe Jiatong Lin, Age 17

you loved me in capital letters loud incessant noticeable you jumped when you saw me screaming my name and running to me threw your arms around me and i loved you back in lowercase letters soft smiles and gentle hugs favourite muffins at midnight but you misunderstood and thought that i didn't love you and that i didn't care about you just because i didn't tell everyone else or show anyone else how much i loved you you thought i was ashamed of you but it's the opposite i love you so much that my heart tightens whenever i see you and i cry when you cry because i can't bear to see you hurt i'm learning to love in capital letters but please know that even though my love doesn't look the same doesn't mean that it doesn't exist



FROM **DRIFT IN THE MOTHERLAND**

Nguyễn Ngọc Tâm Nghi (Nghi Nguyen), Age 17

Xuan Ly dropped his letter of acceptance to the ground as if it had scalded her, rubbed her temple as if simply being in the vicinity of the slip of paper gave her a migraine, and sighed, "What were you thinking? We don't have enough money for this."

"What the fuck?"

Huy had scored highest in the entrance exams of his puny village town, which he admitted wasn't so impressive considering his local competition, but he'd accomplished his score completely by his own study. He'd begged for extra textbooks and attention from the village's bare-bones public school. He'd endured being a living corpse, constantly studying through the night, for years since he decided he was leaving at all costs. He had a diligence no city brat who would attend the same place could compare to. This place, he repeated to his Ma twice: "I'm going to Ho Ha Sang," as if the sheer weight of the name would explain his every reason and motive. Ho Ha Sang was the most prestigious university in Thien Huong. Ho Ha Sang raised alchemists. Ho Ha Sang meant he would break his entire family out of their squalid living conditions—really, he wanted nothing more than to not smell like fish for a day.

He was the youngest out of Xuan Ly's four sons. When he was vounger and even more spiteful, he complained to his Ma about why she even bothered to give birth to four, because if he was still left in the nothing, their rations of food would be much less divided up and he would be much less hungry and glum. She'd grabbed him from his seat by the collar, smacked his ass with the nearest stick-like object she could see (which was a broom at the time), and said, "One day, you'll understand how life, not your own, but the existence of others' is a blessing. And on an even later day you'll understand that the existence of life isn't a choice. I also wish to be unwound back on bad days, but here I am taking care of you instead of being ungrateful. You speak like that again and you will not be able to sit up or stand up, do you hear?"

"If I can't sit or stand, I won't be able to count these stupid shellfish for you," he hissed back. Xuan Ly was largely innumerate, and his brothers didn't have time to help.

"Enough!" she screamed, which was how most of their conversations ended, and he had turned back to throw his clams from one wicker basket to another, counting. He counted in exponentials and backwards from a trillion. He counted imitating the Northern Thienniang accent. He started getting really good at math—and bored of his life.

"You don't use that kind of language around me," she said to him now as he spoke more words he knew were utterly disrespectful.

"You never give me credit for accomplishing anything! I'm going to get a higher education. I'm going to make money from it. And I'm going to be the first in our pathetic family tree to be *collegiate*. I will bring glory and wealth to us all. Why aren't celebrating? Why aren't you proud?"

"You did this completely under my nose. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew you'd doubt me, and I wanted to surprise you!"

"We don't have money," she repeated, and he raged. Not enough money not enough money was the reason he had worn nothing but hand-me-downs, why he threw around clams, why he'd turned a beehive ablaze and nearly scorched an entire wheat field, dipped his fingers into the charred honey and licked, because cane sugar was too expensive.

"Have some faith, if I score well my first year, Ho Ha Sang will give me a full-ride scholarship."

His Ma made a choked sound that was halfway to a scoff, like she wanted to laugh but was too anguished. "You grew up in *Vieng*—"

"That doesn't mean I'm stupid—"

"It means everyone else is pit against you! Did you steal from your brothers for the exam fee?"

"That's really insulting, just so you know."

"Have you been gambling again? Do you know loan sharks would kill people in the city?"

"Not gambling if you use logistical deduction, Ma." And that was perfectly true for him. Not enough money meant looking for unconventional ways to gain

more. He went out to Vieng's only wrestling den at night and bid high numbers for the least likely winners of their tournaments. He had practice first as a child with betting on rhinoceros beetle fights. He learned quickly it wasn't about the brute size of a candidate, but the minutiae of their posture and technique. Big and young beetles were clumsy; overconfident and old alchemists couldn't compare weapons with novice alchemists with more refined equipment, and therefore blades. People who lost to his outlandish bets weakly threatened him of cheating, sabotaging the tournaments, when, really, how could a little peasant boy mess with alchemist games? Sometimes his losers spent all their last coins on the den's liquor and drowned themselves in alcohol. He probably had lives on his hands, and he felt powerful for it.

Oh. And his gambling habit was the catalyst to his obsession with alchemy. Bending metal to one's will seemed superhuman, and the way alchemists fought, so graceful, so swiftly, so brutally, entranced him. He saw it as a child and knew immediately what he wanted to grow up to be.

"Fine!" Xuan Ly seemed to give up on the financial concern of the conversation. "It's almost absolute that they'll throw you into war after you graduate, if you graduate at all."

He laughed at that. "Thien Huong is winning this war, Ma. That's the least of my worries and should be the least of yours."

That was what made her eyes well up. Her voice cracked as she said, "When will you realize the preciousness of life? People die for the most inane reasons. How do you think I'll feel when they throw you, who've never had martial training in your life, into war? You are most safe behind the mountain range, here, in Vieng."

"Why do you think I'll care what you feel? Maybe you should be proud that I will amount to something more than what was predestined for me in little shithole *Vieng*. Do you really think I want to count clams for the rest of my life? No, I get your point: most safe here, right? I don't want to count clams right now, not today, not tomorrow. And I am definitely not going to count clams until the war passes. Don't even pretend like you need me here. Huynh, Si, and Tan will follow you around like lapdogs."

Her wet eyes snapped out of their anguish and turned to glass. "My son does not speak to me or his elder brothers like that. You had no right to lie. You have no right to make everything so difficult. You have the audacity to challenge everything I've ever sacrificed for you. You are not my son."

He shot up from the bamboo mat they were both sitting on, the same bamboo mat he used to sleep next to her in. He said his next words more calmly than he had ever sounded during the conversation, and when he said them and felt no remorse, he knew he made the right choice: "Then disown me. If you will not accept me as your son, if it pains you so much, then you can go on living pretending I never existed. That's so easy for you I wonder why you tolerated me at all—"

"One day, Huy, you will understand a parent's unconditional love."

"No, I don't think so."

She looked to the ground. "Then that's that. You are free to do as you wish. Your brothers and I will be on this side of the Xia Range if ever you decide to come home."

He ignored his Ma for a week as he cleansed out his history at his family's tiny shack. He didn't talk to or eat with her. Let traders shortchange her shellfish sales. There was no room for dinner tables, so they ate on the floor; not enough room for five beds, so the brothers shared a room of four hammocks which became miserable when they aged and their libidos shot through the roof; certainly not enough room for many personal belongings. Si, his least insufferable brother, who could be an artisanal potter if he got out of shithole Vieng, liked molding clay while he waited for his shrimp nets. Si had given Huy several beetle sculptures. Huy pocketed one and stomped on the rest.

He thought long and hard about if there were any last words he wanted to say to his brothers and his neighbors, many of whom sparked his knack for gambling. There were none. His neighbors all hated him for accomplishing something they never could.

