



TEEN

INK

FALL 2019

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Looking Ahead ...

This school year, Teen Ink will be publishing four double issues.

Our next issue, in time for the holidays, will have a special focus on Food & Family Traditions

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Dear Teen Ink ...

The Value of Money

I wholeheartedly agree with Drew Yeager in his article, "The Value of Money". As kids, we don't understand a lot of things, the value of money being one. Like Yeager, I would always ask my parents for toys or snacks when I was younger. I didn't quite understand how difficult it was to make enough money to support your family of five and still have money to spend freely on the side. When Yeager said that he valued money so much more because "[he] was the one working for it", I completely understand and relate. You value your property over others, so when it's someone else's money, you don't quite see the value, but when you have to work to make the money, you begin to see its value, and become more responsible of it, for the most part anyway. Thank you Drew Yeager, for sharing your relatable story. This would be a great story to read to kids who have yet to get a job, or fully understand the value that money has.

Kianna Melvin, Phoenix, AZ

Parents Need to Take Their Teen's Mental Health Seriously

I completely agree with Clarence S. in his article "Parents Need to Take Their Teen's Mental Health Seriously." Teens today are very vulnerable to depression and anxiety. It's not easy having to grow up in the conditions teens have been presented with today, social media being one of them. Mental health can even worsen if

one tells their parents and their parents deny one's symptoms. If parents were more open with their kids on these issues, teens, as Clarence said, would be "more comfortable talking with their parents and telling them more personal things." This, in turn, could possibly decrease mental health issues worldwide. It's an issue that cannot necessarily be solved overnight, but by just spreading the word like Clarence did we can begin to move to a better place with our understanding of mental health issues. Thank you, Clarence, for speaking up on these issues that continue to afflict teens of today.

Noelia Arroyo, Phoenix, AZ

Dear Teen Ink

Dear Teen Ink,

You have changed my life. You've given me a place where I can share my writing abilities with no filter. I've never been able to share my work with friends and family while I was in the room because I was afraid of criticism. I was afraid to share my pieces with my parents because I can write very maturely and I didn't think they would approve. Now, I have a place where others can read my writing and I don't have to be present.

Words don't describe how much Teen Ink means to me. It's opened up a world of opportunities, and I hope to one day be published in the magazine. Thank you, Teen Ink.

Katherine Cornell, Hartland, WI

From Nobody to Somebody

The article, "From Nobody to Somebody" by Noah Fisher is very inspirational. Noah Fisher is running one of the biggest races of his life, and he feels very confident. He has been preparing for it and he really wants to win. During the race he tripped and fell but he didn't give up; he kept running. This makes me never want to give up in life because you never know what's going to happen. Noah ended up winning the race because he didn't give up. I'm thinking about running track this year, and I hope that I can be successful as he is.

Anonymous, Phoenix, AZ

Learning to Drive a Stick Shift

The article titled "Learning to Drive a Stick Shift," written by Allie, talks about her journey through learning to drive. Her writing left me feeling determined that I can accomplish a lot in life. I totally agree with the author - driving a stick shift takes a while to get used to. I had the same issue when I learned to drive older, smaller tractors. This article uses many descriptions to add to the drama of the piece. For example: "I'm a lifelong competitive figure skater who has mastered the death drop spin." She also has some comical lines to help make the article enjoyable: "I was finally able to pull out of my driveway (rather than roll) and drive all the way to school."

Luke Schroeder, Defiance, OH

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Briarcliff Manor, NY



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August Heat and October Hail

by Martha Schaller, Dowagiac, MI

It was the kind of cold that made you wonder if you had any body parts below your knees or elbows, the kind of cold that ripped apart your skin, the kind of cold that made you consider starting a fire using the technique you saw on TV one time when you were five.

I was huddled together for warmth with my fellow marching band members behind the bleachers of the football stadium, waiting for our turn to perform at our final competition of the season: East Kentwood. We were little orange and black penguins in our new uniforms, trying to conserve body heat and keep our instruments from freezing entirely. My silver plated trumpet was so cold that it hurt to hold it in my hands. I tried holding it between my legs, causing it to almost fall on the concrete. If it had landed, I feel like it would have shattered.

My best friend and section leader, Kylar, stood closest to me, clutching his gold plated trumpet close to his chest and rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. Just glancing at him brought back all of the memories we had made together. I choked down my tears; I figured if they fell they would freeze on my face. Kylar was a senior, and this was his last competition. My last competition with him.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked, standing close enough to could count each individual freckle on his face. There were a lot. The unmerciful wind whipped his bright orange plume this way and that.

"I don't think so." His sigh spiraled like smoke up into the air, and was whisked away by the next gust of wind. I put my arm around him, and he embraced me. I focused my eyes on a lock of his curly red hair, so similar to mine. Trying not to cry, I thought of all the brutal summer sectionals when Kylar pushed me to my limits. I remembered the games at band camp, when our stomachs hurt from all of the laughter, all of the late night conversations on the band bus that ended in tender and encouraging words. This was the end of all of that.

My mind pulled me back to one particular summer sectional in early August of my freshman year, when I didn't really know Kylar that well yet. I noticed the stern expression on his sunburned face as he led us through yet another round of "marching suicides." Marching forward and backward over and over again at 160 beats per minute was not anyone's idea of fun, but Kylar's, "You'll thank me later" still rang in our ears.

The weeds in the field where we

marched tickled my nose, and I could hear entire armies of insects attacking every inch of exposed skin.

"1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and back! 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and forward! 1, 2, 3 ..." Kylar's voice pierced through the muggy August air, and when I thought I simply couldn't take another step, I heard his call. "Band, ready, halt! Stab and close!" I stayed as still as I possibly could at attention, despite the fact that a mosquito was assaulting my mouthpiece. I still remember Kylar's words to me at the end of that night: "You did a great job, I'm proud of you."

I wish I could have some of that August heat right now, I think to myself, pulling away from Kylar's embrace. I looked into his blue eyes just as the hail began to fall across my glasses, threatening to block my view of him altogether.

The force of the wind almost took my words and sent them into oblivion. "Just give it all you got. Everything you have, put out onto that field today. All those hours of work need to shine in these next seven minutes." I almost added, "That's what you always tell me," but I

didn't need to. Kylar knew, and his face quickly transformed into his trademark grin.

"I taught you that." He laughed as he elbowed me. "Don't forget when we're out there today that I taught you everything you know."

"I won't ever forget." My tears almost fell then, but I got distracted by our band director's urgent cries.

"Get under the bleachers, guys! It's coming!" I turned and saw the hail coming down even harder, and the noise of it hitting our buckets got annoying really quickly. Every rap on my head was a reminder of what we were about to do. "We're still marching, so don't even think about going home!" A fresh gust of wind blew through, and I could feel my plume threatening to pull itself right out of my bucket and fly away into the cold air above the football stadium. The hail was now mixed with snow, and the temperature seemed to drop again. I was seriously about to start looking for some twigs to make my fire when everyone started lining up to march onto the field.

"Now entering the field is the Dowagiac Chieftain Marching Band! Featuring soloists Isabella Ruiz on alto saxophone and Kylar Kinyon and Martha Schaller on trumpet!" Kylar looked back at us and held his trumpet up as a signal to stand at attention. He smiled at me in a way that made my throat freeze up. His slightly upturned lips and watering eyes said it all. It was the last time he would give us that signal. I took a deep breath to steady myself, then immediately regretted it. It was like suck-

ing in the entire arctic tundra, and every breath I took after that was like inhaling a glacier.

Later I learned that the wind had been blowing at a whopping 30 miles per hour during our performance, and it was a miracle that the sousaphones didn't drag their players down with them. The heavy bells swung back and forth with every gust, reminding me of a pendulum on the verge of breaking. Every step I took, I was afraid that I would crack my head open on the turf that was virtually frozen over. The hail harassing my trumpet was a constant bother and my glasses were in danger of falling off, but I shoved those worries to the back of my mind. I needed to do this, to give it all I had. For myself. And for Kylar.

To be honest, I don't remember much of what happened during the performance (except for seeing my life flash before my eyes when a sousaphone player swayed so far to his right that the bell of his instrument almost hit my head). I do know those seven minutes were a few of the quickest in my entire life. That last command for horns down gave me goosebumps on top of goosebumps. Our drum majors clasped their hands at their sides, standing their ground, but their eyes gave them away. I could see their tears welling up and freezing on their eyelids and cheeks.

The snare drum tapped to lead us off the field, and I tried to take it all in even though my body was screaming at me to just run away to some place far away from here, some place warm. I wanted to go back in time, back to those days a year ago in August when I had my marching career with Kylar ahead of me, instead of behind me. The parents and supporters who braved the hail, snow, wind, and brutal temperature stood waving their blankets and cheering us off the field. I knew there were some tears in their eyes too. The snare drum kept tapping, and I thought I caught a whiff of hot dogs coming from the concession stand. I couldn't feel my arms and legs at all, and I licked my lips, tasting blood.

Then I turned around, to where I knew Kylar was in the line. As he moved his trumpet in time with the drum, he caught my eye and smiled at me. When our eyes locked, I saw the near-frozen tears all over his freckled face. But seeing his smile melted something deep inside of me, and I felt a little bit warmer.

If there is one piece of advice I want you, the reader, to take away from this story, it's to find someone who can make your heart melt even when it's cold outside. So cold you wonder if you have any body parts below your knees or elbows, the kind of cold that rips apart your skin. And for goodness' sake, learn how to make a fire. It might come in handy one day. ♦

Sitting in Sixth Hour

school

We are writing notes on the American government.
That is to say, “we” as in
“ought to be ‘we’”
or “everyone in the room
except for me,”
or perhaps, more realistically,
“approximately 65%
of the students in the room,”
or something of the sort.

I’m quite sure we understand
the difference between
the executive
and legislative branches,
because we were discussing
last night’s presidential debates
before class began.

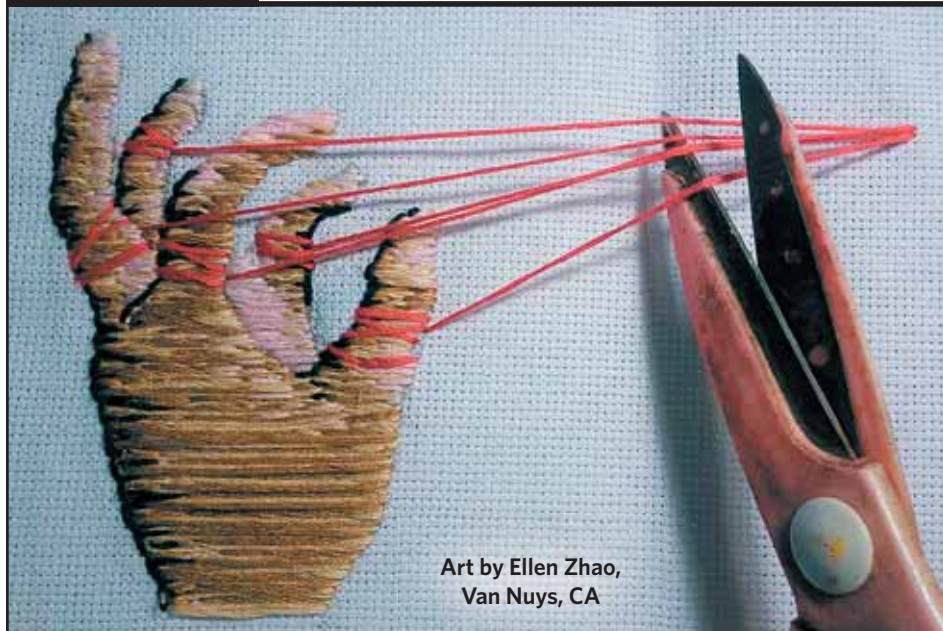
We know this, and you, the teacher, must know this,
and yet
curriculum is curriculum,
so we sit
for 1 period,
45 minutes,
2,700 seconds
every day,
just in case anyone doesn’t remember,
“L” is legislative, legislative legislation laws,
“J” is judicial, judicial judge judgement,
and the executive branch is the other one,
with the, well, President,
and such.

It is sixth hour,
fitting for this class period,
at least for me,
because I understand the United States government
clearly, and my brain needs some rest
before seventh hour:
Honors Algebra II
I am not upset,
I’m not even particularly bored:
this is an enjoyable class,
but
lunch just happened,
and
we were chatting and laughing and eating
just ten minutes ago,
and
we’re full and sleepy,
and,
it just,
um,
puts things in perspective.

I feel, well,
very existential
or something of the like
in sixth period,
I feel a kind of unexpected recognition,
one which doesn’t seem to flow from anywhere
in particular,
yet powerful nonetheless,
of what life can hold,
a glimmer, a glimpse,
during lunch,
and the understanding
of the pain
that will arise
in the future,
next hour... or next year or whenever it will be,
but I sit, in sixth period,
relaxed, at ease,
among friends, a good teacher,
a nice, bright classroom,
surrounded by calm,
where our only goal is to learn things
I already know.

Photo by
Kailey Nichols,
Burlingame, CA

by Jared Goudsmit, Kirkwood, MO



Art by Ellen Zhao,
Van Nuys, CA

We Changed by Ashley Zheng, Clyde Hill, WA

I rushed off the train, excited about finally getting a chance to reconnect with my old friends in Shanghai. I couldn't contain my smile as I hurried my mom along toward the exit. Every second wasted was a second away from my friends. I prayed that the taxi we called would arrive soon, that every car in front of us would move faster, that every stoplight would be green. I just wanted to be there already!

Sometimes ignorance really is bliss.

My three guy friends meant so much to me. The four of us attended the same American school in Shanghai together. Surprisingly, the demanding, stressful year of eighth grade became my favorite school year because of them. They were the ones who took time from their crammed schedules to help me edit my essays. They were the ones who reassured me when I was worried. During that one year we became closer than friends I had known for years.

Evan was a hardworking math and programming genius who was always on top of his academics. He was also a talented writer. I remember how once, with surgical precision, he helped me cut down my six-page English assignment to three pages, condensing it to its essence.

Johnathan was everyone's personal therapist; there was seemingly no one he would not help out in a pinch. He was the person you would call whether you were being chased by a grizzly bear or you got your period while wearing a white dress. We first

met in my SAT prep class, which was a blast because of him. From competing in trivia, to intense sessions of Dancing Line during breaks, to walking across the street for ice cream, together we survived the stress of high school applications. We counseled each other when it became too much.

Finally there was Tim, the one I could always rely on to reply to texts almost instantly in our group chat. Whether the rest of us were trying to guess his crush or just needed someone to rant to, he was there. We met in debate class. Tim was an eloquent speaker, as well as funny and engaging. I admired how his speeches and rebuttals could be assertive and explosive, while he remained logical and calm throughout.

Texting made everything so much easier

We became a close network of support in every way. From playing an escape game as a team of four to sharing our favorite books, we all contributed to the group and learned from one another. Over time, we rubbed off on each other so much that our catchphrases, the ways we interacted, and even the way we texted became similar.

We decided to meet up at the mall across from our old school. When I saw the place again, nostalgic memories flooded my head. There was the bakery where I used to buy the next day's breakfast, the pizzeria where so many birthdays were celebrated, and the iconic juice stand with incredible mango boba smoothies. It's true: you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.

As I walked into the Family Mart, I remem-

bered buying rice rolls and barbecued chicken, Oreos and Hi-Chews. The same cashier was still working there, the one who always smiled and talked with me. But when our eyes met, his no longer lit up. His lips no longer lifted into a smile. I was nothing more than a stranger to him. His memory of me had faded away. I felt my stomach tighten, worried this was a harbinger of more disappointment to come. I took a deep breath and tried to shake off this foreboding feeling. It didn't matter, as long as I could see my friends.

The entrance bell rang, and I glimpsed a familiar haircut over the top of the aisle. Johnathan! He's here! I felt anticipation, excitement, nostalgia. But something else was buried deep inside me too, something nervous and worried, trapped inside a bottle that began to slowly unscrew its lid.

"Hey!" I smiled.

"Hey," Johnathan replied.

Silence. Already?

"So ... how have you been?"

It'll pick up, I told myself. I was never much good at starting conversations anyway. While we were awkwardly chatting, Evan came in. He took me by surprise. In one's memories, the people you leave behind never change. In my mind, he was still the one we would tease playfully about his height (or lack thereof) and how he wore his rotation of approximately five T-shirts. Now I marveled at his height. He must have grown a good four inches. It seemed like someone had stretched him out. He was taller and thinner, with a longer jaw. *It's only natural*, I tried to reassure myself. *Everybody changes*.

Besides, what was one year of separation? Just a measly speed bump in a road that stretched out forever toward the horizon. We tried to catch up, talking about all the things that had happened to us since our lives diverged. Johnathan had finally adjusted to his new school. I was glad he made it past his initial late-night depressing texts and complaints about his grades in Spanish. Evan got accepted into a boarding school after his second try, and I was truly happy for him. For an instant it felt like we were back to the time when we all studied like crazy together, sharing our stress over boarding school applications and our excitement over our acceptance letters. But soon the answers became a little shorter, and the silence between each question became a little longer. Before we knew it, we were struggling to make conversation.

My head began to spin. Texting made everything so much easier. There were no awkward silences, no expectant glances. No need to come up with a topic simply just to talk. Had I become a stereotypical teen who could only communicate on her phone? All these thoughts filled my head in a simple second of silence. >>>

Stop, Drop, and Give Optimism a Try

by Serin Koh, Fort Lee, NJ

We students know that the birds begin to sing around 4:00 a.m. With endless nights, stiff shoulders, and that science test you spent all night preparing for, being a student is far from easy. School places academic expectations on students, society teaches negative ideas of failure, and people push social pressures.

As we head into the new year, some of us can already feel the heat of competition and the incoming stress – which are most certainly not welcoming. High school can seem like a block of brick, containing anxious, competitive and stressed students – an image that is equally not welcoming.

The American culture itself is swollen with pessimism. In 2017, a survey claimed that only a puny six percent of Americans believed the world is improving. In fact, as many as 49 percent of high school students claim to feel stressed – an eye-opening number that proves how much stress and negativity is dominating students' lives.

Yet these numbers do not just stand alone. From watching a news report about a school shooting to being in an unhealthy relationship, pessimism comes from American culture itself. Almost everything radiates negativity, from an advertisement urging you to lose weight, to competition between students, to bills that are waiting to be paid on your desk.

So what is pessimism, exactly, and how do we fix it? Pessimism is the tendency to exaggerate the negativity in reality. It is the fear of, and worry of the future and it creates those “what-if” situations. What if I don't get into college? What if I humiliate myself in front of my class?

Optimism, on the other hand, is often misunderstood. Optimism is not the same as smiling all day or being overly joyful. Instead, it is the ability to realistically work past a problem and to strive toward your goal.

Some think that pessimism is what motivates us to avoid those future problems we are worrying about. Yet with optimism, we are left with more confidence to achieve a desired outcome, such as getting a decent grade on a final or making a new friend in class. Optimism fuels us to achieve new goals at the next level, and it doesn't instill anxiety into our lives.

Optimism also offers a more productive method of approaching challenges. Rather than pulling out your hair over a math problem and giving

up, positivity keeps us open to finding solutions, like speaking with a teacher. As stressed high school students imprisoned by today's political, corporate and societal negativity – and as the literal future of the country – it is important to conquer pessimism.

There are three simple ways to achieve an optimistic mindset. According to psychiatrists at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, the first way is to spend less time on social media and watching the news. Seeing other people's seemingly perfect lives can degrade one's self confidence, which would then lead to seeing the negative in their own life. Too often, the news covers gloomy stories about political flaws, crimes, and scandals; it is rare to see a positive and kind world through a news network. The negativity we see on television and on our phones can only increase pessimism in our daily lives.

A second option is to write in a journal every day about the overlooked positive things in life. Whether it is something as small as waking up before your alarm or saying hello to your favorite teacher, record and reflect on positive and gratifying experiences of your day. These notes can improve your outlook on life, as well as bring you closer to optimism, confidence, and good health.

The last option is to meet new people with optimistic personalities. Just like how a friend's mannerisms can rub onto you, their emotions can also influence you. Pessimistic company will expose more negativity into your daily life. Optimistic company will release positive energy. Having someone optimistic around you will naturally curb your pessimistic instinct. This doesn't have to mean cutting connections with your pessimistic friends – it simply means expanding your network a bit; maybe you can inspire optimism in your friends' lives as well.

We students overlook so many things in our little worlds. With homework, tests, friends, and social media crowding our lives, it is extremely easy to ignore a beautiful sunset, the small spray of a tangerine after peeling it all at once, the smell of coffee in the morning, or the discovery of your favorite movie just beginning to play on television.

Next time you're up at 4:00 a.m. studying for that science test, it might be nice to take a break and listen to the birds just waking up. ♦

*There are three
simple ways to achieve
an optimistic mindset ...*

With another ring of the Family Mart doorbell, Tim dashed in. Calling everyone by their nicknames, he brought liveliness back to a dying conversation with his festive spirit. I felt relief. *Why?* I screamed at myself internally. *Why wasn't it joy or excitement? Just relief?*

We all headed over to a newly built Japanese fast food restaurant, a chain that I loved when I was younger. We sat down and ordered, but before long the awkwardness began to swirl around me. A smile at the brink of collapse is the hardest to muster.

My bottle of emotions began to crack. I dug my heels into the floor and gripped the chair with my sweaty hands. As the others began to talk about the assignments they had due to-

morrow, it hit me that I barely had anything in common with them. I was looking for something that was already gone. Every word they spoke was a pair of scissors, snipping away the strings of our connection.

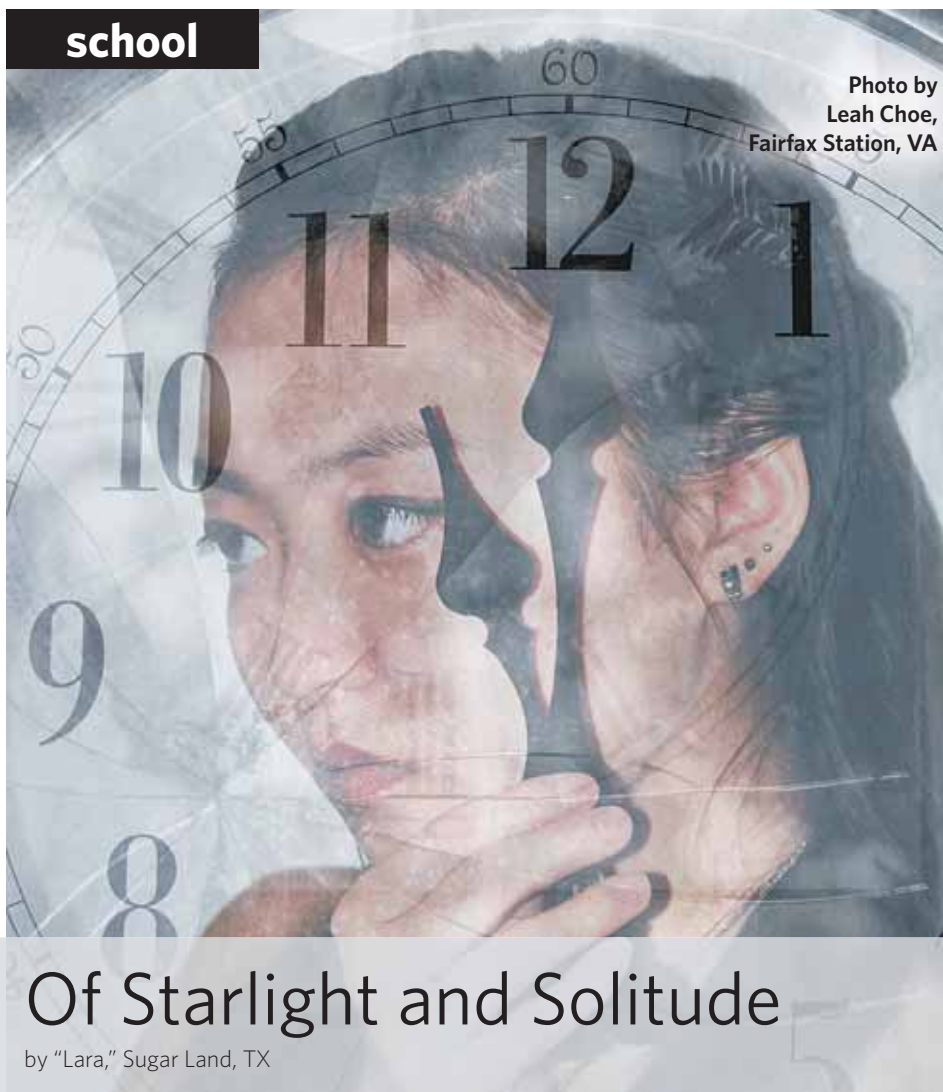
Could a year of separation possibly be an unexpected jagged cliff we drove off, unable to ever return? A wall, cold and impenetrable, dividing us instead of uniting us? My heart raced, and my ears stung. I slowly began to shut down and withdrew myself from the conversation. Everything was going wrong. This wasn't the sweet, heartwarming reunion I had in mind. They were my friends. But it all seemed to be falling apart in front of my eyes.

My bottle of emotions shattered, and glass

shards flew. Fear. Disappointment. Embarrassment. All I had to offer were fake giggles. I tried to pretend that we were still connected, that we still had a chance. But I knew. What we once shared had ended, and the strings that once connected us seemed to be tied in other directions. We were now more comfortable at a distance, engaging in a virtual friendship over texts. The worst part was that distance had helped continue our friendship, but a reunion was what severed it. How ironic.

They say “Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened.” But I knew it would take a lot of crying before I could smile again. ♦

Photo by
Leah Choe,
Fairfax Station, VA



Of Starlight and Solitude

by "Lara," Sugar Land, TX

I'm 30,000 miles underwater and I'm drowning. Or, I would be, if my lungs had remembered they needed air to breathe. Everything's sort of peaceful: murky, muted. The water runs over my thoughts and whisks them away with the current. I didn't need them down here anyway. The night sky moves outside my window, and I imagine myself reaching up towards it.

There's usually a book, and there's always the moon. It starts when the sun goes down. I can feel it in my bones and in my soul that it's going to be one of those nights. There are hugs and goodnights and the assurance to my parents that I'll try to get some sleep, but my room has me in her gravitational pull, and I can't keep her waiting any longer. So I order my aching feet upstairs, force them in front of each other. A heavy feeling lassos my heart and tugs. School tomorrow, foreboding and awful and terrible. It can't happen yet, so I keep it at bay the only way I know how: an all-nighter.

They've become a habit, and I've developed some tendencies. First, I pick a good book, one that's been shoving

its title to the forefront of my thoughts. All my favorite books have been read in one night. Second, I ignore the clock. It's no longer my friend, counting treacherously down until my time is up. Third, I look at the moon. She's known me all my life. She knows what's in my heart. She might be the only one who does.

My world narrows. I become more human. The pieces of myself scattered across Sugar Land, across high school hallways and roadways and sidewalks, move quietly over cold, tired suburbia and greet me at my windowsill. The homework sitting in my backpack shrivels up, or falls apart, or spontaneously combusts; all I know is that it's not getting done, and the thought of that fills me with a fierce, desperate feeling of victory,

like I'm fighting back against the armies of administrators who think they have a say in my future. In the morning there will be talk of Chemistry grades and English quizzes, the voices of my peers thudding softly against the dull ache in my heart, chipping away at me. I'll have to picture a lighthouse in Iceland or a cabin in Alaska. I'll have to go somewhere else, see the Northern Lights from my balcony,

*I'll have
to pull an
all-nighter*

live simply in my mind with my books and my fireplace and my cable-knit sweaters. I'll have to pull another all-nighter.

Sometimes, when the room is flooded with warm lamplight and there's a train moving steadily to far-off places, I think I really could do it. I could fold in on myself like origami, paper-flat, and sink down into the page and the words and the story. Run between the ink and find my eternity-place, a quiet spot to exist forever. I'd close the book behind me, let the cover fall with a muted finality. Look for me on the shelf: I'll be hidden. I'll be home. I don't have to go to school tomorrow if I'm not here. And the moon shines so brightly that I convince myself it's possible.

There are all-nighters when it's not so alone. When a friend of mine is staying up late to study, and the laughs from our Skype call fill the empty space. When I message my Decathlon team, sharing parts of my book and thoughts about anything, reminding myself of my found family and of our siamese hearts, forever beating in time with each other. I lean out for love and they catch me. I was wrong about the moon. She's not the only one who knows me.

There are all-nighters when I feel like I'm sinking. Like my feet got stuck in the bank of the muddy Mississippi, and I can't do anything but watch as the current climbs over my head. On those nights, my intentions are painfully obvious, and my book feels like a flimsy distraction from the fact that I will be drained the next day and I will have late work to accompany my headache. And I think about the other kids my age, protagonists of their own stories with hopes and dreams and fears that are unknowable, and I wonder what they long for when it's 3AM, and they have a project due the next day, and the riverbank is pulling them endlessly down, and the only two things in the world are their head and their heart. Somehow, it makes their voices seem less acerbic in the morning, less like a scalpel and more like a tentative, outstretched hand. I hear the panic and the worry and the wavering doubt behind their probing questions, and I want to meet their hand with my own and run away to somewhere cold and quiet and free.

Inevitably, sunrise drags itself across the sky, pulling with it an ensemble of soft colors and thin clouds. Things look different in the daytime, and reality seeps back into the corners of my vision, fuzzy and not quite real. I've finished my book; I knew I would cry. I bet it's all my brain will be able to think about at school. I shower and dress on muscle memory, already looking forward to the afternoon nap I'm destined for. I know what stretches out before me. I feel a delay in my reaction time, and a heaviness collects behind my eyelids. I'm hungry and hollow and worn out.

But my heart is fuller than it was last night. ♦

My School Uniform

by Anonymous, SC

At my school, a private, all girls school, uniforms are by far the most important thing according to the teachers and administration.

Monday: Today is a non-uniform day but I decide not to dress down. I would rather wear my uniform than be called out by a teacher because I am wearing leggings and my shirt is not fingertip length. "Everyone who is wearing leggings stand up," says a teacher in one of my classes. Girls wearing leggings reluctantly stand up and all but one of them is giving a Friday Morning Service. Every morning when I walk out of morning meeting, I am met by a series of teachers eyeing me. I think to myself, "Is my skirt too short? Is my shirt not fingertip length? Is my shirt tucked in? Are my socks the right color? Am I wearing the right shoes? Did I remember my blazer?" These are the things going through my mind as I walk to first period.

Tuesday: Today is a dress day. Oxford button down, plaid skirt, blazer, black shoes, solid white, purple, or grey socks, and NO nike sports socks. I get to school and realize that I have forgotten my blazer. Assembly rolls around and I along with a few other unlucky girls are told to stay after. "This is a warning" one teacher says, "The next time you get called out you will receive a Friday Morning Service."

*I'm tired
of being told
that my skirt
is too short*

Wednesday: Today is a casual day. Polo shirt, lavender or grey skirt, closed toe shoes, and solid white, purple, or grey socks. I squeeze into my purple skirt which seems to be shaped as a corset. I suck my stomach in try to button it. I put my polo on and head to school. I have a headache and I go to the nurse. While I am there, a teacher points out that my skirt is extremely short. School has just started. I have not had time to try on all of my skirts to make sure they fit. This one is so tight I can't pull it down any further so I simply nod and apologize. When I am home I immediately take off my skirt and feel as though I can breath again.

Thursday: Today is another dress day, only this time I remember my blazer. I get through first period and assembly and I have just gotten to my 2nd block. My button down has come untucked and I reach down to re-tuck it so that I don't get in trouble. "What are you doing?" my teacher asks me. "I am just trying to tuck in my shirt" I respond. "Why don't you go to the bathroom, you are making me and others uncomfortable. Imagine if I started tucking in my shirt in front of the class. You wouldn't like that would you?" I am frustrated with the fact that I got in trouble in the act of trying to abide to the uniform code so I sit back down and I begin my work.

Friday: Today is the final casual day of the

week. I have PE first period so I come to school dressed in my PE uniform, nike shorts with my school logo, and any t-shirt from my school. My hair must be pulled back and I must be wearing athletic shoes. When I get to school I realize that I have accidentally grabbed a shirt that is not from my school and at this point there is nothing I can do. I am called out and told that I must make up the points that I lost from being out of uniform within a week. I am in high school. I have sports, volunteering, and many other after school commitments that I am expected to attend. Yet I must miss one to make up points because of a uniform violation in PE.

It is the end of the week and I am tired of fighting. I am tired of being told that my skirt is too short or that my socks are not the right color. I am tired of teachers being more concerned about my uniform than they are about my education. I am tired of being told that my short skirt is distracting to the male faculty. I am tired of going to an all girls school where I am taught that I must cover up my body.

I don't want the little girls going to my school to be shamed the same way that my peers and I are. I want them to be treated with respect. I want them to be taught that they are beautiful and that they can wear what they want and be proud of it.

I need my school to change. I need them to get with the times. ♦



Art by Elana Ho, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA

A Letter To My Younger Self

by Kevin Fan, Palo Alto, CA

Dear ten-year-old Kevin, Let me tell you what's going to happen to you in the next six years. Yes, you're comfortable right now, but trust me – you're going to be thrust out of your comfort zone, go through these things in life called changes, and come out of them a completely different you.

No, this isn't just about hitting puberty, but good job – you paid attention in Sex Ed.

First off, you're going to move to a faraway land called Palo Alto in a few weeks. You're going to say good-bye to the only house you have distinct memories of, as well as the only friends you've ever known. You're going to have to give Analis away to a family friend because the new landlady doesn't allow cats. You're going to attend great schools and, as a result, you're going to get challenged. A lot. There will be people who are much smarter than you and better than you and it's going to be weird because that's never happened before in your life. But this is how the real world works.

When you're 11, you're going to start going to this thing called church.

Yes, I know you don't believe in God. Yes, you are a self-proclaimed atheist. And yes, you're going to be skeptical at first, but if skepticism is the only thing that motivates you to find out the truth for yourself, then God will take it. C.S. Lewis once said, "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." So knowing that, just try to keep an open mind. And when you do, you're going to realize one day that there is something at stake that is bigger than yourself, and then you are going to make the choice to follow Jesus and believe that through his death and resurrection on the cross, your sins are forgiven and you can be one with God when you die. And isn't that the sweetest truth of all time?

When you're 12, your parents are going to get a divorce.

And it will be nasty.

And for the first time, you're going to experience doubts about your newfound faith. There are going to be days when you cry yourself to sleep at night, and nights when you can't sleep. People are going to tell you, "God won't give you more than you can handle." But you're going to realize that this statement is fundamentally incorrect. When you're a 12-year-old kid in a new town and things have deteriorated so badly that you can't trust your own family anymore or say a simple "I love you" to them – this is definitely something you can't handle by yourself. But even when your parents aren't there for you, God will be, and you're

going to lean on Him. He's going to dig you out of a mess that you can't dig out of on your own, and one night you're going to surrender your life to Him a second time and remind yourself of that every day.

You're going to start high school; it's going to throw you into the fire on the very first day. Classes are going to get harder, and you're going to learn how to manage your time effectively on the fly. You're going to juggle expectations, commitments, and mindsets, but you're going to adjust well and learn many new things. God will put great teachers and friends in your life, and this isn't just limited to school; you're going to meet amazing people from all over the place and realize that life is so

much more than school and grades and whatever college you go to. It's also about the experiences you create for yourself, the people you meet, and the lasting connections and relationships that you build. When you see this truth for yourself, you're going to become braver, stronger, and more charismatic. You're going to receive many more opportunities to lead – not because you've become better, but because you're more willing to take them. And you're going to develop into a good leader with an easy smile and

infectious laugh.

But you're also going to face a lot of rejection as well, and because of that, a teeny-tiny dark part of you doubts yourself. You're going to be afraid of other people judging you for who you are and what you do around them, and it's going to show up in your daily life. You're going to find it hard to look other people in the eye. You're going to become reserved and awkward at times – especially around girls you like. And it's going to make you kick yourself mentally because you want so badly to have a normal conversation as your normal self, but the words just won't come out no matter how much you try to just relax and be yourself.

You're going to be a little different than your friends in the way you act.

Some people will tell you that it's a "good unique." And those people are the ones that you want to stick around. They're going to like you for you, and they're going to look at those small quirks you have and appreciate them for what they are. And one of these days, you're going to open up your closed book and share your life story with them. Yes, you do have some baggage. But that makes you human. And your past is going to be easier to tell because your present state is going great.

You're going to start to appreciate the little things in life. The way the sun peeks into your bedroom through the half-closed blinds when you wake up, the cool breeze through your bike helmet as you try to make it to school on time, or late nights spent studying for that midterm with the soft noise of sprinklers watering the plants around your apartment complex. By extension, you're going to see the proof that God exists everywhere you look – but not in the literal sense. You'll see it in that stranger who helps out another stranger on the side of the road. You'll hear it in those times when you're sad and the first song that plays on the radio is the perfect one, or in those times when you're struggling with something in your faith and that Sunday's sermon is your word-for-word answer. And you'll feel it through the people that come into your life through improbable circumstances and change it for the better.

Yes, you're going to go through a lot. But in the end, you're going to be fine. And not only are you going to be fine, you're going to thrive because even though life hasn't been smooth sailing so far, you've been taught well to roll with the punches and come out alive. Not unscathed, but alive. And that is what is most important.

God bless,
Kevin ♦



Photo by
Michael Guynn,
Salt Lake City, UT

The Only Good Thing

by Anonymous, NY

I haven't been home in eight months, and frankly, I just want my bed back.