When he rode past Vieng's fences in an ox wagon, with a clay beetle, a change of clothes, cradling an acceptance letter carefully encased in hollowed bamboo, he knew he would never be coming back on this side of the Range. He drank wine he bought from the wrestling den. His throat burned. He rejoiced.

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WHEN IT'S DARK LOOK FOR STARS

Grace Patterson, Age 16

DEAR WORLD...

Anonymous, Age 18

Dear World,

please be gentle
stop the gushing tears, heal the broken hearts
send the children kisses from their parents
do not part them away
from their homeland, from their beloved
the war is roaring, the fire is swirling
i can feel it in the air, I can taste it like a prolonged memory
from the past
my country has once suffered.

every nation has gone past the era called "war" so tell me World why are you still initiating it why do you kill the innocent people destroy their lands steal away their identity and pride

will this be the path humans will always end up with? is this a punishment for us, for being too greedy? is this a reminder for us, about how cruel we have been?

but World, these children, these lives do not deserve this they will be the future changers they will heal what was broken they would bend water and earth they would be friends with you and you, World, will be reborn even more powerful, even more unyielding

until that day comes, will you please be gentle with them? will you give us, give them a chance to be friends with you once more?

from one who loves you very much.



"RELEASE!"

Anna K, Age 16

HOLIDAY SEASON

Khaliya Rajan, Age 14

It is the holiday season.

The air is filled with love and warmth,

Despite the frost,

the cold,

the clouds.

Christmas,

Hanukkah, Las Posadas,

Kwanzaa,

Khushali.

It is the holiday season.

So many celebrations, For different countries,

And cultures.

Yet we are all happy,

Even if we celebrate differently

For different celebrations.

It is the holiday season.

Thus,

Warmth and joy fills the air,

Everywhere.

It is the holiday season.

We wish others well

And that their dreams come true.

Decorations are up,

Cards are made,

Dancing,

Singing,

Bells ringing.

It is the holiday season.

Candles are lit,

And we have to find an outfit that fits. We have to find the perfect gift.

It is the holiday season.

Shopping,
Making,
Baking,
Wrapping.
Then waiting for the day.
To come,
So we can unwrap, eat and play.

It is the holiday season.



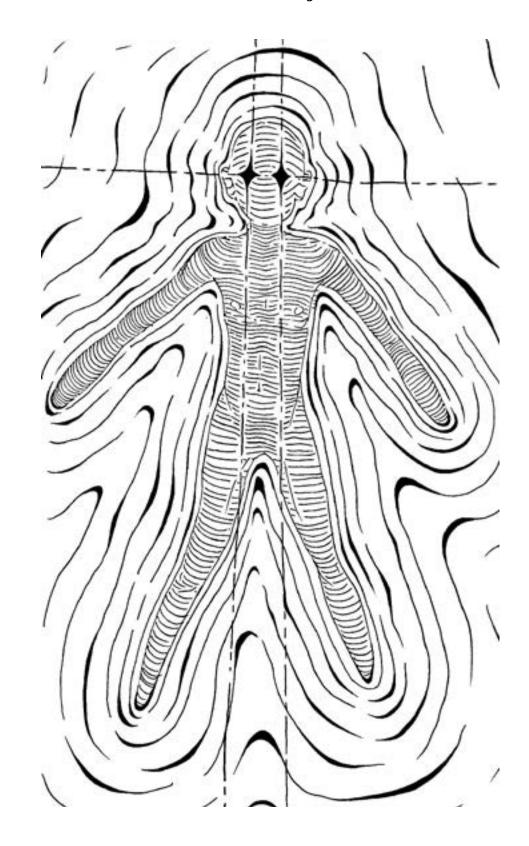
SUSPENDED MIND

Sask Downard, Age 17

NO UTERUS NO OPINION

Grace Patterson, Age 16

When the hell did it become My body; Your choice I'm sorry I didn't realize you grew a uterus over night Seriously, you stand it the streets complaining About how it's a personal choice to wear a mask But not a personal choice to get an abortion Fuck you and your "religious" values If it's so bad for a 16-year-old to have a baby What in god's name are you doing Forcing her to have one Your moronic laws won't change a thing Haven't you noticed by now You can't knock us down We are more resilient than any of you dip-wads It's not about *not* getting an abortion It's about not getting a safe abortion Do what you will, but just know We've fought you before We will fight you again No uterus; No opinion



COCOON

Grace Y, Age 16

The leaf is cluttered with eggs. Small and round. Resting in between the veins and curls, like dew droplets of condensed air. Fragile. Three thousand six hundred chromosomes, seemingly still and silent beneath the weight of the morning. Sugar and phosphate wound in tight coils, tension in every shudder and breath. The shell-encased yolk passed through the oviduct, from darkness to darkness to break through to light.

The pain had teeth. It chewed at my insides, gnawing on my flesh with an ever growing appetite. As I studied, I felt its bite. As I walked, I felt its bite. My life seemed to be held in its jaws, flicked side to side like a dog's chew toy. It nagged at me, sharp and cutting. I did not long for escape, just reprieve. It taunted me – too late. Too late.

I woke up one morning, my body quelled by sleep. I pressed my toes deeper into the rug to remain standing and walked to the bathroom. My thoughts were a jumbled mix of dreams and reality. But as I looked into the mirror, I was reminded of the little monster that rested in my uterus. I looked in my reflection and saw pain. I tried to see my hair or my eyes, shaking out the creases along my brow. But in every twisted strand of sugar and phosphate of my cells lived pain – pooling and dripping like mercury poison. And in the poison of pain lived fear, deeper than the ocean I drowned in.

A caterpillar inches out of its mother's abandoned womb. Flopping slowly from the past to the future. Subsisting in its first few breaths of a new world, filled with the fresh hot air of June. The milkweed barely trembles beneath the weight of the caterpillar's appetite, small mouthfuls being consumed with the steadiness of the sun rising over the horizon. It hovers for a moment over the caterpillar's world, so small and round. And then it continues its ascent, climbing the mountains inch by inch. The sky fills with light and the caterpillar eats onward.

Slowly, pain persisted in its presence. As I crawled slowly to the future, it tagged along, leeching to my side. It consumed small mouthfuls with the steadiness of the sun setting beneath the mountains. Its appetite demanded my zeal, my delight, my strength, my life. Is this what it was like to not live, but survive? I couldn't do as I had done, laugh as I had laughed. I was the milkweed, drained of my sap and colour. As the sun climbed the mountains inch by inch, I was forced into a world on Earth, where pain was as real as the dead.

They told me it didn't matter, not really. That the future was filled with light. But it didn't matter to me, not really, because that future was not mine, and that light was not mine. It was my baby's. So small and round, seemingly still and silent, yet a monster. Continuing its ascent. Consuming my reputation with the steadiness of the sun rising over the horizon. Another day to be reminded that I was a mother. As my baby came to life, all I had worked for seemed to die. When will I be angry enough to no longer be heartbroken? Had I asked to be ridiculed? Had I asked to be stared at? Had I asked to be alone, waiting? They told me it didn't matter, not really, because even if I had not asked, I had received. And this was my duty.

To me, joy was freedom. The baby's fist, formless and boneless, seized my hand every time I lifted it to wave hello. No one wanted to know me anyways. I was oversized, weighed down by the mistake I should not have had. Maybe it was not the baby who was the monster. Maybe it was me.

Within the cocoon the insect grows restless. Waiting, waiting, waiting, lts antennae curled like fern fronds poking through loosening winter ground. The cocoon twitches and shudders, its curtains ready to unfold.

The beauty of birth was like the beauty of a sandstorm. Frenzied in shapes made up of the same dust that spins in the stars, but spinning counter clockwise instead of clockwise. I was done having the baby inside of me long ago, and now after all that waiting... the baby was done too.

As I laid in the soft sheets of the hospital bed, I thought about motherhood. The desire to love and to know. To stand at the curb in the mornings until your child stumbles off the bus towards you. To save up pennies and nickels in a jar so maybe one day he could go on vacation. To lie about the insults that are whispered behind his back. To avoid the inevitable – I am a mother already cursed. Giving birth to a baby who will never be mine, he will be a social pariah. And I wonder, if I do not love him now... who will love him in the future?

Time hangs in balance, memories of previous butterflies flying through the air, fluttering and landing on leaves, ready to watch their former friend burst into being.

As I clutch the frame of the bed, I resolve: everyone deserves love. As my body contracts, I resolve: everyone deserves love.

As if the last grain of sand has hit the bottom of the hourglass, the process is sudden yet slow. Spindly

legs poke from the tiny tear. A fuzzy head pushes its way out, taking in the slight changes to the world it last saw as a larva.

As I hold a bundle of flesh and skin, I resolve: this baby deserves love. And I deserve love too.

Its small face did not look like mine, and yet it was mine. Mine to kiss, to hold. To choose, to love. It was simple intricacy, woven sugar and phosphate smooth and tight. It was pain, and yet it was peace. The monster of humiliation was now replaced with pride because he was mine. Maybe I had not asked, but I had received. And this was my duty. But maybe now it was also my joy.

The air seems to hover slightly to the left, the earth seems to be packed just a bit denser. The thorax and abdomen greet its old friends, that little thistle, and that little sapling. A folded pair of wings fight past the snags in the cocoon. Crumpled and pleated, they shiver in the cold morning, like the dead leaves of fall precariously clinging to the soil. And yet, how much stronger. They spread, expanding in black lined blue, bright as the borrowed silk of the ocean. They catch the air, pumping like each heartbeat pumps blood. It has been long enough. It is time to fly.

MELODY Imo Eidse, Age 14

WRITTEN

Katie Evans, Age 17

And I'm free, running through paper forests between pencil branches with graphite needles and inky rivers, reflecting simple stories:

bus ride dandelion puff orange sunset.

The forest: The keeper of lives, of secrets, and eternal souls.

This is how we will be known—in tiny scribbles on post-it notes, messages in textbooks, names etched in trees: A promise.

We promise to feel. We promise to find lost souls.

We are all lost, but we will be immortal.



DISCOVERING MY WAY INTO LIGHT

Jun Jie Zhong, Age 16

I leaned my head against the soft leather headrest of a white Toyota SUV trying to doze back asleep. The roads grew narrow and the once bright city lights transformed into overgrown oak trees that covered the bright iridescent sky.

"Did you bring everything you needed?" asked my dad, grinning without breaking eye contact with the road.

"Yeah, I did," I replied, knowing full well that I didn't bother to search for some items.

"You know, you can't be lazy your whole life," he mumbled, loud enough for it to be audible.

Perhaps my dad knows me too well, I thought. It is days like these when I wonder if laziness is just some unfortunate virtue I have picked up. Maybe darkness I have encountered? This was a trip that was planned 2 months ago, but I have done little to nothing to prepare for it. I just didn't feel like doing the extra work. Just like everything in life.

When we arrived near the patch of the grass where all my friends were, I waved goodbye to my dad and watched my friends set up tents. A group gathering. I dragged myself over and picked up a few rods trying to piece them together.

After an hour of metal poles hitting the wet gravel and tents forming a single-file line across the patch of grass, the organizer of this trip, wearing his bright red jacket, suggested we do some group activities and games. And so we did. *I had fun*. Not a single worry entered my mind.

Following the games, the sky was already dark. The forest was pitch black with echoes of wind and fallen sticks that surrounded the camping ground. Breaking the silence with his voice, the organizer asked everyone a question that turned my blood cold. "Just making sure that everyone brought a flashlight?"

Wait what? Did he just say a flashlight? My hands slid into my bag without hesitation. Piles of useless books and clothes were being brushed aside as my hand made its journey further into the bag. Then I remembered. I was too lazy to find a flashlight so I just came without one.

My eyes scanned across the whole campground. Left to right. No one stepped forward. There is no way that I was the only one who didn't bring a flashlight. Right? Sweat droplets slowly formed on my head like precipitate after leaving a cold glass of water on the table.

Before I was able to gather the strength to ask if anyone had a flashlight I could borrow, people who'd been gathered around the campfire disappeared into their tents like water seeping into the floor. Oh well, maybe I won't need a flashlight right?

But then, through the corner of my eye, the sign indicating the location of the washroom caught my eye. Needless to say, the washroom was a 3-minute walk away in a pitch-black forest. *And I needed to go*.

With each step, regret echoed in my mind while my dad's voice, "you can't be lazy your whole life," played on repeat without a second of rest. Crouching down, my hands guided my legs through the sharp ridged edges of the gravel. I could only feel the path. I couldn't see it. Perhaps, this is like a scene from a horror movie and some creature is waiting in a bush for the right time to jump out screeching, I thought. My legs trembled with each echo that I heard from the forest. "Isn't this punishment a little too much for being too lazy to find a flashlight," I muttered under my breath in hopes someone or something would hear and save me.

As soon as I saw the light coming from the windowpanes of the washroom, my body let out a sigh of relief that sounded like it was kept in for hundreds of years. I survived. But unfortunately,

walking back to the campground was the same thing. Same horrors. The exact same invisible trail. But this time it was a bit faster. I was more familiar with the direction so I crouched and ran as fast as Usian Bolt.

Crawling into my tent after that horrid adventure, *I can't see with my eyes again*. It was pitch black in my tent. I touched around the tent to make out my surroundings. It was nearly impossible. So laziness does come with a consequence, I thought. Feeling whatever I could in my tent, I finally found my sleeping bag. I pulled the thick covers that wrapped all around me. Was it worth being lazy? If I was lazy at work or school, what would be the consequences of that? I slowly drifted to sleep as questions continue to pile up in my head.

The night fell and the sun rose, perhaps it was the sunlight beaming through the material of the tent, I woke up with happiness that could not be explained. I can finally see again. Hearing pots and pans, I could smell the burning of food happening outside my tent. Maybe some people got up early to cook breakfast. Still remembering what happened last night, I got up. I'd rather leave those questions unanswered.

As I unzipped the tent, I blurted out, "Need help cooking breakfast?"

A faint, "I thought you were going to sleep all day," floated in from outside. I instantly recognized the voice as coming from one of my friends.

"Nah, I'm done laying around doing nothing all day," I said, and pulled aside the tent's doors to reveal the outdoor sunlight. If I want to change, I need to start now. I stared into the sky and walked proudly into the light. Perhaps this was a journey where I discovered my way into light. Maybe my dad was right. I can't be lazy all my life.

MOPE

Morgan McLean, Age 16

THE END OF THE DAY

Riya Sandhu

I hate sunsets.

I hate them for all that they cover.

For when the sun and the Earth just barely touch,

The world falls into hibernation.

The dark consumes it all,

Engulfing the Earth in one measly bite.