The hospital mattress is lumpy and covered with strange, ominous stains I have no interest in asking about. The thing about it that really makes me tick, though, is the fact that we only get one pillow each, even though there are hundreds stacked in the back. I bet the staff use them to sleep on when they're supposed to be doing bed checks.

There are a lot of bad things about the hospital, like the food and the petty patients and all of the unnecessary (and sexist) rules. Here's one: if a girl's shorts don't pass her knees, she can't wear them. Outside. In 100 degree weather. But God forbid a guy gets in trouble for sagging his pants so low he trips on them and chips a tooth. (It's happened.)

The hospital prides itself on its safety, but the time my friend found a rusty hammer sitting on her bedroom table screams otherwise. It was a ludicrous situation, really. Everyone was confused as to how it ended up there in the first place. My theory is that a maintenance guy forgot where he was and made the unfortunate mistake of leaving it behind. In the end it was fine, because my friend doesn't have a homicidal bone in her body, and didn't decide to go all Texas Hammer Massacre on everyone. But I would not be surprised if she did; I would've been tempted.

Obviously, a long-term state psychiatric facility isn't the ideal place to spend the summer going into my junior year of high school. There's just so much I could be doing, that I should be doing, instead of making duct tape pens and completing so many puzzles that I literally have no place to put them anymore.

My whole entire life revolves around these suffocatingly beige tiled walls, and no matter how much I try to give to the universe it never gives back. I'm left with my empty palms stretched out, pleading to anyone who chooses to listen.

It doesn't come as a surprise when no one answers back.

The one good thing is the yoga class Ms. Beverly teaches every Thursday night.

There are around eight students, each of us placed in a circle under the dim lights of the auditorium stage. I have a few friends who go, and we always practice next to each other. We're not very good at the hard stuff, but it's nice to belong to a little club amidst all the chaos. During the hour we're there, it doesn't really feel like we're patients, and the peace that cradles our scarred bodies in its arms is a stark contrast to the rest of our day.

Ms. Beverly is a staff member in her thir-

ties, petite and muscular. She's sweet and her voice is like honey. She starts off every lesson by telling us how perfect we are. A few of us laugh uncomfortably – we're mentally ill teenagers with no confidence whatsoever – but Ms. Beverly repeats it until we have to shut up and listen. It's a good tactic.

"Do we want to work a ten today?" She al-

A long-term psychiatric facility isn't the ideal place to spend the summer



Photo by Olivia McClain, West Bend, WI

ways asks us, and we always say yes, of course, we want to sweat and forget about our problems. We go through all the stretches and Sun Salutations, each pose affecting each muscle differently.

Out of all of them, I like the Warrior One pose the best. It sounds stupid, but I feel so confident whenever I stand tall like that with my arms spread to the sky. That's the thing about yoga: you fake it until you make it.

Usually, we lay on our mats and meditate for the last 10 minutes or so. But one day in particular, Ms. Beverly had us lie down next to each other with our feet vertical on the wall. I ended up shoulder-to-shoulder with two of my closest friends. We giggled at the proximity.

"Relax all your muscles and close your eyes if you're comfortable." Ms. Bev's voice echoed from her spot across the stage. "Make sure you're focused on your breathing."

I didn't close my eyes, but instead stared up at the lights that hung above our heads, taking in air through my nose and releasing it through my mouth.

"I want you all to think about the intentions you set for today's practice," she continued,

"and how you think you accomplished them. Did your mood shift? Do you still feel as heavy as you did before our session?"

I didn't.

"I know your minds are all over the place, because mine is as well," she said. "But there's one thing I'd like to focus on, and that thing is courage."

She breathed the word out in an airy sigh; I felt my heart thump inside my chest.

"You're all here because you need a little more of it," she said. "And I do, too. But I'm here to tell you that your lack of courage does not make you weak. It makes you human.

You're hurting right now, I can sense all the pain your bodies carry, and I know you're tired of the fight. I don't blame you." She paused, as if to gather her words carefully. "I have a task for you. I want you to put your right hand over your heart and pretend you have all the courage you need to succeed. To love someone, to forgive someone ... to forgive yourself. Take a few minutes to really think about what it's going to feel like when you finally do whatever it is you need to do. Open your eyes when you're finished. I want to see each and every one of your beautiful, triumphant faces. Remember to really focus."

I did what I was told, and thought about how scared I was to get better, how terrifying the outside world really is. I thought of the look on my mom's face on the way to the emergency room, the gentle pressure of her hand against the cuts on my skin. The screams of my sister and the weeks spent lying in bed, stoic and silent, wanting so badly to let the bed swallow me whole.

Your lack of courage does not make you weak, it makes you human.

It wasn't until Ms. Beverly told us to open our eyes that I realized I was crying. A few other girls were as well, and we all tried to discreetly wipe away our tears. But their shell-shocked faces mirrored mine, and I knew what we were all thinking: *God, I need to get better.*

What I love about the class isn't just the yoga. It's the feeling of feeling enough. It's treating my body like I love it and pretending to have the courage that I eventually need to find within myself.

In all reality, I don't know where I'm going. Or what's going to happen in the future. I'm still living day to day, therapy session to therapy session. I may need to rely on medication my entire life.

But there's one thing that's certain, and it's that someday, I will be able to sleep on a clean bed with two pillows, and that's enough for me. ♦

Art by Emily Cai,
Las Cruces, NM

My Grandmother's Bones

by Ananya Ganesh, Sandy Springs, GA

I dreamt of my bones every night. I pictured their smooth and slender white surfaces, cloaked in layers of skin and muscle, like chains of slumbering reptiles, linked by the inevitability of their common fate. I waited patiently for one of them to rouse and stretch, hoping the glorious cascade would shake the others out of their stupor. Many nights I lay in the dark listening intently for the slightest creak of their awakening, willing them to reach across and lock heads and tails.

They slept.

I'm not quite sure of the precise moment when I went from being delightfully petite to just plain short. Perhaps the summer after which everyone returned to school, their generous bones bestowing upon them the inches I so deeply coveted. Mine had hibernated all summer. I tried to ignore the whispered taunts floating in the air wherever I went. Even the orange tree in our backyard, laden with luscious spheres of sunshine, seemed to mock me. My father had planted the sapling when I was a toddler. My parents continued the practice of their homeland, believing that as the tree grew, so would their child. My mother watered it faithfully every day, praying to the Tree Gods to hold my hands and raise me up tall and strong just like them. They simply ignored her. My bones just couldn't keep up with the orange tree.

My mother's days were consumed with percentiles and growth charts. "Late bloomer, perhaps," people quipped. My father worked into our conversations names of accomplished people while feigning surprise at their incidental shortness. "Bones have no business being late," I complained to no one in particular.

That summer, we went to see Paatti. It was the summer I learned why the Tree Gods had

failed me and why it didn't matter anymore.

"We're going to see Grandma," announced my father, his voice muffled with longing. My heart ached for him. I couldn't imagine not seeing my mother every day, not cuddling up to her bosom for five more minutes of sleep, not spilling my adolescent woes into the crook of her neck, soothed by her scent of ginger, garlic, and sandalwood soap. I hadn't seen my grandmother since I was a toddler, my forgotten memories of her sometimes surfacing like fireflies out of cinder.

We reached Paatti's house early in the morning. The heady petrichor

of early monsoon showers caressed my nostrils as I stepped out of the car. I watched in awe as the neighborhood women started their day casually creating complex geometric patterns of rice flour loops and circles outside every doorstep to entice the Gods of Prosperity. Far away, the intermittent scratch of grass brooms sweeping across concrete sidewalks woke reluctant residents.

I almost didn't see her open the door. My eyes, searching for lost sleep took a while to find Paatti. But when they did, the air froze in my lungs.

Hungrily, she gathered me into her arms. My head towered above her disheveled sea of gray. I looked closely as she released me to hug her son, barely clearing his waist. Sparkling, serpentine, gold chains were lost in the folds of her stunted neck. Paatti's bones, like mine, had changed their mind halfway to adulthood. I couldn't distill the rainbow of myriad emotions that swept through me. Even as I felt somewhat relieved that my lack of height wasn't entirely my failing, I tasted the acrimony of rage and disappointment at the back of my throat. There was my grandmother – the unmistakable reminder and cause of my Lilliputian fate. I felt an urgent need to let the whisperers know. It wasn't my fault.

I woke to the sound of Paatti's voice – honey flowing over smooth stones. She was teaching my mother the secret to making poli – my father's favorite breakfast. Perfect circles of flaky pastries sat in a sticky syrup of sugar and loneliness. Skinny rivers of hot clarified but-

ter crisscrossed the polis. Paatti insisted on feeding me, her slender fingers deftly pulling the layers of poli apart. I took a bite and the poli melted in my mouth, tasting of the fear of another farewell.

Later that afternoon, Paatti took me to the temple. She wore a bright-red silk saree, spires of golden thread woven into an intricate filigree of temple towers and elephants. Her diamond nose ring caught the light and spewed fire as she turned her head, the middle of her forehead sporting the flawless vermilion circle. Paatti looked resplendent and ... short. The lump in my throat was back.

"For you," she said, handing me a matching skirt set. Made of the same bright-red silk fabric of her saree, twin golden elephants. She had sewn them herself. I tried on the skirt, and before I could speak, she squealed, "See how it fits perfectly. You have my bones!" My eyes brimmed with regret threatening to spill over. Heads turned as we walked to the temple – matching visions in red silk and jasmine strings. "My granddaughter," Paatti introduced me as pride lit up every tired wrinkle on her face.

Outside the temple sat rows of people – young, old, children, newborns, some missing limbs, missing voices. In front of each one of them lay steel bowls into which the temple-goers flung money from afar. Disease had maimed their bodies and tarnished their souls. People avoided looking at them, afraid their misery was contagious, but Paatti sat down among them. I worried that the elephants would lose their gold. She fed the little ones the poli she had packed in fresh banana leaves and chatted with the ease. I watched, mesmerized,

as the children started to play around her – some lying on her lap, another one playing peek-a-boo with her billowing saree, all of them soaking in her radiance. After a little while, she rose to go inside the temple, and the children, like mutilated and blind mice, followed their

enchanted piper to the doorstep. We went into the temple to pray and I hoped she wouldn't ask what I had prayed for.

I wore a new skirt every day – six lustrous yards of blue, pink, and yellow silk sprayed with gold and silver spires, the elephants always golden. We walked to the temple with our clothes and bones perfectly matched. When we returned home, the elephants on Paatti's saree were always speckled with the dusty remnants of the arenose temple street where the children played.

On most days, after lunch, my parents left to catch up with friends and rela- ➤ ➤

Contest
Winner!

We walked to the temple with our clothes and bones perfectly matched

Saving Dexter

by Sophia Demir, Miami, FL

Staring through the steel bars of a small enclosure, I anxiously hopped from foot to foot. I tried to focus on the words spoken by the staff member but my attention continuously wandered to the sad dog who was lying still on cold floor. It was as if our gaze made him shrink into himself. His brindle fur was ungroomed, his tail nervously tucked between his back legs. My mother nudged my arm and told me to concentrate. I was supposed to be in charge here, so I listened.

I had assumed I knew what was in store for me at the shelter, but as I stood in front of the cage, I found myself cringing from the loud barking, the medicinal smell, and the overall depressing vibe.

Could I tell which dog needed me the most?

I had found Dexter's name on a list for euthanization on a private social media account. Euthanasia wasn't an aspect of the shelter that the staff wanted to advertise. There were 10 other dogs on the list and hundreds that would someday find their way onto it. Yet, I chose Dexter. He was the special one. He was going to live.

However, being at the shelter and walking by the cages of hundreds of other dogs was heartbreaking. How unfair was it that I'd be taking Dexter home, while the other dogs would remain here and suffer? I second guessed my decision and briskly walked down the aisle looking into the enclosures. Could I tell which dog needed me the most? Which one I could save without it being unfair? I couldn't. Big or small, quiet or loud, they all needed me. Every dog deserved a better life. Shoulders slumped, I made my way back to Dexter. Here I was trying to commit an act of kindness, and yet I had never felt more cruel in my life.

Crouching by his cage, my arm extended through the cold isolating bars, I waited for Dexter to respond to my presence. It took five minutes. He was depressed – you could see it in his eyes. He'd been here too



Photo by
Crystal Calderon,
Phoenix, AZ

long. I was gently stroking Dexter through the wretched bars when I heard something that made my blood boil. "I wouldn't recommend him as a family dog. He's aggressive," the lady said. Before my mom could respond, I shook my head frantically and told the obnoxious woman that I would decide that for myself. With a dramatic sigh from the wicked witch and the clanking of keys, the cage door was opened. Dexter lunged out, tail wagging and ears pricked. He was like a whole new dog. We played with him for a long time, and he was not aggressive once. I was confident he was the one.

We had arrived as a family of two and left as a family of three. Despite my previous negative thoughts about leaving hundreds of dogs behind, I was content with what I had done. I knew I could not change the world by saving one dog, but for Dexter, his world had changed forever. ♦

tives. Paatti and I were alone. She made me sit on the back porch, facing the jasmine tree. In her hand was a bowl of coconut oil – "the elixir for my tresses," she insisted. Could it make my bones grow? I wondered. Her long, bony fingers delicately parted my hair as she carefully coated each dark strand. My thirsty scalp gorged on the rich oil. The intoxicating scent of jasmine in the air and Paatti's fingers rhythmically massaging my scalp in slow circles was about to lull me to sleep.

That's when the stories started. One step at a time, Paatti held my hand as we started to descend to the depths of her heart. At every step, a different, younger Paatti met me and took me further. The child, orphaned at eight, raised by aunts and uncles, no golden elephants or silver spires. The teenager, forced to end her education abruptly and marry a man she hadn't met before. The hint of a blush disappeared in the ridges of her chestnut wrinkles. Then her eyes darkened to the color of grief-stricken clouds. Her words faltered and her voice began to crack, unable to bear the weight of the story that followed – of losing her firstborn, and second, and third. I wondered if her heart bled

with every beat, squeezing out the excess sorrow it couldn't hold.

Sirens screamed in my head to drown the question threatening to escape. "This is not the time," my mind chided.

"Did it bother you ... I mean, were you ever unhappy ... because you are sh-short?" There! I said it. The words slipped out of my mouth slick as the oil on Paatti's fingers, before I had the chance or sense to chew them down. Her laughter sounded like my mother's brass pots tumbling over – the ding-dong of temple bells. "Short?" Surprise coated the chestnut ridges on her face.

"Do you think I am short?" I didn't answer, but I was sure she could see the trail of pain starting to form on my face.

"I was one of the taller girls in my village. And beautiful, too!" She cradled my face with her hands. "And you have my bones. But the problem is," she swatted an imaginary fly with oily hands, "your bones don't know yet that they have left home."

Her words pierced my heart and plunged to my soul. No one had said that to me before. The jasmine branches swaying and nodding

in the evening breeze agreed with Paatti. Her words, bounced around in my mind, knocking down the cobwebs I had been collecting for years. In the new vastness of my mind, I realized slowly that there was nothing wrong with my bones; I had merely forgotten where they had come from. How tall I grew was as much a part of my heritage as the big copper pot of turmeric-colored curry my mother cooked every Sunday. I had unfairly pitted my bones against counterparts of a different league. I had assimilated so completely and was entrenched so deeply in the world I was born into that I had neglected to hold on to the world I had come from. If I had learned to embrace this fact earlier, perhaps I could have saved myself from years of heartache. Like my kohl-lined dark eyes, like the tendrils of my jet-black silky hair, like my skin the color of melted caramel, my bones were fulfilling their destiny.

I had inherited my grandmother's bones. I hoped I had inherited the tenderness flowing from her heart. I wished for her indomitable spirit.

I never dreamt of bones again. ♦

Litany

by Rachel Shey, Walnut Creek, CA

*“I am the blue nigella flower
You never expected to find
Particularly at this late sunset hour”*

*You are the bird in the crepe myrtle trees
Perching and jumping and flying
On the smooth branches with no leaves”*

9th grade

On the hunt for a distraction, I ambled over to my brother’s side of the desk, leaned over his chair, and squinted into the blue light emanating from the computer screen. My brother scowled at me for invading his space.

“I’m not a poet, but this assignment looks fun,” I said, pointing at the “poem writing” homework on his Winter Break to-do list. Having successfully found a diversion, I issued a command. “Show me what it is.”

*“I am the sea of daffodils tossing
All too aware of how little time they have left to sing
Although knowing that they will return next spring”*

It was an assignment for my brother’s online American History Through Literature course. His teacher assigned an endless stream of quizzes for her unlucky students, and as a dutiful older sister, it was my job to ensure that my brother completed every single quiz on time. In general, it was a thankless ordeal. Early in the year, when I sat down next to him to plan out the week’s work, he frequently pushed me away, reluctant to accept my advice.

We were utterly hooked on poetry

Yet this time when I sat down with him to work on writing poetry, he did not try to shove me away. After a few nights, we had over a hundred lines of doggerel, far more than the requirement. We were utterly hooked on poetry. No longer was the sky merely dark; it was “studded with stars,” “lively with meteors,” and “illuminated by the calm light of the moon.” No longer were our surroundings blurred and boring; they were glowing with the freshness of specificity.

*“You are the faucet, strangely juxtaposed
Living in a marble kitchen
Surrounded with the scent of rose”*

*I am the lake with the fountains
Upon which elegant geese sail
Look up to see the devil mountains”*

Several years ago, on the way back home from a visit to the optometrist’s office, I opened the black, vinyl glasses case and ran my finger over the soft microfiber cloth cushioning the precious cargo within. Even with my childish inexperience, I knew to be careful, so as not to damage the delicate metal frames. I picked up the glass-



es and unfolded them, then settled them on my face. The new nose pads pinched at the sensitive skin on the bridge of my nose, and the handles itched on the back of my ears. Nevertheless, I forgot my discomfort when I opened my eyes.

I wasn’t aware that my view of the world was clouded over with the fog of myopia until I saw, through the lenses, everything resolved in dizzying clarity.

So it was with me and poetry. When I settled my fingers on the smooth keyboard and began to type a poem, it was as though I had placed a pair of lenses over the imperfect orbs of my unobservant eyes.

*“You are the playground so colorful
It can be spotted from far away
Look at its swoops and curves so wonderful”*

In the heady first days of our poetry writing, one of us somehow added the poem to Google Docs. Every word was stored in the Cloud, so we could edit the document simultaneously. Long after the assignment was submitted, poetry remained a shared obsession. My brother and I added poems nearly every day. We fed off each other’s enthusiasm, suggesting topics and ideas to each other. The new year came. Spring arrived. AP week steamrolled through. Classes ended. Summer started. We kept writing.

*“I am the fresh green horsetail
You’ll find me even a century from now
Still straight and narrow”*

10th grade

I applied and was accepted to an online publication. This job entailed



Photo by Whitlee Neeley,
North Salt Lake, UT

compiling my own poems, the poems of famous poets, and my analysis into a monthly column, which I would send to my editor by the deadline. Once I fixed my errors, I posted the finished column to the website, where many of my classmates and friends would read my work. My column received little traffic, except from my brother, who invariably posted a supportive comment. Even so, I was eager to seem sophisticated to my editor and meager audience. To that end, I decided that my poems had to be serious and revelatory, not just insignificant combinations of rhyming words. New anxiety was now bundled with the art of poetry. It made me forget important things: I forgot the happy clatter of my fingers flying over the keyboard. I forgot to ignore the tight nose pads and the weight of metal handles resting behind my ears. I forgot how beautiful the world was through a lens. I forgot poetry.

*“You are the blue and purple anemones
Colorful and joyful and free
Flowers that belong undersea”*

Even in my forgetfulness, I still remembered something: deadlines. I needed to submit a column by the 26th of each month. Combing the poetry document for my favorite specimens, I smiled to see some of my better works, and sometimes laughed at my brother’s additions. He did not seem afflicted with the same uncertainty, continuing to add poetry that, while usually silly, could also be surprisingly beautiful. They gave me a glimpse of the clarity I had enjoyed when I wrote poetry. With my brother’s poems, I could almost see a way out of the mist that had descended over my vision ever since I stopped working on rhymes, playing with meter, and figuring out alliteration.

“I am the spiral staircase

*Roping around a building up and back down
Run through in a breathless haze.”*

One morning I woke up with a tingling in my fingers and an itching in my mind. It was the unmistakable feeling of needing to write a poem. I threw off my blankets, brushed my teeth in record time, and rushed to my laptop so I could write my poem. My enthusiasm evaporated as I opened the poetry document and noticed that the last time I’d added a poem was weeks ago. I pondered. What was stopping me? My pride as a poetry columnist? The fear that no one would take me seriously if they saw me struggling to fit words together into a coherent poem? “Damn the torpedoes,” I thought, remembering my brother’s bold writing, and blazed full speed ahead to the tune of my keyboard clanking under my fingers. A strange sensation bloomed in me, like I was remembering something.

*“You are the green, waxy pine trees
So high they kiss the clouds
And bring the masses to their knees”*

Reinvigorated, my interest in poetry mushroomed once again. Never content to keep wonderful things to myself, I organized a poetry recital in March and spent a pleasant hour reading poems with my friends. Even my brother came to support my event. What had I remembered? I had remembered poetry. I had remembered to take it out of its black vinyl case, musty but unsmudged, slip the handles behind my ears, and let the world resolve into brilliant focus.

*“I am the wind rustling the leaves
You are the leaves rustling in the wind
Together we take on the park*

*Where children lark and dogs bark
Adventure lurks in every part
For those who seek: so take heart.”*

11th grade

Summertime arrived with the end of AP week and the end of my tenure at the e-zine. I considered re-applying to the online publication. Should I return to my post as poetry columnist? Or strive to the higher echelons of editor?

I stared into the blue light of the computer screen, trying to decide which application to pick. War was waged between my poetry-columnist side and a new, as yet undefined aspect of myself. I woke up the next morning to find that sleeping on it hadn’t helped and the fight was still going. Setting the battle on the back burner, I opened my poetry document and started to write.

Even then, while I lacked any official position, I was still writing poetry. These poems came from something deep inside me that would not be corralled by such insignificant obstacles as title names. The battle lost its significance. I had fought to reclaim the poet in me, and I knew she wouldn’t go down so easily.

Thus, I filled out my application for the position of editor. Months passed while I eagerly awaited word of whether I had been accepted. Then I received an email.

“Unfortunately the position you applied for is already filled. However, we would love to offer you a job as poetry columnist.”

The poet in me had survived.

Tell me I’m not a writer, and I’d nod in agreement. Writing may be a tool I have long sought to master, but it isn’t an integral part of my identity.

Tell me I’m not a poet, and I’ll look you in the eye.
And I’ll say two words: “You lie.” ♦

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*"I learned that I have stories to tell
and that I have the potential
to be a real writer."
—2018 Young Women's Writing
Workshop Participant*

Tips for a Great College Essay

Your college essay should convince admission officers, in less than ten minutes, that you would be a good match for their colleges. At the most basic level, the essay demonstrates your communication and writing skills. In addition, the essay allows admission officers to discover more about you as a person – a side of you not reflected in statistics like grades and SAT scores.

How the essay is evaluated

- Did you address the question asked?
- Is your writing mechanically sound? Is your writing style comfortable? Can you construct a good sentence? Can you put together a cogent paragraph?
- Can you discuss a theme? Is your argument logical? Did you begin and end the essay with some finesse?
- Do you write with style, nuance and creativity – and in a distinctive voice?

Choosing a topic

While there are no inherently bad essay topics, be careful about the following subjects:

- Winning or losing the big game
- Death of a pet
- Friendship problems
- Religious or philosophical epiphanies
- Anything that suggests that you don't see the future beyond high school.
- Simple solutions to world problems.
- *Remember to answer the question!*

Polishing the essay

- Craft an interesting opening sentence to hook the reader. If it's dull, the reader will be bored.
- Be revealing ... disclose things about yourself without being confessional.
- Beware of trying to impress admission officers with what you think they want to hear.

- Don't be afraid to use your imagination or to be unconventional.
- Have a teacher, parent or friend read your second draft. Ask them: Is it interesting? Does it sound like me? Was it fun to read?

Navigational hazards

The little details aren't the most important part of the essay, but you don't want the admission committee to think you're a careless writer.

- Always proofread before producing the final draft. If you are tired of the essay, let someone else proof it. Check for spelling errors; spellcheck won't catch everything!
- Don't plagiarize: admission officers have read widely and have sophisticated ways of checking content.
- Don't get overwhelmed about composing your essay – write what you feel, do it well ... and you'll make a great impression! ♦



COLLEGE ADMISSIONS TIMELINE

A STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

It's never too early to start thinking about college.
Check your progress each semester and stay on track!

1ST YEAR

FALL FRESHMAN YEAR

Start your high school career by meeting with your academic counselor. They help you narrow down your goals, create an academic plan, and register for higher level honors and AP courses. Get involved in extracurricular activities to boost your college resume!

SPRING FRESHMAN YEAR

Don't fall behind in your school work and focus on final exams! Seek tutoring for your weaker subjects and keep shooting for a 4.0+ GPA. Learn more about honors and AP courses that you can take next fall.

SUMMER FRESHMAN YEAR

Be active in your community and volunteer somewhere you feel passionate about. Find colleges you are interested in and visit if you can. Read tons of books and complete your summer assignments. Start studying for your PSAT.

FALL SOPHOMORE YEAR

Revisit your counselor and make sure you are on track academically. Join student organizations, clubs, and teams that interest you such as student council or drama club. Study for and take the PSAT.

SPRING SOPHOMORE YEAR

Choose the AP courses you want to take next year and start studying for the SAT. Start looking into college tours and summer programs. Maintain a high GPA and seek help on subjects you need a little boost on.

SUMMER SOPHOMORE YEAR

Continue to be active in your community. Attend a pre-college or summer program in a subject or at a college you want to learn more about. Study for your SAT and ACT and complete all summer assignments including work for AP classes.

2ND YEAR

APPLY EARLY!



Early Decision and Early Action are advantageous admissions tools because you are compared to a smaller pool of applicants

S M T W T F S

EA

Early Action: non-binding plans of application that allow a student to be accepted early with no requirement to commit

S M T W T F S

ED

Early Decision: binding plans of application that serves as a commitment to attend the school if accepted

3RD YEAR

FALL JUNIOR YEAR

Start planning for college with your counselor to choose your courses wisely and keep your grades up! Start taking SAT and ACT practice tests (or the actual tests) to see where you stand. Excel in your extracurricular activities and take on leadership roles in your organizations and community.

SPRING JUNIOR YEAR

Attend any college fairs that your school or local community holds. Take the SAT, ACT, any SAT Subject tests, and your AP tests. Narrow down your top college choices and learn more about their application styles, deadlines, and fees. Visit these colleges if you can.

SUMMER JUNIOR YEAR

Stay committed to your community activities and attend another summer program if possible. Finalize your top college choices and start compiling your college resumes and applications. Start writing your college-specific application essays as well. This is a good time to research scholarship opportunities.

4TH YEAR

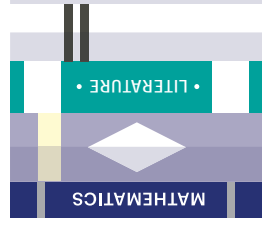
FALL SENIOR YEAR

Don't slack off! Finalize your applications and essays and submit them by their individual deadlines. Don't forget to ask for recommendations from teachers, counselors, and community leaders to add to your applications. Take the SAT and ACT again if you need to.

SPRING SENIOR YEAR

Continue to maintain your good grades during your last semester. Visit the colleges you've been accepted to and complete your financial aid forms. Don't forget to apply for scholarships as well. Choose your college wisely and submit your deposit!

Over **50%** of American teens graduate with an A average. Find ways on top of your grades to distinguish yourself!



Billionaire's Gift Hints at Solution to Student Loan Debt

by Frank Yang, New York City, NY

When billionaire Robert F. Smith surprised Morehouse College's class of 2019 with the news that he planned to pay off all of their student loans, the 400 new graduates were understandably thrilled. Not having to worry about student loan payments would obviously be a huge relief for anybody, especially when they are just starting out into the professional world. Of course, most students graduating from college are not likely to get that kind of surprise bailout. Still, Smith's generosity served another positive function: it drew attention to the student loan debt crisis.

If you don't like to drive, you can always bicycle or take public transportation. It might be slower, but you'll get there. For many professional careers, though, the only way to get started is with a college degree – sometimes a graduate degree. Most students therefore feel like they don't have a choice. With no apparent options, they take on debt, hoping that in the long run it will pay off by helping them get ahead in today's economy.

Unfortunately, college costs have been rising steadily for decades, faster than inflation and faster than wage increases. Students have therefore been forced to borrow heavily to pay for their educations. Today the average amount of student loan debt among college graduates in the United States is over \$37,000, with more than 44 million people together owing \$1.5 trillion.

Middle-class students tend to take on the most debt for school, since they lack the resources of wealthy students but are not eligible for some financial aid that helps poorer ones. Poor students and people of color are hit hard as well, however. It is significant that Robert Smith chose Morehouse for his gift, since Morehouse is a historically black college and African-American students not only take out more federal student loans than their peers, but are also at higher risk for defaulting.

Paying off student loans can take years, or even decades. Some student borrowers are never able to pay off their loans, resulting in high default rates and trashed credit scores. Others feel obliged to take the first job they can find, so as not to fall behind on payments. That means they lose out on the theoretical career boost from having their degree. Some fail to graduate at all, ending up in debt with no advantages to show for it. Maybe worst of all, fear of debt may discourage some

prospective students from applying to college to begin with. That defeats the whole purpose of having student loans, which are meant to make college more accessible.

The effects of student loan debt also go beyond just the borrowers. Money put aside for student loan payments is money that cannot be spent on starting up a new business, buying a home, or other goods and services. In this way, student loan debt negatively impacts the economy as a whole.

How did the situation get this bad? For one thing, the student loan business used to be solely a government program. Then in the 1990s, the student loan business was "privatized," allowing lenders to seek profit from student loans. Some banks gave loans to students

what they are getting into when they apply to college and take out student loans. Information and guidance are obviously important, but we also don't want students lowering their ambitions because of money.

The real question is not: How can we make student loans affordable? It is: How can we make sure that every student who wants to go to college gets that opportunity? With debt skyrocketing to unmanageable levels, too many students failing to complete college even when they receive loans, and too many graduates not making enough money to justify high tuition expenditures, we have to consider that student loans may no longer be the most efficient way of helping students access higher education.

The current system of college financing is broken. Student loans are no longer accomplishing their task. Shouldn't we instead be doing whatever is necessary to help students go to college? That's what Robert Smith decided, but he can't pay off everyone's student loan debt. Together, however, we can eliminate the need for student loans. If what Smith did was admirable – and everybody seems to agree that it was – then shouldn't we, as a nation, be emulating him?

We can make "college for all" a reality. Both Senator Sanders and Senator Warren propose funding their higher education reforms by taxing only the very wealthy. Warren's plan would tax households with annual income above \$50 million, while Sanders's plan would tax Wall Street investment firms engaged in speculation. The same methods can be used to replace, rather than reform, the student loan system. For some in politics, "tax" is a bad word, but tax money is routinely used to fix broken infrastructure, and higher education is a key part of the economic infrastructure of the United States. After all, lower debt and an educated workforce are good for the economy, and that's good for everyone.

Ultimately, we have to ask: Why was Robert Smith so widely praised for helping one graduating class write off their student loan debt? Partly it was because of his generosity, but it was also because he was identifying a national priority. He was saying that supporting an educated, debt-free workforce is money well spent. He was saying that young people are worth investing in. If we agree on that, we can act on it. ♦

Fear of college debt may discourage prospective students from applying to college

who could not afford to repay them. If that sounds familiar, that's because it is much like what happened a decade later with the subprime mortgage crisis – which led to a national financial meltdown and recession. During that recession, state governments cut spending on higher education, forcing colleges to hike tuition and students to borrow even more.

Plenty of government leaders and politicians talk about fixing the student loan debt crisis, but so far there is little agreement and less progress. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos wants to limit student loans, which she believes contribute to higher tuition. However, it seems unlikely that college tuition will suddenly go down, so it is hard to see how this will help. Senator Bernie Sanders has introduced the College for All Act, which would lower interest rates on student loans and help borrowers refinance their student loans. (His plan would also make public universities free for many students.) Senator Elizabeth Warren has her own plan, which would eliminate a sizable chunk of debt for students in eligible households. However, both of their proposals face serious opposition in Congress. Other discussions address making sure students know

Photo by
Roger Coutu,
Danielson, CT



In Wake of Scandals, College Worth Comes from Within

by Maria Proulx, Gales Ferry, CT

Like many ambitious high school students, I've always dreamed of attending an Ivy League college. To many teens, the exclusive group of schools seems to guarantee a successful future. But how far would someone go to get in?

Most teenagers have heard about the recent college admission scandal. People were so desperate to get themselves or their children into high-ranking universities that they shelled out thousands, or even millions, of dollars. Along with bribing admission officers, students faked disabilities, hired others to take their SAT or ACT, created phony charities, or pretended to be an athlete to make the cut. This begs the question that countless motivated teenagers fail to consider: Is it the college we attend that determines our success, or is it ourselves?

How much success does an Ivy League college guarantee? No doubt the social status could help us later in life, perhaps in obtaining a prosperous job. But for us teens, it is our own ambition and ability to overcome obstacles that relates to how successful we are, not what college we go to.

As a teen, I find myself questioning our world. What is wrong with our society? What causes teenagers to believe that they need to attend the best college?

I speak with past experience; since I was nine, it has been my dream to attend Harvard. However, I personally think of the admission process as a game of chance. Less than 20 percent of Americans think the college admission process is fair, and more than three in five citizens believe

college acceptance “favors the rich and powerful.”

The Ivy League colleges are exclusive. Most schools accept only a small percentage of all applicants (usually under 10 percent). And we teens have no idea what the formula is to get in!

Yes, we know that you need good SAT scores, a fair share of extra-curricular activities, and all-around good grades. But countless students have all these factors – and many more – and are still rejected.

The admission process is subjective. There isn't a formula. There is no magic wand that guarantees you get in.

I, along with many other teens, can find these facts disheartening. The college you attend can seem like a factor that will make or break your entire life. We teens need to have confidence in ourselves. In the end, it will be our determination that will drive us to greatness, not necessarily our formal education.

A famous Hollywood actress bribed college admission officers to get her daughter into a prestigious school. The daughter recalls the advice her parents gave her before she left for college: “Be classy, – you only get one reputation.” Isn't it ironic?

I still dream of attending an Ivy League college (Harvard, are you listening?). But the college admission scandal has gone too far. Education is meant to help you learn, but lying to get into the college of your dreams will only lessen your integrity. We should know when to draw the line. ♦

How much success does an Ivy League college guarantee?