For when I would look around,

All I'd see is the stillness of the night.

And if I would look up,

The moon would have eventually replaced the sun,

Taunting me for it had won today's match.

Sunsets remind me of the beginning of an end.

The end to the countless possibilities that could have been,

The mistaken opportunities.

And for that,

I hate sunsets.



NIGHT AT A SUBWAY

Vicky Nguyen, Age 16

As a high school student living with parents in an old suburb of Vancouver, there aren't many options for having fun at night, except convincing myself to either get enough sleep or finishing my homework. At 9:30 pm, I should either be preparing for tomorrow's notes or bundled up in a warm blanket with a TV show on hand.

But one Friday night, I didn't do either of those things. I had already finished my History assignment at school, and there was really nothing else to do. A thought popped into my head: "Oh dear, I would die for some bánh mì loaded with ham and topped with chock-full of veggies and pickles." My pocket money didn't allow for an extravaganza meal at a dimly lit Vietnamese restaurant on the east side of the city, so I begged my dad to drive me to the nearest... Subway. After some mouth-drying persuasions, here I was, buckled at the front seat and shivering from the chilly night air. Come on, I thought, spring is just in a few weeks.

Fingers still frozen from the frigid seaside breezes, I swiped the screen on the front seat at the radio to break the awkward nocturnal silence. Normally, I would love to tune on to one of the pop music radio stations with singers concocting straight words on top of their lungs. But tonight, I was very much obliged to choose something relaxing, so I turned on Trove Sivan's Suburbia. And suburbia every inch it was outside. We drove past the sleepy residential townhouses, where the yellow light haze evokes some past sense of the 1950s when the people who bathed in the warm light lamp should have settled down for some greasy TV dinner trays instead of venturing out in a foggy night as I did. The only signs of life of the neighborhood, besides the perfectly manicured lawns, were the flickers of the TV showing SuperBowl matches. Aside from that, the whole town looked every inch the same as my father's village in Central Vietnam, with doors tightly shut, murky streetlamps flickering, and the occasional bar of a dog from afar.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at a small strip mall tucked around the corner of a busy intersection. As virtually no one would venture out on this hour on a weekday, we encountered a stroke of once-of-a-lifetime luck (in one of the most densely populated cities in North America): a spacious parking lot. My father did a superb maneuver to park the car straightly into

our allotted space, which was in front of a fried chicken shop. The comforting aroma of fried batter filled my nostrils during my walk to the Subway rest, feeling like Marty embarking on his pivotal mission at Twin Pines Mall in *Back to the Future*. The night was silent, except for the chatters of a few coat-clad shoppers hustling to reach home. Looking a little further, beyond the glittering skyscrapers, I could see the snow-capped mountains lit up with a thousand lights, which I could figure out to be cable cars from ski resorts. While the suburbs were in a haze of slumber, the more vibrant downtown districts up north were dancing the night away with the lights.

But the wind was starting to pick up, so I began to stride faster to the Subway. I slid the door and walked in after the high-pitched ring-a-ding of the entrance bell. The restaurant was bare at late night, except for a Sandwich Artist and two teenagers munching cookies from a bucket. But what caught my eye was a dazzling array of fillings and toppings lined almost one-third of the width of the restaurant. Freshly cut tomato slices, wrinkly jalapeno pickles, and succulent leaves of lettuce lay adjacent to thick slabs of mozzarella, cheddar. and myriad other cheeses that I couldn't even name. At the other end, a bread warmer was inviting me with its fluffy sub sandwiches neatly arranged in racks: flaky 9-grain wheat with their rich chocolate hues, jalapeno cheese dotted with golden flecks of cheese, and the simple yet embracing flatbread. Despite the vast options lying ahead, I opted for my favorite classic: a 12-inch (ahem, I'm also sharing it with others) Hearty Italian Bread filled with tuna and roasted ham, topped with almost every available green, from spinach to all shades of onions. The sub wouldn't be completed without spicy mayo and hot sauce drizzled on the top. The sublime feeling of holding a sub with all the flavors packed into a thin wrapper radiating warmness was worth every second of my nighttime venture. I paid and left the Subway with a big grin on my face, all "nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles" under a mask.

On the ride back home, I let the rich aroma of roasted meat and pungent jalapeno fill my lungs. The streets were now embedded in a dark velvet veil as the porch lights had just started to go out. I couldn't wait to slouch on the couch with a cut of the sub on hand and *The Crown's* suspenseful intro music starting. I bet even the royals don't enjoy a night better than this.

HEARTSHATTER

Jane Jeong, Age 14

You stand so stiff and stern, that I almost laugh out loud. But I've already noticed the faint blush on your cheeks, because you're holding hands with her.

If a vase breaks,
my heart shatters.
A billion flying sharp pieces
pierce the pigeons above,
their blood streams down like silk-smooth ribbons,
stain the pink cement below,
and the gazillion shards fall,
piercing right
through me.

I can no longer convince myself that everything you've done for her has just been a friendly gesture.

UNTITLEDSask Downard, Age 17

TWO BULLETS

L. S. Low, Age 14

The warm summer air contrasts against the cool ocean water. Sun radiates across the beach; all the light and heat coming from a star million miles away. The water pushes me forwards, splashes against my bare back.

"Hey, Will! I don't mean to trouble you, but I'm getting some water. Do you want me to grab you anything?" Matthew calls, waving his arms at me from the shoreline.

Matthew and I have been together for just over three years and this sanctuary is our escape from the world. We wanted some time alone, without work or any other interruptions.

"Yeah, I'll have a water too! Thanks!" I call back. Then, I start chuckling in exultation. Matthew and I are happy, so what could be wrong? Our love might be like the ocean, so deep and endless that I consider it unsafe.

The fitful sleep I had during yesterday's flight weighs down my body, so splashing the chilling water over my face should be a quick way to wake up. The water comes over my face and blurs my vision temporarily. I turn back around to admire the rocky cliffs and the bright blue sky, goosebumps crawling over my skin every time another vigorous wave hits my tired body. Some of them would knock me over if I wasn't paying enough attention. What could be wrong?

BANG! BANG! BANG!

My ears are ringing, a faint humming in the background of screams. My vision fades in and out with every step I take. Those were gun shots. Matthew still hasn't come back with our drinks. The ticklish seaweed and sharp rocks become cushions beneath my numbing feet as I run out of the waters and into the crowds. People are rushing back and forth, all yelling to their loved ones. I call out Matthew's name over and over, my throat getting sore from how loud I'm getting.

BANG! BANG!

More gunshots are going off around me. Matthew wouldn't be here, he'd be near the hotel. Now, I'm sprinting. The air is freezing and the pavement is burning, yet it doesn't bother me. I'm turning corners with people huddling into alleyways and small shops, but all I need is to find Matthew.

"Matthew! Matthew!" I'm calling his name again. It's quieter, but I can still feel the buzzing of vibrations in my ears.

"Will!" I hear my name close by.

BANG!

I turn towards the firing. I see him. He's been shot. He's bleeding. I hesitate. I can't move. My previously numb feet don't work. I'm disintegrating. The world is swallowing me while I'm crawling to Matthew, but he can't help me if he can't see me.

Matthew is dead.

I wake up, breathing heavily and covered in a cold sweat. I'm dreaming, but still I cry, weep, and mourn the death of my lover. My nightmares refuse to obey the laws of medications and therapy. The doctors mock me, serving me prescriptions on silver platters as if they don't do more harm than good. Nothing works, nothing helps.

Everyone's life blurs together into a meaningless fraction of the world's time, so I don't care to notice the time or how I got to where I am. The chilling feeling of having a pistol in my hand is almost unnerving. It holds more power than I do. In my dreams when Matthew dies, so do I, just in different ways. Our love was like the ocean, so deep and endless that neither of us could survive it on our own.

Now, we'll die the same way. Two people, two bullets



TWO POEMS

Riley Tam, Age 14

EXPLORER

I gazed upon the Earth, And my nine eyes lit up.

The water, crystal clear,
Like a portal to a mirrored world.
It falls as if a force is pulling it to the ground,
And flows into the river and calmly falls asleep.

Huge rocks stand together proudly, All covered with fallen clouds and sharp edges. They rise steeply, their peaks touching the sky.

Below the rocks are living creatures. Rooted deep in the ground, their trunks rise to the top, And they change into a lush green. Growing endlessly, these creatures fill the valley.

When shadows cover this world, and an aurora appears With colours from a shiny purple to a glowing green, Like ghosts traveling, carrying memories from their past, Creatures of Earth fall asleep and shut their eyes. I move to the next planet, glittering in the dark.

FINISHED IN THE FOREST

Standing still, but sticks breaking around me.
Cool mist and the milky midnight sky
The stars are stage lights, lightning up the dusk.
Second after second, a set of eyes, watching.
Towering timber everywhere in the land of lumber.
Wolves, howling a horror story,
Feeling trapped with trembling knees,
Hungry, they hunt quickly and quietly.
Crawling, leaves are crushed under their feet
Creeping up on you, with a growl.
I breathe heavily, wishing to be heard.
Surrounding me are predators.
And I'm the prey, preparing for death.

THE PEDESTRIAN

Zachary Nabi, Age 15

A large truck rushes down the street at extremely high speeds, and I am unlucky enough to get in its way. Time stops as the truck nears me, I start thinking about life and all of its worth. Life isn't a happy thing, it's a terrifying thing. If death is as natural as birth, why should it be feared? Humanity is scared of the unknown, and what awaits us after death is unknown. That's the main reason why people turn to faith, either be it the afterlife or rebirth, it's a feeling of reassurance. I don't know what's next for me, but I do know that in a few seconds I'm going to die. I had a bagel and cream cheese for breakfast, I'm really going to miss bagels and all the things that go with it. I'm going to miss my friends, is it selfish that I wish to take them with me? So that I can have something familiar, to remind me of my past existence, wherever I may go.

I never thought that I would die this way, hit by a truck on the way back from work. I thought that I would be married by now and with two kids, Eljay and Robin. But things don't always go as planned, I'm a 36 year old bachelor, or should I say "was". I guess I should start talking about myself in the past tense, but after the truck ends up hitting me, it won't matter. As my body gets crushed, I'll enter the void of non-existence, whatever or wherever that is. My stamp on the world has been made and, I can tell you, it's not a big one. The only thing that matters to a dead person, is if they'll be remembered. There are 8.5 billion people on this earth and do you think everyone is remembered fondly after death, or even just thought of for a small fleeting second, because I don't. It gives me peace of mind, because not being remembered means not having to be missed.

I can hear the truck creak closer and closer. I look at the driver, in tears with a wine bottle in her hand. I start to think about what's going on in her life, how sad she must be. My death isn't going to be anybody's fault, it's going to be the result of the situations that brought her to this point. Because villains don't exist, only victims do. I'm not defending serial killers, rapists and pedophiles, or any other detrimental person that falls into that category, because they belong in the 90th level of hell for what they've done. But people, like the one driving this truck, isn't a bad person, just a lost one. This accident is going to harm her more than it is me, and that's out of my control.

As much as anyone tries to please everyone around them, it just isn't possible. The ideal situation once you die, is to leave the realm of the living with as little guilt as possible. Meaning that you would have to tie up any loose end you ever created with anyone, but nobody plans for death until it happens. Even if they are ill or plan for the day of their death, no one is ready for the end until they face it head on. I'm not too sure why I'm acting like somebody is listening, because no one is. The end is inevitable, death is a constant, and the only variable is time. That's how it is, it's how it's always been, and I'm ok with that. There isn't anything to do about it other than just to stand here, stopped in time, thinking.

I can feel the bumper of the car scraping against my leg, knowing what is going to happen in a few moments. I start to look around, wide eyed and stopped in time, I start to absorb all the information around me as I'm still able to. I start to examine every angle built into the buildings around me, I see a group of friends, on the sidewalk, chatting. I look to my left and see a mom pushing her son in a stroller holding her dog by leash. The dog, its tongue out, cheerily walks next to its owner. The trees, its leaves are orange and falling, so beautiful. A man in a suit and tie holding a nice hot cup of coffee from my favorite cafe. I'm going to miss this.

Time speeds back up and the truck rams into the pedestrian. The impact from the collision sends the pedestrian a few meters back. The bystanders stand there in shock, as the truck hastily stops itself. The now deceased pedestrian lays there, blood covered, smiling.

A FOUNDATION OF FAILURE

Dante Mota, Age 16

David was an engineer.

A rather good one at that. As master of the architectural and engineering guild, and having overseen the construction of most towns on the New Frontier, David was quite secure in his skill and pride as a master builder and constructor.

And so, when a man named John came into Rinsmore, requesting the services of the best engineer in the empire, David was readily volunteered. Eager for a new challenge, his tune soon changed upon hearing the stranger's request.

"You want to build a town... where?"

"Veil's Vale."

David stared at the man, still not guite hearing him.

"Veil's Vale." David said, disbelieving. "The furthest place from any civilized area, surrounded by cliffs and wolves and monsters and-"

"Yup." Replied John, cutting him off.

"I- it's like, forty miles out! A-at least a four-day journey to the most uncharted part of New Frontier territory..."

"I'm well aware of where it is and what's in it," said John, cutting him off once more, "but the area is pretty beautiful, and I ain't goin' let it go to waste."

David just shook his head in amazement and incredulity, practically gawking at the probably insane man and his equally insane suggestion.

"Listen, I don't know where you come from," began David, "but I like to take jobs that are actually doable, not follow strange people off on loopy missions to the farthest reaches of the known Frontier."

"Are you sayin' you can't do it?" retorted John. "Don't seem like much of a 'master engineer' to me."

David's eye twitched.

"Alright." he spoke, gritting his teeth. "Fine. Let's go build your *stupid village*."

John smiled as David began to pack.

After leaving the gates of the town, waving back at the gate quards, John turned to his companion.

"Farsofer."

"Hmm?" hummed David, confused.

"You asked earlier, 'bout where I was from. It's Farsofer."

David had forgotten about that, but he wasn't about to admit it.

Stopping by the side of the road, David pulled out a map of the New Frontier. Spreading it out across the ground, he pointed towards the uncolored parts of the parchment. "Look, the green bit is everything we know about. The plain parchment is everything we don't know about. See how deep in the veil is?" he said, poking the paper.

"So?" replied John.

"I'm just wondering what you could possibly think is worth going all this way." David sighed.

John stopped and spread his arms out. "Like I said before," he said, "I'm here for the view."

"That's seriously it? You're going to risk all this *time* and *effort* for the view?"

"I mean, yeh." John said somewhat confused, as if he couldn't think of any other reason.

"And if you fail? You're not supposed to do anything unless you have a 100 percent chance of success!"