TEEN INK COLLEGE GUIDE

Facts & Figures

A Profile of Freshmen at 4-Year Colleges

Reasons deemed "Very Important" in deciding to go to college

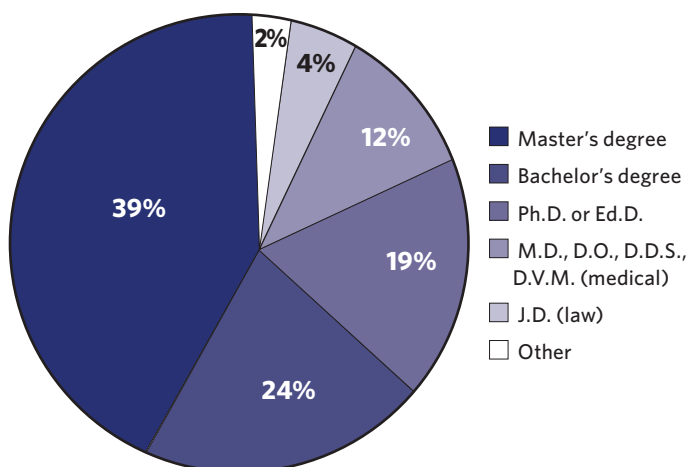
To be able to get a better job.....	85%
To learn more about things that interest me.....	84%
To get training for a specific career.....	78%
To gain a general education and appreciation of ideas.....	76%
To be able to make more money	72%

Probable field of study/major

Pre-med	21%
Biological and life sciences	16%
Business.....	14%
Health professions	12%
Arts and humanities	11%
Engineering	12%
Social science	11%
Undecided	8%
Pre-law	7%
Math and computer science.....	6%
Other majors	5%
Education.....	4%
Physical science.....	3%

SOURCE: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2017

Highest Degree Sought by Incoming Freshman



SOURCE: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2017

Best National Universities

Name/Rank	Tuition & Fees	Enrollment
1. Princeton University Princeton, NJ	\$51,870	5,428
2. Harvard University Cambridge, MA	\$51,925	6,788
3. (tie) Columbia University New York, NY	\$61,850	6,202
3. (tie) Massachusetts Institute of Technology Cambridge, MA	\$53,790	4,602
3. (tie) Yale University New Haven, CT	\$55,500	5,964
6. (tie) Stanford University Stanford, CA	\$53,529	7,087
6. (tie) University of Chicago Chicago, IL	\$59,298	6,552
6. (tie) University of Pennsylvania Philadelphia, PA	\$57,770	10,183
9. Northwestern University Evanston, IL	\$56,691	8,231
10. (tie) Duke University Durham, NC	\$58,198	6,682
10. Johns Hopkins University Baltimore, MD	\$55,350	6,064

Best Writing Schools

Name/Rank	Tuition & Fees	Enrollment
1. Brown University Providence, NJ	\$58,504	7,043
2. Duke University Durham, NC	\$58,198	6,682
3. Princeton University Princeton, NJ	\$51,870	5,428
4. Cornell University Ithaca, NY	\$57,222	15,182
5. (tie) Harvard University Cambridge, MA	\$51,925	6,788
5. (tie) Yale University New Haven, CT	\$55,500	5,964
7. Stanford University Stanford, CA	\$53,529	7,087
8. (tie) Carleton College Northfield, MN	\$57,111	2,097
8. (tie) Hamilton College Clinton, NY	\$56,530	1,915
10. (tie) Columbia University New York, NY	\$61,850	6,202
10. (tie) Elon University Elon, NC	\$36,571	6,196
10. (tie) Middlebury College Middlebury, VT	\$56,216	2,579

SOURCE: U.S. News & World Report, 2019

Wages for Selected Creative Occupations

Occupation	Annual mean wage
Artists and related workers	
Art directors	\$104,590
Multimedia artists and animators	\$78,230
Fine artists, including painters, sculptors, and illustrators	\$58,370
Craft artists	\$40,490
Designers	
Fashion designers	\$87,610
Commercial and industrial designers	\$71,430
Set and exhibit designers	\$61,020
Interior designers	\$59,120
Graphic designers	\$54,680
Floral designers	\$28,900
Media and communication workers	
Technical writers	\$75,500
Writers and authors	\$73,090
Editors	\$69,480
Photographers	\$42,770

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics survey (excludes self-employed), May 2018

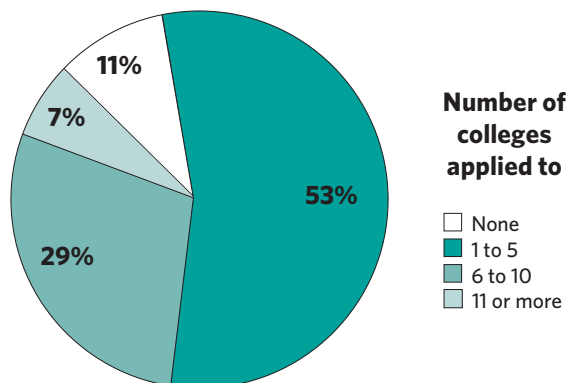
Fastest-Growing Occupations

	Projected growth by 2028	Median annual wage (2018)
Solar photovoltaic installers	63%	\$42,680
Wind turbine service technicians	57%	\$54,370
Home health aides	37%	\$24,200
Personal care aides	39%	\$24,020
Occupational therapy assistants	33%	\$60,220
Information security analysts	32%	\$98,350
Physician assistants	31%	\$108,610
Statisticians	31%	\$87,780
Nurse practitioners	28%	\$107,030
Speech-language pathologists	27%	\$77,510
Physical therapist assistants	27%	\$58,040
Genetic counselors	27%	\$80,370
Mathematicians	26%	\$101,900
Operations research analysts	26%	\$83,390
Software developers, applications	26%	\$103,620
Forest fire inspectors & prevention specialists	24%	\$39,600
Health specialties teachers, postsecondary	23%	\$97,370
Phlebotomists	23%	\$34,480
Physical therapist aides	23%	\$26,240
Medical assistants	23%	\$33,610

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018

U.S. Statistics

A Profile of Freshmen at 4-Year Colleges



SOURCE: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2017

Average Test Scores



SOURCES: ACT, 2018; College Board, 2018

A Night with the Sea

by "Paula," Park Rapids, MN

It was a very foggy morning, one that I will never forget. The fog that slumbers in the northern peninsula of Washington is nothing compared to the fog I have complained about at home in Minnesota. Even with the fog lights on in our family car, we still had trouble making out the road. We stopped at a rest stop, where mom and dad studied one of the several fold-out maps of Washington they had picked up in some gas station along the way.

While they studied the map, I discovered a worn-down trail by the edge of the parking lot and started out on it. The trees here looked just like the ones from home, but the air was cleaner and smelled of sea salt. My feet hardly made a sound on the trail, except for an occasional squish from a puddle. The grass and moss of the damp forest was a wet carpet, which didn't help the fact that my feet were already drenched. About a mile down the trail, I started to hear it. Something inside me shifted, and I felt the little kid in me tell me that I needed to get there faster. So I began to run. Finally, I reached a decline in the trail, and at the bottom, the grass of the forest turned into sand. I peered out in front of me and there it was.

The sea.

I always thought of the sea as blue. How sil-

ly it is to assign one color to something that is always shifting. As I gazed out toward the horizon over the ocean, it seemed as black as a moonless night. However, down at my feet where the waves come reaching up to tickle my toes, I noticed it was opaque. Out far from shore it was a dark navy before it crashed white against the rocks.

Slowly the waves came in, they always do, and brought with them unexpected treasures. As I wandered along the shoreline, I found a

My junior year was a breaking point for me

perfect sand dollar. A smooth piece of driftwood. A broken shell. A locket. I had an impulse to tuck each of these away into my jacket and take them back home with me, but I resisted the urge. I stared at them for a while, burning them into my memory. They belonged to the sea now.

• • •

I walked out of high school on the last day of junior year with my mother's words of wis-

dom ringing in my ear; "This is the beginning of your lasts. Make sure you have fun with your friends and do everything you want to get done before everyone gets swept away with the excitement of a perfect senior year."

Perfect wasn't a choice for me.

I remember in 5th grade when we had a huge project in the spring. It was worth 400 points, which seemed like a huge amount to a 12-year-old. I spent months preparing a poster and making it my mission to memorize 300 facts about my topic. The night before we presented it I couldn't sleep, so I went to the basement and stayed up all night finding new issues with my poster board. My mother came downstairs in the morning to find me amid a pile of paper scraps and note cards trying to find things wrong with my poster. That day I received a near perfect score. But it wasn't perfect. Later that evening I came home and cried for hours. This was the first time my mother was able to see the internal battle her young girl was fighting.

I wish I could say I found ways to cope with perfectionism in high school, but harder classes and the looming thought of graduation only made it worse. When it came time for finals each trimester, I would find myself up in the early hours of the morning trying to squeeze a few more facts into my brain. The last trimester of my junior year in high school was the breaking point for me, as I had a goal of a perfect report card. When I didn't receive it, my anxiety skyrocketed and I found the thought of sleep all but erased from my mind.

I needed a change of pace. My mother wasn't blind to my struggles and tried to find different ways to help me with my obsession with perfection. When some forms of medication didn't work we tried yoga and meditation. Before bed each night I would take melatonin supplements, but after a while, my body grew tolerant to them. Finally, my father brought up the idea of a family trip. He was a big outdoors guy and believed in the healing powers of nature. So we packed our bags and set out to the destination of my choice: the Washington coast.

• • •

After I gazed at the waves several minutes, I finally tore myself from the shoreline and wandered back to the rest area, where we piled into the car and began to drive down the coastline highway. I never let the sea leave my sight. We eventually came to the small town on the Washington coast named Forks. We found two available small cabins at a family-owned resort on the edge of town by the sea and decided this was the spot.

Halfway through the night, I >>>

Photo by Kaitlyn Snedeker,
Centerville, OH



Reconciling Pieces of My Identity

by Jessica Zou, Puyallup, WA

My first time crossing the Pacific Ocean happened at two months old. Tightly packed with numerous blankets, I went on a flight from Los Angeles to Chengdu, China, the bustling city that became my home for six years. Returning to the United States for elementary school, I began absorbing the culture and language around me, but at the same time, gripped onto elements of China that would continue to feel like home. I drank steaming hot jasmine tea in Seattle Seahawks water bottles and played Chinese opera on my new piano. Different aspects of the two cultures never seemed to clash until I found my passion for history in middle school. I asked myself a question: how do the vastly different aspects of American and Chinese history shape my identity? Through visiting different places in the two countries, I have collected pieces of history to answer that question. While attending the National History Academy, my visit to Harpers Ferry completed the puzzle surrounding my identity and perspective.

Calming splashes from the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers contrasted the roaring honks zooming in front of Tiananmen Square. Even so, both places carry a violent backstory that has sculpted my privileges and responsibilities. At Harpers Ferry, I stood on the long B&O Railroad Bridge, trying to feel the weight John Brown carried on the same spot 60 years earlier. As an abolitionist willing to die for his beliefs, his plan to ignite a slave rebellion inspired me, but I carefully considered if I would have followed his lead. The humid heat of the moment brought me back to a year earlier in Beijing. The same scorching sun struck me when I looked up at the large portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square. I felt devastated for the students, who in 1989, fearlessly, but fruitlessly protested for democratic reform under a regime that lacked the confidence to negotiate changes. Despite the different goals John Brown and the Chinese students had, their willingness to fight against prevalent norms despite its risks motivate me in a similar way.

The visit to Harpers Ferry and the numerous investigations of influential leaders at the National History Academy showed me how individual people can champion move-

ments and shape the way future generations live. But more importantly, having the ability to witness varying opinions of historical figures such as John Brown made me realize the privilege I have as an American to freely share my perspective and debate prominent people without any fear of retaliation. Learning about history in the United States, I sense no fear of criticism or reflection on past mistakes, exemplifying the type of mindset I strive to uphold in order to constantly improve myself. Although learning about Chinese history differs significantly due to censorship, the tenacity and courage I have observed in everyday people pushes me to hold onto my values of freedom regardless of the social norm and people in power. The 5,000-year Chinese history, filled with perseverance and reconciliation, defines the qualities I hope to reflect throughout my life in order to maintain the freedom past leaders have fought for in American history. ♦

Individual people can shape future generations



Art by Caroline Dai, Austin, TX

awoke suddenly. I could hear the waves through the open windows in the cabin. The waves were a spell, calling me. I pulled on my sweatshirt and made my way out the back door toward the sea.

I was not very accustomed to the sea yet, but tonight I knew it was trying to say something. I sat on an old piece of driftwood for a while watching the waves come in and out. In and out. In and out. There was a rhythm, a heartbeat, but an irregular one.

The sea is free. Each wave comes of its own accord and doesn't always fall perfectly. One wave would consume the other, and they would both roll back into the depths. Others came several moments after the other. You could try to tell them, "No wait, it's not your turn yet,"

but I'm guessing they wouldn't listen. And why would they? Who are you to tell something so beautiful and free that it needs to change to be perfect?

What if there was such a thing as perfect, but it didn't fit my definition? What if perfect described something flawed, yet someone chose to see it as the best version it could be? It wouldn't matter if it wasn't perfect to anyone else, just yourself.

I do not know how long I sat there. The stars made their paths across the sky, and I listened to the waves. They sang a soothing lullaby to me, one that I will never be able to recite. Slowly, I found myself wandering toward the water's edge. My arm outstretched, reaching. A thought came to my head, and I started to wade out into

the waves. As I stood waist deep in the shallows, the waves slowly came in and out. In and out. In and out. As the dark blues of the horizon turned to a light violet, I realized that some lessons couldn't be learned from school textbooks or our parents. No, these have to be taught instead by something else. The waves lulled in and out, and a sudden peace fell over me.

The beginning rays of light began to glint upon the water, the purple sky turning to a vibrant orange. The sea seemed to hold its breath for a brief moment as the sun finally peeked over the horizon. Then the waves continued, showing the way to something deeper than the surface. ♦

5 Major Considerations When Choosing Your College

The years you spend in college can very well determine the path of the rest of your life. So it's incredibly important that you consider all of your options to make sure you're making the best choice for you! To help you start your college search journey, CampusCompare has put together a few major considerations when choosing your college:

1. Academic Interests – Your number one goal in college should be to study something that you believe will help your career and future. Don't pick a college just because your friends are going! Choose schools that offer robust academic programs and opportunities that focus around your major. Don't know what you want to major in? Start with what you're already good at and go from there!

2. Location – Are you ready for a big city adventure or do you prefer secluded, natural surroundings? Do you want to stay close to home or are you ready to explore the world? Make sure you consider your location options and understand your personal needs. If you need more support from friends and family, check out your community colleges or nearby

state-colleges. Maybe you're not quite ready to travel too far from home, but you may change your mind later; in these cases, check out the transfer options available at each college.

3. Tuition – The most common concern that students have when going to college is the financial burden of tuition. Make sure to fill out your FAFSA as early as possible to understand your options. Research available grants, scholarships, work opportunities, and more for each college. Make appointments with financial aid and academic counselors at colleges as well and learn how they can help you! Sometimes, all you need to do is ask!

4. Culture – There are so many different and similar college environments out there; sometimes your best choice depends on the culture. Are you a big football or basketball fan? Are you considering Greek life? Do you feel more comfortable in lectures with hundreds of people or do you prefer intimate classroom sizes? Are you looking for diversity or a chance to be with more people of your race, religion, gender, or culture? Is it important for your college to be eco-friendly and be focused

on mental health? These are a few things that impact your fit and feel for each college.

5. Future Success and Growth – We know choosing a college is already difficult enough, so it's hard to think about what's going to happen AFTER college. Going to college can be an amazing and fun experience, but don't lose sight of the ultimate goal - your future! Check out the alumni networks available for each college and see if you can connect with nearby alumni. Understand their successes and the types of resources they used to get there. Be aware of your academic requirements and see if you can get started early while still in high school. Make sure there will be job opportunities and growth in your selected industry by the time you graduate! Set yourself up for success!

There is a lot more that goes into learning about prospective colleges and sometimes it's not that easy to find all of this information. In those cases, check out [CampusCompare.com](https://www.campuscompare.com) where you can search for colleges that match your needs! Register today for free and start finding the college that was made for YOU! ♦



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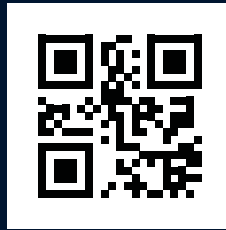
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A Traveler's Take on Journaling

by Cassie Muenchen, Phoenix, AZ

Journaling a daily travel guide is an art, a life hack, and a time for reflection all in one. Just as one person may be captivated by the travel itself, I am captivated by the minuscule details of life in every new city, place, or country I visit.

When I explore my cultural horizons, I find myself drawn to the random lady on the tube who wears a bow bigger than her forehead, the running speed of illegal vendors selling Eiffel Tower key-chains when the police pull up, and even how the crepes sold under the Eiffel Tower taste best with Nutella, strawberries, and bananas. These little details of life spark my curiosity. What were the best little things about that day? Was it learning that the toilet paper in London hotels double as a tissue? Or was it that the best tasting water on a scorching hot day is bought coming out of the Palace of Versailles for a single euro? What about the importance of tea-time gossip and a game of cards at midnight in Barcelona? Or that I realized the best way to keep your hands full in Montmartre is to buy a sandwich on a fresh baguette, cross the street, and purchase a raspberry gelato to go in the other hand?

After each long day I spend playing the part of an explorer captivated by the world's beauty, I sit down and write what I like to call, "Cassie's Declassified Travel Survival Guide." When I am writing, all the small details from the day come rushing back, and it's like unloading a valise full of French scarves. Funny details, experiences, concerns, cultural

differences, interests, thoughts, and feelings tumble onto the pages of my journal. When I'm writing, I re-experience the range of emotions from the day: ecstatic, nervous, excited, even restless.

Having the ability to recall these sentimental memories is what makes me so in love with journaling. I can reflect on the wonders of my day and bask in the highlights of new experiences. When I finally finish recording my "survival tips" – the details of each new adventure that turn a blank page into an intricate story – I re-read my guide. Reviewing my journal allows me to travel back in time. Each page is a portal that transports me back into the midst of the Champ de Mars or the bird's-eye view from the London Eye.

However, the most important aspect of my journaling is not the mental time travel or the ability to relive a day like rewinding your favorite movie scene. It is remembering all the minute details of each trip that could change the world of travel. I believe everyone should know that sitting at the top edge of a Roman amphitheater is crucial for experiencing life like a Gladiator (even if it is a little dangerous). I believe that travelers should be informed that airplane toilets do explode, and that Delta will pay for your stay at a fancy hotel until you find a ride home. Most importantly, people should know that you can be captivated by the small details of the world. After all, it is the small details of life that have the biggest impact and create the best memories. ♦

*It's like unloading
a valise full of
French scarves*

My Grandfather's Voice

My grandfather's voice is sonorous
like the Yangtze River, a steady current
flowing through a country scarred by hardship.

He told me about hiding in the mud-slabbed banks
as Imperial soldiers burned his village to the ground,
the sky coughing magmatic ashes and gunpowder,
bruised blue mothers and unborn children welded
to the tips of bayonets.

Books were his only salvation.
As his family fled the war-plagued countryside,
Grandpa devoured poetry as though it would cure
the undying hunger clawing at his stomach
or the swollen bruises lining his ribcage.

"For a few minutes a day, I was able to pretend
as though the enemy fire and bloodied pleas
of my dead friends were merely a dream. I was transported
back to a different world, a simpler time when we skipped rocks
by the riverbank and clambered across bamboo tiles
for my mother's famous chicken dumpling soup."
He smiles against a blur of plastic tubes
hooked to his mouth like shackles.
His hands tremble like December wind
and his voice – once mellifluous as honeydew songs –
croaks with silence, paralyzed by the aftershocks
of two wars and a Revolution.

Yet this silence – this immobility – is a form of art too.

I hear my grandfather's voice, silent but steady
like the Yangtze, teaching me the invincibility
of language, how to turn words into weapons
and make my voice the gunfire.

I was five when he showed me the beauty
of Kaishu calligraphy, ten when he etched Chinese poems
into my skull until I learned to love them too.

When I write today, I feel my grandfather's hands on mine.
He smiles proudly, guiding me through every word,
shaping me as I speak.

by Jeffrey Liao, Livingston, NJ

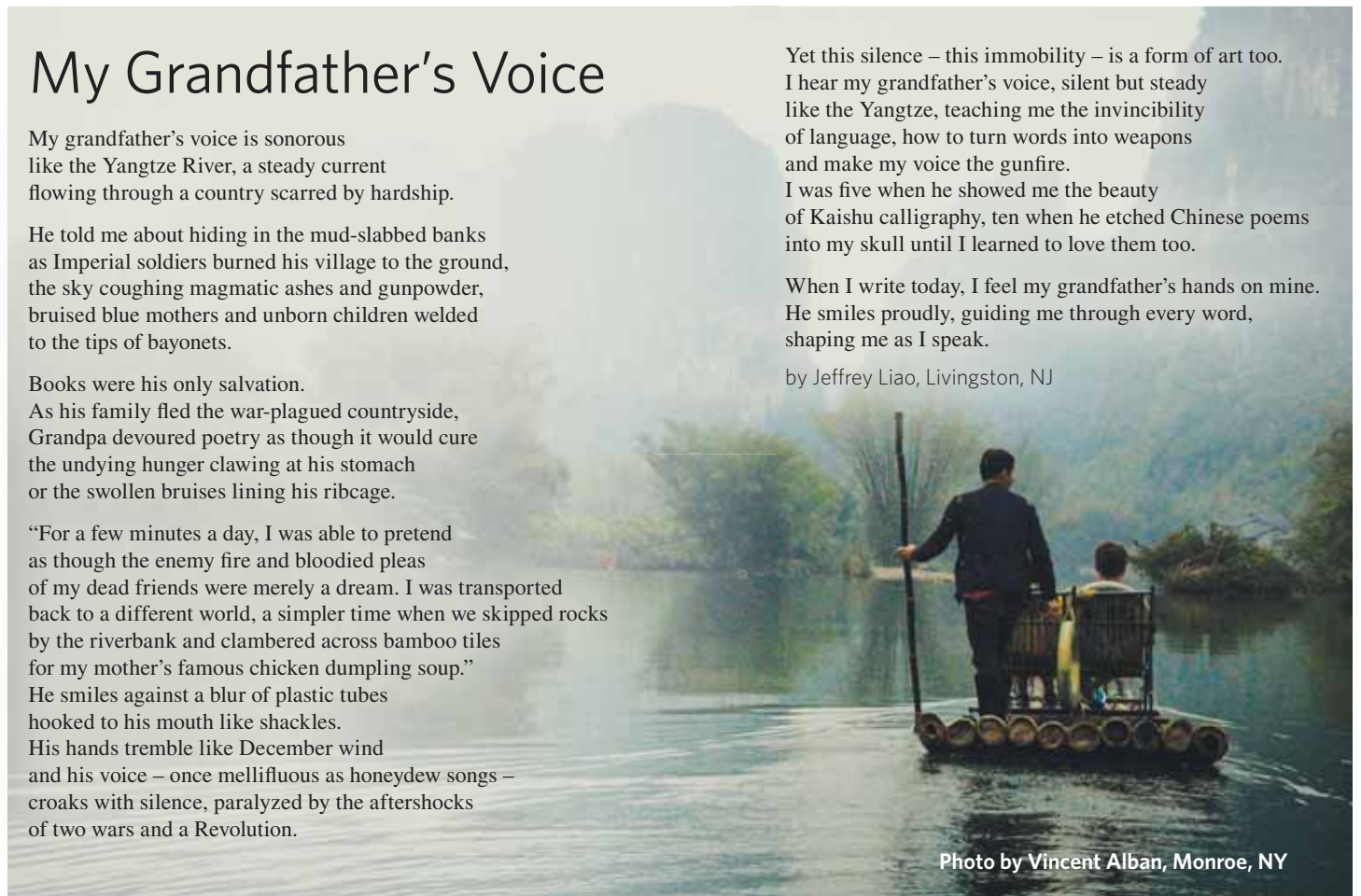


Photo by Vincent Alban, Monroe, NY

All You Really Need in Life

by Anna Timms, Bend, ORL

The hot Caribbean sun beating down on us, we made our way inland, a quick two-mile trek from the ship. The walk was beautiful, but in a devastating way. Trees swayed back and forth in the light breeze, as the waves crashed upon the shore in a consistent pattern. The ocean water was blue, clear, and calm. However, trash littered the beaches. Everywhere I looked I saw pieces of trash strewn across the island. The further in we walked, the more garbage we saw. I will always remember seeing a house with a mountain of junk in the yard. Several houses were torn down, and many people were using tarps for their homes.

We made our way to the field, used to the walk that we had made about twice a day for the past week. We reached the field and saw several children playing various sports: soccer (football as it was known there), volleyball, and running track. The kids saw us, the crew from the medical/mission ship Pacific Hope, and ran over. Their eyes shone bright with excitement as they invited us to play ball, as we had done the previous days.

I will always remember two little girls who I connected with. Vasha and Jewell. Vasha was a quiet four-year-old who had been living on the island of Dominica her entire life. She was always happy despite her home being completely demolished in the hurricane. Then there was Jewell. She was the sweetest, most joyous little girl; she had so much love in her heart to give to others. All of the children were like this, I noticed. So many of them had suffered through so much, but were still the happiest people.

Another person I will always remember is Osias. Osias was a teenage boy who we met while helping on the island. He had lost his father six months prior to us visiting. He had to suffer through the hurricane, then lose his father, but he was still such a kind person with a huge heart.

Dominica is an independent island in the Caribbean. It is small, and

many people who are born there stay there their entire lives. They have no other option. In 2017, the beautiful island was devastated by Hurricane Maria, and has been working to recover ever since. Because it is an independent island, Dominica doesn't have support from wealthier countries and has been working alone to recover from the hit. Many people were left without a home, or with very little of their home left. People moved into houses made from tarps or trash that they could find along the island. Some used boats that had washed ashore or old, abandoned train cars. We were there to provide relief to the people on the island and to run a program for the kids living there.

Spending three weeks on this island got me thinking – maybe the happiest people aren't the richest, but the people who can see beauty in anything. Even though they may not have a lot, they have each other. Maybe that's all a person really needs in life. ♦

*People moved
into houses
made from
tarps or trash*



Photo by Kim Ngan Bui, Olympia, WA

Castillo de San Marcos

by Daedalus Fitzgerald, Winter Garden, FL

I was recently in Saint Augustine, Florida, and visited our country's oldest masonry fort – Castillo de San Marcos. The structure still exudes a feeling of rugged stoicism despite being built in the late 1600s. Its walls cast out a message that discourages entrance. In spite of centuries of weathering, the fort still fulfills one of its original goals – to be intimidating.

If I had tried to enter this place 300 years ago, I would have been greeted by a volley of muskets and cannon fire from Spanish soldiers willing to die for their empire. I would probably have never made it inside to see the barracks housing those soldiers, a treasure room, and a prison. Inside the fort was a world of order separated from a harsh and antagonistic world beyond its walls. At its construction, the fort was a marvel of engineering, a glorious demonstration of power by an empire in its prime.

And now it's not. Today the fort is a national park, children play where gunmen would've

stood guard, and the barrier to entry isn't being pelted with bullets or cannonballs; it's 15 dollars. You can walk across the bridge where soldiers of centuries past died trying to invade or to protect. You can watch a park ranger speak about the history of the walls that sur-

*The fort was a glorious
demonstration of power*

round you, of the silent yet deafening narrative that is shouted by the bars on the windows and the unchanged sea just outside.

Despite the walls behind glass, the dry moats, and the view, the most awe-inspiring part of my visit was seeing a poster detailing the life of a man who gave tours of this fort in the 1830s and '40s. Looking at it, I realized that there will come a time when today's histo-

rians will themselves become relegated to history. That modern tour guides may, in a century or so, become part of the tour. There will be a day when the ocean of centuries past washes away the people who remember this forte, just as it washes away that which they remember.

After a while I found myself sitting on the tip of the fort, overlooking the sea below. I watched waves wash over the seashells that make up forts of both centuries past and the ones yet to be built. My little brother stood up behind me, arms outstretched, and shouted: "I am king of the world!" An ocean gust knocked him down and he muttered: "For a moment."

This fort was built by the kings of the world, it is being toured by the rulers of the globe, and soon enough it will be forgotten by the royalty of civilization. Whether we like it or not, we are all monarchs of our world. We are here, yet to be relegated to history. We are here to build and tear down. To remember and forget. And hopefully, to always keep in mind that we are kings – if only for a moment. ♦

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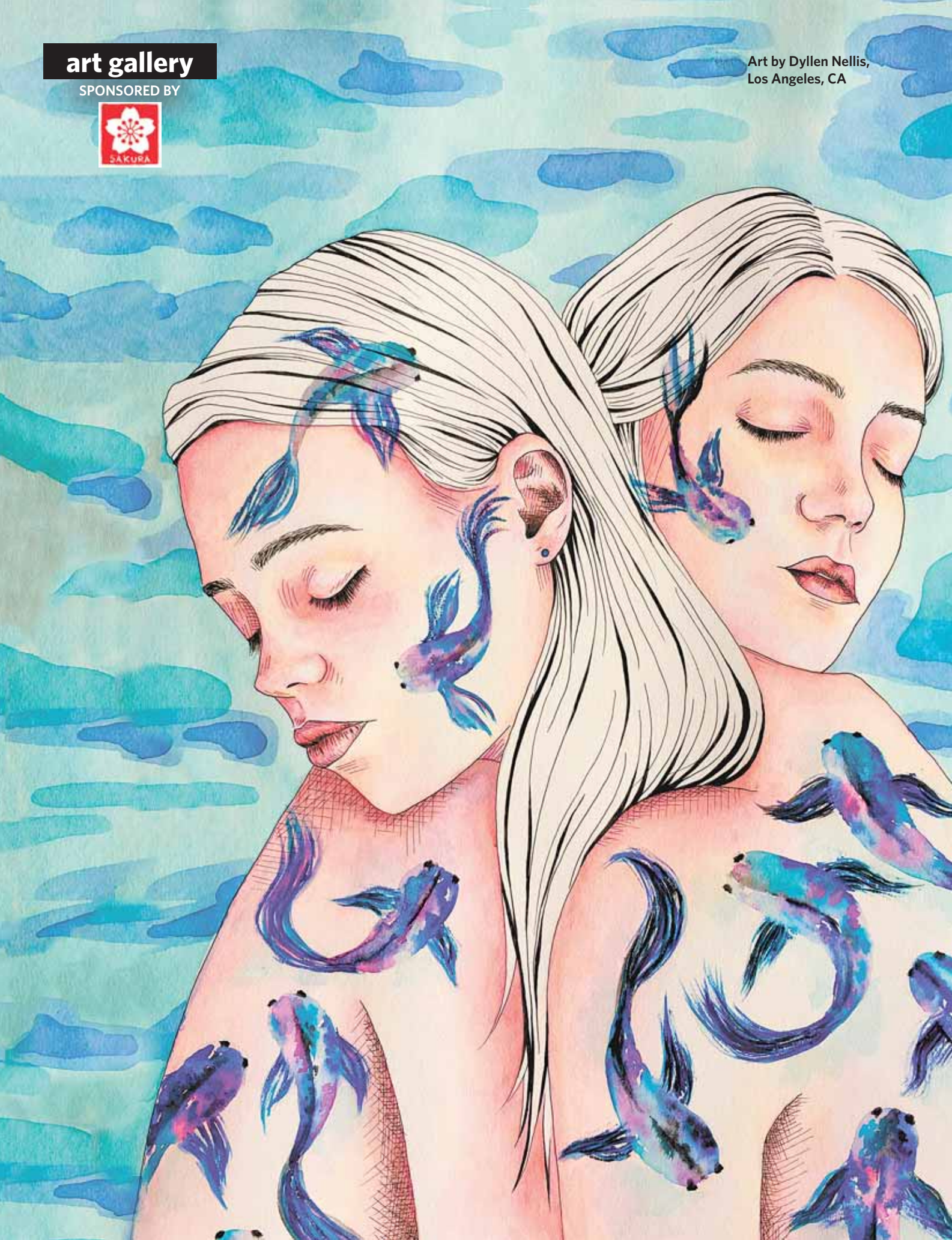


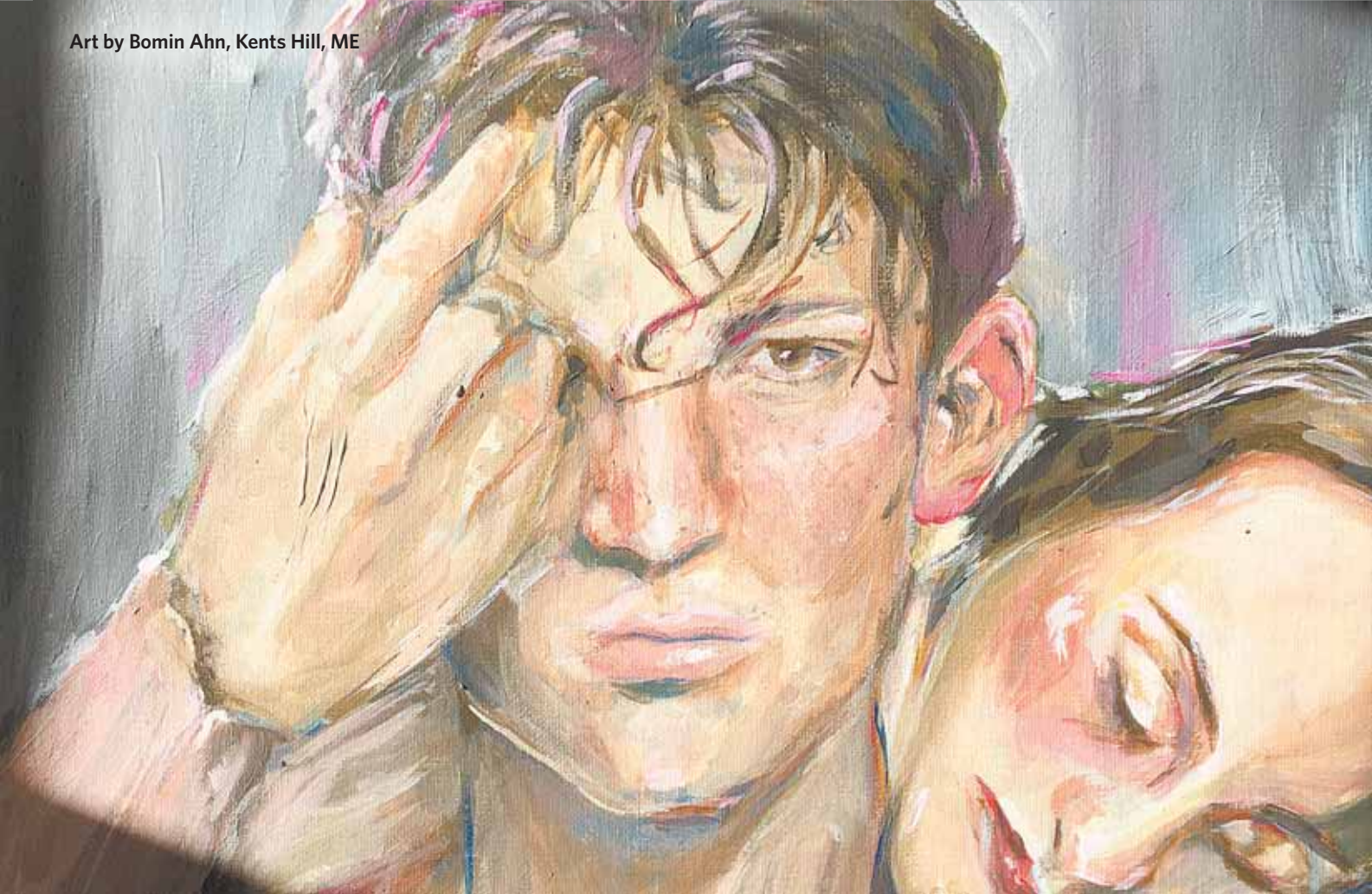
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Photo by Grace Musser, Fallon, NV

The Problem With Sophie Turner's Juul by Zoe Yu, Conroe, TX

It isn't new news that Sophie Turner is extremely attached to her Juul. Dozens of paparazzi pictures feature Turner clutching her vape, taking puffs behind the scenes of *Game of Thrones*, and most recently, crying real tears in *Dark Phoenix*, all thanks to her director taking it away. However, Turner's fixation with her Juul reflects a real concern. Although Turner has the liberty to make her own decisions, her vaping sends a distressing message to teens.

The problematic message sent out by many media outlets – which youth are all easily exposed to – portrays Turner in a light that almost promotes the use of e-cigarettes. This activity may influence teen perceptions of Juuling. The normalization of vaping, especially when it comes to celebrities that appeal to teens, attractive marketing campaigns, and social media endorsements are the driving force behind teen e-cigarette use skyrocketing within the past

few years. What's troublesome is that many teens don't realize the adverse health risks of nicotine. If their favorite celebrities are using the product, why shouldn't they?

From a health perspective, the dangers of e-cigarettes are just being discovered. Addiction, DNA damage, an increased risk of diabetes, lung and heart diseases, and cancer are only some of the threats associated with vaping. On December 18, 2018, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a health advisory, the fourth in 10 years. As of August of this year, the CDC claims that "25 states have reported possible cases of lung illnesses associated with use of e-cigarette products." At least nine deaths related to vaping have also been reported. Our new generation's infatuation with the latest trend has officially been declared an epidemic, and no celebrity can make that cool. ♦

Teens don't realize the health risks

The Missing Ninth by Sara Jarecke, Lakewood, OH

“Four.”
“Minutes?”
“Hours.”
“Hours!”

My history teacher spun around, portraying his dramatically gaping mouth to the entire class. “Four hours a day on your phone?” he yelled. “How do you people live?”

Honestly, I have no idea.

My classmate just laughed and turned obediently back to her phone.

Life goes on, and we're a few months into school, right back in sophomore U.S. History. The glorious class that seems to be nothing more than a class to teach teens how to stealthily add to their Snapchat stories while the teacher is lecturing. A different girl sets a new record by casually mentioning that she spends 11 hours a day on her phone, thanks to the new Apple update that calculates your average time per day. My history teacher doesn't freak out at this one; I don't think he actually believes it. He asks her anyway, almost as if he were challenging her.

“What the heck do you do all day?”

She laughs like it's a silly question. “I'm on FaceTime pretty much all throughout the school day,” she boasts to us. “And I'm on it non-stop from the time I get home to the time I go to bed.” She giggles. “I mean, if I go to bed.” She flips her long blonde hair over her shoulder and I almost expect to hear a whip crack.

How could this possibly happen?

I'm not sure I want to know the an-

swer.

But I think back to several years ago. I was somewhere around eight years old. It was Elizabeth's birthday party. She was a nice girl, but we hardly ever talked during school. Since we rarely talked, I didn't know what gift to get her, so I grabbed a friendship bracelet kit from Five Below and hoped for the best. You know, the default option.

In the pile Elizabeth's gifts was a small box neatly wrapped in pink and green striped paper. She picked it up, and to every-

one's surprise, it started ringing! She gasped, and unwrapped the gift quickly.

“A PHONE!” My third grade ears never knew someone could scream so loud.

Elizabeth loved her new phone, but I hated it. I thought it was stupid that an eight-year-old got a phone. Still, I couldn't help but feel jealous. I never would have guessed, though, that in just seven years, she would be spending 11 hours a day on that stupid thing.

How do you live? I'm beginning to believe my history teacher hadn't been acting so dramatically after all. More and more frequently I want to grab my peers by the shoulders and shake them until they answer this question. How do you go about your life with a screen

We spend one-ninth of our lives on our phones

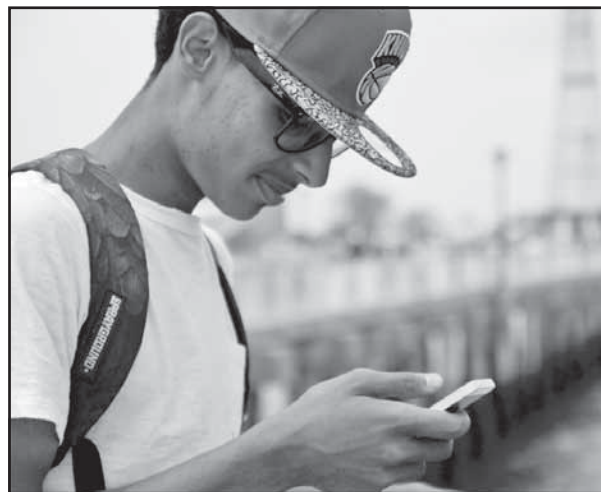


Photo by Kaitlin O'Sullivan, Pelham Manor, NY

in your face? How can you do your homework when Instagram needs updating or Snapchat is begging you to look at another picture of half of someone's face and the ceiling, or FaceTime is whining with another call? How do you see your family, do the things you love, laugh, clean, cry, sleep, eat, or even think with this thing shoved in your face?