"Wait, you've never failed before? Made a mistake?"

he asked, incredulously.

"NO! Of course not – I only ever work in safe, secure, *guaranteed* conditions and in cities! How do you think I made it to Master Engineer?" he retorted, annoyed.

"Then how do you learn?" questioned John, confused.

David blinked. "I... don't. As a master, I've hit the peak. I'm the best of the best."

"...and you made it there by learning from your mistakes?"

David frowned at him. "I made it here by succeeding."

John just raised an eyebrow and continued onwards.

David rolled up his map and followed after him.

Finally, after days of travel, the pair climbed down into the valley, and looked over the area. While scanning the Vale, David noticed something.

"What the hell?"

"What's up?" asked John.

David whipped around to look at John before pointing at the plethora of ruined buildings and towers that dotted the landscape.

"Why are there so many of them?" he questioned weakly.

"Ah, well." said John. "Trial and error tends to have a lot of error."

David whipped around. "You made all these?"

"Yup."

"Then what's the point of us being here!? You're probably just going to fail again, you know that?"

"I probably will." he admitted. "I'll probably fail, head back to town, grab some more supplies, and I'll

probably try again."

"Then why bother?" asked David.

"Each time, I learn something." said John. "First one failed cause I didn't spread the supports enough." He pointed towards a small fallen wooden tower to the left.

"Now I give 'em a firm foundation. Second one dropped 'cause I didn't account for the tide that comes in and out." He pointed at a sea wall that had been erected near the shore.

"Now I make sure the water doesn't have enough force to knock down those foundations."

He began to plant some wooden planks on the around.

"You could always head back to the city and go back to designing your elaborate temples and halls." John suggested. "Or, you could stay here, face the prospect of failure, and maybe even learn something from the experience."

"I will not needlessly fail. There's no point. Why fail if you can do something perfectly the first time?" David asked, miffed.

"Failure is an important part of growth." said John, grabbing some nails and a hammer.

"I'd say success is a bit more important." said an annoyed David.

"And I," John said, hammering a nail into the plank, "...would say failure gives that success meaning."

"Now, are you going to help?"

David sighed, and kneeled next to John.

"First thing's first, we're going to need to dig a hole, 4 meters in diameter..."

IRIS

Jiabao Wu, Age 16



THIS CHAIR

Milian Chen, Age 15

In the corner there sits a chair Roughed edges and worn wood Deep creases and rigid corners Its burnt legs blackened One sits there and ponders, wonders Thinks and grieves What had this chair seen? The weary warriors that sat The kings and queens before that Their reasons and stories with this chair Every knife mark carved Every dark cloak draped The lone man starved As the one earth shakes Or the young petit couple Who aren't seeing double A loveseat this could be Or a cradle of eternity Where the old lady knits on Sundays Where I tie my shoe at the end of a long fray The chair that's climbed on for a better view The chair that's turned to cue Kicked over in frustration Smashed in anger Thrown on when in grief Tilted back in joy But then again, it could be

Just a chair

I LIE BETWEEN EVERYTHING AND NOTHING

Lilian Shi, Age 14

i.

What am I?

I am Lilian, not Lillian. But I never correct my teachers, my classmates, or my friends when they spell it with three L's, because I don't want to trouble them with rewriting my name. Because I've been taught to not make a fuss, to not attract attention.

I am a daughter, a sister, a friend, a girl. A person, a human, an animal. Something that exists on this earth, albeit briefly. I am something. Or maybe nothing.

ii.

I am a broken mix of Chinese and Canadian, too much of one to fully be the other. I am Chinese, you tell me, more so to convince yourself than to me, because we both know that I am not. I am the steady flow of perfectly annunciated English from my own mouth, yet still not quite right, still stained with yellow, with me. I am the English novels I read like a lifeline, like a stream that dies into a river, never-ending, for I cannot read the language of my mother tongue, for I have died trying, and failing.

I am the strained smile, seen through pixels of a screen, when I'm supposed to greet my family—strangers whom I've supposedly met, before my tongue was bleached to speak only English. I am the disappointed stares of family members, as I stutter over every sentence I speak in my mother tongue, in the language I was born with, raised with, spoken to.

I am every mistake I make of calling 'black tea' 'red tea,' because that's what it's called in Chinese, in the language I call foreign when I live in what you call a foreign country. I am noodles, over plain, buttered bread, because I cannot fully be either, because I cannot choose one over the other and you cannot ever choose both.

iii.

I am the 97.75% average I hold in my math class, which you tell me is good enough, though we both know you'd much prefer my being perfect than 'good enough.' I am the straight As on my sixth grade report card, which I clutched like the air I breathe, because only ink printed on legal-sized paper could prove me worthy of everything, of anything, of something that wasn't nothing.

I am the Korean pop songs I listen to, the melodies that lace between my ears and through my room, as you yell at me for not being Chinese, for not being Chinese enough, for actively liking other cultures that weren't my own. I am the silence that followed, because I didn't want to tell you I feared being a failure, a fraud. Because I didn't want to tell you that I tried to forget my culture, the remaining, fractured, broken shards of what was meant to be an identity you picked and chose for me, because I wanted to have a place I truly belonged to. To not be stuck in between everything and nothing, white and yellow, yes and no. I wanted to have an answer.

I am the faded echoes of your arguing with my dad from the kitchen, of when I pressed my ear against the floorboards because I couldn't understand why you always had to raise your voice at everything, why you couldn't just be *happy* because there was no way it was just that *hard* to be satisfied, to have an answer you could both agree on. Because you must've had an answer to everything I had questions about.

iv.

I am the broken 0.5mm led in my mechanical pencil after I threw it onto the wooden boards, after it hopped away from my reach and lay on its side, still and intact. Because I cannot understand why I am average at three too many things, because I cannot stand feeling like I'm falling behind and failing to get the answer to the last question on the last page of chapter 6.2. Because I cannot stand the feeling of being average, for I am not, for I've always been told, been expected, been known not to be such.

I am the damaged sheets of music, slammed onto by my own fists, angry from my inability to play a phrase, a note, a beat, from my inability to become less average, from my fear of failure, of losing, of being left behind and abandoned. By others, by me, by skill, by life, maybe.

I am my 98 on my Chinese midterms, wishing that edging closer to a perfect score would give me some sort of identity, of culture, of what I used to be, what I was supposed to be, am supposed to be.

v.

I am art, paintbrushes that don't care what I say, simply what I can do with my mind and my colours. Because colours don't need identities or anything but loose meanings given by wherever they land on a canvas. I am my love for art because it doesn't matter if I'm Lilian with two L's or three L's because all I am is the creator of a piece of art. Because, by my creation, I am able to be more than an unnoticeable chip in the timeline of forever, of space, of earth, of humanity. Because, in some way, I matter.

I am words, literature, letters, stories, intangible ideas turned into black ink on paper, for I can write much more than I can speak, for my ideas are never able to be translated into sounds, much like how my tongue seems to tie itself into a knot every time I try to speak the language of my culture, my supposed identity. I am permanent. I am something, not nothing.

I am a writer, an artist. I am a daughter, a sister, a friend, a girl. But first and foremost, I am a human, floating between cultures, between identities, between questions and answers, between nothing and everything.

Therefore, I am something.

82 ink 2022

ENCAGED SUPERNOVA

Jenny Nguyen, Age 18

ONE DAY

Qiana Andrews, Age 15

One day I want to let go of the branch which is holding me up.

My grip so tight, desperate to leave a mark that people would remember me by, and fall down the tree of life, just to see what it's like.

I hope that one day I can float down the river of paths and choices; to go where I want.

At my own cruising pace, without anyone saying, "Don't go that way, it's slow; go forwards, go sideways, go faster."

I wish that one day I could stand in the field of weeds and flowers, to pick what I want and admire it, without anyone saying, "Don't like that, it's weird; adore sunflowers, love daisies, smell roses."

I dream that one day I can go home to a house and live where and how I want, my neighbours a ten-minute walk away, without anyone saying, "Don't live there, it's too far; it don't live like that, don't talk to them, don't change this."

I want, I dream, I hope, I wish, I will, one day, climb that tree again and step on the branch which I once held onto so desperately, once, so worried that people will remember me by the little pond I engraved on the hardy wood,

the wood which thousands have engraved deep oceans upon, and shout, "It's nice, down there, you choose how and where you hope to go, like what and whom you wish to like, and live with and wherever you dream to live. You can be yourself and live your choices... not other's expectations."

One day.



WHITE GOLD

Esmé Mac, Age 13

Peri's late again.

I twiddle my thumbs for at least half an hour before their sister pulls up in her Subaru, and Peri jumps out. Max will stay close. Peri doesn't see me yet, and I don't call out for them. I watch them look for me in the parking lot.

"Peri!" I wave. They hear me, and jog over.

"Hi," Peri says. "You in your wetsuit?"

"Yeah." I know they have theirs on under their clothes too. We strip off our puffy jackets and sweatpants, and wade in.

* * *

It's not a deep lake. Human-made, it's only twenty feet or so at the place we're diving. We've been freediving for a while; cold training, and pushing ourselves to hold our breath longer. My best time is one minute and forty-seven seconds, Peri's is a minute thirty-nine. We've never blacked out. Contrary to Peri's poor dad's concerns, we're being as careful as we can. Plus, Bob only lets us dive when Max is keeping an eye on us.

It started on New Year's three years ago, when Aunt Xelia made a joke.

"Your New Year's resolution could be to dive to the bottom of the lake and get the ring!"

My mum lost her grandmother's ring in the lake when she was a teenager. White gold, with dots of Madeira Citrine, she swore to find it. She was going to hold herself up to that promise, but before she could find the courage to learn to dive and look for it, she was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis, and suddenly she would never be able to dive. She died eleven years ago, when I was four, and that's when I moved in with Aunt Xelia.

Peri and I couldn't stop thinking about the ring after that. We did our research, and pitched a plan.

"You're more likely to find a *shipwreck* in that puddle of a lake than your *great-grandmother's ring*," Aunt Xelia said. "But sure."

"So long as you're safe," Bob said, and then promptly gave us money for the wetsuits.

Since we've learned to freedive, we've been combing the same quarter of the lake where my mum dropped the ring. I'm losing faith that we'll find it. Peri hasn't said anything, but they seem less excited these days too. Honestly, I'm getting tired. We've been obsessing about this godforsaken ring for so long; it's interfering with my life. We're in this lake every day for nine months of the year, and the only reason we don't come all year is that both Peri's dad and Aunt Xelia forbid us to swim in the lake in winter. We snuck out once in January, but we've never done it since; I'd never been that cold in my life, and Peri almost got hypothermia.

"We have to let them keep going," Aunt Xelia said when Bob said we had to stop. "They've been working so hard on it, and I've never seen Ven so excited about something." Bob finally agreed to let us keep diving. That's when he set the rule about Max.

I dream about this ring. I haven't had a good night's sleep in months. I tried talking to Peri about maybe stopping for a while, or just not coming every day.

"If you give up," Peri said, "I'll keep diving anyway, and when I find it, I might just keep it."

"You wouldn't." I grab the bag of chips and pour the last of the crumbs into my mouth.

We get to the spot where we're diving today. We've been leaving small orange buoys in every square

foot that we've checked. That was Max's idea, after she found them at Dollarama. Like every other day, Peri will go first and check one square foot, they'll come back up to the surface, and then I'll go down and double-check. After that, we'll take a break and switch jobs. I pass Peri a buoy.

"Be careful, be smart, be safe." This is what we say whenever one of us goes down.

"In a while, crocodile." Peri adjusts their goggles before diving under.

They get to the bottom safely, where I can't see them anymore. They're down there for thirty seconds. Now Peri should kick off and swim back up, but there's no sign of them. My heart beats faster. Seconds pass. My stomach twists with fear. It's been too long. I drop the bag of buoys, ropes, and weights. The tangled mess sinks. I dive.

* * *

I finally find Peri unconscious at the bottom of the lake. I get one arm under their armpits, and use

the other to swim us to the surface.

"Max!" I scream. "Help!"

"Peri!" Max drops her book and runs into the water. She swims faster than I've ever seen anyone swim. She grabs Peri from me and drags them onto the sand. "Call 911!" Max starts CPR, sobbing.

The doctors say Peri was without oxygen for too long, and they might not wake up. Max hasn't stopped sobbing. Bob lies on the bed with Peri, holding their hand. I'm the only one not crying. We should have stopped diving months ago. Our obsession killed Peri.

I touch Peri's hair. It's just as short as when we met at a gymnastics class when we were five. They helped me learn how to do a summersault, and liked my French braids. It took us five minutes to become best friends. I take their other hand when Bob gets up to comfort Max. It's clenched into a tight fist. I gently open it.

Peri found the ring.

THIS OR THAT?

Nikki Zhou

"Can you speak Cantonese?" is a question I know well. After moving far away to the Caribbean when I was still a toddler and growing up in an English-speaking country people should give me some leniency. There is this saying that my father loves, "Not an A or a B." He uses it mostly when he's referring to people. I never liked how he categorised people growing up and it was always humbling when he said it to me. Looking back, I realize I am really one of those people.

As summer was on the brink of ending and becoming a teenager was right around the corner, my family booked a last-minute trip to Guangzhou, China. The architecture was so different from what I imagined. Buildings were jumbled together, and the streets were polluted with people. Mothers crowded the markets to buy vegetables, trucks drove past loaded with live poultry, and middle-aged men squatted with the fumes from their cigarettes clouded their faces. Every corner we turned, a restaurant would pop up. I saw a lady serving one of my favourite Chinese breakfasts, Cheung Fun, also known as Steamed Rice Noodle Rolls. She opens the steamer and boom goes the hot steam dispersing through the air. She wipes her sweat and hustle to get the line of people shortened. She throws in batter, chives, adds in an egg and then puts it right back into the steamer. She slams her hand on the bell multiple times and shouts what I believe to be an order-number. I swear I can hear her loud voice inside the car. We made a quick stop and my mom got me my fav, shrimp Cheung Fun with lots of soy-sauce. This is what I loved about China, the hustle, the food, and the street life.

My family were basically foreigners to me. Yes, I'd seen photos but I rarely spoke to any of them. I was more nervous to speak Cantonese, it's not like I didn't know how to, but I wasn't fluent. It was more Chinglish—Chinese-English.

Meeting them for the first time in years was filled with fear, happiness, and love. We shared laughs and I saw every wrinkle that traced their faces when they smiled. I didn't realise how much I'd missed them. I hated the fact that I couldn't speak Cantonese fluently and the amount of things I would have loved to share. Every gathering I was too shy to speak, fearing that the elders would make fun of me and think I was a disgrace.