Introducing the new Apple Soul Harvester 87! Guaranteed to suck every last year of life out of you!

Why is it that when we find out we will spend a third of our lives sleeping, we feel like we are missing out on so much? Did you know we will spend one-ninth of our lives on our phones? Why do we so easily conform to wasting a ninth of our life when it's something we can control?

Why Low-Income Families Need Access to Books

by "Kay," Rolling Hills Estates, CA

Author Dr. Seuss once said, "The more things you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." Does that mean we as humans will learn less if we do not read? According to the US Department of Education, there are currently 2.5 million children in the United States that are enrolled in districts that have no access to public libraries. That's a possible 2.5 million children that will likely have a difficult time developing the skills that reading provides at a young age. Although many believe that books are easily accessible to anyone, many children from low-income families are left without books each year and it is important that they are supplied with them because books improve performance in school, social interactions, and independence.

It is important that books are made available to all children because reading is an essential aspect of advancing academic performance at a young age. Statistical data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that children in book-rich environments perform at a much higher level academically than those who are not. Simply having access to a large number of books will help improve a child's ability to succeed or even exceed the limits in school. This is because children seem to read more frequently when raised in homes or areas where print books can be retrieved with ease. The more these children read, the more likely it is for them to improve their literacy along with their overall set of learning skills. According to researcher and scholar in the field of student motivation, John T. Guth-

Reading is an essential aspect of advancing academic performance

rie states that children who read many books are usually high achievers. Often challenging themselves by taking hard classes in school, high achievers are able to get the most out of their education at a much more advanced level than the average student. Along with this comes an essential factor in developing efficient learning styles: the ability to keep trying in school even after experiencing failure. Students can use this to their advantage in school to learn from their mistakes to know what can be improved to achieve success in the future.

In addition to improving a child's overall performance in school, reading also works towards developing the ability to connect with others. Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D. found that literature helps individuals express feelings of empathy, "the ability to understand someone else's point of view." Empathy is an important characteristic to have because it allows humans to set aside their differences to learn more about one another. People who have a strong sense of empathy are those who are able to open up to those around them. They have a good understanding of how others may be feeling in certain situations and what role they can play in order to make things better. Empathy is important; however, it is not the only factor that defines communication with others. Paula J. Schwanenflugel, Ph.D., and Nancy Flanagan Knapp, Ph.D. claim that reading is important because it helps children by expanding their vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Vocabulary is an essential part of communication because it offers more flexibility when expressing thoughts or

ideas. People with a high level of vocabulary are able to talk to all sorts of people whether it be sophisticated or casual. They can better comprehend what others are trying to say simply based off of the words that they are using.

Reading can also create a sense of independence for children so that they will be able to make decisions on their own. According to the South African College of Applied Psychology, a major takeaway from reading is that it increases both rationality and creativity. Rationality is an important factor in being independent because it gives children the capability of using logical reasoning. Rational thinking allows individuals to get through everyday problems by determining what will and will not work for them. Creativity, on the other hand, works towards building a sense of independence by allowing humans to come up with things or ideas that are unique to them. If you mix both rationality and creativity, you end up with a person that will be able to achieve greater without always depending on others for help. For these reasons, it is key that all children have access to books. Every child should be able to think for themselves so that they will not have to struggle later on in their lives.

Dr. Seuss is, in fact, a wise man for emphasizing the importance of reading. Now it's just a matter of taking action so that every child receives the opportunity to read. Book drives can be hosted by libraries or schools on a more frequent basis and district emails can be sent out to parents advertising the need for these books. It will all be community service so no funding from the government will be needed. As long as there are people willing to donate, book drives can be successful in collecting books for children from low-income families.

◆

Gradually, carelessly, that ninth is beginning to grow. "Candy Crush" replaces homework. Why talk to your friends at the beginning of class when you can see what Ariana Grande had for lunch instead? Read a book? Why would I do that?

The danger lies in the subtle difference that separates phones from laptops, tablets, and TVs. With their handy-dandy size, phones can deviously fit right into your pocket, ensuring that they're always with you. Always the eas-

ier, comfortable option, promising a landing pad to fall back on during an awkward conversation, excruciatingly boring lunch, or those few minutes before class starts.

Time on our phones decreases our "memory income." Children keep their memories third grade and birthday parties, but how much of our time spent on our phones do we remember? When we're 78 and living in a nursing home, what memories are we going to look fondly back on? Updating our Instagram feed?

Call me crazy, but I don't think so.

Are we really living when everything we experience is on a screen? It may feel comfortable, but we miss out on so much behind the safety of our phones. We can watch every single "People are Awesome" video out there, but we will never truly experience what it's like.

It hurts, almost. Knowing that you spent your life looking at things that you never actually experienced on your own. ◆

A New Age of Slacktivism

by Angela Paik, Valencia, CA

In recent decades, social media has been hailed as the linchpin of political liberation. Through various platforms, millions of users express their political beliefs and opinions on a wide range of issues, transcending previous boundaries for activism. This “digital activism” has allowed online movements to garner support through the convenient hashtag or retweet, and the online community is contributing far more to the nation’s political climate than ever before. But how far can this social media activism really take us?

Scrolling down my Twitter feed, I notice viral tweets demanding change for oceanic pollution with the hashtag “Save the Turtles” or a drive for Asian American feminism with the slogan #NotYourAsianSidekick. These movements deserve global awareness, but more importantly, they require solutions through genuine engagement. While social media often provides the former, it lacks the latter. In this new age of digital activism, the convenience

of the retweet button becomes a substitute for action. People mindlessly join campaign after campaign, ultimately abandoning them as the popularity dwindles. In today’s world, the greatest paradox of online activism is the rise in social consciousness with a decline in social responsibility.

The retweet button has become a substitute for action

Although political discussions are regular facets of life for social media users, this newfound knowledge does not necessarily result in tangible change. In fact, activists who engage initially in “private” modes of support, such as writing a letter to a representative, are more likely to have a deeper level of engagement than those who initially support a cause over social media. Too often, digital activism simply rewards users with “socially conscious” brownie points while failing to promote involvement. In other words, “slacktivism” works to boost the ego, not the movement. Social media users are not ignorant of this either, as a whopping 71% of people agree that “social media makes people

believe they’re making a difference when they really aren’t,” according to a recent study from the Pew Research Center.

A great amount of information is at our fingertips, but our attention to it is fleeting. Users impulsively click “like” on issues they deem significant without taking the time to research the topic. As a result, social movements with genuine intentions are oversimplified and even misconstrued by the sensationalism of media outlets, as shown by the #Kony2012 and #BringBackOurGirls movements. Despite global attention, these campaigns were quickly turned into online fads that failed to implement change.

Digital activism may be an important starting point for awareness, but it is hardly a replacement for personal action. As a society enraptured by social media, we must fundamentally change how we utilize our potentials. It’s time to realize that retweeting support for a cause is only the beginning of a journey for justice, not the end. So, I urge social media activists around the world to engage in activism beyond the security of the cell-phone screen. It’s time to take a stand, literally. ♦

Why Isn’t Lobbying Unconstitutional?

by Lorelei Watson, Lexington, KY

In 1998, a man named Bruce C. Bereano of Maryland, was convicted for mail fraud and sentenced to five months of jail time and five months of house arrest, with the addition of paying a \$30,000 fine. But Mr. Bereano was a top-grossing lobbyist, with an inordinate devotion to his job. He continued to enlist clients and to lobby the State House using a phone in order to get legislators to vote against a bill that banned cigarette vending machines. His lobbying worked. When he was released from his term, his salary rose by half a million.

If you don’t know what lobbying is already, it is the attempt by individuals or interest groups to influence the decisions of government officials and lawmakers. At first, this notion might not seem so bad, as protecting the rights of various interests is essential to the integrity of democracy. But what happens when that integrity becomes skewed?

What happens when integrity becomes skewed?

the way of proper legislation?

In 2010, the Supreme Court case of Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission allowed corporations to contribute money despite regulations on campaign contributions and lobbying spending. In 2014, the Supreme Court case of McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission ruled limits on money contribution were a violation of the First Amendment, under the right to petition the government. This right is often framed as “consultation” in which “consultants” represent the views of the “global public” for showing the diverse perspectives on political policies. Actually, most of these consultants represent industry and trade associations like World Coal: whose prime interest is lobbying.

Many of these businesses use covert means of getting access to lawmakers and officials such as grassroots mimicry, as companies frame themselves as being non-profit organi-

zations, or closely associating themselves with non-profit organizations. They bring trade associations with honest intentions into their organized lobbying operations functioning under the guise of those honest intentions. This is why knowing about who shapes the political process has been a pressing question, especially recently.

Lobbying has increased dramatically, putting billions of dollars into circulation in order to get laws passed that act in the interest of businesses trying to lessen the burden of regulation and gain the benefits of tax breaks. In a 2014 study published in *Perspectives on Politics*, scholars conceived four theoretical iterations of how American Politics works and their degree of influence on legislation. The data showed that regardless of what portion of the American public voted on an issue, the likelihood of that legislation being passed was 30 percent, all the time. What’s even more startling is the fact that the United States has lobbying laws that are more stout than lobbying on an international level, which ➤➤

Video Game Loot Boxes Should Be Illegal

by Braeden Kelly, Collins, IA

Video games are a part of many people's lives. In fact, a recent Pew Research Center study found that 72 percent of teens play video games. While gaming is fun and can even be educational, playing video games comes at a price. Very few games are free, and many include microtransactions (using money to buy in-game currency or skins), DLC (downloadable content available for extra fees), or loot boxes. Loot boxes can be purchased and include a random selection of gaming content, varying in importance, rarity, and style. The content of the loot box is only revealed to the player once it is purchased. In effect, teens are "gambling" on gaining valuable loot. Content from all these transactions can make games feel more appealing and often give players an advantage over gamers who can't or won't spend money on the game.

But here's the thing: these boxes and expensive add-ons promote child gambling. According to The Next Web, a site dedicated to technology development, "the number of children with gambling problems has quadrupled to more than 50,000 in just two years." The alarming figures come from the UK Gambling Commission's latest annual statistics, which showed that the prevalence of problem gambling among children had risen to 1.7%, compared with 0.4% in 2016 and 0.9% in 2017." The Gambling Commission's report also noted that "13 percent of teenagers aged 11 to 16 had played gambling-style games online, and that 31 percent had accessed loot boxes in a video game or app, to try to acquire in-game items." Gambling problems amongst children have been rising at an alarming rate in recent

The number of children with gambling problems has quadrupled

years. The fact that microtransactions in video games have also been increasing steadily in recent years shows that loot boxes need to be banned because they are increasing the amount of children with gambling problems by offering great rewards for money.

"Fortnite," for example, is a game that has picked up in popularity very rapidly. I even played and spent money on the game. But, the issue with "Fortnite" is its combination of microtransactions and its appeal to little kids. Kids have no concept of money, and this leads them to spend their own (or their parent's) money on the game. In July 2018, a father allowed his son to purchase one, and only one, skin on "Fortnite." This purchase of one skin quickly turned into 81 total purchases, and led to a total price of \$918. The father was obviously outraged, but had no way to reverse the purchases. At the very least, microtransactions need to be banned for players who are underage.

In conclusion, playing video games isn't something that should be frowned upon. They are a means of escape for some adolescents like myself, or even, potentially, a career. But video game companies are trying to do everything in their power to get players to hand over every cent they own. Whether it be through gambling, locking game content behind microtransactions, or making the game much easier for people who spend money, companies will continue trying to take their clients' money. For all these reasons, paid transactions and loot boxes in games need to be banned, or limited. ♦

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isn't even considered lobbying anymore, just "popular representation in the present-day world" and a so-called "guarantee of political legitimacy." This is furthered by instability of preexisting laws such as the development of Brexit – which was obviously a huge flop. While the popular belief is that professional associations and interest groups serve to advocate for average citizens' interests, the data does not show this.

In order for legislation to properly represent the majority, the principles of democracy, and the wants and needs of the nation as a whole, lobbying can't be allowed to have free reign over American politics. But why is this so important on an individual level? In issues concerning big policy and "the system" the idea of making an impact seems incredibly out of reach, even thinking about it makes most people shudder and dismiss the complexities of public policy altogether. Every person has heard some iteration of the phrase "one person can make a difference." However, it seems as if Americans still struggle to have an effect on politics in significant ways, aside from squabbles at the Thanksgiving dinner table. This

belief isn't necessarily true, what's important is not the fact that each individual can make a difference, it's that every person tries.

The belief in asserting natural rights that are universal has manifested itself in cultural and social movements against discrimination, protests against sedition, and other situations where rights were threatened and people assembled in order to thwart that obstacle. These issues are more easily agreed upon, as they are the threads of national identity that bring Americans together despite political party affiliation or knowledge generally on the subject of policy. But the myth that movements such as these must be formed in order to create change must be dispelled. There are efforts on an individual level that cannot be ignored. And the method that takes foremost importance over anything else is voting. Not just the concept on its own, but informed voting. The idea of informed voters vs. majority voters is an idea that descends from Socrates's ancient Theory of Democracy, but it also tears in half an American citizen's ability to change things, in the same way that political parties do. ♦



Photo by Ashley Kiczek, Cliffside Park, NJ

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Will I Become an Alcoholic?

by "Anonymous," Lexington, KY

We sit in a circle staring at each other because the eight o'clock meeting is starting in a few minutes. The woman chairing the meeting stands up and says, "Everyone please stand for the Al-Anon pledge." Once everyone stands and grabs the hands of one another, we say, "Let it begin with me. When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen always be there, and – let it begin with me." Al-Anon is a recovery program for the friends and family members of alcoholics. And the topic for the meeting tonight is "accepting when the alcoholic relapses."

Alcoholism has run in my family for generations. All the men in my father's family line have been alcoholics since my great-great-great-grandfather. Stories of these men have been passed down; sometimes they are used as excuses for why yet another son has become an alcoholic – that's just how they were raised. The woman chairing the meeting, Rose, asks, "Who here would like to share about someone close to them relapsing?"

No one raises a hand or jumps in to start the conversation. Everyone retreats back into their bubble, staring at the floor, remembering when their loved one fell off the wagon, but too scared to share. I stare at the clock, hoping that with the silence in the room I will be able to hear the ticking as the second hand makes its way around. The walls of the room are a light brown with nothing on them: plastic chairs and fifteen bodies are the only things occupying the space. The air conditioner blows directly on me and my hairs begin to stand all over my body. The woman next to me smells like she just finished smoking a cigarette and her premature wrinkle lines show me it's a habit she has had for many years. I am trying not to focus on my father, but he is consuming my thoughts.

I start to talk, hoping what I have to say will get everyone else talking. "I remember how my father pulled me in and began screaming in my face. I could smell the orange Kool-Aid on his breath – it was Vodka. I know he always mixes vodka with Kool-Aid. His arms tightened around my shoulders and his fingernails began to dig into my skin. He lost his sobriety of three years," I say to the group.

When I was little, my dad made a vow to my

"He has relapsed six times in the past nine years."

family that he would stop drinking, but this wasn't the first time he broke that promise. I continue, rambling to the group, because it does no good keeping these thoughts to myself. "He has relapsed six times in the past nine years. Sometimes he gets a hold of his drinking quickly, and sometimes he goes on a binge for six months before he decides to sober up again. I don't really have anything else. Thank you."

My family always wanted my dad to be sober, but in reality, he was just a dry drunk, which is just as bad. A dry drunk is an alcoholic who has stopped drinking but has maintained the same behavioral patterns of an alcoholic. He would lash out and yell at us the same he did when he was drunk. Instead of drinking alcohol, he would drink up to 10 cups of coffee a day: his compulsive behavior just switched to a different drug. I began calling my dad by his first name a few years ago, when I came to accept that even though he is my father, he will never be my family. When I was little, I used to ask my mom about his drinking and she would give the same response every time. "It is a disease; he can't help it."

In 2012, a team of researchers looked into the potential hereditary causes of Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD). They found there are 11 genes in our body that are associated with AUD. These genes are linked with drinking too much and with developing compulsive behaviors. Alcohol.org quotes the study as saying that "many of those 11 pairs were also associated with neuropsychiatric disorders aside from AUD, like Parkinson's disease, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety, and cocaine addiction." Although scientists found these 11 gene markers, they state that genes are responsible for only about half of the risk for devel-

oping AUD. This is because gene expression is affected by the environment you are in. I guess my mom was right. It's a disease.

A loud thump as someone drops their water bottle pulls me back into the meeting. "My son is exactly like my husband. I am just so scared that he will become an alcoholic because they are so alike," a woman says. Her hands are trembling and she is clenching onto a tissue. She begins crying and raises her hands to cover her face. After a few seconds, she lifts her head and manages to say, "I'm done."

The question that I have tried to block out of my mind for years begins to creep in. Am I going to become an alcoholic? When I was little, I used to watch my dad drink and stumble around the kitchen. He would be yelling at my mom or my sister and the only thing I could think is that I didn't want to become my father.

Children who have a parent with AUD are four times more likely to become an alcoholic themselves. Environmental factors that put you at an increased risk for alcoholism are mental health problems and a history of abuse in the household. I have struggled with depression and anxiety my entire life, along with being physically and verbally abused when I was a child. Genetics and my environment have predisposed me to be a perfect candidate for AUD.

My dad and I grew up in households that are almost identical. We both have had an abusive father who is an alcoholic. He used to tell me stories about him and his father fighting. After hours of screaming back and forth, my dad would pack his bags and leave home for weeks at a time. When I was little, I spent the majority of my childhood at my best friend's house because most nights I would be too scared to come home.

My grandmother used to turn a blind eye to the abuse going on in the home because she loved her husband and believed >>>

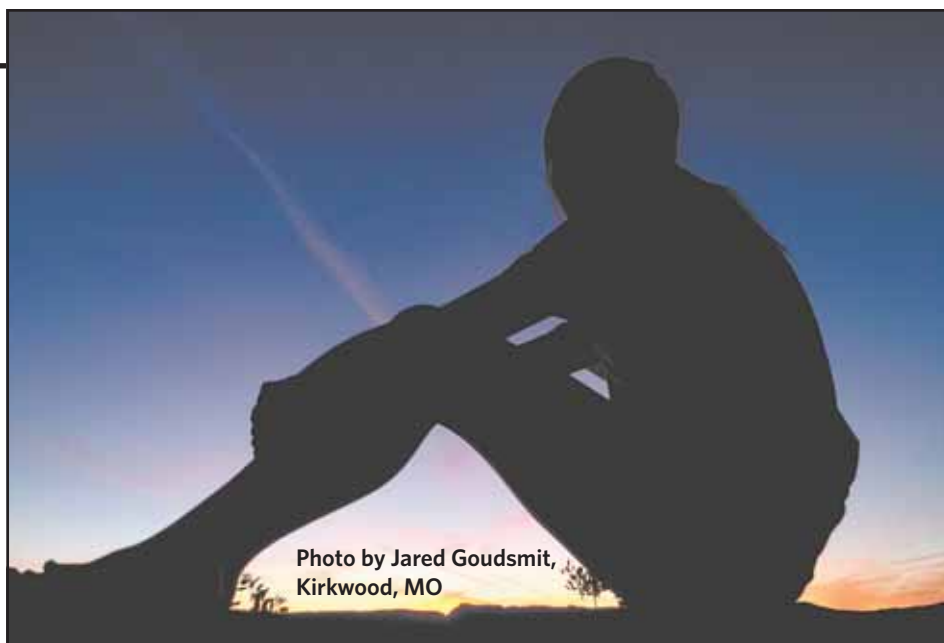


Photo by Jared Goudsmit,
Kirkwood, MO

Yellow Vans

by Halie Frahm, Cedar Falls, IA

Your sneakers – a pair of old yellow Vans – remind me of when I used to walk. Dirt stains the toes a mushy gray color, and fresh mud crusts across the non-existent arches. I wish my shoes still looked like that.

A little hole starts to peek through the worn canvas near your big toe, and I'm starting to feel jealous. You got to keep all of the things that ran too fast for me to catch. I want to forget that because I like the heavy thud skate shoes make on pavement a little too much. I can't really make that sound myself anymore, and I miss when I could without pain.

Your skateboard is another thing that makes me melancholy. The grit of plastic wheels across the cracks in the street makes me feel oddly nostalgic. I wish I could make that sound sometimes and do cool tricks. I only have one trick and it's a pathetic 360 wheelie, but for some reason you still like it. I guess it's enough for me to pretend that I'm really like you. In moments of teenage obsession, you try to get me on the quarter pipe at the skatepark but I'm too scared that I'll wreck my wheelchair. You tell me to let go and live a little, but you have no clue how much this chair cost. If I told you, I'd ruin the moment. So I don't. I've been told that I'm pretty good at that – ruining the moment. A sudden slide across a curb makes me wish that I brought a first aid kit in my backpack, but that would ruin the moment too. You get the right to be reckless that I wasn't gifted. It pisses me off.

I don't hate you for it, but you also get the right to be completely oblivious – a right I never had. We share some glass bottles of Mexican Coke after baking in the sun for a few hours and it's time for me to take my meds again. You chuckle to yourself as I wash down my afternoon dose with pure sugar. You joke, "Hey, can you pass me an Oxy?" You don't regret saying it, though I have half of the mind to make you. However, I have to market myself carefully. My pills aren't taken for fun. They're a fine \$400 cocktail of Earth's most deadly natural substances bottled specifically to subdue spazzes like me. I wish I didn't have to take pills four times a day to feel comfortable in my own body, but to you, it's just

You remind me why it's hard to make able-bodied friends

a joke. You remind me why it's hard for me to make able-bodied friends.

I try not to be standoffish the rest of the time we hang out: it's been a good day, and we were having such a fun time. You offer to push me home and I oblige. It'll give me time to convince myself that I shouldn't regret leaving my house this morning. When I finally revert to the safety of my personal IKEA ripoff, I turn on the small radio sitting on my windowsill. I keep it there for the days I'm in so much pain that I can't get out of bed, but you don't know about those. The lyrics to "Pretty Girls (The Mover)" by Against Me! ring out: "I just want to be young, I want to live/ God, I want to be healthy, I don't want this problem/ You wouldn't think something like irresponsibility would complicate something like asking for some company/ but there are things you must accept as said and done ... You'll always wake the same person in the same place."

So here are all of the things I wanted to say: I'm jealous of all of the things you don't even realize that you have. I get angry when you think that I'm like you and when I'm the only one intuitive enough to recognize that I'm not. No matter what, I'm still going to feel alone even when I'm right next to you because you got to keep the innocence I lost at a young age. And no matter how hard you try, you'll never be able to understand the emptiness that fills me with. It's said and done. Do you still like me now?

There are a lot of things that I want to tell you but you wouldn't understand, let alone fathom. Like about the three pairs of Vans I keep neglected in my closet, along with the other shoes I can't bring myself to wear anymore. I can't wear Vans (my feet are far too abused from years of uncorrected walking) and my favorite pair of Converse remain virtually untouched in my closet. That's the easiest place to start. My limited edition Andy Warhol Statue of Liberty Converse sit on a shelf collecting dust because the last time I wore them, I saw someone almost die. So I like to pretend that they don't exist anymore. It's easier for me to decide that you couldn't handle that story and leave it be, in the quiet. I don't want to ruin the moment. ♦

it was "wrong to leave someone because of a disease." My mom used to leave the house when my father was drinking because it was "too much for her to handle," but left my sister and I there to take what she didn't want to.

My dad's sister blames him for not protecting her more and not being there for her when she needed him. My sister blames me for not being there with her every night, for leaving whenever I was given the opportunity.

A woman in the meeting begins to talk, and she is impossible to ignore. Her voice is so loud and high-pitched that it demands our attention. "Oh, honey, I was worried about that too, but my son turned out just fine. He is exactly like my husband, just without the drinking problem. That's all, I will shut up now." The woman goes back to reading *The Dilemma of the Alcoholic Marriage*.

Although my father and I have many of the same qualities, as well as a similar childhood,

there is one major difference between us. He began to drink heavily at the age of 17, but began drinking occasionally even before that. I, having just turned 17, have never had a drink of alcohol in my life. It is a choice I have made because of what I know about the disease, that it runs in my family and that I am at a greater risk for alcohol dependence. I know if I never drink alcohol, I won't have to discover if it's something I would ultimately become addicted to.

The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation cites a 2006 survey linking teen drinking to a lifetime alcoholism risk. The study focused on 43,000 people who suffer from alcohol dependency. Forty-seven percent of the group began drinking heavily in their teen years and had grown dependent on alcohol by the age of 21. Early drinking also puts you at a greater risk for relapsing later in the future.

I will always be at a greater risk for AUD.

You don't get to choose whether your environment and genes put you at a risk for developing this disease. There aren't a lot of choices you get to make with this disease, just like you don't get to choose if you have cancer or Parkinson's. The power I have is to not start drinking in the first place. It doesn't mean I don't have AUD, because I don't know if I do or not. It means I'll never give the disease the power to take over my life.

The woman chairing the meeting begins to talk again. "Ladies, our hour together is up. Please stand for our serenity prayer." Everyone in the circle stands and grabs one another's hands. In unison, everyone says, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

Everyone scatters from the room, but we will find our way back again next Sunday. ♦

Migraines vs. My Life

by "Holly," WI

I remember my first migraine. It was during the first week of my freshman year. I didn't even know my schedule yet. I was in Business class when my skull suddenly felt like it was full of lava. My hands and feet were tingling, my skin began to sweat.

I laid my head down on the table, and it became too heavy to pick back up. Every time I moved my eyes, daggers pierced them, and every sound ripped through my ears as if fireworks were shot directly at my eardrums. My friend told me to go to the office, and I admitted that was the best plan. When I stood, the world swayed, and my stomach did vertigo-induced back flips. I put one foot in front of the other, but the tiles jumped around them. My walk was more of a stagger.

When I reached the office I leaned on the door frame, but it failed to still the world. The sweet office attendant, Nancy, looked at me with concern.

"Holly, honey," she'd asked. "Are you feeling all right?"

I don't remember answering, but suddenly I was looking at the ceiling. My brain felt like it was too big, like my head was a balloon that would soon explode.

"Holly!" Nancy called, then I was looking up at her.

I wanted my dad. I think I told her that.

The rest of the office staff helped me into a dark room; they all were so kind. My face was wet so they gave me tissues, but I didn't use them. I couldn't move.

When my dad showed up, he carried me to the car. I wanted to thank

him, but my head was screaming too loud for me to even remember how to speak. He drove me to the hospital. My doctor's name was Tammy. She gave me a shot for the pain and told me to drink more water.

I was back with Tammy a week later, because I couldn't get out of bed and missed school. Tammy ordered a CT scan because she was worried about tumors. Upon finding no tumors, she diagnosed me with dehydration, despite my mother's and my concerns that something more was wrong. She condescendingly told me to drink more water and sent me on my way.

That year, I missed almost 20 days of school due to migraines, and spent nearly every day with a headache of some sort. I didn't want to see Tammy again, because I couldn't deal with her patronizing tone and unhelpful treatments. So I didn't go to a doctor at all. I refused whenever my parents suggested I go back. By sophomore year, I spent most nights hurting too much to sleep, or the pain would wake me up in the middle of the night.

I started drinking coffee because the days began to drag. By my junior year, my schoolwork was slacking because I couldn't focus in or out of class; I began to pull away from my friends because I could never do anything with them. My stomach was always hurting because I was too nauseous to eat, and I lost considerable weight. My athletics were mediocre at best and, in the beginning of my senior year, I couldn't make it through a volleyball practice without getting a migraine.

I was barely making it through life, self-medicating with caffeine, ibuprofen, and Excedrin. I wasn't eating, exercising, or socializing, and my mental health had been bad to begin with. I was feeling hopeless. I was irritable all the time, due to hunger and insomnia. There were almost weeks at a time when I didn't shower because I didn't have the energy.

Eventually, after my father argued with Tammy for a good hour, my mother decided to take me to the hospital, a good one that was an hour away in La Crosse.

My head felt like Jell-o as per usual as we made our way to the third floor of the hospital. I was sent directly to a neurologist, John, who diagnosed me with a mixed headache and migraine disorder. His nurse practitioner, Stacey, was very kind and began asking me the usual questions about allergies, medications, diet, and exercise. I lied on some of the questions, unwilling to share. Not ready to trust.

"On a scale of one to ten," – she pointed one of those cheesy charts of pain where the emoji faces seem to get more blue as the number rises – "how bad are your headaches?"

"Like, a six," I lied. I didn't want to sound like I was exaggerating. I had been constantly told that I was overreacting. Not only by my parents, but also by my doctors.

"Okay, and how often?" She typed something into her computer. She looked a lot like my friend Taylor, I thought.

"Almost every day."

She raised an eyebrow. "What does almost mean? Every other day?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes."

She turned fully toward me then, and looked me in the eye, as if trying to read my mind. "Do you have a headache now?"

I broke eye contact and nodded.

"And on a scale of one to ten?" She gestured once again to the chart. I stared at the faces, slowly turning blue. Choking on their own pain.

"Seven," I breathed.

"Okay." She typed more into her computer. "I will get you a shot of Toradol before you leave today. We are going to need to test your neurological responses."

"What does that mean?" I asked nervously.

My head was a balloon that would soon explode



Photo by Stephanie Shen, Lake Hiawatha, NJ



When My Trust Went Up in Smoke

by Sophie Cavalcanti, New York City, NY

I hear a pattern of clicking rhythms and exhaling behind the hollow wooden guest room door. I wrap my fingers around the doorknob and twist my wrist, but it does not budge. I knock on the door and Gigi says she is coming. I hear a drawer closing. The lock clicks open and I see my cousin with a wide smile on her face. “Why was the door locked?” I ask with a rucked frown.

“Oh sorry, it’s just a habit! Do you want to go to Shake Shack for lunch?” She places her hand on my shoulder and slowly pushes me out of the narrow doorway.

Later, putting pressure on my finger, I squeeze my paper cut closed as I walk over to the guest suite. I open the bottom drawer of the nightstand and lined up neatly side by side are several plastic boxes of the same size. I begin to open them in search of a Band-Aid when I come across three small black and green plastic squares tucked underneath the smallest box. Gigi comes into the room and frantically slams the drawer shut. “What are you looking for?” she asks with a tight smile. Her hand still on the drawer, she tilts her head right, waiting for my answer. “Never mind,” I mumble under my breath. I run to my room and my eyes sting a bit as I fling my laptop open. My fingers tremble ever so slightly as I type the word “Juul pods” into Google as quickly as possible.

I click on images, and there are the black and green squares, identical to the ones I had seen in the drawer. My head pounds frantically in confusion. I read the articles filled with terrorizing statistics about the new epidemic: vaping. I rub away my tears and walk back over to Gigi’s room. “What are the plastic squares you’re hiding in the drawer?!” I shout at her.

I hear a pattern of clicking and exhaling

“I have no clue what you are talking about!” she responds with her eyebrows perked up.

“They are Juul pods, aren’t they? Why do you have them?”

Gigi continues her act of innocence: “Stop accusing me of something I didn’t do! You know I don’t Juul!” I start to stomp out of the room when Gigi grabs me by the arm and adds, “Don’t tell lies about me to your parents.” I feel her clammy fingers wrapped around my arm. She gives me a tight squeeze.

The long table in our kitchen, whose job is to hold unfinished homework, half-opened mail, or simmering dishes, is surrounded by various faces. My mother and father wear

oblivious smiles as they enjoy their meal. I hold a tight grin, barely opening my mouth except to clench my teeth around the shining silver fork piled with tasteless food. Gigi’s long brown hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail. Her eyes glance up every so often and pierce mine with confidence and power.

As saintly as she appears, Gigi helps my mother finish washing the dishes after dinner. “May I be excused for a moment?” she asks as Mom heads to the media room.

“Of course,” my mother replies, kindly.

A few seconds later, my chair scrapes against the scratched marble floor tiles as I stretch my forearms away from the glass table. “Be right back.” I slip away and tiptoe toward the guest room where Gigi’s been staying. The tips of my fingers lock in place as I press my ear to the door. Again, the clicking rhythm fills the silence; my heart begins to pound at the same rapid beat.

The door creaks open and I pop my head into the doorway. The room is pitch black except for a small shining light. Once more I hear the pattern of clicking and exhaling then see a cloud of white smoke coming out of Gigi’s lips. There it is. The sight that I never expected to see, and one that I had dreaded my whole life; a family member whom I loved and trusted had succumbed to the epidemic. ♦

She held up a paper and pen. “Draw the face of a clock for me.” I must have done well because she nodded and set it aside. She tested my reflexes next, then shined a light in my eyes. “Okay, hold out your arms, palms up,” she commanded. When I did that, she pushed down on them. “Don’t let me move your arms.” Then she pushed up. She did the same things with my legs, and made me close my eyes as she touched one of my fingers, then she told her which finger she had touched. It all felt quite ridiculous. She had me walk in funny lines and stand on one leg. I felt like I was getting a sobriety test. Then she had me take off my jacket. She wanted to listen to my lungs and heart. She saw my arms. “What are these from?” She rested a finger on my inner arm, upon the slowly healing lines. Panic seized my heart, clawed at my stomach, and shot like ice through my veins. “I don’t remember,” I whispered, begging with my eyes to make her stop asking questions. She didn’t believe me, I knew that, but she didn’t push it. I was on edge again. I pulled my jacket back on the second she turned back to her computer. The rest of our appointment was spent talking about what came next, treatment-wise.

I remember her telling me that it was pretty uncommon to have symptoms for as long as I did without a diagnosis, that it had probably gotten worse due to lack of treatment. She even made me go through an MRI because she didn’t think she could trust my past imaging.

She sent me to a therapist, and put me on meds to help my headaches. She also prescribed some as-needed medication to take for migraines, as well as an antidepressant. I cried on the drive home because I was so relieved. I was beyond grateful to finally have a doctor that listened, and to finally know what was happening to me.

Doctors have been influential to my life. However, my experience was not always pleasant. I have had good doctors and bad doctors. The experience has left me wary of hospitals, but I’ve learned to question my care to be sure I’m getting good, quality treatment.

I was misdiagnosed as a 14-year-old, and it made my life hell for the next three years. Every aspect of my life was affected and I resented that doctor for it. When I finally got the proper care, my entire life turned around. Everything felt possible again. I may never forgive that doctor for what I went through, but I hope that teens reading this will understand the importance of a second opinion. ♦

Dead Last

by Alex Zhang, Denton, TX

My new swim team coach was aghast. I was ahead of my entire team in the lap pool, but I swam slowly and with terrible form. As it turned out, I only appeared to be ahead of my team for a short while. One by one, my teammates tapped my foot to let me know that they were passing me. The others were exactly a lap ahead of me. But my parents were not surprised; they joked that I was always dead last.

As their kicking feet faded away, I realized the pack had left me in the bubbles of their wake, and I told myself I would work hard until I was at least in the middle of the pack. As

the sound of their splashes faded, I chose my method of execution: butterfly.

The butterfly stroke was something that everybody found difficult. When we swam laps with other strokes, the difference between the fastest and the slowest (me) was like the Pacific, stretching on and on and disappointingly on. But when we swam butterfly, that gap was a stream. I was still considerably slower, but the difference was workable.

I asked my father to take me to our neighborhood pool, and this eventually became a weekend routine. I would spend an hour or two at the pool, practicing the butterfly stroke.

“Swim faster,” my dad would call. “We’re not here so you can be lazy.” By the end of my meager laps I would be gasping for air, my arms two long pool noodles.

Swim competition after competition passed, and I was never invited by my team to participate. But the team had to give everyone a chance; at the final meet of the year, I was asked to join. Immediately, I signed up to swim butterfly in the individual and team relay events, but on the day of the meet, I was taken off of the team relay event.

As the clock ticked down to the start time of the events, my coaches fussed over the other members of the team. They tightened, loosened, and re-tightened the goggles of the other members. They warmed the team up until I assumed the water was about to boil. But they didn’t help me. To them, I was invisible.

*I stepped onto the
cold concrete ledge
... Then I jumped.*

As I walked up for the individual butterfly, I put on my goggles. I stepped onto the cold concrete ledge.

“Swimmers on your marks ...” I put my right foot in front of my left, as they had shown me. Or was it my left foot in front of my right?

“Three ...” I closed my eyes and leaned on my back foot. The slow countdown and the breathing of the other swimmers absorbed into the background, *I can’t be last*, I told myself. Then I jumped.

The splash of water put a shudder in my bones, and I was sailing downward. I pulled up and began to windmill my arms wildly, weaving in and out of the pool like Athena and her loom.

Then my hand touched the metal plate at the end of the lane, and I came up, gasping for air, water spilling out of my mouth like a grotesque European water fountain. I wasn’t last, I realized. At least I wasn’t last.

“Alex, come here,” one of the instructors said. “I have your results. Here’s your ribbon.”

I went to show my father. “Fifth place! Good job!” he exclaimed.

“It’s out of eight,” I explained.

He laughed. “Better luck next time.”