"Can you speak Cantonese?" was what my cousin asked on that trip that left me wallowed in guilt. It was the facial expressions that led up to the question. I got the memo that she pitied me. I watched her and said nothing.

I was too Western, and the majority of my family saw me as such. I had no Chinese values and most of the traditions we kept I had almost lost. This insecurity grew with me and it followed me back home to the Caribbean. They only spoke English in Trinidad and Tobago, so I wasn't that insecure, but my mouth never failed to stay shut when I was in a room filled with Chinese people. I grew up ashamed to be Chinese. The Asian population was small and fitting in was my only survival.

Eventually, I started to lose my mother tongue at a very young age and wherever I went, people still thought of me as a tourist until they heard my sweet T'nT accent. But one question they would never fail to ask is, "Can you speak Cantonese?" There is always regret when I answer, "yes," like I'm lying to them. So often enough, "no" is my answer. It means that I won't have anything to prove. But there is always that face and judgement when I say I don't. "I mean... you're full Chinese... from China... and can't speak it?"

This insecurity still follows me to this day. I still get reminders as to why I am not good enough. My identity exists on a thin line between being Chinese or Caribbean. I am in Canada now and I am placed on an even thinner line. I have always found myself in the middle and pressured to be one thing, "Not an A or a B." Now I must speak properly or my Broken-English will make me seem less intelligent. I haven't quite gotten it figured out and everywhere I go I still feel unwelcome. I grew up not having a stable environment where I knew only one culture, so often, I felt displaced.

It took me a really long time, but I am starting to become accepting of my uniqueness. There was constantly this ongoing trend of "Can you speak Cantonese?" or if I am an "A or a B." Now when someone tells me I am less or more of something it doesn't affect me. I accept that I don't speak flu-

ent Cantonese, and it doesn't make me any less Caribbean. I accept that I have Caribbean mannerisms, and that doesn't make me any less Chinese. I accept that I have a unique lingo, which doesn't make me any less Canadian.

What I get to decide is who I am. I am someone who loves to play volleyball, work-out, eat, hangout with friends and deliberately take the long way to school just to see the Cherry Blossoms. I may not be fully one but each part contributed to my identity. I have learned that life isn't so easy and with the comments I get now, I breathe in and feel no hurt. I sit here reflecting as I write, and I cannot be more happy that I am "Not an A or a B."

POISON

Christine Quinto, Age 16

WRITTEN

Bibi Kalthum Azami, Age 17

1.
You see, my heart's a pretty cramped place,
Not a lot of room within,
So, I kindly asked Peace to leave my abode,
When Love was moving in.

Of course, Peace did not take the news well, And went strongly against her nature, "You'll regret these childish whimsies," she spewed, "It'll be over in a few months, I'd wager!"

Even Wisdom did not agree with me, And gave me curious looks, Doubt whispered lies about his future neighbour, "I've heard he's a liar, a thief, a crook!"

"What if he's not who he claims he is?", From the corner Fear breathlessly cried, "What if all this is a ruse, a mere facade, And he's really the devil in disguise?!"

"I'm not so sure myself," mused Experience, "And in no way do I mean to insult, But seeds of passion, grown in erratic soil, often don't yield promising results."

I paid no heed to their baseless objections, And went promptly ahead with my plan, Everything happened in quick succession, And Love arrived within a day's span.

Upon meeting him, all the other roommates, Soon regretted their previous tirades, He was so kind, so earnest and charming, He even gifted them rose-tinted shades! 2.
Gazed into a mirror,
There she is – me,
On my end – the present,
On hers – eternity.

Raised my hand to the glass, There it is – the space, A silver film that confines, That chains and separates.

Look at her – so similar, Yet quite the opposite, Though my heart's likely in my chest, In the palm of her hand hers sits.

My body burns with molten lava, And hers – hollow, deserted, How did she come to this miserable state? This girl – laterally inverted.



BEAUTY IN NATURE

Meaghan Law, Age 17

DUSK'S EPIPHANY

Elaina Zhou, Age 15

The rose-tinted sky seemed to soften up the monochromatic winter Giving it a peculiar sense of warmth Dusk silently fell into the approaching night While I imploded into myself like a dying star

I felt like an intruder

Disturbing the momentary perfection nature takes for granted
How can something as burning hot as the sun that is embedded in the flames of infatuation and aggression
Caress the snow in such a genteel manner?
How can something as distant and bitter as the snow that is engrossed in the blizzard of apathy
Embrace the sun without reluctance?

I rushed to hide in the shadow behind the pine tree
As the sun lingeringly farewelled the snow and found its way to the horizon
I knew it saw me creeping in the dark as there is nowhere to run being a condemned sinner
But it forgave me still
I wonder if that was out of mere pity for a stalker like me

A saturated dream over a wrinkled silk sheet
It's a sight so stunning that I couldn't help but fear that it would be the very last one
The thought of the coming night sucking up its beauty into the abyss haunts me
I wanted to run away
Before I witness the tragic death of it

Sunset,

Cremate me to ashes while you last!

Then I'll gladly embrace the darkness that will soon arrive with open arms



FUSCHIA SKIES

Vicky Nguyen, Age 16

ANOTHER SERENE DAY

Amelia Chu, Age 13

Winter mornings, sunlight sleeping in the days still begin with silent yawnings,

Cars roaring on the streets, traffic lights winking at me and people breathing heavily, I hop on the bus as it retreats.

Flying birds turn the other way, the world ready to fall asleep as the sky starts to weep, another ordinary day.







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ink

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- Two pieces of writing per person
- Two visual pieces per person a piece of artwork, a comic OR a photograph

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Last nam	e			First name		
Email			Phone			
Postal code			Age	Submission date		
Title of su	ıbmission:					
Type of submission:						
□ Art	☐ Comic	☐ Fiction	□ Poem	☐ Review	☐ Other	
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(for program participants aged 18 and under)

Ink volume 6, 2023 (the "Program")

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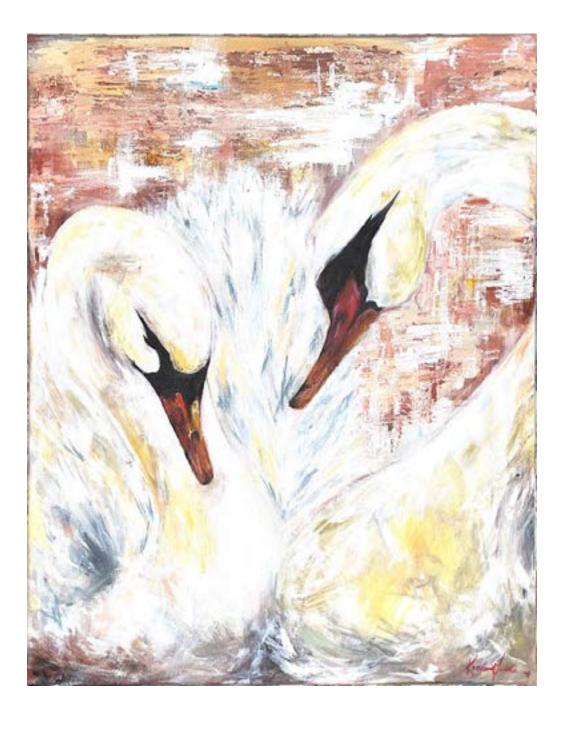
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IRENICKoshielia Velarde, Age 17



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ONWARD

Sandra Zhang, Age 14