I didn’t need better luck, because I’d already come far enough: I was dead middle. ♦



Photo by Sujung Lee,
Suwon, South Korea

I Took a Bow

by Elise Siregar Chen, Pasadena, CA

The sky was gray; the faint halo of the sun barely made it through the thick cloud cover as night began to fall. My cleats dug into the dirt as my legs moved quickly across the soccer field. Only feet away from the ball, my chest began to burn. A wild-fire spread across my lungs, as if someone threw a smoke bomb into my windpipe. I gasped, not able to breathe. The game stopped.

The next thing I knew, my mother was carrying me in her arms, rushing me into the pediatric doctor's office in Pasadena. Seconds later, a nurse wheeled in what looked like a machine created by a mad scientist. She flipped a switch, and a loud, droning roar pierced my ears. She strapped a mask over my mouth, and within a minute, I felt my shoulders relax, and air began to flow again.

I was devastated that I had to quit the Yellow Jackets, but soccer would only be one of the many sports I would have to stop playing because of my frequent bouts of pneumonia, seasonal allergies, and severe pediatric asthma. I tried tennis, only to last a month. I tried basketball, but wasn't able to keep up with the rest of the team halfway through the season. I felt like an outcast, like I wasn't normal. I felt utterly useless.

All of my friends could run, jump, and pass the ball back and forth without pain or the fear of having their airways close or their lungs collapse.

It wasn't until last summer while visiting my family in Hong Kong that I discovered a sport I could play at full strength without compromising my health. I watched my cousin grab a large, suitcase-like bag and head to the hallway. Unzipping it like a government agent, he pulled out three pieces of metal, and clicked them together to form an archery bow. A quick snap could be heard as the end of his arrow was secured onto the string. He tightly pulled back the string with a gloved hand and let go. I watched as the arrow pierced into the bullseye of the foam stack. It felt like a scene from "The Hunger Games." My cousin was a real life Katniss Everdeen. In that moment, I thought, maybe I, too, could wield an archer's bow.

The entire flight back, I imagined myself in a sleek long sleeved shirt in an open field, feeling tension release as my arrow pierced straight through the center of the target. While my arms would direct the arrow and guide my bow, my lungs wouldn't be compromised. I spent the next week researching archery competitions, shooting ranges, and local archery coaches. After hours of searching, I stumbled upon Joy Lee Archery Academy led by Olympic archery coach, Kisik Lee, who is famous for teaching the country's best archers. And it turned out, his club was only 25 minutes away; I couldn't believe my luck.

Entering the fenced concrete space, I saw a row of ten kids facing ten targets, their quivers and bows aimed at their bullseye. They were both intimidating and comforting at the same time. Intimidating, because they seemed to really know what they were doing, as if they had been practicing for centuries. Comforting, because they were like me – drawn to this magical sport; they were people, like me, who loved order and calm. I joined them in a uniform line, and with my bow in my left hand and an arrow in my right, I waited for the whistle's shrill scream to cut through the air, signaling the beginning of the shooting. Arrow after



Art by Linh Tran, Lafayette, LA

*I watched as
the arrow pierced
the bullseye*

arrow, I repositioned myself, aiming to properly hit the foam board with consistency and precision. After every arrow that successfully hit the target, I felt empowered, as if I had leveled up like a character in a video game. Half an hour later, the repetitive shooting had made me fatigued. Although my arm was trembling, I was breathing without difficulty.

Over the next few months, I practiced shifting my body weight in the precise ratio of 40 to 60 percent and keeping the tension of the string carefully divided between my index, middle, and ring finger. My shots became consistent, and my arm no longer trembled. I learned to keep my shoulders relaxed; my coach had told me that being tense would only cause issues to both my muscles and my aim. The shooting range was my safe space. It brought a new state of liberation and relaxation to my mind. Focusing on my stance and position caused me to completely let go of any white knuckled grip I had on stressful or frustrating thoughts.

To my surprise, benefits of archery followed me into the classroom. Instead of being worried and comparing myself to others, I was concerned with improving my own skills. Being able to shoot at different archery ranges with people constantly watching me allowed me to practice the art of calming down in the face chaos. Whether it be a competition or a test, my worries seemed to dissipate like thick clouds in the bright sun. I was more focused than I had been in my entire life. While my friends anxiously scrambled to remember theorems or events, I recalled terms and definitions with ease. I even started to climb the ranks of Kahoot, a fast-paced competition used in class to test knowledge. With its daunting music and 15-second timer, Kahoot was adrenaline-inducing. Each time I typed in the access code, I read each question carefully, and then successfully selected the correct answer without a frantic cursor zooming across my screen in hesitation.

Archery has changed my life. I feel blessed to have found a sport that not only strengthens my body, but my mind too. ♦

Not Man Enough

by Erik Posadas, Sacramento, CA

Why should I be less of a man for who I am? Society dictates that a man must be strong, immovable, unstoppable, powerful, and loud. If you lack any of these masculine traits, you are considered “less than.”

In elementary school, I realized I was different from the “fellas” when I was walking to lunch one day and heard people laughing behind me. I joined in, asking what was funny. They said that I walked like a girl. Because I had a trait that seemed more feminine that they saw me as “less than,” a person not worthy enough to hang with them. I didn’t meet the standards of these guys. Did I care? Absolutely not. Did these encounters continue to happen? Yes. That’s when I started to care.

My first reaction was to close myself off and be more reserved with the way I walked, the way I talked, and the things I talked about. I kept my head down and didn’t talk if I didn’t have to so I wouldn’t get clocked.

They said that I walked like a girl

This worked – kind of. Being more like the rest took me out of people’s radar and made me seem more normal. But hiding is difficult, and I spent so much energy trying not to slip up rather than just being myself. It was a constant slap in the face when boys I didn’t even know would ask, “Why do you walk like that?” Or, “Why do you talk like that? You laugh weird.” I mean, my laughing is weird, but thier comments seemed pinned to the idea that I wasn’t man enough.

At the end of the day, it was in hiding where I seemed most acceptable the the world around me. When I hid who I truly was, people could at least tolerate me.

Gender roles and traits are ingrained in us as early as elementary school. From the toys that we play with to the color we prefer, everything is weighted down by gender expectations. The color pink is no longer just a color, it is a girl’s color. It represents femininity, something a boy shouldn’t go near unless he wants to be seen as unnatural, out of place. A boy’s choice of toy has to represent strength and invulnerability, like action figures and loud toy cars. Why?

Is it a masculine problem or is it femininity problem? Why is there such a negative undertone with the words feminine and vulnerability? After all, that is where the problem lies for me. Society should not convince us to fall in line with the misogynistic model of a man. It’s too taxing.

I spent so much energy trying to follow along and pondering if I did something wrong, so much time hiding the fact I was gay. Always struggling to meet a benchmark of the masculine persona.

Why must I hide behind this persona? Why must I change who I am and what I do in order to fit it to this societal structure? This invisible beast? So what if I like to garden and pick flowers? So what if I’m not 180 pounds of pure muscle and that I walk and talk differently? So what if I am okay showing my emotions and my own vulnerabilities? So what if I am not society’s ideal image of a man?

My traits do not make me less of a man than any other man. The way I walk, talk, and the things I talk about do not subtract from my identity as a man.

How do we solve this issue? Who tackles this invisible beast that tells us whether or not we are valid? Blaming the offenders

doesn’t work; I know that. I blamed my own dad for not being open, for not trying to work with me, for not understanding. But it was me who wasn’t really understanding that he also went through the process of proving his manhood. He also had to experience the fight to meet society’s image of a man, a cycle that goes back who knows how many generations. The real solution starts with a simple statement you say to yourself here: You are a man exactly how you are right now. Nothing more, nothing less. Our actions define who we are. It what makes us unique. They have never subtracted from who I am. I shouldn’t have to hide behind this a false persona because I was a man all along.

Let’s remove the stigma that we aren’t man enough. Let’s remove false personas and take off our societal masks. I am man enough, and no one other than myself can say otherwise. ♦

do i have a voice?

1.
 - i am a jew
 - i am a woman
 - i am a lesbian
 - do i even have a voice?
 - or will i forever be silenced
 - by homophobia poorly disguised as religious fervor?
 - (red-faced rabbis with their veins protruding as they angrily scream that stds are a punishment from god to all the gays)
 - (and a clipping from the jewish press about a british religious guy who is fighting that the religious schools should not be required to teach tolerance for people of all gender identities and sexual orientations)
 2.
 - the rainbow was the symbol of godly appeasement not forgiveness but appeasement
 - and it was spread out before noah after the flood the flood came because of bestiality, polygamy and now we wave our rainbow flag for homosexuality does god even forgive us?
 3.
 - because i have sat and weeped and wiped my eyes and then i said – god i just cannot do this anymore apparently gay isn’t something that could be prayed away
 - and i was sick of trying to fix myself twist myself to be like everybody else
 4.
 - so if there is a god
 - can he forgive me for being the way he made me?
- by “Kara,” Brooklyn, NY

Art by Aicha El Alaoui, Rabat, Morocco

I Am Autistic

by Chloe Anderson, Redmond, WA

If you pass me in the hallway, you will probably see either a tired girl ranting about the perils of a Monday morning, or you will see an excited girl running, flapping her hands, and jumping for joy even though she is fourteen. You will see a girl with a long black coat because she feels uncomfortable and cold otherwise. She is slightly unkempt without much regard for fashion or makeup. If you don't know me, you might think I'm strange. But if you get to know me, you'll understand why I'm constantly moving and dressing like I do.

When I flap my hands, I feel like a million butterflies are lifting up my arms and fluttering around me. When I wear my jacket, I feel secure and warm against the cool elements outside me. When I run, I feel like an airplane on a runway, soaring. When I do things like this, when I am my autistic self, I feel free. If I don't, I feel like a moth without wings or a bird without a song. I am autistic, and I couldn't be prouder or happier.

Some have this idea of autism as a socially awkward, straight white boy who's about twelve, one who loves trains and knows the square root of 57 up to twelve digits. Maybe

they're that character in the book with a tragic fate, the embarrassing little sister, or Rain Man and Forrest Gump.

If they see autism as a thing, they falsely envision heartless mad scientists injecting evil autism serum into vaccinations, or cute blue puzzle pieces on a fundraising T-shirt to demonstrate that they know autism exists.

But autism isn't a thing or a character. It is simply one aspect of a whole human being. I'm autistic, and I go to a regular school. I have a few disability accommodations, like extra testing time. I get crushes on girls and boys just like any other person I doodle in Spanish and have friends. Some students with autism, who have a greater amount of supports, may use devices or pads to "talk." Sometimes they have classes in other parts of the building to meet their needs, but they are nonetheless still teenagers. Autistic teenagers, like me. Who again, have dreams and plans and crushes.

Are we different? Of course we are. Autistic teenagers might be ostracized for our flapping or rocking. We might use fidget toys, or have to have extra patience in dealing with people who use "autistic" and the R-slur insultingly.

*When I am
my autistic self,
I feel free*

When we "stim," or move in strange ways or repeat sayings, it's our way of moderating the constant sensory input all around us. The same thing applies when we use spinners or cubes or stress balls. Our interests are often intense or obsessive, but this intensity allows us to create beautiful things or join communities and make significant contributions. Many people believe Silicon Valley wouldn't exist without autistics helping to build up the industry. We are the way we are, not caused by vaccines or in need of cures. We are autistic and amazing.

We aren't people with tragic lives. We aren't worthless. We're the next generation of autistics, beautiful in all of our stimming and obsessions and abilities. We are more than puzzles, we are more than the stereotypes presented by Autism Speaks, and our disabilities are important to our identity.

I challenge you to not just think about autism whenever April rolls around, but to be appreciate people with autism year round. Commend autistics not for how neurotypical some may seem, but for being autistic, being brave, and facing ableism. Do this because we are fantastic and awesome people. We are teens too. ♦



Photo by
Whitney Toutenhoofd,
Boulder, CO

Trapped in Society

by Autumn Antonson, Occidental, CA

She gazes at herself in the mirror. Her face is too close to the glass, and her breath leaves hot fog in its wake. Her eyes search her skin, finding each mark and flaw. Her pores seem clogged, her skin greasy, her acne worse than ever. She rubs at the skin beneath her eyes, as if she could erase the bags that hang there. All she succeeds in doing is making her pale skin more blotchy. She gnaws at her bottom lip, trying to imagine what she might look like if her eyes were a bit larger. She'd be prettier.

She sucks in her stomach, arching her back a bit. Too much side fat, too much of a belly bump, too-wide shoulders. On and on. Unable to find a single thing she likes about herself, she quickly puts on her clothes and exits the bathroom.

She gazes up at the photographs on the walls of Victoria's Secret behind the cash register. She is buying overpriced bras and underwear because she feels like they will make her body look good. No one will see it, but it's her own opinion that matters.

But now, looking at the images of the Victoria's Secret Angels, she realizes that she doesn't look good in the underwear after all. People tell her that being "thick" is a good thing, that having a bigger chest and bigger hips makes up for also having a bigger waist, but the girls in the photographs are like sticks. If they are considered at the top of beauty standards, what does that say about her? They look nothing like her. She bites her lip and pays for her expensive items.

At a young age, her mom shows her a video of a woman getting photo-shopped to match the beauty standards of magazines. Her mom wants her to understand that she shouldn't compare herself to those pictures. The model doesn't even look like the same person by the end of the video. She has longer legs, bigger eyes, thicker hair, smoother and brighter skin, a thinner waist, so on and so forth. "The things in magazines are fake, and you should never compare yourself to those girls. They aren't real." Her mom smiles sadly, and her daughter nods in determination. She will never fall into those traps.

She is seven years old, staring down at her stomach. "Am I fat?" she asks her eight-year-old cousin. He doesn't know the extent of her fear, her need for an answer. He doesn't know the societal views, doesn't understand the pressure, doesn't see the box women are trapped in. He responds with, "Well, can you see your feet when you look down?"

"Yes."

"Then you're not fat."

She is seven years old, but she doesn't believe him.

"Why are you complaining? At least you have a butt and boobs." Her friend rolls her eyes and purses her lips, scanning her own body up and down. The girl is thin and beautiful, and yet she doesn't like herself.

"Why are you complaining? You're skinny and actually pretty," she responds, sucking in her stomach and trying to imagine what it would be like to feel good.

She mixes the green powder into coconut milk, shaking the mixture vigorously. She looks forward to the drinks now, the time

"Why are you complaining? You're skinny ..."

when she can choke down some sustenance. The pills are disgusting. It's been five out of ten days. She's already lost six pounds. She feels proud and healthy, and maybe even a bit skinnier. Just five more days. If she keeps this up, she'll be even skinnier before going to Hawaii. She actually feels good, happy – like she's in control of her body this time. She wants to be able to feel good in a bathing suit, so a 200 dollar juice cleanse is worth it.

She is curled in a ball on her bed, crying so hard she can't breathe. It's been three days since the end of her juice cleanse, and she was feeling so proud for doing all ten days. She wasn't as skinny as she would have liked, but at least it was something. But now, three days later ... she stepped on the scale ... every pound, plus two, had come back. She screams into her pillow and digs her nails into her arms. She hates herself.

"I'm not really hungry." Her friend glances at her and then looks away.

"You should probably eat, though. Did you have breakfast?" she asks.

"Yeah. I'm just not hungry." Her friend doesn't meet her eyes. The girl hasn't eaten in two days.

She glances down at her dinner and pushes the food around. Her stomach hurts. She didn't eat breakfast – or lunch – but she is so done with feeling bad. She thought it would be impossible to not eat for a whole day, that she was too much of a pig, but it seems that her hatred has won out.

She walks down the street toward Safeway. She is in a good mood, the sun brightening the day. She hits the crosswalk and glances over just in time to see a car, its windows being rolled down. A loud whistle comes from the vehicle before it speeds off, laughter echoing. She stares after it, shocked and disgusted. She tries to convince herself that the whistle wasn't directed at her, that men are better than that.

She walks down the school hall, threading her way through the crowds of people. She keeps tugging the bottom of her shirt, unsure if it looks good. The outfit is a bit ... exposed ... but she thought she looked good in it. She keeps her stomach sucked in tight, knowing from looking in the mirror for ages that it makes her look better. One of her guy friends walks by and takes in the tight shirt and cropped shorts.

"Haha, you look like a stripper." He laughs, and she laughs along with him, but she's cringing inside. She liked the way the outfit looked, making her body look curvy and not chubby. But apparently it's too much.

She stands by her car, feeding the tube into the gas tank. She looks at her phone, trying to avoid looking at the two older men standing around the other car next to her.

"Look at her, she's hot!" The voice is loud and crass.

She stiffens and gives a strained smile toward the men, trying to ignore the clenching in her stomach.

"Hey, what's your number, cutie?"

The gas clicks off and she practically runs to the driver's door.

"Is that a no? C'mon hottie, get over here."

She hops into the driver's seat and drives away as fast as she can, her hands shaking sporadically. Eventually, she pulls off the road, rests her forehead on the steering wheel, and begins to cry.

An acquaintance of hers cries on one of her friend's shoulders. The girl gets like this every night apparently, because of PTSD. She has nightmares and has attempted suicide multiple times. She was gang raped.

She presses the button to get her parking ticket in order to leave the mall. She wears a small shirt with an open back, something she wouldn't wear to school but thought was okay to wear to the mall. Her friend taps away at her phone beside her, texting one of their other friends.

She looks around, and sees the old man standing a few feet away with his phone out. The way it was positioned, the way he was holding it ... Was he filming her?!



Brown

The summer water ran red,
 post-apocalyptic picket signs screamed go home.
 As if with one crooked finger Mexico could beckon
 her love-children back, wrap barbed-wire snares
 around thin ankles and lift bodies past clouds.
 We sweat dollars here, shedding pennies when the
 AC breaks; yellow teeth stained by Backwoods
 and Bud Light, prophetic spit wads landing at bare feet.
 We familiarize family by scent:
 Papi comes home reeking of fertilizer and anti-fungal,
 Mami smells like lemons and ammonia. In the evenings
 sisters braid sunshine into black hair, hands thick and steady,
 beating rhythms into scalps. In the evenings brothers
 gather to forget, beady-eyed and stumbling, empty
 40s swinging from finger-tips. On Sundays we
 peel away a layer of skin, tuck bruises behind cowlicks,
 baptized by the promise of new dawns and distant deserts.
 Someday Mexico will come calling for us and we'll return,
 fold into her rheumy eyes and let the cicadas lull us to sleep.
 The hollow ache of her absence burns deep tonight,
 tamarindo juice dripping down chins like blood,
 and we whisper a silent prayer. Go home.

by Amelia Zander, Los Angeles, CA

Photo by Alycia Ruffin, Tucson, AZ

She taps her friend's wrist frantically, but the girl is oblivious. He walks by laughing, and lowers the phone when he has passed. She feels bile rise in her throat and she drags her friend from the mall.

She watches the TV intently, the court battle between Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Ford playing out over the screen. This woman is so strong, speaking her truth in front of the world, facing death threats and hatred, to try and prevent things like this from happening to other girls. Girls like her acquaintance, who didn't see the point in living anymore because she had been violated so completely. But it seem that even the highest justice in the country can

ignore this. She buries her face in her hands as she watches the darkness of society as it unfurls before her eyes on the television screen.

She reads the news, and articles, and sees movies. She knows that, in many minds, her gender is the fair sex, the weaker sex, the more inferior sex. That she is somehow less intelligent or less capable than her brother, or her boy friends. That she has less value, except as a pretty object to be admired. It makes her wonder about how history has played out, how ancient concepts of hunting and gathering continues to play out today, how people still believe that women should be paid less, that their contributions are less worthy.

Women are the strongest people she knows, more mature and forward thinking than the men she interacts with. They fight through body shaming, impossible beauty standards, catcalling, leering, and arrogance. They give birth to children and raise them to be good citizens of this planet. They juggle life's difficulties and struggle to succeed despite the pressure against them.

And yet ...

Her friend doesn't eat.

Her acquaintance doesn't sleep.

And she still hates herself. ♦

Art by Nishee Patel,
Upper Deerfield, NJ

A Raven's Message by Elijah Jeffery, Cedar Hills, UT

Contest
Winner!

The final member of the Thalia bloodline opened her deep green eyes and sat up in the soft grass, her long red hair rising with her head and flowing down her back. The young, 14-year-old girl wore a pristine white dress fit for a wedding, with deep pockets in the skirt. As she leaned forward and turned her legs on their side, she felt a small object rub against one of them. She knew immediately what it was, and wished she was the only one who did.

She looked about and took in her surroundings. The clearing in the startlingly green woods was a cozy little bed of grass, with flowers and bushes surrounding it, masking it from view from anything that approached. But the brush also created a barrier that hid everything outside the clearing from within. Sunlight shone in from above, through a hole in the canopy, illuminating the dark understorey of the forest.

She turned her head sharply at the sound of rustling in the bushes to her

left. She shifted, readying herself to stand and run, her hand involuntarily gripping the precious, sharp object in her pocket. She would have called out, asking who was there, but she was fairly certain she already knew.

The figure emerged from the bushes and confirmed her suspicion. He was an abnormally tall and slender man, his skin pitch black in the few places it showed beneath the dark, feathery outfit he wore. He wore goggles and a mask that hid his eyes from view and made his mouth and nose look like a beak. A raven was perched on his shoulder, as always. He halted, and spoke.

"Hello again, Maybell." He greeted her with the friendliness of a vulture watching something die.

Maybell's entire body was tense, and she said nothing, only tried to match his gaze that was sharp and cold as a sword.

"Come now, don't you remember me?" His voice had an otherworldly quality to it, and it

felt as if it was coming from within your own head if you closed your eyes or blinked. Neither of which Maybell was inclined to do.

Maybell gulped, and nodded. "Rokh."

"Yes. That is my name." He nodded approvingly, as if she were a child. Which, technically, she was. But that didn't help.

"What ... what ..." she stammered.

"What do I want?" Rokh finished for her. "Ask a question you don't know the answer to." He nodded to her hand, buried in her pocket. He also knew very well what it was holding.

"Why are you after me?" she asked, finally able to form a complete sentence in the suffocating terror the Raven Incarnate's presence cast over the clearing.

He shook his head and chuckled, bemused. "That's just another way to ask the same thing." He nodded again to her tightly clenched hand which was turning nearly as white as the dress it was hidden in. "One more try."

She swallowed again as the raven on Rokh's shoulder's intensified its gaze, like a cat about to strike. Its master also subtly tensed. It did not help. But while Maybell's body >>>

*She gripped
the precious,
sharp object
in her pocket*

was effectively paralyzed with fear, her mind worked in overtime to ask something that he couldn't just brush aside. In her haste, she finally settled on something.

"Where are we?"

The tension in Rokh's body evaporated and he nodded approvingly once more. "Ah, that's an excellent question. I've only ever done this kind of thing once before, with your brother, so how would you know? It's not as if he ever had a chance to tell you."

Maybell flinched, and now she was seriously struggling to keep her eyes from moistening. She felt a brief surge of anger, but it was quickly subdued by the same thing that had caused it: the fact that her brother was dead, his life ended by the very being who stood before her now. This was followed by similar recalls of her parents and she quickly shut them out of her head. She was already fighting to keep herself together; she didn't need their memories weakening her flimsy composure any further.

"So he did tell you." The Raven Incarnate watched her for several moments. "Don't worry, you can cry. I won't stop you," he said consolingly. But when the comforting words came from his lips, or beak, they were inevitably poisoned by his voice and his appearance, and especially the history he shared with his current audience. It came out sounding like a trap, or a threat, and that was exactly what poor Maybell heard.

But she was firm, and she wiped her eyes with resolve and looked right back at him. "I'm fine. Now answer the question."

He nodded. "Do you remember what your brother said, the day after I first crossed paths with him?"

"H— he'd seen you in his dreams."

"Well, there you go."

Maybell looked around again, but not for more than a second did her gaze stray from the figure standing in front of her. "We're in my m— mind?"

"Not quite. But that would be very interesting," he replied. "Here, come closer."

He started to slowly walk toward her, and his great height made the slow, deliberate movements of his slender body extremely ominous. Maybell began to crawl backwards, but she didn't get an inch before a sharp wind blew into her face with the sound of a very large bird moving extremely fast and she closed her eyes. She felt a firm, feathered hand grip her arm, the one she still had in her pocket. A foot pressed down on her leg, and she dared not struggle and anger its owner. She felt breath on her neck, and was too afraid to open her eyes. Then, the Raven Incarnate spoke into her ear.

"Now answer a question for me, little one."

She nodded immediately. Just as immediately, his voice intensified, as if all the trees were echoing after him in a haunted chorus.

"Where are you hiding?"

Maybell shook her head, still refusing to open her eyes.

"Perhaps it will answer you."

The hand gripping her arm loosened and dove into her pocket.

"NO!" she screamed, and opened her eyes. She twisted her arms and legs away from him and held the small item tightly in both hands. Rokh's goggles shone red. She held it tight against her chest and tried to curl her body around it.

"Give it to me, child. Give me the final Thalia stone," he demanded. Ravens flew violently through the air above the clearing, swooping past her head and catching painfully in her red hair. "Give it to us! Give it to us! Give it to us!" they cawed and squawked.

"You can't hide forever," he said, and she felt a hand grip her by the back of the head and lift her painfully into the air. Her bare feet dangled below her, seeming miles away from the ground. The ravens continued to blaze through the air all around her, filling it with their black feathers and horrid cries. She refused to meet his eyes.

"YOU CAN'T HAVE MY STONE!" she screamed over the chaos, and it silenced immediately. Flinching, she lifted her eyes to meet the red hot gaze of the being who had taken everything but the stone from her. She felt like nothing, dangling in the air above him, his firm grip keeping her right where he wanted. She stared deep into his eyes and saw things she'd never forgotten and never would.

Her older brother, lying still on his back, his eyes gone from his face. The raven, perched on his chest and observing its handiwork, his deep blue stone held tightly in its bloody beak.

Her mother and father, sprawled on the flagstones of a courtyard far below the balcony a flock of merciless crows and its master had thrown them from. Their red and purple stones were gone, already deep in their killer's pocket. The Raven Incarnate standing up where they'd fallen, his gaze following a distant figure running as fast as she could, already beyond the city's walls and disappearing into the countryside.

And then, an image Maybell had only seen in her tortured imagination flashed in his eyes: herself, doubled over in pain, clutching helplessly at her face as her beautiful green eyes rolled away from her, ruthlessly stolen by the

raven. Blinded, as Rokh stood over her, the stone that completed his collection in his hand, raised proudly over his head.

Maybell shook her head and snapped out of it, only to be faced with that same raven staring back at her, perched tensely on its master's shoulder, looking eagerly, hungrily, at her eyes, just as it had looked at her brother's. The Raven Incarnate raised his other hand and reached for her tightly closed palms.

At that moment, with the pain of his grip in her hair, the devastating feeling of loss he'd forced back into her, and the fear that the only thing she had left in this world, the only thing connecting her to all that she'd loved, was about to be taken away, Maybell Thalia snapped. With a defiant yell, she opened her hands, revealing the small, bright green stone as sharp as obsidian. Maybell brought it down as hard as her terrified strength would allow, smashing it into the Raven Incarnate's mask. Just before impact, his unreadable face transformed into a crow's.

The stone crushed the crow's beak and skull, killing it instantly. But Maybell was no longer in that place, no longer in her hunter's grasp. She was in her bedroll, having bed-

ded down the night before in this wooded countryside so far away from the home she had fled. She had awoken very suddenly, and taken the bird which had been standing over her by surprise, quickly ending its life. She held perfectly still as she realized all this. She

began to shake and sob uncontrollably, lifting the stone from the dead bird. She didn't have the strength to whisper, but what she would've said ran through her mind over and over again, trying to drown out all the trauma she had just experienced.

He's gone, it was just a dream ... He can't hurt you anymore, it was just a dream ... It's just a bird, and it was an accident ... You didn't tell him where you are, he can't follow you ... You still have your stone, he can't use it ...

But she knew he would be back. And she knew he would hurt her again, dream or no dream, just like he'd done to her brother. She'd killed that bird, and its blood was all over her stone, staining her clothing as she held it tightly against her chest. He didn't know where she was, but he certainly had a good idea of where to look.

But she still had her stone, and as long as she did, he couldn't complete the terrible work the Thalia Stones would unlock the power to do. ♦

She knew he would be back

How to Lie

by Ana Sangh, Boyds, MD

All of the social workers were the same, if you thought about it.

There was Grace, with the blond curls and too-bright smile, and Esme who laughed when nothing was funny. Michelle was tall and always talked about how concerned she was, and Layla gave squeeze hugs all the darn time.

Each of them was ridiculously annoying in their own way, and they were all nosy – but the reality was that they didn't care about me or Nia. Their job was to talk to us and sympathize, but it didn't matter what went on in those meetings, as long as their stupid forms were filled out.

Nia and I got past each of them easily, rambling on and on about dumb things. We never really gave them useful information about us and our lives.

But then Rey came along. Rey, he was different. He made us think twice before saying nothing.

To start off, Rey was a man. Me and Nia had never talked to a male social worker before. But there he was – a tall, good-looking man with a deep voice and warm eyes.

The little girl in me wanted to hug him and tell him that he reminded me of my Dad ... before everything that happened. And Nia, who was still a little girl, must have wanted to do the same.

But both of us resisted giving him even the smallest smile, because no matter who he reminded us of, he was our enemy. He was the one trying to tear our carefully constructed lives apart.

And Rey seemed to understand. He seemed to get that we would never – could never – trust him, no matter what he said or did.

The first thing he said to us wasn't said with an infuriatingly calm smile. He didn't try to hug us or hold our hands, and there were no promises about it "getting better." I'm sure he knew as well as we did that it wasn't getting better because of one useless social services meeting.

So Rey, considering the situation, did the best thing he could. He looked both of us in the eye and said, "Y'all have been through a whole lot."

Then he waited, staring at us, willing us to give him some sort of reaction. When we said nothing, he sighed. It was a sad kind of sigh, and it held the weight of the world. It made me wonder, how much this man really knew.

"Look," he said, pushing his longish

hair out of his eyes. "I can't force you to talk to me. I can't force you to tell me the truth. But the situation you're in, it's not good. You're in danger, no matter what you think. When I was a kid ..." He breaks off, shaking his head.

"But this isn't about me. This is about you two. You can't push away help if you need it. All we're trying to do is help." He looked right at me then, as if he knew that I was afraid of accepting his help.

Instead, I glared at him, hoping he could see the fire in my eyes. When he didn't flinch, I crossed my arms. "You tryna say my parents are crap? Cuz they're not."

He didn't back off. He's a strong one, this Rey. "No, not at all." His voice was calm. "I'm trying to say that if you need help, any help, you better ask for it. Because from what I've

been hearing, your dad ain't been treating anyone right. And I think you know that it's not okay for him to do anything to you or your mom."

I thought of Nia crying herself to sleep at night. I thought of my mom staring out the window for hours at a time. I

thought of the blisters and burn marks on my hand. I thought of the bruises and scars on all of us.

For a second, I wanted to tell Rey everything. I wanted him to help.

But then I thought of foster families, and leaving behind the few good memories I still had left. No, I decided. Rey won't be getting anything out of us.

I glared again. "We're being treated fine, thank you very much."

Something in his face changed. His soft look became determined. "Oh really?" he said, his voice challenging, almost daring me to lie again. This guy was a lot more persistent than the rest.

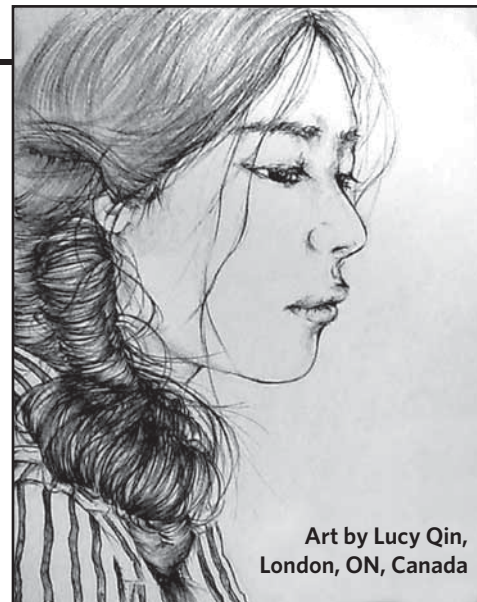
"Your little sister ended up in the hospital. It seems like your father pushed her down the stairs. Is that fine? Is it really?"

"She fell, you moron! Don't you dare say those things about my dad. It was an accident, nothing more!" I was screaming and couldn't help it. I didn't want to admit that he was right. Saying it made it true. And maybe Dad would get better. He promised he would.

And he promised the time before that. And the time before that. But Rey doesn't need to know that. No one needs to know that.

"Okay then, Ana." He said my name like a curse, then shook his head. "I hate to do this, but if you're not going to talk to me, then you can say what you want to the authorities. I'm filing a police report about your dad because I have a sneaking suspicion what's going on here."

All the fight slowly drained out of me. This



Art by Lucy Qin,
London, ON, Canada

was it. I had nowhere to go from here. You can't deceive the law, can you?

As if he knew what I was thinking, Rey frowned at me. "I'm going to ask you one question. And you are going to answer me honestly."

No, no I wasn't. Not if I could help it.

"Does your dad hurt any of you – physically or emotionally?"

He knew the answer. He just wanted to hear me say it. He needed proof that it was true, so he could prove my family guilty. So he could tear my life apart.

One second passed, then two. I knew I should tell him the truth.

But Rey, sitting there, made me so mad. He knew nothing about me, nothing about my "messed-up family." Or, he knew something, but not the important part. He knew my dad was a monster, cruel to his kids and absorbed in his problems.

But Rey didn't know that Dad used to spin us until we were all laughing too hard to breathe, that he taught me how to deal with life better than anyone else could.

Rey would only ever see my mom as fragile and depressed. He had never tasted the secret apple pie that she used to make, he hadn't felt her gentle hands comb his hair.

Me and my sister would never be anything but a charity case to him. He would never hear Nia sing her songs, her voice light and feathery. He wouldn't ever see me paint, my eyes relaxed at last.

I knew he would never see us as real people. When he left this building at night, he had a whole other life. He was probably a dad, and maybe a brother and husband too. He probably had hobbies and friends to go to when he was done with us. Why should it matter to him what happens to stupid kids like us?

He. Doesn't. Care.

Repeating that in my head, I do the only thing I can.

I look him in the eye and lie. ♦

A Piece of Cake

by Andrew McIlvaine, Darien, CT

It was an August or July afternoon – I can't remember exactly. I was biking down Seawall Road, and it was hot outside. I'm talking fry-an-omlette-on-the-sidewalk hot. Miserable temperature. I was coasting past the hardware store, the small market, and that joint "Miss Delilah's Dessert Parlor" that's always empty, and I thought to myself, *why not check that shop out?* I'd never been there before. Worse comes to worst, I'd get a good story about some smelly old bat that makes a sh** pecan pie. I propped my bike against the picket fence out front and pushed open the door. It had one of those cheesy bell contraptions that banged against the glass pane whenever someone entered. I hate those things.

The room smelled like lemon Lysol. Like too much lemon Lysol. Some ancient-looking radio behind the counter was playing that "Jolene"

song by Dolly Parton where the ugly chick can't keep a boyfriend, you know, "*Jolene ... please don't take him just because you can.*" From behind the counter, some rat of a dog skittered out, barking its tail off. The thing nearly scared me out of my skin.

The dog's owner, Miss Delilah herself, came rushing into her parlor in a frenzy to shut that thing up. Thank God for her that the restaurant was air conditioned, because if it wasn't, I'd have been back on my bike at that very moment. The rotund old lady straightened herself up and put her glasses into a pocket. She was wearing one of those purple smock things that had embroidered flowers down near the bottom and pockets all up the front.

"Welcome to Miss Delilah's Dessert Parlor! What can we get you today?" It was hilariously rehearsed. She smiled at me, one of those old woman smiles with crooked teeth, and I wondered who "we" referred to as we were the only two people in the room. I asked if she had any pecan pie, and she chuckled. "That one is my favorite," she said, but she had sold all of her pies. "You should return soon to try it, though. It really is quite delicious."

I mean, of course. I give this woman a chance and she doesn't even have a damn pecan pie. On the counter sat some platters of cookies and brownies and a few cakes. I think one was supposed to be carrot cake, another must have been chocolate as it looked like a cow pie. I pointed to the third cake, coconut, and asked for a piece. She beamed at me as if I had given her establishment five stars on Yelp and lifted the glass cover. She had wiry gray hair and crinkles around her eyes and mouth. I saw a gold ring hanging on twine around her neck. She caught me staring and smiled, making me squirm. I hate it when old people do that kind of thing – they try to connect with young people in awkward ways when they've gotta know that the two of them won't ever meet again, and they'll just die some horribly sad old-person death like falling down the stairs, or drowning in a bowl of chicken soup. It's pathetic. She handed me a slice of her cake. She also handed me a fork and smiled yet again. I asked for some water, and she shuffled through the back door, muttering something about bringing back a jug. I sat down at a small table near the window, and that dog growled again.

I tried a bite of the homemade cake, and I actually gagged. It felt, and tasted, like I was chewing stale bread smeared with lard. I needed to get rid of that cake before the woman came back. There was no trash can, no paper napkins, but here's the catch – that dog still sat near the counter. I practically flung the cake onto the floor, and spat whatever I had in my mouth in front of the mutt. The dog just stared at me – not at the cake – but at me, and growled. It was like he wanted me to be humiliated.

"Eat it. Eat the damn cake you stupid animal!" But it was no use. The door behind the counter opened and I saw the purple of her smock before I saw anything else. Miss Delilah's face fell, her wrinkles settling without expression. The door swung shut behind her but she stayed where she stood. She held a water pitcher in one hand and the other hand just hung loosely at her side. I didn't look in her eyes, I didn't want to, but I know she stared, just stared at me as I straightened up, cleared my throat, and left her shop. I just left the pile of cake on her linoleum. I needed to. What else could I have done? The door shut behind me with the bell chime, and I mounted my bike. I swear to God, she just watched me as I rode away. I know her dog wasn't barking, because I could hear my blood pounding in my ears, or maybe I just couldn't hear the bark. I just don't know.

But who cares, right? ♦

*It was like
chewing stale bread
smeared with lard*



Photo by Savanna Johnson, Littleton, CO

Art by Pam Best,
Greenlawn, NY



The Creature in the Cage

by Sophia Cotton, St. Louis, MO

Andrew Ostow bent down to pick up the unmarked envelope, his eyes darting across the street to see if anyone was watching. When he saw he was alone, he quickly snatched it up and went back inside his apartment. Inside the envelope was a small piece of paper with just an address. He flipped the envelope over; there was no clue of its origin.

The logical side of his brain told him not to go. It could be dangerous. But the curious side – which is what usually got him into trouble – told him to check out the address. Curiosity won. He had nothing better to do for the rest of the day.

Andrew got to the address, an old, run-down warehouse. It reminded him of a horror movie, which unnerved him. Nevertheless, he grabbed his phone and slowly walked to the building. He crept inside and was suddenly horrified at what he saw.

Inside was a small black blob. No – not a blob. A creature? It was in a large, metal cage, wailing as if it were in pain. He brought his phone up to take pictures, the creature taking shape as he zoomed in. He clicked the button to capture the scene without re-

alizing his sound was on. The little *click* drew the thing's attention, causing it to stop wailing and turn toward him. Despite his fear, Andrew stared back, feeling drawn in by the creature's apparent panic and suffering. He put his phone back in his pocket and slowly stepped inside, compelled by something unknown to him.

The creature stilled, cocking its head to the side as it watched the man inch forward. He could now see two big white eyes and a mouth. Ears, a nose, a body, legs. Once he got to the cage he put his hand up to the still creature and it nuzzled into it. Without thinking, he opened the cage door.

The creature's eyes widened, seeing the open door. It leapt out, standing on the concrete floor in front of him. Suddenly, it transformed from its dog-like body to a cat. Then – a frog, a lion, a mouse – until it settled on a bird. Andrew stepped back, both in awe of the creature and terrified of it. The bird flew up and landed on his shoulder, content with its perch.

Andrew knew he should be scared, but he felt weirdly comfortable around the unknown creature. He felt like he had a bond with it, a past together that spanned centuries. He shook his head and pulled his phone back out, snapping a picture of the cage and surrounding area. He couldn't find anything new so he turned around to go back into the sunlight. As he was leaving, the bird flew off his shoulder and onto the base of the large doorway, where it picked up a forgotten piece of paper in its beak. It flew back to Andrew, dropping the paper in his hand:

"To be dropped off at Port 7 in Oregon by June 17. On its way to Port 51 in Nevada by June 20. Shipment 40 of 40."

Andrew frowned. Today was June 19th, and this was Oregon. He slid the paper in his pocket and walked back to his car, thinking about all the things that were happening. And, of course, about the strange creature that was currently nuzzling his neck. He put his hand next to it and the bird loyally hopped onto it. Andrew brought his hand in front of him and stared at the innocent-looking animal. "What are you?"

The bird immediately looked into his eyes and turned into a snake, wrapping itself around his arm. It continued staring into his eyes, but as unnerving the creature was, Andrew couldn't feel anything but trust. He crouched down next to his car and let the animal slide onto the ground. From there, it turned into a dog – a border collie, actually. His favorite kind of dog. It jumped through the open car door and curled into a ball in the passenger seat, sighing contentedly. Andrew drove them to his apartment.

Once he got there, he went straight to his computer. The dog followed gleefully. He searched "Port 7, Oregon" but couldn't find anything. Next he searched "Port 51, Nevada" but all that came up was conspiracy theories about Area 51. He shook his head, disappointed, before hearing a crash from his kitchen and spinning around.

"Hello," a person said from behind the counter's island. At least it looked like a person, but with blue skin, wide eyes, and no ears. Or hair. "I know you must be confused. Don't worry."

"Yeah, I am pretty confused. Which I evidently have a right to be," Andrew spat, backing up from the person in front of him. It jumped off the stool behind the island and walked across the floor to him. Andrew noticed it was only about two feet tall. >>

*He was horrified
by what he saw*

Evan's Every Day

by Colin Sweeney, Oakland, CA

Evan – with fidgety feet and bouncing knees, whose wardrobe boasts names such as Gucci and Supreme, who sobs when Mrs. K. hands back a B and laughs when he hits the tiled science lab floor from leaning backward in his chair, – wakes up at daybreak. He grabs his Nutella packet from the walk-in pantry stocked with grains, cereal, and sugary snacks, smothers peanut butter and jelly on two (soon to be crushed by school books) slices of white bread, rolls his roly backpack to the car, and waits for the younger brother and sister to get ready.

Every day, Evan and his family drive through “the drop off” lane in their SUV. Evan hastily unloads his siblings’ book bags while the impatient driver behind them shakes her head. During Social Studies, extroverted Evan, seeking attention, answers Mr. Kenward’s questions with the right answer or a joke.

Like always, at recess, Evan stuffs himself with his crushed peanut butter and jelly sandwich and some Nutella sticks, not caring about the consequences of an empty lunchbox. And later, starving, Evan begs his

fellow eighth graders – seated with their lunches along the row of green metal, crosshatched benches outside – for any scraps of food. When a kid says, “No,” Evan shrugs and moves onto the next target.

*“Go away, Evan.
This has nothing
to do with you.”*

When we are gossiping about something new that has happened, Evan will stick his head into our huddle, eager to find out what we’re talking about. “Hey, guys, guys, guys, guys. What happened?” He’ll most often hear, “Go away Evan, this has nothing to do with you.” But he persists. “C’mon, guys ... you always do this. You keep excluding me. Can you just tell me this once?” We’ll send him off and he’ll sulk around for a minute, then get over it and become that same old Evan.

At the end of the day, waiting like hungry baby birds for our parents to stop chatting in the parking lot, Evan, who must first go directly to fencing practice, shares his eagerness to get home and play “Apex Legends.” ♦

“I am, as you Earthians call it, an alien. I came here from another planet, one that your government doesn’t want you to know about. The planet that your – er, dog came from.” Andrew looked back at the animal, and it trotted over to the alien, seemingly friends with it. “I came here because I need help. Your help. I don’t know why it’s you, but I guess I’ll find out.”

Andrew calmed down, letting go of the fists he didn’t know he was making until now. “What does that mean? My help, but you don’t know why?”

The alien hopped onto a chair so it could be at eye level with Andrew. “These animals can form bonds with other creatures. For some reason this one picked you. I knew you had to be special.”

The dog turned into a bird once again and flew to Andrew’s shoulder. “Okay ...” Andrew paced back and forth, trying to absorb everything that was happening. “I’m Andrew, but I guess you already knew that.”

“I go by Crumble. I was the one who left that envelope at your door because I needed you to find that creature. Thankfully, I knew where its shipment was going. The others, I’m too late.”

Andrew sat down opposite Crumble and put his head in his hands. “Okay, explain to me what’s happening. And what the shipments are.”

Crumble took a deep breath. “I work for the leadership in my society, which I’ve found out is corrupt. They have made a deal with the

leadership here to trade weapons. We give you some of these creatures –” he gestured to the bird “– to use as weapons in wars. And you give us bombs. That little guy there is part of the first shipment, one of forty. I flew here illegally because I need to stop this. Not only is the slavery of these creatures terrible, but I fear very bad things may happen because of it. I need your help, Andrew, to sneak the ones already enslaved out and back to my planet. I’ve already started a revolution back there, so no more shipments will be coming.”

Andrew stood up and walked to the front door. “What are we waiting for?”

“Nevada. Area – I mean Port – 51,” Andrew said as they drove closer to their destination. “So what’s the plan?”

“Okay. You’re gonna dress up like a soldier. I have the clothes. And I’m gonna sneak you in the back of the facility. Take the animal with you; it can help. Go down the main hallway and follow the signs to a room labeled ‘Live Testing.’ That’s where they’re kept right now. I’ll get into the control room and turn off the alarm, and you unlock all the cages. Your creature will tell them all to turn into flies and then they can follow you out. I’ll meet you at the back door. I’ll take over from there,” Crumble explained as he handed the soldier clothes to him. Andrew parked the car far away as to not draw suspicion, and changed into the outfit. All three of them made their way to the facility.

Once they got to the door, Crumble saluted Andrew. “And this is where I leave. Remember

– ‘Live Testing.’ Act normal.” He disappeared around the side. Andrew crouched down to face the animal who got him into this mess, and stroked the dog’s fur. They locked eyes and in that moment Andrew felt nothing but trust and confidence. He nodded at it, standing up and opening the door.

Once inside, the dog turned into a fly and sat on Andrew’s shoulder. He blended in seamlessly with the crowds of soldiers and scientists, scanning the doors for ‘Live Testing.’ He finally found it and slipped inside the dark room. Cages lined the walls, each with a different animal. But Andrew knew they weren’t normal animals – they were the aliens, same as the fly sitting on his shoulder. He flipped the light switch and walked to the closest cage to start unlocking them.

Before he could even find the lock, the door-knob clicked and the lights went off. Suddenly, he felt ropes being tied around his arms and legs, pulling him to the ground. He struggled against them, overwhelmed and confused. The lights turned back on and standing in front of him was Crumble. Two aliens like him were on either side of Andrew, holding the ropes. Before he could get a word out, the fly hopped off of his shoulder and flew to Crumble’s.

“I would say I’m sorry, but I’m not. We wanted more than just bombs for our part of the trade deal,” Crumble said as he looked at the fly and then back at Andrew. “But we’ve learned we have to be smart to catch you humans.” ♦

Skipping Stones

by Sydney Ling, Palo Alto, CA,

Photo by Brianna Wahlquist, Foley, AL

The lake lies silver in the bright light of the noon sun, not a perfect oblong like a looking glass, but amorphous like an ink-splatter on starched white paper. It is a mirror of the surrounding coniferous trees, with a surface as smooth as glass. A fresh, earthy, pine scent floats in the air. The weeping willow, the wispy clouds above, all become a Monet. The landscape is a painting of dappled, impressionist brush strokes of muted hues from snow-pea green to silvers with blue undertones. Your eyes gaze to where the sun-speckled water blends into the horizon, where blue meets blue. You and your brother used to love to come here to play, escaping the frenetic movement of the rest of the world.

At age 15, your brother, Caleb, still wants to compete with skipping stones against you, even though you are two years younger. He still enjoys the glory of beating his lesser, still enjoys destroying your pride.

He picks up a stone and tosses it into the water. As the stone skips across its surface, the radiating ripples catch the sunlight.

After three skips the stone sinks; then once again the lake looks like glass, making you picture gliding on its cold surface in your socks.

Caleb keeps skipping stones while you look down at the sea of slippery, glistening pebbles of various sizes. It is a difficult task, finding the perfect one. Each one is a different hue of gray, brown, and black. Some are streaked; others are marbled.

After a few minutes of searching, your back is already aching, so you sit down and watch your brother.

He's squinting his eyes, spinning the stone off with the exact coordination, like the expert he is. The dark gray stone dives into the clear water with a little splash, sending ripples in ever-widening circles each time it skips. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Nine times. Nine skips. "Score!" your brother hoots, throwing his hands up into the air in triumph, and runs over the rocky shore to you.

He still enjoys destroying your pride

"Try to beat that," he gloats with a smug smile.

"Nine skips? Even a five-year-old could do that," you say.

"Prove it," your brother says. You're lying, and he knows it. The highest number of skips you've made is two.

You look back at the stones, and you feel defeated already. You go on all fours and start picking stone after stone, pebble after pebble. You don't even know what a perfect skipping stone is. You only know that you want to beat your older brother.

A stab of pain scorches your right thumb as the sharp edge of a rock slices it. You wince and suck your thumb to release the stinging pain. Your mouth tingles as the metallic taste of blood blooms. When you draw your thumb back, you see tiny droplets of dark crimson starting to seep from the fresh cut, blotching your pale skin. It hurts, but no matter. You have to beat your brother. You pick up another rock, and the cut stings again. This stone is flat. Holding it feels like you're holding a sand dollar. It is speckled gray with a white streak in the center. Smooth. No cracks. It is the one.

You rub your good thumb thoroughly against the smooth surface. The rock is almost too perfect to skip. Too perfect to throw into a

pool of water, breaking the surface, disturbing the eerily calm setting with its splash, where it will sink slowly, eventually lying amidst millions of other stones just like it.

And it will lie there, for years, centuries, millennia, until it resurfaces onto the rocky shore where you had found it.

How do stones skip, exactly, you wonder? How do they move so speedily at shrinking lengths across the body of water before surrendering, sinking down to their ends? Almost like a deer trying to escape. Leaping into the air before landing swiftly on the surface, galloping away. Each jump done precisely, with a strange, almost incalculable rhythm. Each beat, each skip of the rhythm like the flashing of the white tail of the galloping deer. Each skip's sharp sound gently fades away, like the sound of hooves pounding into the distance. An echo on the water. Skip. Then the stone is into the air again. Skip. And then it disappears into the water's open arms.

"What are you waiting for, Abby? Stop standing there like a moron," your brother jeers.

You try to ignore him, but the words still sting. You try to resist, but your feet start moving toward the edge of the water, your hand still clutching the light gray stone.

Your brother looks at you, a sneer across his face, a look of triumph. That he had won, that you would fail, that the rock would not skip even once, but instead plunk itself stubbornly into the water and sink to the bottom.

But no, you could not let him have that. You could not; you would not, let him have his win, his victory.

You grip the perfect, smooth, dry, skipping stone with your right hand, the one you had cut. You take a last look at it and with ➤ ➤

I Want to Walk Like You

by Giulia Belgrado, Muscat, Oman

He's strong and it's scary.
He walks slowly.

When he walks the world slows down, my heartbeat slows down, he's walking slowly, he's calm, I'm calm, I slow down, the noise around fades and disappears. Now it's just you, walking slowly, like you have all the time in the world, as if you know everything and are bored. Are you bored? Is that why you walk so slowly?

Then you see me; I hate it.

I hate that you see me.

I hate it that you look so strong alone and so lost when you see me.

I hate it that when you walk alone your eyes are lost inside you, and the black iron pearls are dark, indestructible; and then when you see me they sparkle and I realize they're made of glass.

I hate that you speed up.

Slow down again, calm me again.

But now the moment is gone. You take my hand and push open the

My soul is as thick as a wall

door of the green room. You throw my backpack off my shoulders, you kiss me, I close my eyes. I'm blind. Now I'm starving and hungrily kiss you. I try to steal everything you have in you, your calmness, your strength, I want it all, I need it all. Then you pull away and tell me my eyes are beautiful and that you want me so bad. I hate it. I hate that you can't just give me what I love about you. I hate that I can't walk slowly, that I can't be so calm and say the right thing every time. I hate that you like me because I love you. I hate that you will never love me like I do, maybe you'll love me more but never like I do. You'll never love the things about me what I love about you. You'll never need me like I need you. You'll never be so deeply in love with how I talk or how I act like I am with you. Your voice brings me peace your kisses take away my breath and I wish you could keep it so I would have a real reason to need you but you always give it back to me. I hate how every time I'm sure you're going to hurt me and disappoint me ... you don't. And every time my heart shatters, it gets back together in half a second. I hate how you want to be anything for me but not everything. "I'll be your friend, I'll be your lover, I'll be whatever you need," you say. But I want it all, I want the friend and the lover and everything in between.

I want to take it slow. I am scared of you, so tall, so strong you have the power to shatter me with your pinkie.

My pinkie is red and bleeding but you don't see that, do you? You only see my eyes, you only see my lips, my hands are hidden behind my back with all my secrets. I told you small things and you think you see right through me and gosh I wish you did. I wish I was so transparent you could see right through me, but my soul is as thick as a wall, as 100 walls that not even your strong arms can take down.

So now when I'm lost or sad I walk slowly and imagine being you, walking so slowly.

Teach me, my friend, how to walk like you. ♦

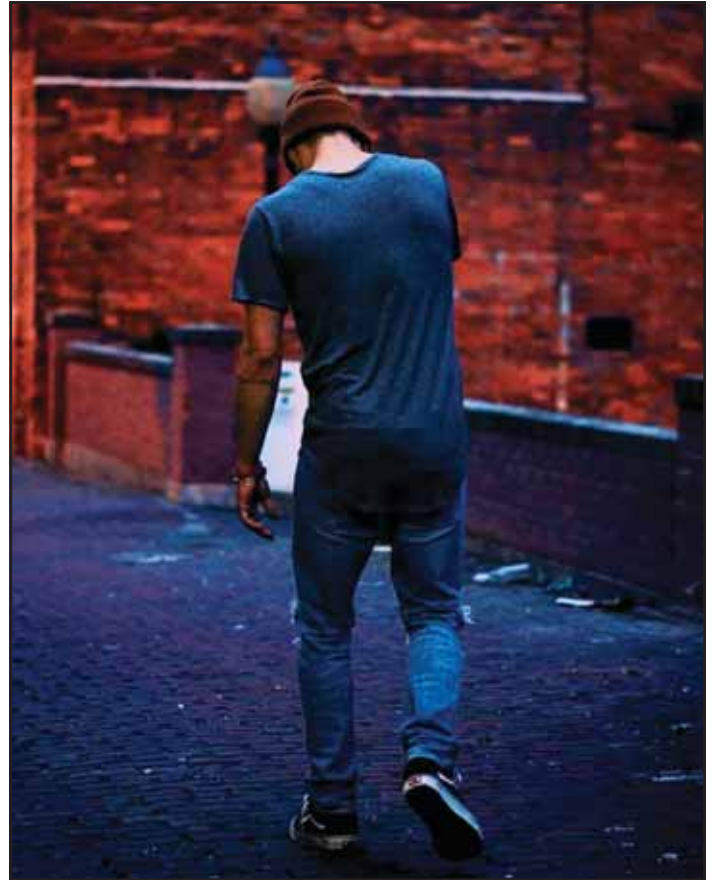


Photo by Nishee Patel, Upper Deerfield, NJ

all your attention and might, let it fly out of your grasp. You realize you have flung too hard, but it is too late. The cut stings. You hold your breath. All you can do now is wait.

Expecting it to disappear into the water, you look away, not wanting to see your brother's gloating face. You wait for him to mock you with his sardonic voice for saying that nine skips was nothing.

But instead, you hear him let out a little "whoa."

You turn your head back to the sparkling water, and watch the stone move like a deer, swiftly and flawlessly, across the smooth glass

surface, barely creating any ripples. The stone jumps into the air with each ascent, then dips down to lightly kiss the water and release, creating a bouncing path by which the stone threads sky into water.

Four. Five.

Your brother isn't sneering anymore. He isn't gloating anymore. He has a different look on his face. What is it? Anger? Jealousy?

Eight. Nine.

You have reached his level. You are tied. It doesn't matter if your stone sinks right at that moment, that blip of time. You have won. You look at your brother. He looks surprised. Yes,

that was it – definitely jealousy. Maybe even regret.

The stone keeps going.

Ten.

As you watch it, almost in slow motion, the eleventh skip, the stone does not go farther. There is a splash. A splash of water. Just a tiny one, but it is still a splash. Specks of water fly a few centimeters into the air; white foam rises. Then all is quiet.

The water settles. The ripples disappear. The surface is as smooth as ever.

And your stone, your perfect stone, is gone. ♦

Top 10 Writing Tips

by Jennifer Jacobson, Director of the Juniper Institute for Young Writers

Writing unfolds, explodes, falls, blooms, whispers, and shouts when you least expect it, so give yourself permission to write whenever you have an idea. Here are ten ways to jump-start, capture, and coax writing out of your head and onto the page.

1. Think about what makes the physical act of writing easy for you. What's your favorite way to write? On a keyboard? With a pencil and paper? On your phone? Do you have the perfect pen? Whatever your tools are, find them, and keep them close.

2. Collect your writing supplies and set a timer for five minutes. Keep your pen/pencil/fingers moving. Write whatever comes into your head. Don't censor anything and don't worry about punctuation, spelling, or grammar—that can all get prettied up later. For now, just keep the flow going, and if you get stuck you can write, "I have more to say. I have more to say. I have more to say." You will find that you do.

3. Prompts can help a writer muscle through the trap door of the psyche, unleash the unconscious, or help you feel less self-conscious. Pick a prompt and write for five minutes. See what happens.

- When the storm passed we found the ...
- At the end of the road they ...

- She picked up the blue bottle and ...
- Some say he never ...
- The lights in the sky looked like ...

4. Respond to an image. Visit a museum, open a magazine, find some graffiti, scroll through your social media feed, and choose a painting/ photograph/ collage/ image that grabs you. Don't overthink this: first thought = best thought. Describe the image or the action in the piece. What happened just before? What will happen next? How does it make you feel? If there's an object in the picture use it in your story or poem. Will it cause conflict? Inspire a journey? Answer a question? Go.

5. Exquisite Corpse is an exercise made for writing with others. Decide on the sentence structure before you start. For example, you might decide the sequence should be adjective, noun, verb, adjective, and noun. Write the first word, an adjective, on a sheet of paper, fold the paper so the word is hidden, and let the next person add another word. Go around as many times as you want keeping the words hidden, but following the sequence. The random selection of words often creates powerful and surprising images and very funny poems.

6. Take something you've written and instead of having the poem, scene, or story end in the way you had been imagining, do the opposite. For example, Tiger is heading to a

party where she won't know anyone and she's nervous about having someone to talk to. Now try changing directions. Tiger's heading to a party and she'll know everyone. How will she get a few minutes alone to talk with her best friend?

7. A found poem uses words, images, and phrases from other sources and brings them together in different ways. You might find language in an instruction manual, weather chart, horoscope, tweet, recipe, advertisement, history book, newspaper, novel, poem, or comic. Pull out words that attract your attention. Put them together. See what develops.

8. Choose something that you've written and underline the places where the language you've used is abstract or generalized. For example, in the sentence, "The sky was beautiful," you might underline "beautiful." Then write, "what I mean by beautiful is the way my mother smiles so I can see her uneven teeth." Keep going.

9. It's amazing the number of stories and poems you can create when you **start making a list**. Here are some ideas: What I hate about summer. Things that roll. Parts of an insect. What September smells like. Streets in my neighborhood. Colors in my room. Ingredients in my favorite pie. Try it.

10. Congratulations! You've made it all the way to number 10, so I'll tell you the very best tip for writing: If you want to be a writer, you have to write. Every day. Start with five minutes. Want more? Set the timer for another five. Use these strategies. Keep a list of what's working. Do it again and again. Remember, you have more to say! ♦

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Jennifer Jacobson directs the Juniper Summer Writing Institute and Juniper Institute for Young Writers, teaches at Smith College's Young Women's Writing Workshop, and is the Associate Director of the MFA for Poets and Writers at UMASS Amherst. Her work has appeared in Chronogram, jubilat, MotherWriter! and elsewhere. Read her story "Flight" in the November 30th Masters Review/New Voices Issue "featuring the best stories by emerging authors."





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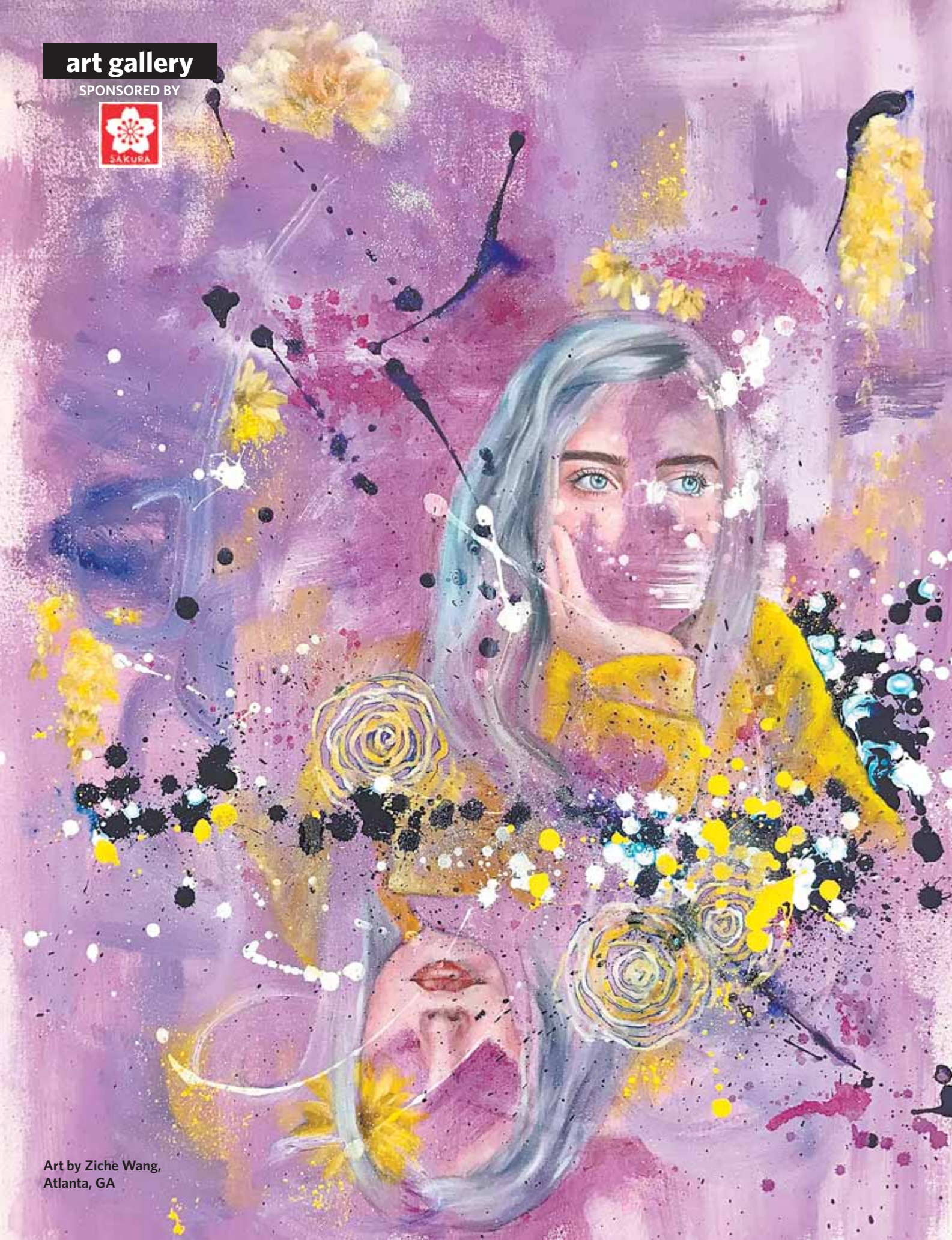
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Sunset Season • Conan Gray

Conan Gray is a 19-year-old singer songwriter from Texas. He started his music career on YouTube, and his career skyrocketed in 2018 after he released his song “Idle Town” – an ode to his small hometown. “Idle Town” now has over 10 million views on YouTube and over 13 million streams on Spotify.

Later that year Gray moved to LA and met a producer from Republic Records who helped him add some final touches to the songs he had written. He released his first EP, called “Sunset Season,” last November.

Conan tries to relate with his fans through his music. For example his song “Generation Why” is the perfect song to explain his approach to songwriting. This song is a message

to older generations and the media that see 21st century teens as selfish, sad, and lazy. Throughout the song Gray uses a sarcastic voice to mimic the false perceptions of teens: “Cause we are the helpless, selfish, one-of-a-kind millennium kids, that all wanna die.” These lyrics are significant because a lot of teens can relate to them. Parents and teachers pressure us to be so perfect and they forget that we’re just kids.



Inspiring and emotional

“Greek God” is written about the popular mean kids. It talks about bullying, saying, “You and all your friends have to walk in a squad cause y’all are so insecure” and “I know what you really want – a little more confidence.” There are people who seem larger than life who are so mean because they can get away with it. “They hurt people because they are hurting,” reminds Conan, “but once you’re older and wiser, they fade into nothing and just become stories from high school,



Photo by Elaine Kharbanda, New York, NY

just folklore.” Gray also sings about the intensity of teenage emotions in upbeat songs such as “Crush Culture,” or sad heart-breaking ones like “Lookalike.” Both of these songs are about being in love, but their tempo, sound, and message are very different. “Crush Culture” is about liking someone who doesn’t like you back – so you take it out on everyone else. Then “Lookalike” is about trying to get over someone you loved. Conan writes about topics that every person in high school can relate to.

just folklore.”

Gray’s music career hasn’t been easy, but he still manages to keep his head held high. In “Sunset Season” he’s not afraid to answer questions, to stick up for others, and to build relationships with people. Conan’s main goal is to make kids who are hurting or struggling feel like people care about them.

I recommend this album to teens because it’s so relatable. Listening to it feels like a therapy session. The album includes songs that go perfectly with any mood, whether you are happy, sad, or experiencing heartbreak. Conan Gray is talented, inspiring, and emotional; his music should be heard by everyone. ♦

by Camila Medeles, Sacramento, CA

Mellow Gold • Beck

Though they may not know it, the beginnings of Beck’s and Radiohead’s careers actually have a lot in common. Both started off playing music relatively young, unexpectedly found themselves in the spotlight due to a nihilistic surprise hit (the former’s “Loser”; the latter’s “Creep”), and went on to become extremely successful while ironically dismissing the songs that made them superstars. However, that is where the similarities end, for while the rest of Radiohead’s debut is generic wannabe-rock radio fare, Beck’s first really popular album (the much lesser-known releases “Golden Feelings” and “Stereopathic Soulmanure” were already out by that time) is a shockingly imaginative, never-predictable stunner through and through.

That isn’t to say that the rest of “Mellow Gold” overshadows its most popular tune. In fact, that infectious folk-hip-hop slacker anthem, complete with nonsensical stream-of-consciousness lyrics (“So shave your face with some mace in the dark/ Savin’ all your food stamps and burnin’ down the trailer park”) is easily the best thing here. However, those who think they know what to expect from the rest of the album based on that



Lots of warped fun

particular song are gonna have to prepare themselves for a real shock, ’cause absolutely nothing could be further from the truth. Though Beck himself described “Gold” as conceptually being something along the lines of “a satanic K-tel record that’s been found in a trash dumpster,” it really feels more like a seriously tripped-out Bob Dylan release co-produced by Ween; erratically switching between being laidback [“Pay No Mind (Snoozer)”], freaky (“Soul Suckin’ Jerk”), woozy (“Steal My Body Home”), and just plain nightmarish (“Mutherf*****”).

Despite the album’s pervasive anti-commercial attitude and gleefully bizarre genre-hopping, however, perhaps the most shocking thing about it was how critically and commercially well-received it was, selling over 1 million copies in the United States and even earning the approval of the notoriously hard-to-please Robert Christgau. True, it may not be for all tastes, but for

those brave enough to try to unearth it, this “Mellow Gold” offers lots of warped fun. ♦

by Ben Parker, South Burlington, VT

Aura • Ozuna

A mixture of Spanish culture from Panama and reggae from Jamaica, reggaeton emerged as a male dominated genre – very misogynistic, immensely sexist, and objectifying toward women. The songs included aggressive beats and sounds—virile, masculine anthems to sexual conquest. Artists like Don Omar, Daddy Yankee, and Wisin y Yandel popularized this genre, making it globally well-known.

Reggaeton today has left that misogynistic way – it is not coincidental that female artists like Karol G. and Natti Natasha now dominate the genre – and has become more about finding or being in love, still keeping that old sensuality and sexual appeal while introducing new feather-light and chill vibes. Puerto Rican reggaeton and Latin trap singer Ozuna has been topping the charts and giving everyone a run for their dinero as “el negrito ojos claros” has been creating worldwide music history.

Born as Juan Carlos Ozuna Rosado on March 13, 1992, Ozuna’s rhythmic and danceable style of music has been drastically changing the reggaeton game. From the beginning of his discography, his musical style has always been melodic and upbeat. One of his first songs, “Un Nuevo Amor,” from the

album “Yums: The Mixtape Part 2” gives off a fun-day-at-the-beach feeling, utilizing a reggae beat. The single that significantly increased his popularity—“Dile Que Tu Me Quieres”—mesmerizingly and blissfully talks about the beautiful moments where one realizes he’s falling in love accompanied by a sparky tempo.

Ozuna’s latest album release, “Aura,” won the 2018 Billboard Music Award for Top Latin Album. The album is composed of 20 catchy sets of words to make anyone’s ears smile and features collaborations with artists like Akon, J Balvin, Anuel AA, Romeo Santos, and Cardi B.

The album begins with the song “Aura,” an emotionally rich and poetic vibe: “Espejo, tú que dices la verdad ¿Cómo hago para yo no mentirme?, eh-ieh Cuando te miro sabemos la realidad Pero sé que me hago daño al mentirme, eh-ieh.” The song talks about having mixed emotions and feelings, which is the complete opposite to “Aunque Yo Me Porte



Hypnotic and inviting

Mal,” the tenth song on the album. Totally contradicting “Aura,” “Aunque Me Porte Mal” talks about what it’s like to know exactly who has your heart and how it feels to be in love with them. Along with its feel-good and playful beat, this song will have anyone up on their feet dancing and singing with their loved ones. And for those who have not had the best experiences with love in the past, the song “Monotonía” will have people crying over their nonexistent past lovers. Ozuna depressingly sings, “A mi corazón que te borre pero es que él no quiere y me suplica y dice que se muere,” activating tears to pour down like flash floods. Although reggaeton has transitioned into a more fresh and clean version, Ozuna certainly does not forget its roots. Similar to Anuel AA, Karol G., Bad Bunny, and Natti Natasha, Ozuna still boldly emphasizes sensuality and seductiveness in a fun and flirty way. “Supuestamente,” “Ibiza,” “Escape,” “Tu Olor,” and “Devuelveme” all keep that fire and passion in both the lyrics and overall rhythm. He courageously shows this in the lyric from “Supuestamente” featuring Anuel AA: “Haciéndolo, bebé, tú eres mi víctima (mi víctima) Te endiablas y te pones pornográfica.” In “Tu Olor,” Ozuna sets the mood by telling his partner that “Se quedó tu olor en mi cuerpo Prohibido es mejor Volvamo’ a tener sexo.” Ozuna does a flawless and smooth job of being straightforward and ambiguous at the same time about the things he wants to do with his significant other.

Although Bad Bunny and Ozuna have very similar musical styles – not to mention that they are the most successful Latin trap artists and reggaetoneros to bring those the genres into the American mainstream – Ozuna keeps it a little more sexual in his songs whereas Bad Bunny switches from sexual to inspiring to heartbroken to nostalgic.

Ozuna has greatly impacted Latin music and keeps giving both Latin and non-Latin listeners banger after banger after banger. Overall, his album “Aura” deserves an outstanding round of applause in Spanish. Ozuna has found a dynamic way of preserving the original reggaeton roots and also modernizing to give it a hypnotic and inviting appeal. ♦

by Diana Gonzalez, Las Vegas, NV



Art by Brenna Costello, Louisville, CO

Kids See Ghosts • Kanye West & Kid Cudi

“Kids See Ghosts” is a joint project from Kanye West and Kid Cudi. In this album, the two artists talk about their personal problems with drug addiction and mental illness, how they overcame those afflictions, and how they feel free now that they have left their troubles behind them. This album came from a place of power and courage. Kanye and Kid Cudi send a clear message even though the seven song tracklist only clocks in at about 24 minutes long.

The cover art for “Kids See Ghosts” was created by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. It was inspired by Murakami’s original art piece called “Manji Fuji.” The Kanji characters translate to “chaos,” which ties into Kanye’s personality and also all the chaos the pair went through to reach this point in their life.

The first track on this album is “Feel The Love” featuring Pusha T. His verse is perfect for this album because he talks about his dark past of dealing drugs and how he came to fame. This verse is accompanied by the Kid Cudi’s excellent vocals singing, “I can still feel the love.” After the verse, Kanye comes in with powerful vocals of various boom noises and some intense drums. This half of the track really gets you riled up.

The second track, titled “Fire,” takes a different approach. It uses a sample of Jerry Samuels’ 1966 song “They’re Coming to Take Me Away, Ha-Haaa.” This sample makes sense because the song is about a person’s struggle with mental health, which is the dominating message of the “Kids See Ghosts” album. Kanye and Kid Cudi’s verses are joined by some guitar strums and flute melodies. Overall, this is a very solid track.

The third track, “4th Dimension,” uses a Christmas song from the 1930s as its sample. The eerie vocals of the sample really catch your attention, and when the beat finally drops, the amazing verse from Kanye starts and you can’t help but be captivated by every word. Soon after Kanye’s verse ends, Kid Cudi’s starts and it’s just as good if not better than West’s. The two really compliment each other on this track because while Kanye plays the kind of crazy and wild angle for his verse, Kid Cudi goes for a more calm and well thought-out vibe and it turns out to be exactly what the album need-

ed. The fourth track “Freeee (Ghost Town Pt. 2)” is an extension on the song “Ghost Town” from Kanye’s newest solo album “Ye.” It starts out with some heavy guitar chords and some intense drums then all of the sudden, Kanye yells out “I don’t feel pain anymore” and you can hear the emotion in his voice clear as day. As the track goes on, West talks about how he feels free and then the track begins to slow down and we receive and few lines from Ty Dolla \$ign. Then, the song seems to come to a complete stop with the phrase “I feel free” coming in intervals with heavy guitar strums once again and beautiful melodic vocals. Kid Cudi soon breaks the slow pace with his impactful verse and synth decrescendo and brings the track to its end. I believe that this track was beautifully put together and it emphasized on the lighter side of this album is all about.

The fifth track “Reborn” happens to be my favorite because I believe this song embodies what the message of the album is which is overcoming of your problems and feeling free at last. The track starts with a slow piano melody and Kid Cudi’s enchanting humming. He starts off with “I’m so, I’m so reborn. I’m moving forward.” Cudi continues to go on about moving forward and how he is stress free. Kanye chimes in with his short verse and he talks about his mental illness and how he often stressed out and how he is off of his medicine (“I was off the meds, I was called insane/What an awesome thing, engulfed in shame”). Then the track goes back Kid Cudi with the moving forward lines. After this, Kid Cudi starts his verse, talking about there wasn’t much he could do about his problems but peace is something that starts with him. This is key to the overall theme because you can tell that Cudi is trying to start a new chapter in his life. He continues to go on about how he struggled with accepting himself and knowing what his purpose was in the grand scheme of things (“At times, wonder my purpose/Easy then to feel worthless/But, peace is something that starts with me”). The track comes to an end with Kid Cudi contemplating about which path in life he should take (“Really couldn’t find my way out/ Of the storm/ Which way do I go?”). This is a very motivational track because it focuses on learning

from your suffering and moving forward to create bigger and better things.

The sixth track on “Kids See Ghosts” focuses on the obstacles the two artists faced in their childhood. The term “Kids See Ghosts” is used to express how children can see things that adults cannot. It also refers to the grief that both artists experienced from their parents’ deaths and how they can still feel their presence. This track is haunting. It starts out with a feature from artist Mos Def chanting the phrase “kids see ghosts sometimes” in a hushed tone. Then Cudi comes in with an ominous verse talking about how he is sick of running from his problems, but how he also can’t face them alone: “I guessing I’m just sick of running/All this time searching hard for something/I can hear the angels coming.” After this, Kanye begins his verse. Its meaning seems a little incoherent because at first he talks about the time it took him to make music (“Well it took me long enough to rap on this strong enough”), then he talks about his faith and religion (“Constantly repenting cause yes, I never listen”), then he mentions his fashion and art sense. His verse just doesn’t fit the theme for this track which feels off-putting.

The seventh and final track “Cudi Montage” starts with a loop of “Burn in the Rain,” a recording of Kurt Cobain that was released after his death. This track starts out with a few lines from Kid Cudi that set up Kanye for excellence. Kanye’s verse is one of his best in a long time in my opinion. This verse is powerful even though it strays from the main theme of the album. Kanye raps about gang violence, revenge, and the pain that results: “All growing up in environment/Where doin’ crime the requirement/They send us off to prison for retirement.” Kanye proves with this verse that he still has very valuable lessons about life left to offer, and I love to see that from him. This track is among the best of the album.

“Kids See Ghosts” is a very emotional album. It’s full of heartbreaking lyrics that really make you feel like you lived life through Kanye’s and Kid Cudi’s eyes. This album is a huge rebound for both artists’ careers, especially since Kanye has been getting a lot of criticism for his behavior in the media and Kid Cudi’s album, “Speedin’ Bullet 2 Heaven,” was a huge flop. “Kids See Ghosts is definitely their saving grace. I give this album a rating of 9 out of 10. ♦

by Ezra Green, Wilmington, DE



Heartbreaking lyrics

A Stranger in the House • Shari Lapena

My mom has always enjoyed psychological thrillers and would watch the movies with me. When I was little, it was a little traumatizing for me, but I grew to love the genre and the suspenseful mood tingling throughout my body. So I was excited to read *A Stranger In The House*, a thriller by Shari Lapena.

Karen and Tom Krupp are your classic, happy, white-picket-fence couple in suburban New York – until one night when Karen Krupp does not come home. We later learn that, instead, she was recklessly speeding through one of the worst neighborhoods in the area and had an accident. Her accident occurred a couple blocks away from the murder of an unknown man. Karen is suspected of being connected to the crime, but her amnesia from the accident is of no help to her defense. The Krupps' perfect life is shattered, and they must now face marital problems, a murder charge, fines, and the police.

The plot of the novel hooked me from the beginning;

it was the best part of the book. The story is well-developed, and all motives and actions, for the most part, made sense. It was fun to guess who had committed the crime and who was involved. While any twists were predictable, I still did enjoy the overall plot.

The major criticism I have of *A Stranger in the House* is its lack of anything for the reader to connect to. I could not feel the love between the characters, and their personalities were clichéd – the cunning detective, the distant husband, etc. The writing style did not have an interesting tone. Instead, it comes off as too straightforward, telling the reader everything and not allowing the reader to make some of their own conclusions.

If you enjoy emotional reads and are looking for a deep, thoughtful story where you can fully submerge yourself in the writing, this book isn't the one. If you want an easy book with a plot that hooks you, *A Stranger in the House* is one you'll probably enjoy. ♦

by Leyla Saraj, Edmonton, AB, Canada



An easy book with a plot that hooks you

Art by Emily Cai, Las Cruces, NM



George and the Blue Moon

Lucy Hawking and Stephen Hawking



Didn't have a big impact on me

For someone so famous, I expected Stephen Hawking to have written a better book. *George and the Blue Moon* is a book with alternating sections of fiction and nonfiction written by Stephen Hawking and his wife, Lucy.

The fiction section follows two friends, George and Annie. Annie's dad is a scientist who works for a suspiciously vague government organization. The book is written in present day or possibly the near future. One of the major weaknesses of this book is that it is too unbelievable for this century. For example, the scientist father has a computer with a space portal. The computer is seemingly magical with endless computation powers. The far-fetched computer makes the whole book too unbelievable. This fact made it difficult for me to engage; there are too many glaring impossibilities. On the positive side, I can see this book appealing to a younger audience who might believe in magical technology.

Each nonfiction chapter is followed by a fiction section. The non-fiction sections are written by a range of scientists with interesting information that correlates to the plot. These sections provide mediocre information about everything from space to sea life. I didn't learn anything, but it is a nice

method to possibly engage a younger audience in a variety of science fields.

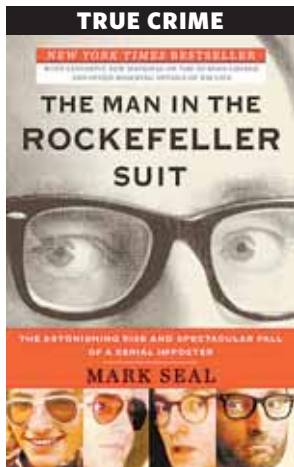
For a teenager, the characters seem a little too flat and therefore can't be fully appreciated. The boy-girl friendship doesn't have much conflict; they are just good friends. Annie's relationship with her dad is also light. Bottom line, the characters were enjoyable but boring.

The story does flow well. If you ignore all the impossible technology and don't need complex characters, it's a fun read. *George and the Blue Moon* has a climax where the kids have to fight robots in space. The resolution is predictable. True to this genre, the kids can't tell anyone of their amazing adventure and go back to pretending everything is normal.

The book didn't have a big impact on me. Perhaps if I had started the series in middle school, it might have been more enjoyable. *George and the Blue Moon* is a good book, but I suppose teenagers just aren't its intended audience. ♦

by Jonathon Hammond, Kirkwood, MO

The Man in the Rockefeller Suit • Mark Seal



The Man in the Rockefeller Suit is a compelling tale of identity theft that was brilliantly researched by journalist Mark Seal. This masterpiece causes its readers to contemplate the true consequences of lying. Although the truth of “Clark Rockefeller” will most likely never be fully uncovered, Mark Seal turns bits and pieces of information into a fluid time line for readers.

The book begins with a teenager named Christian Karl Gerhartsreiter obtaining a student visa to travel to the U.S. From there, he changed his name, location, and his overall character dozens of times. Each person he met along the way was hooked by his charming manner, and they believed everything he said – from his supposed royal background to his fake education at prestigious schools. His final identity, Clark Rockefeller, ended with dire circumstances that readers will have to

find out for themselves.

This story will engage readers from cover to cover as it eloquently describes the journey of a man who switched his identity multiple times over the course of three decades. Mark Seal perfectly describes the work of a true con artist, and how he managed to fool hundreds of educated individuals. The story of “Clark Rockefeller” will force readers to ponder the fabricated stories we tell each other, and might even cause them to question

A shocking tale

their trust in those around them. Although the life of Christian Karl Gerhartsreiter seems too crazy to be true, I can assure you that this all-true account of his life will keep readers entertained and on their toes. I definitely recommend reading this book for the shocking tale of a true pathological liar. ♦

by Allison Moody, Wilmington, MA

Fahrenheit 451 • Ray Bradbury

When I read *Fahrenheit 451*, I wasn't really reading a book. I was living Guy Montag's life, I was inside his head – witnessing and experiencing his thoughts and feelings as he did. That is exactly why I couldn't stop “reading.” I was there and I was alive and I was trying to get my wife to speak with me but she just kept lying there with those stupid little earbuds in her ears – floating farther and farther away from me. My brain was buzzing yet I couldn't move. I couldn't get up for a sip of water, I was no longer in my bedroom, I was in a world where books were a pleasure to burn. I was so immersed – engulfed – I completed half of *Fahrenheit 451* in one afternoon. Kudos to Amazon Kindle for keeping track of my progress.

Written by Ray Bradbury and published in 1953, it is no surprise that this book brought up some contentious issues. Consider the social and political climate of the time-frame: the Cold War, the Red Scare, the massive rise of television, all of which are explicit themes of *Fahrenheit 451*. The saddest thing is that this book is considered one of Ray Bradbury's most brilliant works. Luckily, since the 1950s, the controversy over the book has been somewhat mitigated. In fact, a remake of the original “*Fahrenheit 451*” film has recently been released.

However, it wasn't only the themes that made the novel widely disputed. It wasn't what Ray Bradbury wrote, it was how he wrote it. *Fahrenheit 451* follows the story of a man named Guy Montag, a “firefighter” who begins to question his conviction in his work after he meets a bright, peculiar teenager named Clarisse. Being a firefighter is such an honorable and dignified occupation, though, even if in this dystopia, the firefighters make the fires instead of putting them out. Guy should be happy. He is happy. Isn't he? He is happy when he comes home



Gives me chills

to a lonely and silent house. He is happy when he lies down next to a woman every night that barely recognizes his existence. He is happy when he is invisible. Isn't he? Well, if he is invisible, if his one-dimensional boss and co-workers see straight through him, then what does it matter if he breaks the law? What does it matter if he reads a book?

Fahrenheit 451 seems to have everything: a powerful plot, raw and intense characters, and thought-provoking themes. But still, those elements are incomplete without one powerful addition: the dialogue and the figurative language. The detail and dialogue in this book gives me chills to this day. The thing that is the most astonishing is how the scenes build themselves. They start from an abstract, confused, obscure foundation, which is something that adds verisimilitude to the novel. In real life, people talk over each other, people have individual motives when they speak. And no one ever completely listens to what the other person is saying because they are simultaneously attempting to construct a response based on their own opinions and biases.

When it comes to reading an impeccable, dystopian novel such as *Fahrenheit 451*, you aren't just reading; you're traveling to an alternate universe or experiencing a lucid dream. Although the book was widely disputed during the early years of its publication, that doesn't diminish the brilliant and sublime writing of Bradbury. With his use of figurative language, detail, and immersive dialogue, the reader is able to mentally and emotionally connect with the characters in a way I haven't experienced before. Bradbury mirrors human behavior so well, while developing a complex and riveting plot. I'd certainly give this novel 5 stars. ♦

by Amehja Williams, Philadelphia, PA

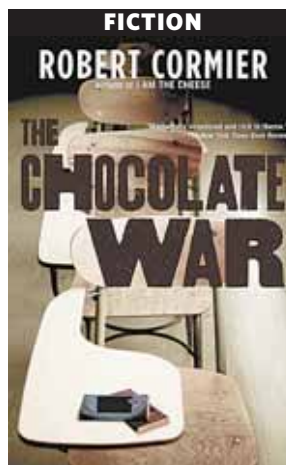
The Chocolate War • Robert Cormier

Normally, when a book carries a name as cheerfully innocent-sounding as *The Chocolate War*, it tells a similarly lighthearted tale of friendships, rivalries, and the joy of making and eating tasty treats. However, those expecting a story along those lines should prepare themselves to instantly be greeted with a cold slap across the face.

Although wisely giving ample time to several different characters, the novel generally focuses on the troubled Jerry Renault, who boldly refuses to participate in the annual chocolate sale that his all-male Catholic high school strongly encourages (read: practically forces) all of its students to do. Unfortunately, this arouses the ire of both the cruel vice-headmaster Brother Leon and the school's secret society/real dominating force, The Vigils. Tensions flare, barely veiled embarrassments lead to violent retaliation, and Jerry finally learns the sad answer to the question the T.S. Eliot quote on the poster in his locker poses: "Do I dare disturb the universe?"

Undoubtedly one of the darkest books ever

targeted at YA audiences, *The Chocolate War* has literally been challenged at (if not outright banned from) schools over two dozen times for its often brutal content, including one particularly disturbing plot point involving a sexually explicit photo that doesn't even exist which is used to blackmail its subject. Granted, none of that is really surprising considering that the book's author, Robert Cormier, soon wrote another novel geared toward teens – *After the First Death* – in which terrorists hijack a school bus filled with little kids and wind up accidentally killing one of them. However, what ultimately makes *The Chocolate War* worth picking up is the hard look it takes at the real life of seemingly ordinary schoolboys, as well as the



A darkly essential teen classic

truly disturbed thoughts and feelings that pervade some of these individuals' minds. Additionally, the gripping writing and grimly realistic characters are simply superb, getting under your skin more than the average horror movie and leaving you feeling thoroughly shaken and unsettled.

As such, the novel is definitely not recommended for anyone expecting anything uplifting or "feel-good," and will probably prove too much for some with its bleak nihilism and noticeable lack of any helpful solutions. Nevertheless, it is still a darkly essential teen classic, if one that you will never see any parent

groups backing up. ♦

by Ben Parker, South Burlington, VT

The Eye of Minds • James Dashner

"Who knows the definition of real?" Skale said evenly as he continued to eat. "When you've been trapped in the Sleep this long, it's all as real as anything else." *Eye of Minds* by James Dashner is 100 percent mystery, 100 percent action, and 100 percent sci-fi. That makes 300 percent good book for everybody, whomever you may be.

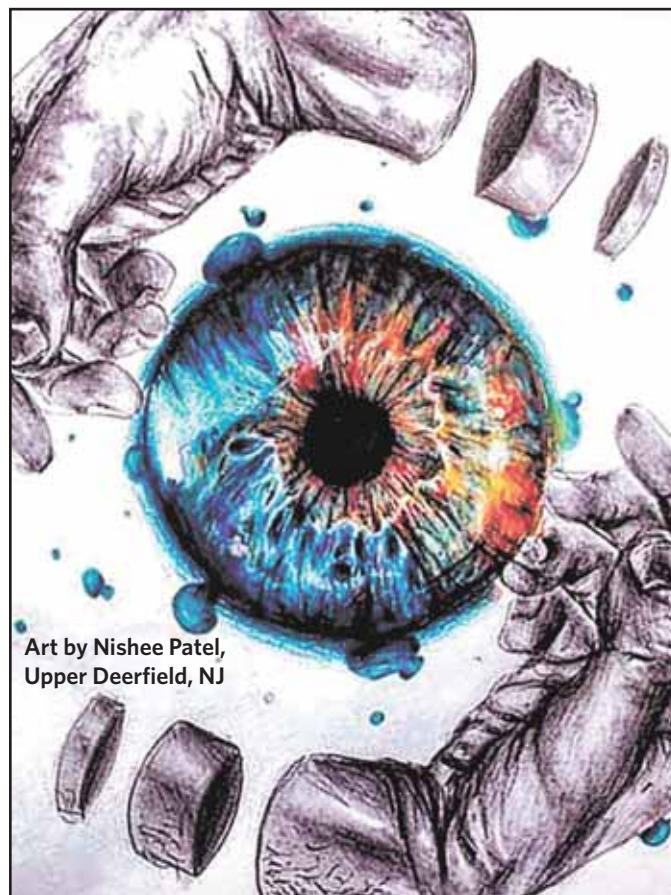
Michael's best friends are named Sarah and Bryson, but he's never met them before – not in the Wake anyway. He only sees them in the Sleep. Created by a worldwide organization called the VNS, the Sleep is basically just a virtual life. You can eat, play, and meet people without even having to leave your house. What Michael doesn't realize is how developed the Sleep really is. When a powerful and power-hungry, hardcore gamer named Kaine starts to do malicious things to people while they're in the Sleep, Michael and his friends team up with the VNS to try and stop him. Will they be able to halt his evil plans, or will Kaine hurt them, too?

Dashner adds twists and turns throughout the entire story, making *Eye of Minds* an amazing book. You'll want to resist the Sleep – this book will keep you up reading the entire night. ♦

by Timmy Markee, Kirkwood, MO



Twists and turns throughout the entire story



Art by Nishee Patel, Upper Deerfield, NJ

Aladdin (2019)

As I trailed into yet another remake of a Disney movie, I felt unexcited, yet hopeful – unexcited that I may have just wasted another 15 dollars on a movie that was either too similar to the original, or so radically different I forget what I’m watching, but hopeful that Disney would pull through with a new movie to obsess over. Luckily for me, I was not disappointed by “Aladdin.”

Something that Disney tends to do is produce a carbon copy of the original when they do these remakes, or they will do something completely different to the point that people end up being confused and upset. I thought Disney did a great job of making sure neither of those two things happened with the remake of “Aladdin.” I love that Disney makes new versions of their classics so every generation can enjoy them. This version stayed true to the original story except for one thing: Jasmine wanted to be Sultan. This was a very interesting choice for Disney, but I greatly appreciated it. This generation is much more satisfied with seeing a woman take a position of power than sitting through another film where the man saves the woman because the woman can’t save herself. I hope that this film opens the door for many more like this, because it is good for young girls to see that women can be powerful and be great leaders without dependence on anyone. I love that Disney makes new versions of their classics so every generation can enjoy them.

The movie stars Mena Massoud as Aladdin, an unfamiliar face to me, but not to the big screen; he already appeared in “Jack Ryan,” “Open Heart,” and “Masters in Crime.” His acting performance was terrific, along with his impeccable dance moves during the song “Friend Like Me.” The role of Jasmine was played by Naomi Scott, who also appeared in the iconic Disney Channel original movie “Lemonade Mouth.” While



Did not disappoint

I enjoyed her performance thoroughly, I could not help but notice that her pop-like voice did not seem to fit with the style of the original movie. Of course, Will Smith as the genie truly stole the show in his twist of “Friend Like Me” and “Prince Ali.” While his singing was a bit lacking, his character was so full of life that my eyes were constantly drawn to him.

The soundtrack also stayed close to the original, but with a few additions. The movie did produce one new song called “Speechless.” Jasmine sings it twice, at times when she feels that the people around her want her to stay silent, underscoring the fact that she will not go “speechless.” It is a very powerful song, but I was not a fan at first. The song “Speechless” seemed like an attempt by Disney to produce the next “Let it Go” from “Frozen” or “How Far I’ll Go” from “Moana,” which were both smash-hits that empowered their audiences and made a ton of money. “Speechless,” however empowering, does not fit with the style of music in “Aladdin” and seemed all too forced and artificial. Whatever Disney’s intentions were with the song, it eventually grew on me despite it being totally unnatural when placed in the movie’s setting.

Disney’s “Aladdin” (2019) did not disappoint, offered a fresh take on the story, and while featuring a slightly unnatural song, brought a long-loved story back to life with an amazing cast. I would highly recommend for any family to come to see the magic of a Disney story made just for a new generation, or for anyone who wants to see a fresh take on a familiar tale. ♦

by “Amy,” Nashotah, WI

Get Out

Jordan Peele (of Key and Peele) makes his directorial debut in “Get Out,” a film that mixes racial politics with horror in a way we’ve never seen before. “Get Out” follows a man named Chris Washington (played by Daniel Kaluuya), who is black, and his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage (Allison Williams), to her family’s country estate. Rose’s father, Dean (Bradley Whitford), makes patronizing remarks to Chris – “I would’ve voted for Barack Obama a third time,” he says – that make Chris uncomfortable and, as the story unfolds, increasingly paranoid. Eventually, Chris realizes that he suspects only the beginning of things darker and more manipulative than he could have ever imagined.

Jordan Peele is most well-known before “Get Out” for his sketch comedy show “Key and Peele.” On “Key and Peele,” the sketches followed a specific structure: quickly set up the premise, establish an interaction between characters, and repeat some form of that interaction a few times. The stakes and emotions between the characters esca-

late every time, until the comedic climax of the skit. Midway through “Get Out,” there’s a big gathering of Rose’s family and their friends. Chris has increasingly uncomfortable and off-putting interactions with many of them, and both the arc and climax of the scene mirror those of “Key and Peele.”

In one scene there is an interaction late at night between Rose’s mother, Missy (played quietly and eerily by Catherine Keener), and Chris. In this scene, the camera never pans out to the whole room. Instead, it cuts between close ups on Chris and Missy’s faces, trapping you in the literal and figurative claustrophobia of the scene. The tension, anticipation, and dread is impossible to look away from due, in part, to the purposeful directorial choice of keeping you, almost



Tension and anticipation

literally, in Chris’s head. When Chris tells Rose he is suspicious about the way Rose’s family interacts with him and suggests that this is an ongoing problem, she says that these strange instances are isolated and not part of a larger phenomenon. As a white male, I know that I can’t relate to Chris’s experience or know what it feels like to be black in America, but I nevertheless understand “Get Out”’s message: racism is not only perpetrated by police brutality, bigoted politicians, or the KKK. Racism is often a middle-aged, smiling, liberal white man telling you, almost too happily, that he, “would’ve voted for Obama a third time.” ♦

by Elijah Bacal, Northampton, MA

Legally Blonde

To begin, I'd first like to thank this film for introducing me to the words "alibi," "liposuction," and "objection!" Special thanks to that last word, because I would wind up seeing it a lot during my "Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney" gameplay.

My first encounter with "Legally Blonde" was when I was in elementary school. Needless to say, I understood almost nothing about the film aside from, "Harvard is good," "Her boyfriend is mean," and "Wow, I want to be like Elle Woods." Rewatching the film as a teenager, that last sentiment still rings true. I still want to be like Elle Woods. Who doesn't?

"Legally Blonde" (2001) introduces us to fashion princess Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon), who is cruelly dumped by her boyfriend, Warner (Matthew Davis), when she is expecting a proposal from him. Warner cites that Elle is not intelligent enough for his law school aspirations, and dashes off to Harvard Law School. Determined to win Warner back, a devastated Elle sets her sights, too, on the same law school. She gains admission with a shocking 179 on her LSAT. Elle's time at Harvard, however, is not easy, as she faces belittlement from her peers, scrutiny from her professors, and sexual harassment. Ultimately, our heroine comes out of the experience strong and successful.

While the film maintains competent cinematography, "Legally Blonde" shines most brightly with its charming characters. Vivian Kensington (Selma Blair), Professor Stromwell (Holland Taylor), and



Charming characters

the whimsical David Kidney (Oz Perkins) made for a strong band of supporting characters. However, the true standout, unsurprisingly, is Elle Woods.

Reese Witherspoon pulls off her character extremely well, bringing to life the likable, bubbly, cheerful, and unflinchingly authentic Woods, who is impossible not to root for. Elle, who comes into law school hoping for the validation of her ex-boyfriend, goes through a remarkable character journey, ultimately gaining confidence in herself. By the end of the film, Woods becomes independent and ambitious, a far cry from her former self. Most notably, however, is that, despite her own development, Elle never loses sight of who she is, as shown by her fully pink outfit when she appears in the courtroom in the finale of the movie. She develops as a character, sure, but she never sacrifices her own identity to do so. And, when Elle almost does lose sight of who she is, she almost loses her future law career, showing us that, if we lose sight of ourselves, we lose everything.

All in all, the film can be interpreted in many different ways for many different people. However, the story of a young woman gaining confidence and independence despite setback after setback never loses its luster. Eighteen years later, "Legally Blonde" still remains an iconic film. So, if you haven't watched it yet, watch it. And if you've already seen it? Do yourself a favor and watch it again. ♦

by Cindy Zhang, San Diego, CA

La Casa de Papel (Money Heist)

"Money Heist," better known as "La Casa de Papel," has become one of the most viewed Spanish TV shows by non-Spanish speakers. It was released in May 2017 and still hasn't lost its attraction to viewers. The story begins with a boy who has a terrible disease. While in the hospital, his father tells him criminal stories, and he tells him about his biggest dream which is to heist the National Royal Mint where money is printed. A few days later, the boy's father is killed when he is entering a bank. And some 20 or more years later, as a tribute of his father's death, the grown up boy, Sergio, plans to fulfill his father's dream.

"Money Heist" is very successful because its fans are not only in Latin American countries, but in African, Asian, and European countries as well. This fact has opened people's minds from all cultures and inspired them to invest in the show.

The cast is amazing. They express their feelings through more than language. Just by looking at their faces you can see what's going on in the show. The main characters are a criminal mastermind called "The Professor"

and eight robbers who try to infiltrate the Royal Mint. The relationship between Tokyo and Rio (two of the criminals), the constant fights between dad and son (Denver and Moscú, two other criminals), and the relationship Denver develops with one hostage (Monica Gaztambide) create twists and tension that keep you glued to the screen.

Who, ultimately, are the good guys and who are the bad ones? This is a question viewers will ask at some point. And all will wonder who they want to win the final battle – the robbers or the police. Because of all the little things that the robbers share about themselves, it's hard not to become invested in them. I can assure you that half of the audience will want the robbers to win.

"La Casa de Papel," is one of the most intriguing TV shows I've ever watched because you never know what will happen next.



One of the most intriguing shows

a lot of the problems depicted on the show are solved with violence and there is offensive vocabulary. ♦

by Davis Mateo Conde Gomez, Tirana, Albania

Killing Eve (Season 1)

“Killing Eve” was made by BBC America and is one of the most adventurous, genre-defying pieces of TV I have ever seen. It is consistently unpredictable and wonderfully made. Here’s a quick description to pique your interest. Eve (Sandra Oh), an intelligent, desk-bound MI5 agent and mercurial hit-woman Villanelle (Jodie Comer) go head to head in a fierce game of cat and mouse. Each woman is equally obsessed with the other, as Eve is tasked with hunting down the psychopathic assassin.

While “Killing Eve” has a lot going for it, its crown jewel is the co-lead, Villanelle. Phoebe-Waller Bridge impressively writes this psychopath as a child in a woman’s body, turning a remorseless murderer into a hilarious and strangely likable character. Jodie Comer brings the writing to life in a thoroughly entertaining performance. When she spins herself around in an office chair and giggles after mercilessly killing one of her victims you can’t help but smile. Of course, I would be eviler than Villanelle herself if I failed to mention the second lead, played to perfection by Sandra Oh.

In stark contrast to Villanelle, Oh’s Eve shines in her obsession with Villanelle. When her husband questions this obsession, Eve replies, “she will keep hurting people until I catch her, she wants me to find her.” This line not only effectively summarizes Eve’s character but the entire plot. Eve spends the entire show putting her mental and physical energy into



Consistently unpredictable

hunting a predator, while Villanelle is a predator playing with her food. She wants to be found.

As someone with a passion for writing, it is extremely refreshing to watch the show’s writer, Phoebe-Waller Bridge, consistently subvert the clichés of the spy genre. When Eve is entering the secret hideout where she will be working, instead of a serious scene introducing stakes, Eve’s boss tells her about the rat she once saw drink from a Coke can beside the door. Moments like these make “Killing Eve” consistently unpredictable. The directing also deserves acclaim. There are many different directors throughout the series but each one elevates the strong performances and writing. Shots linger on characters’ faces, inviting the audience to allow their minds to reflect on the characters and their motivations. There is a scene where Villanelle holds a knife against her prey and the camera goes so close, you can almost feel the cold steel on your own flesh.

The first series of “Killing Eve” is nothing short of a masterpiece. This show’s writing, direction, and performances will make you become one with your television screen for eight hours. Considering Ridley Scott’s comment that “Killing Eve” represents a real threat to the film industry, there is no doubt that this is a show to watch. ♦

by John Brady, Dundalk, Ireland

The Promised Neverland

This season in anime has been a blessing. With shows like “Kaguya-sama: Love is War,” “Rising of the Shield Hero,” and “Dororo,” 2019 anime has been a blast. But one anime in particular, “The Promised Neverland,” is redefining the genre of horror anime as a whole, gaining it a spot as one of the best horror animes of all time.

The plot of “The Promised Neverland” follows about 40 children in a range of ages between newborn and 12 year old. They live at a foster home called Grace Field under the protection of their “Mama” and “Sister,” the women who care for them. Every day, the kids have to complete tests and tasks to train themselves mentally. Three children in particular – Emma, Norman, and Ray, – have always reached the top scores on these exams. One day, the kids find out that the House, while posing as a foster home, is actually a plantation where the kids are shipped out as food for Demons, so they decide to plot an escape to save everyone. From the very first episode I felt compelled to keep watching. It was one of those first episodes that is so good, it hooks you instantly. It ended on such a dark tone that I had to keep going on.

One of the main reasons this show is so good is the blending of character archetypes. For example, in most shows, you would have the edgy kid that wears black, the nerd that won’t get his nose out of a book, the overly energetic kid, and the super-fit athlete. “The Promised Neverland” cuts out all these clichéd characters by



Redefines the genre of horror anime

blending archetypes. Ray, while being the kid that’s always reading a book and opting out of physical activities, lets loose his emo side with long black hair and a pessimistic mindset. Emma, the caring girl who never seems to run out of energy, is also the most physically fit out of all the kids. This idea makes the anime much more engaging without needing to follow 400 different characters at the same time.

Another great thing that this anime has going for it is the theme. The theme of this anime is teamwork, and here’s why. Even though certain characters are revealed to be traitors, the group still needs them in order to escape. When Sister Krone, the woman who accompanies Mama, tells the kids that she wants to help them, they accept – even though they know that she is probably going to betray them. They need everyone they can get to help them reach their goal. Another overarching theme is that of betrayal. The plot twists reveal shocking betrayals and allow the show to explore how the characters deal with them.

Mama is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting villains that I’ve seen and is a textbook example of how to create one. While it’s true that the concept of “person acts like your friend but is actually the villain” exists everywhere, “The Promised Neverland” executes it perfectly. We start off feeling emotionally attached to Mama. She appears to be so caring and nice as she looks after the kids. There’s no way she ►►

Spider-Man: Far From Home

“**S**pider-Man: Far From Home” is an exhilarating roller coaster that continues the adventures of everyone’s favorite web-slinging superhero. Following the events of “Avengers: Endgame,” Peter Parker (Tom Holland) is forced to step up and become the Avenger that he was always destined to be. Although Peter doesn’t plan on having to deal with being Spider-Man for the summer, when he goes on trip with some of his classmates (including love interest MJ, played by Zendaya) to Europe, trouble eventually finds Peter and he can’t run from being Spider-Man for long. Earth is being attacked by monsters called Elementals and Peter must work alongside Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) – as well as a mysterious soldier called Mysterio (Jake Gyllenhaal). Peter is soon at a crossroads when he’s forced to decide between being with MJ and being the superhero that the world needs him to be.

“Spider-Man: Far From Home” brings out the true heart of the Spider-Man character. Despite all his powers – including his increased strength and ability to have a sixth sense of sorts – the man behind the mask is only Peter Parker, an ordinary teenager. He feels torn by his responsibilities and constantly questions what he should do next, especially considering that if he doesn’t help fight the villains, he might end up ruining his chances of telling MJ how he feels.

The setting of this movie is different than other Spider-Man movies, as it takes places in Europe. The change in location helps to highlight that, above all else, Peter Parker has realistic problems, just like the rest of us. This causes both Peter Parker and Spider-Man to become even more relatable and likable.

“Spider-Man: Far From Home” is a visual masterpiece that relies heavily on a mixture of visual and special effects to create an action-packed adventure. The numerous fight scenes don’t disappoint. With both amazingly

vivid visual effects and spectacular special effects, the movie is able to capture moments that are nothing short of breathtaking. It captures the audience’s attention with its vibrancy and never lets go.

Each and every character is given time to shine, and it feels that everyone in the cast has an intended and necessary purpose. Tom Holland is simply awesome as both Peter Parker and Spider-Man, and he manages to bring emotion and intensity to the star role.

He terrifically transforms into the character and ensures that the character is always grounded and relatable. Jake Gyllenhaal is magnificent as Mysterio and manages to make the character as mysterious as the name suggests. Zendaya is superb as Michelle Jones, and her portrayal gifts fans with a brave character that is sarcastic, clever, and says what’s on her mind. Jacob Batalon gives a fantastic portrayal of the fan-favorite Ned Leeds, and he is able to astoundingly pour humor into the movie with his character’s comedic strengths. Samuel L. Jackson’s Nick Fury is wonderful, as per usual; he returns with an unprecedented level of spunk, attitude, and passion. There are some other notable roles, like Jon Favreau’s Happy Hogan, but Tom Holland and Zendaya are the real stars of the movie, and their on-screen chemistry is simply a delight.

“Spider-Man: Far From Home” may have excellent visuals, but the story-driven plot is just as well-executed. The story flows seamlessly and is jam-packed with eccentric concepts that aid in making the whole movie feel substantial and interesting. The beginning of the movie brilliantly transitions from the latest blockbuster of the Marvel Cinematic Universe



Emotion and intensity

and reintroduces audiences to Peter Parker’s Spider-Man in a flawless fashion. Although the middle portion of many movies tends to be one of the weakest parts, this is simply not the case here. In fact, the middle of this movie is one of the most entertaining portions. It masterfully presents challenging obstacles for Peter Parker – both as Spider-Man and as a teenager – that cause watchers to be invested in every minute. The thrilling twists and turns will genuinely shock just about everyone. Like most of the movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, this movie contains hilarious jokes and witty one-liners to ensure that the story never becomes overly dark. The ending is both heartbreaking and heartwarming. It fully takes advantage of all of the drama, suspense, and intensity that has been building throughout the movie.

“Spider-Man: Far From Home” has the rare honor of being rate well by audiences and critics alike. Rotten Tomatoes gave the movie an outstanding 92 percent – which is just as impressive as it sounds – and a whopping 96 percent of Google users liked the movie as well.

“Spider-Man: Far From Home” has it all – a thorough plot, a star-studded cast, vivid visuals, romance, comedy, and surprises galore. The movie is a good fit for both adults and teenagers; teenagers in particular will appreciate with this uncanny adventure. The movie also manages to make us like the character of Spider-Man even more than we did. Just like the superhero that this movie is based on, “Spider-Man: Far From Home” proves to be amazing. ♦

by “Dave,” Short Hills, NJ

can be bad, right? Once her reveal as a villain has been fully understood, your emotional attachment to her leaves the viewer confused. Mama’s power as a villain does not come from raw strength, but from the emotions of the characters that she has manipulated into loving her. Emma, Ray and Norman have built up their trust over the years to their guardian angel, which means that even though she’s evil, the kids are so afraid of her that she still has tons of power over them.

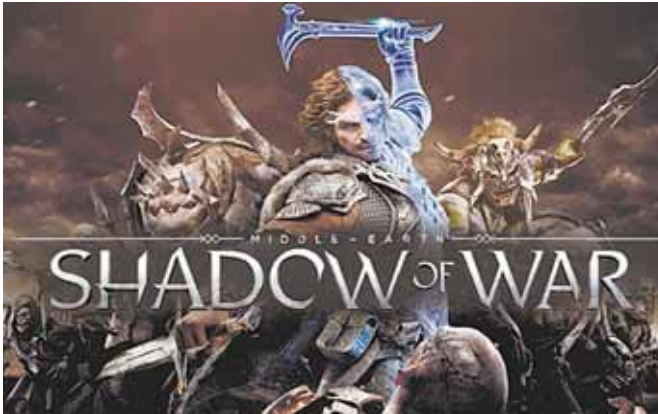
Whenever I talk about this show and refer to it as horror, there’s always one person who tells me, “But it’s not even scary! How can it be a horror anime if it’s not scary?” Well, that’s where the psychological part of psychological horror comes in. Despite what many people believe, horror isn’t all jump-scares and ghosts; it’s often more subtle. This is

one of the reasons that “The Shining,” another psychological horror, was so good.

“The Promised Neverland” has many aspects that make it a contender for one of the greatest horror animes, although not everyone watches it for the horror. Its character depth, theme, and especially its treatment of a villain are things that caught my eye and drove me to write this review. I implore you to at least try watching it. If you do, I guarantee that you will enjoy it. “The Promised Neverland,” joins my list of favorite animes. I give it a 10/10. ♦

by Martin Kalo, Tirana, Albania

Middle Earth: Shadow of War



Game-Changing Nemesis System

For technogeeks, “Shadow of War” is revolutionary. The Nemesis system, is much like life itself – every unique and individual decision yields a unique consequence. This gives Orcs their redeeming traits, names, and physical characteristics. They have numerous different voices, quotes, armour, facial structures,

classes, clans, tribes, etc. For example, the “Skill Tree” with a number of branches allows you to hone your skills and become the most powerful being in Mordor. The “Wraith Flash” skills allows the player to blind, poison, freeze, or even set enemies on fire in the middle of a fight. Captains, Warchiefs, and Overlords each have their own personalities, strengths, and weaknesses that can turn the tide in the midst of battle. I can guarantee the player will never be bored!

Gameplay: Extensive Nature

The game contains many regions with unique vegetation, weather, fortresses to capture, and much more. With numerous collectables, skills, and gear to acquire, the complex nature of the game make sure not a second of gameplay is boring.

Agility of Choices

With the Nemesis System making sure every action has an impact on your story – from choosing whether to send your captain in as a spy, assigning him as bodyguard, or sending him to the fight pits – it’s no wonder the game’s motto is: Nothing will be forgotten.

Side Missions for Variety

The Nemesis System creates side missions that range from rights of passage of Orcs, raids, hunts, and many more. If you’re looking for some captains, the side missions are a good place to start, if orcs are enemies chances are they will have conflict in side missions.

There are two DLC’s which add two orc tribes and a new region and two storylines. The DLC’s are not necessary for a good time in the game but if you are interested in more it’s a worthy investment.

Final Review 9/10

I love the combat and the story, but the on-line aspect is weak. Over half of the time that the game has been around, there was a store where you could buy orc captains that were epic and legendary. This completely defeated the purpose of fair multiplayer match-ups when attacking a fortress. Another bone I have to pick with this game is when it first came out it cost me 120 dollars to buy the gold edition – which added a steel case, DLCs and some legendary captains. It was okay, but the

Riveting details

game would have still been enjoyable without the upgrades. “Shadow of War,” however, is one of the best open world RPG games I have played. The numerous side missions, amazing campaign and riveting details makes this game is worth the nearly 50 dollars the normal edition on PS4, Xbox and PC. It has some graphic scenes of violence allowing the player to lop off limbs of enemy orcs, but it is easy to see it is not realistic. Still, parents should be aware of the content in this game. This game contains no sexual content, explicit language, drinking, drugs, or smoking. This game should be available to players 12+ who understand the difference between fantasy and reality. ♦

by Julian Ones, Tirana, Albania



Introduction

If you want an immersive experience into the magical world constructed by J.R.R. Tolkien, there is no better place to dive in than “Shadow of War.” Players will be pulled deeply into the complex storyline while assuming the identity of a battle-hardened Gondorian, thirsty for revenge. Even those bookworms who normally snub the world of video games will be attracted to the literary virtues of Tolkien’s digitized imagination. Trust in the magic of the experience, and dive into the game with me!

Exciting Twists and Challenging Swordplay

“Middle Earth: Shadow of War” is the sequel to the ground-shaking “Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor.” Players find themselves in the shoes of Talion, a Gondorian ranger who died on the Black Gate and came back, tied to a wraith lord named Celebrimbor. Celebrimbor and Talion set out to destroy the Dark Lord. The player will go on missions and build an Uruk Army (one of the breeds of orcs, the most violent and powerful) to take fortresses in Mordor. In addition to being an open world game, “Shadow of War” offers multiple different regions with different climates and vegetation. The landscape is breathtaking in its variety; the outlines of majestic mountains, the light and shadows, and the orcs that inhabit them make the game the best of its kind.

For exciting swordplay, “Shadow of War” also has memorable battles with Captains, Warchiefs, and Overlords. Captains can return from the dead, betray you, and even become deranged. These kinds of ever changing plot twists keep the game fresh. Every action has a consequence in this game.

Celeste



2018 was a year full of many accomplishments in video games. “Shadow of the Colossus” and the “Spyro the Dragon” games received their anticipated remakes, “Red Dead Redemption 2” finally released (earning Rockstar Games over 700 million within one week.), “Spider-Man” gave Marvel fans a new story about your friendly neighborhood Spider, and “God of War” was my cinematic experience with a lot going for it. Amongst a year with all these successes, I feel like smaller and independent developers weren’t given as much attention as they should have gotten. With all these games that bedazzled us, I was happy to see a little game known as “Celeste” win Best Independent Game and Games with Impact awards.

To give background, “Celeste” is an indie platformer title developed and published by Matt Makes Games. The story follows a young-adult lass named Madeline trying to conquer her anxiety and self-doubt by climb-

ing one of the most dangerous mountains known to her, Celeste Mountain. The whole mountain itself is filled with hazards that could mean your progression or game over. Overall it’s a very challenging experience, but that adds to the game’s overall narrative.

The game was developed in a 2D pixel style that is very engrossing to look at. Each screen of the game has a new hazard to face, and new scenery to look at. I personally never had a moment where I thought something in the overall look of the game felt off. It all feels like it correlates together very nicely, like a puzzle. But what else fits in with it? Looks aren’t everything of course, and that’s where the music and gameplay shine together.

One core skill that Madeline has that is rooted in the game is the “dash” ability. Whenever you press the game’s assigned action button, Madeline will do a quick dash in whichever direction you face her. This is the game’s main feature, and it would not be possible to complete the game without it. As well as the dash ability, you can grab onto walls and such and climb up them before running out of stamina. This shows that simplicity doesn’t mean a simple game. You have a very easy-to-explain and use gameplay style, but a killer hard game.

What makes a game without some rad music? “Celeste” has a very upbeat and sometimes somber score. It adds to the game in whatever situation you’re in. There are moments in the game where you may meet up with a character named Theo by a campfire. The score here will change to silent and somber as the characters interact. Or the opposite, whenever you’re being chased or have to make a split-second decision during gameplay the score will kick up and make you truly feel on the move, and I really feel its effects. The music is very diverse in its scores. It is upbeat when it needs to be, and intense when it needs to be.

And now to the segment of why I love this game so much: the central themes and story. “Celeste” is more than just a game about

climbing a dangerous and literal killer mountain. Your character Madeline is climbing the mountain not to overcome it, but to overcome herself. She lives with self-hate, depression, and doubt in herself throughout the game. Her overcoming this mountain is a metaphor for real people’s fight with their mental illness and themselves, them overcoming their feeling to give up. And this theme isn’t portrayed in a preachy or in-your-face way; it’s all portrayed through Madeline and her own thoughts throughout the game

At the beginning of the game her anxiety, hate, and doubt manifest into an alternate version of herself. It is implied that the mountain has a strange “aura” about it, so in the context of the game, it makes sense. But it also makes sense in the context of the game’s themes. The self-loathing version of Madeline is a clear nod to many people’s own hate toward themselves, and that the only way you can get over it is by trying to accept it and work around it.

When you break down the game to its core, the beauty of its true narrative is what makes it special. I personally relate to many of the themes of the game and sympathized with the events the characters go through. It represents the struggles of living with anxiety perfectly, and it teaches an important lesson.

You may not be able to get rid of anxiety, or any other mental illness, but you can learn to live with it successfully, and that’s the beauty of “Celeste.”

I highly recommend “Celeste.” It’s a challenging game for sure, but the developers also left in the “Assist Mode” to aid players that still want to beat the game when stuck. The game’s soundtrack is a joy to listen to, and easy to find online. It’s aesthetically pleasing to look at, and at times I found myself just looking at some of the artwork instead of focussing on gameplay. So much work was put into the visuals of the game. I believe that those who love video games and good storytelling should experience this. The game cares about shedding true light on what its story is really about, and every crevice of the game shows that. This game is worth your dime. Showing more love to developers like this will give us more heartfelt stories and games in the future. ♦

by Finn Knadle, Dennison, MN



Photo by
Yunzhi Cao,
Shenzhen, China

Toxic

Slippery, slithering snakes
Entangled in a dance.
They snap, they hiss, they sigh, then hug
And it repeats all over again.

The screens don't protect the texts that sting
Or the tears that fall when the bites don't end.
Their scales slowly shed into something
much worse

But the snakes keep dancing because it used
to work.

Tied at the tails,
Tangled together,
Unable to let go.
They want to, but they don't
Because they don't know
How.

Screaming, sobbing snakes
Trapped in a toxic dance.
They snap, they hiss, they sigh, then hug
And it repeats all over again.

by "Eve," Franklin, WI

Non-retentive

Troubled mood and troubled mind
in a metronomic swing
contort the force of humankind
in a way that it can sing.

Pluck and play to swing and sway
with no sense of relief,
these keys convey my sad display
of discouraged disbelief.

My stupid hands will play their plans
a hundred times all wrong,
my spirit cries through heavy eyes
as I end my tired song.

86 by Sariah Larsen, Meridian, ID

Lifeline

The whistle of wind
pushing
flying
lightning
one moment
launched
free
soaring
then the ground
crunch
cold
cheers
breathless
lying
up, away again
beserk
flying

by "Kevin," Muncy Valley, PA

Hoodwinked for a Sparkle

curated,
you spun lies of gold,
shimmering in warm beams of sun.

it was long before I realized the glare was not
a reflection of me,
but of your own morose core.

in terms of heat,
you were merely a conductor,
not the flame, which you had claimed to be.

in a rush, you flooded my life,
with which I will fervently proceed.

only a fatuous woman would trade her years,
for fool's gold.

by Emily Wacker, Elma, NY

Apple Tree

Apples hanging there
Snoring while they sleep tonight
Dead by morning dew

by Amber Franson, Watertown, MN

Stars

They twinkle
They dance
They sing

They suffer
They burn
They flee

They shoot
They cry
They dream

So do we

by Chris Dieck,
Blue Mounds, WI

Corvus Corax

Bitterness is the thing with feathers; with a
pointed beak that curves toward cruelty;
with claws that grasp witless mice unwitting
from the ground.

It is a hungry raven, using his beak to peck at
his fellows, desperate for anything that will
drown out the hunger pangs in his chest;

It alights on the rotting bones of prey long
picked of anything sapid, and screeches his
starvation to an apathetic desert,

Bitterness is leather-skin clinging too tight to
bone, resentment making the brittle feathers
gleam, ire in every squawk.

by AJ Weltin, Bedford, MI

I Live in a Doorway

I live in a doorway between two rooms,
I hear someone shouting in Chinese,
Exuberance quickly muted by the
Red firecrackers.
My cheek turning red from all the pinches
from relatives that I don't even recognize.
Hunched over a table,
Folding pork dumplings,
I am called American a million times.

I peek in the other room of
Sun lizards.
My friends bask in the rays of California
sunshine, listening to throwbacks
on the pink portable speaker we all chipped
in to buy.
Laughing and teasing each other, our
Sneakers thumping onto the black concrete,
Running wild in the street.

by Rachel Yang, Kensington, CA

Remembering

Antiques piled up
In the forgotten corners
Dust, ants, and you ...

by Mae Rusconi, Concord, MA

Graveyard Mouth

I make myself dizzy,
spoon-feeding the dark-eyed girl who lives
in my mouth.

She sleeps on my tongue,
rests her head atop my molars
and awakens mad.

Most days she sobs and screams,
her voice shrill like a child's,
piercing through my head.
There is no silence.
Only her sharp words, like broken glass
flooding my mouth with blood.

She tells me I'm disgusting,
laughs when I spit red.
God, I wish I knew how to believe,
that between the two of us,
she is the evil one.

I tell myself again:
these teeth are tombstones,
marking the graves of all the wicked creatures
I've swallowed so far.
The girl who lives in my mouth will soon
find herself
in the pit of my stomach,
rotting alongside the evil.

by Julia Trujillo, Arvada, CO

What's-Its Name

I forgot that thing
You know the thing
the blue thing
Remember the blue thing
You know the thing
that had six sides
Come on
I forgot that thing that blue thing
with six sides
You know the thing
it was bumpy
Remember it grossed you out
You know the thing
that would make noise
Come on
I forgot that thing that blue thing
that made you feel grossed out and
made noise
You know the thing
it was bigger than a computer mouse
Remember the thing that wouldn't stop
going off
Ya that blue thing
I hated that thing

by Kari Cross,
Melissa, TX

The Fish

On a matchstick night on the rocks.
The clouds – the back of a gray god,
battered wounds bruised the bottom sky
thunder of a gale, unshod feet
traverse the dunes on wicked kicks.

We shot out like red rocket flares,
“faster!” we bellowed,
and stopped until
we snatched a fish in a net and
let it flop and flounder on sand.

We wring our hands of blood
and brine.
The turquoise tide came rolling in –
blackened by the still skyward storm –
flooding its stunned mouth with salt,
and stinging its blank eyes.

When he couldn't answer our calls,
our voices swarmed – desperate flies.
Our eyes bent downward and
our spines
were straight and still as
wooden boards.

A crack of lightning seared the sands.
Our remorse had rung asinine,
fading, just as our quicksilver
and fledgling pink soles of our feet
beat up the bay and back inland.

by “Lisa,” Lexington, KY

Palen Pass

Mountains rise to the
Roar of enormous morning,
Lands fold like velvet.

by Jack Rhodehamel,
Newport Beach, CA

Is This What You Want?

Mr. Editor,
please tell me
what it means
to love poetry

Is it to dine with her
over cheese and wine
starry-eyed as I imagine us
happily aged with new lines

or caress each stressed foot
in a bath, easing away cramps
under the intimate moonlight
of a flickering desk lamp

perhaps even dancing a delicate tango
along voluptuous curves that jut?

My bony fingers wander,
finding ways to cut

and break, holding back tears,
as I slash her paper spine
with my insatiable ballpoint,
leaking crimson from the crime.

by Dennis Zhang, Hillsborough, NJ



Photo by Chloe Todd, Winter Park, FL

Ode to My Seventeenth Birthday

Contest
Winner!

Night washes over us in small fires –
jazz from the retro jukebox of Ruby's Diner
spiraling like smoke into stifling air,
the burning stench of sidewalk summer swell
lingering in our lungs along with the
salt-scented fries
and cherry-lipped milkshakes we bought
with the money we don't have,
from our parents' stolen wallets.
Moonlight paints the silhouettes of trees
on our sweat-slicked skin as we tear
through roads like paper,
driving too fast for our bodies. Not even
our shadows
can catch us as we chase the haunted
horizon of the city,
the crunch of tires against asphalt
our only anthem.
We are novitiates to a fleeting
American Dream –
desperate to feel the teenage high
of this forbidden rendezvous
under streetlamps that choke the houses
with light,
aching to escape this small-town scene
like the birds gliding past
our starred, striped sky. On the radio,
a crackly voice sings over sad,
shimmering synths,
lamenting the fear of getting old, reeling
midnight streets,
and don't our bodies know that familiar
language –
the quiet tragedy of growing up,
our inglorious selves?
The moon is howling. The night is dying.
Soon, dawn will cleave the sky
like a peach pit,
and early city traffic will smother the streets
in its dreary hum.
The radio will sing, *when I was seventeen*
I knew just how I wanted life to be,
and we'll laugh at its irony, bittersweet.
Our growth plates will fuse. Our smiles
will harden.
We will outrun suburbia and our parents
and ourselves,
driving past the years we've left behind,
the ones we've yet to reach miles and miles
ahead of us:
bright and aglow on the horizon,
a destination without directions,
impossible to see –

We'll drive toward it anyway.

by Jeffrey Liao, Livingston, NJ

Calm

She tells me her nervous system is calm.
She is ready to work and asks if I would like
some help calming mine.
I am conscious of the fluttering of my heart,
Hot flush in my cheeks.
My fingers twist and twist and twist
the hairband,
Winding it ever tighter,
Toe tips flying across the floor in couplets,
Must never break rhythm of two or four.
Maybe it's these things that tell her
Or simply her knowing that change in plans,
interruption, traffic that has made me late
Was always bound to set my teeth on edge.
I remind myself that her nervous system
is calm,
Not angry or anxious or any other form
of tumultuous.
Here she has extended me her hand
so-to-speak, help.
All I must do is take it.
I simply must say "yes."
"She is not like the others," I tell myself.
"No mask required. No danger lurking."
I really do mean to say "yes."
The word on the tip of my tongue,
But I open, and out tumbles "No, thank you.
I'll be fine in a minute."

by Alex Coleman, Palo Alto, CA

Sun

My hair is frizzy
Strands extend like rays of the
Broken yellow sun.

by Mae Rusconi, Concord, MA

The Pond

Shimmering eyes looking back
Looking inside
The chilling door of psyche

That abyss of nothingness
Is the reason the scratching
Of my pen on the blank page
Is so admired

It is all created inside
In four gray walls
Within the center a pond

Whenever is needed
I sink and vanish
In mind's lake

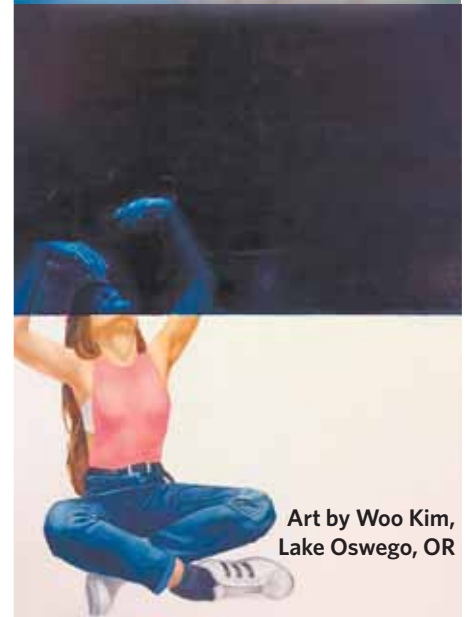
A deep gorge
Where silence reigns
From which ideas
Fly up like upside-down rain

by Giulia Belgrado, Muscat, Oman

Art by Dyllen Nellis, Los Angeles, CA



Art by Julia Pope, No. Andover, MA



Art by Woo Kim,
Lake Oswego, OR

& Spit Out the Seeds

My boy is
absolute porcelain.
Shattering,
carved.
He speaks to me like his sister,
bruised and smiling,
he kisses me like a woman,
sad and meaningless,
foaming at the mouth,
his lips
slick with feminine spit.

My boy is
sweet and sour,
he's broken his leg once before,
and cultivated a
fear of falling.

My boy's soul is a bathtub,
tepid and hungry.
Its fingers envelop
me, frozen.
He was a funeral when I
had gullibly assumed that he was a wedding.

My boy likes tangerines and oranges,
lemons and limes;
He peels their skin till they are nothing more
than juice and flesh.

And then he bites.

by Sofia Catanzaro,
Yonkers, NY

I Was Raised

I was raised in an apartment,
tattered from our humble family.
I was raised with the smell of petrichor—
for it drapes heavy on our cul-de-sac.
I was raised with the farm tractors outside,
working away the day.

When I was raised, I saw shadows
hover over my family as the sun settled down.
When I was raised, I saw the struggles of
deciding paths—
for no path would remain untouched.
When I was raised, I learned the tough way
because without error it seemed too effortless.

What I learned is, childhood won't last for life
it sheds like trees in autumn.
What I learned is, I dread the shadows from
long ago—
for they could fall upon myself.
What I learned is, that to have strength
I must remember how I was raised.

by Tracie Gray,
Nashotah, WI

Jealousy

She was the noon day sky
bright
(fried electric blue hair)
soft

(stomped robin egg shells)

Her face was freedom
Her lips, whispered promises
striped red white and blue
Her eyes, star spangled
my American dream

the wicked curl of her lip
her wink
that flash of faded denim blue
melted paint and I just wanted
to cup my hands in its stream
and drink

her words
rolled off her tongue onto my lips,
and I licked
swallowing the blue, to be blue

I turned and jumped and leaped, falling, stupid
for her, into that great expanse the color of
eyes. Drank all life from her lips.

Her liquid ink coated my veins and poured
out. Blue and unrestrained and covering me
(drowning in blue.)
Eyes closed. Skipping on lakes...Sipping on
Sapphires...Slipping in skies
(and over sentences.)
Running from the lights. Red white and blue.

My face was freedom
My lips, whispered promises
striped red white and blue
My eyes, star spangled
my American dream
the wicked curl of my lip
my wink
that flash of faded denim blue

I was red white and blue. An American
Dream. Now I'm running from the lights
and numb. Numb to June-gloom tears
pounding on my face. Flying through all
the shades of blue until I'm just blue. Being
cool until I freeze.

No oxygen. Bloated blue veins through
swollen lips. Stones in my stomach. Cold
blue skin.

Ripped. Like her denim eyes. But people
aren't jeans and faded, ripped people are not
in style, not designer.

So cold. Ice blurring the windows to my soul,
cataracts encroaching and turning me white.

by Thien-Nha Tiet, Los Altos, CA

Su Shan

I traverse through mud puddles
and under the dead living tree.
I hold my breath through the bees
inhabiting the Susans beneath my feet.

The rocks shine in the bleeding sunlight,
too jagged to step on.
The foliage splatters the sky.
It never looked after me anyways.

Music pours into my soul like a meandering
delta,
as it pretends it's from nature herself.
That frog hasn't moved since I last passed;
perhaps it's been waiting for me.

Same as it ever was,
yet something about it feels incomplete.
It isn't the flora that scares me.
Perhaps I don't know what scares me.

Now the footprints that follow me
shadow my every action.
Maybe I shouldn't wait;
perhaps she's doing the same.

I guess that's what scares me,
subconsciously or I've always known.
Now it feels wrong, like an odd meter.
Perhaps it's s'posed to be that way.

Where did I go wrong?
Or has the natural cycle materialized?
Glass shatters but I've yet to cut myself.
Perhaps I'll piece it back together.

The future quakes from the ground;
having optimistic thoughts a life vest.
I want to reconnect with
Perhaps we'll go out for tea sometime.

by Ethan Schlett, Hartland, WI



Photo by
Skyler Tucker,
Merrimac, MA

Gravitone Delle Mie Poesie (Graviton of My Poems)

Every time my ten-year-old cousin trips over her own feet, she blames the floor.

She kicks it as hard as possible while her furious face juxtaposes with the cold marble.

I know she will wrong me before I correct her with logic and science because she inherited the obstinacy from me.

Before bed, I tell her a story about that time when she coiled around my leg while I fought the grist of bees.

She tells me the queen bee loved maple leaves until I tried to kill her with one. "Does trauma taste better than honey to you, now?"

Her anxious eyes speak to me "Is it because of the viscosity?"

I thought stories were meant to be lulling.

So I tell her about the said legacy of our family, about the infamous Alexandria's genesis.

"Would you want to give up all your mahogany shaded hair for purple eyes?" I ask.

She tries to scream [a No!] but her voice breaks, seized by a narrative impulse,

She asks if she could have them both, with a loud "Tell me all about it. Tell me how surprised everybody would be on a scale of you to me."

I tell all about it, the inevitable terror of yet another genetic mutation,

The changing eye color, from gray, to blue, to deep purple, to royal purple and then to a certain violet-blue.

Sometimes, a tremendous disappointment, other times, a painless memory. She calls it breathtaking,

But she doesn't want me to speak of the fear and alienation that would follow.

She sips hot cocoa from my mug.

I think of a way to escape before the little one drives me insane. I take her to the garden in our yard, Soft stillness and moonlight evenly spread. We hear waterfalls in the middle of the city.

I hold a jasmine steady for my wise beige girl while she slaps it into garish red, purple, black and yellow, changing hands and frames of reference.

"Quantum?" I imagine discrete energy packets proportional to the frequency of its radiation.

"Quarks?" I think, imagining hadrons disintegrating and gyrating about a fixed point. My mind swims around,

In all the terms she'd seen in my book the previous day.

Next morning, I drop her at school. She says she is afraid of atoms and subatomic particles.

"Aren't those too mighty big words for dots and circles?" Nothing remains to be said.

I am all that is left behind, with an "Addio, arrivederci."

I proceed to go to my school but I think I'll never be gone. Our new school captain is a boy I used to like.

Now, I see him pinning girls against the walls of abusive love, intertwining his fingers with their curls, helically.

I can only visualize electrons falling into a nucleus, my atoms collapsing against my will.

There is no electrostatic force, no gravity to keep my words intact. Circles and dots are fearsome and I wish there was an easy analogy.

At home I lie on my bed with the small of my scarred back. It isn't something we inherit,

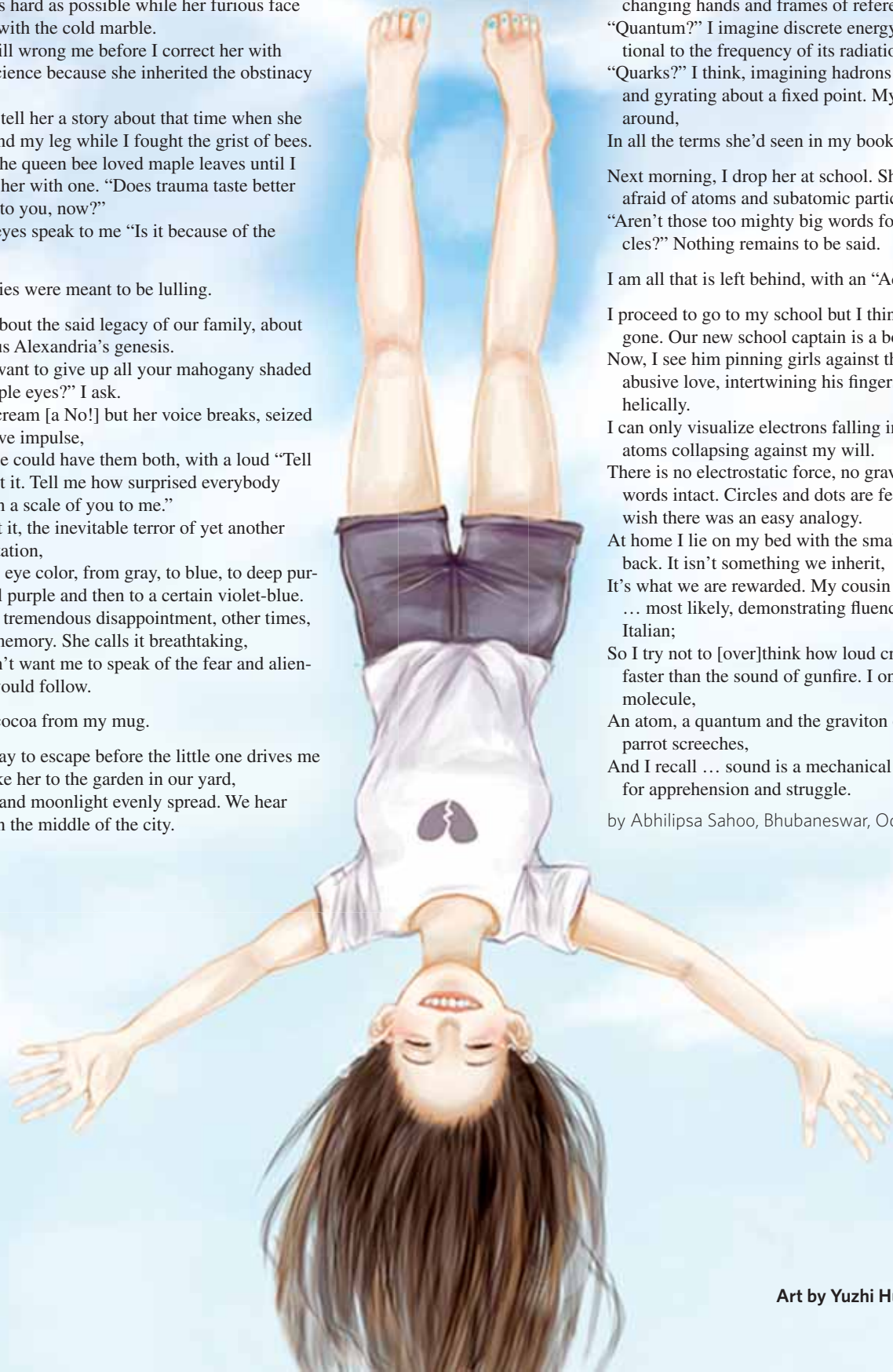
It's what we are rewarded. My cousin is safe at school ... most likely, demonstrating fluency in her broken Italian;

So I try not to [over]think how loud cries resonate faster than the sound of gunfire. I only think of a molecule,

An atom, a quantum and the graviton of my poems. A parrot screeches,

And I recall ... sound is a mechanical wave, an emblem for apprehension and struggle.

by Abhilipsa Sahoo, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India



Intoxicating Instagram

The dim light shines as you put on your mask
Endlessly envying others you seek
Every facade leaving us all to ask
Why must real life be unbearably bleak

All the staged times to capture the rare
Fake images to have as a disguise
Ones that were truly never even there
Without our goals reached we capsize

You're lucky if you leave unaffected
Most become a stalker or self-obsessed
Try and lie you're just staying connected
With that phony life just making us stressed

We still love mindlessly scrolling for hours
Oh Instagram we are so devoured

by Caroline Burkart, Apex, NC

Urban Nights

In my city the sky will never be pitch black
The fog is illuminated by the street lights
Strip clubs flash bright colors
Fluorescent blues and purples rotate
around the signs

Gray pigeons flock away
As skateboarders roll down the hills
The privileged roll by in their black Ubers
and yellow taxis
Drunk and ready to get to the next bar

Christmas-colored street lights
That reckless drivers choose to ignore
The homeless rummage through the garbage
The back alleys are where it's dark, isolated
from society

Dice are rolled, smoke is blown
Bright gunshots blasted
And my city keeps its life
Through the bright red flashes of ambulances

by Bryson Rowe, Kalispell, MT

Cold Coffee

I don't mean for it to be cold
Somehow I'm always too slow to drink it
From once filling my insides with warmth
To being bitter and disappointing
A lot can be said for cold coffee
How similar it is to love
How just as cold coffee, love is somewhat
disappointing

How the warmth from love, leaves just
as quickly as the warmth from my mug
How if you forget that love it there
It will turn bitter and cold
But I'll drink it anyway because it's what
I've been taught to do

by Maddi Woods, Mount Beauty, Australia

Art by Jiaxin He, Concord, MA



Searching for Birch Trees in Brooklyn

My father likes it when I read poems aloud
heading home on the I-95, static playing
and the road stretched before us. Last Tuesday
I read him "Birches" by Robert Frost,
turning each
word over in my mouth before I spoke
so I might
not stumble over the part where the ice-storm
arrives
and heaven falls shattering down to the ground.

Perhaps that's what snow looks like where
Robert Frost comes from – heaven-stuff,
the kind
that comes down to earth and rests in an
empty grain
field asleep in the wintertime, and there's
one boy
standing there, the snow brimming at his
knees and just
his footsteps behind him, so that it looks
like he is
the only thing left alone in the world. I like
to imagine
that the snow looks like bedsheets, the ones
still half-warm
from the dryer, and that the boy has snowflakes
melting on his eyelashes.

My father sighed when the poem was over
(a soft-but-
a-little-bit-sad sigh, like he'd been holding his
breath)
and said that's what makes good poetry:

knowing simple things, like birches, so well
that even

words written on paper can turn trees into
grand things.

He turned the radio on a bit higher and Billy
Joel played.

The night sky was still and wispy, too light
to make out
the stars through the car window so I leaned
back and
tried to draft a poem in my head. I thought
about birch trees
first; outstretched like they were drawn
with only a back pen,
paper, and two aching, skinny lines,
but somehow

that poem felt an awful lot like lying. so
instead
I thought about sitting on my front stoop,
drinking
ice water from a chipped glass, watching
the curtains
flutter in the brownstones across the street.
and then I

thought about the roses. They grow just
up the block,
peeking their noses through the chain link
fence –

they're light pink things, or maybe white.

I couldn't
remember then, and I can't remember now,

sitting cross-legged on my bed, rewriting
and rewriting a poem about a poem about life.
trying to imagine what snow is supposed
to taste like.
hoping to breathe life back into paper
birch trees.

by Maeve Brennan, Brooklyn, NY

Unconscious

Wake up.
Contour your blemishes and
Go to school.
Hide your curls in your hood
Until your friends recognize you.

Wake up.
Smile into surgery
Strangers will drill into your head
For 7 hours
And will send you out with a Band-Aid
And a pat on the back

Wake up!
Detonate your ears
To mock the whisperm.
Flood all cities around you
So you can't be whispered to.

WAKE UP!
Photoshop your body
To fit a size two.
Auto-Tune your voice
To deafen others.

please wake up ...
Stretch yourself out three feet
past your original height.
Cut your own heart into fragments
And distribute until fully consumed.
Congratulations,
You have successfully lived a life of
Unconsciousness.

by Madisyn Bennett,
Selinsgrove, PA

Synesthesia

The sadness of puppies dissipates in the barn
as a frantic new mother tries to calm them

If you turn hope on high you would see new
homes with freshly painted walls and a
puppy waiting by the fireplace.

The past sits in a small pile of newspapers
fashioned into a bed for a puppy alone i
n a barn

The swirl of loneliness sounds like the dry air
on a fall morning flowing lazily through
the trees

If you jump into the present, you'll land on
tomorrow's dew drops on the grass,
a young family chasing around a new family
of puppies taken away from that dirty
old barn.

by Erin Vanevenhoven,
Sussex, WI

by the river

she is a lovely languid velvet, bluer than the
sky, deeper than the souls who find solace in
her waves. a home and a graveyard; she is
soft, caring mother and cold, abusive father.
she is whisper and roar, friend of wind and
fear of fire. she is both dread and wonder,
her singing a lullaby for our aching, broken
hearts. we hurt her and we choke her but we
love to watch her dance. what is her name?

by Rhiannon Viola,
Canby, OR

Fire & Ice

Candles explode,
I drop matches on wooden tables.
Heat overwhelms, and takes over.
Then ice comes.
Soothes, and comforts.
Surrounding you, gently giving
off the cold aura.
A silent killer, and a silent lover.
Staying together until the end of time.

by Amber Patten,
Gilford, NH

to-do list

i.
desert
i am a little bit alone,
not unloved
unseen
unheard

just falling behind in
the raison d'être category

i miss the gentle caress
of a meaning in life
i miss the 9 months
i was carried; not touch-starved
my purpose was set:
womb guardian extraordinaire

ii.
sea
my uncle's boat sailed on silk
i was too young to know anything except
laughter
i read books and knew who i was
a pirate captain !
lacking only a peg leg and a parrot
but
that's not today's problem –
today is Nancy Drew and lemonade
tomorrow i will save the world

by Caroline Skwara,
Cincinnati, OH

Human

Maybe I don't know why I lose my soul.
The human condition is grabbing ahold.
Being indecisive is gift and a curse.
This is the life I was chosen for, and it hurts.
Because I can't find an open door,
Not even the rhythm in rhymes,
Or the ticking of time, as it passes me by.
And I can't afford to lose the nothing I have.
Just know none of this was part of the plan.

The path is never clear,
But you never drop tears.
Just be driven, and I'll tell you where to steer.
Don't be stupid and don't say much.
Words are ammunition that pierce
without touch.

You got endless potential, but they put you
in a box,
box out like Ali,
and don't you dare stop.

Dying is easy.

Living is not.

People have died for the life you got.
Don't throw it away just like he did
before you.

Remember they don't really know you.

by Ariel Bonilla, Houston, TX

Running Future

The future holds a broken bone, waiting
for relief of its cast
The future contains ingredients that are not
quite stirred enough ... and just too vast
The future is unpredictable, it strides away
seconds too fast
From the future, lingers the understanding
of my unforgiven past.

by Javin Beard, Ewart, MI



Photo by Aleah Travers,
Oconomowoc, WI

An Abundance of Love

I hate the way you fill my soul
just like invasive beetles fill woodland trees
just like honking horns and city sounds fill
the ears of pedestrians
fill and fill until everything overflows.

The smile on your face may be a facade,
but it aligns so well with mine
you'd almost believe it was real.

Have you ever seen one of those paintings
where at first you think it's a photograph
because all the details are perfect
but you stare at it for a little longer,
you realize that it's not a carbon copy
of a human
it's embellished, by the artist's touch?

That's exactly how my consciousness
beholds you
non-human, no flaws, only beauty and fresh
silk and springtime smiles
slender grace and charm.

I can't comprehend the inferior part of you
that sobs every evening
goes home and stays up late feeling every-
thing and nothing,
all of the glow lost
brown eyes rimmed red,
mind full of gray slush.

Even though you've told me, in detail,
several times,
I can't picture you as anything less than
impeccable.

So I'll sit, with you, admiring your perfection
let you talk for as long as you need
idolize you in my mind
all graceful fingertips and slender ankles and
fluttery eyelashes

I'll stare at your goddamn superiority until my
mind shuts down and my eyes stop working
until I can't praise you any longer.

by Skylar Ball, Los Angeles, CA

An Apology

My sincerest apologies
If you ever felt overwhelmed by my presence
Or my saccharine-glazed optimism
That clings to fingers and heartstrings
like drizzled honey
Or if it fluttered too closely to your guarded
feelings
Or wherever your invulnerability lies

by Olive Badrinath, Chicago, IL



Photo by Nancy Groat,
Lake Havasu City, AZ

I've Sailed the Violet Seas

I've sailed the violet seas
As its waves sprayed shattered hope
Watched by the moon who knew no light
Beneath the skies of ebony

This dream-like realm so familiar
That it could be called my home
Its looming air crying sorrow songs
Raining tears of glass and silver

The twilight waters at war
A constant thundering quarrel
Dragging my ship into the depths
Of its dark, shadowy core

I never knew the horizon
My ocean realm an infinite void
Of vast bitter clarity
Which held no haven island

Yes, I've sailed the violet seas
As its waves sprayed shattered hope
Watched by the moon who knew no light
Beneath the skies of ebony

by Erin Gonzalez,
Madison, AL

Attached

I saw a hair strewn across my screen
Trembling with an incandescent gleam
Rainbow.
Before it had left it had already gone
Because I knew I would long for its heart-
warming song
Preemptively, it was a dream

by Ryan Conti, Plano, TX

Le Souris

I knit myself into the fabric of you,
twisting and turning and hoping
that your immune system accepts the invasion.
I am made of glass, and you of cinders.
The wind picks me up and I become it
I am the cloud of breath from your lips and
I am the floaters in your eyes
I exist only in the pink-edged daisies, wet
from the weight of the morning.
Take my hand and I will show you
that you too were born from stars.

by Ellowyn Moore, Olympia, WA

Orion

We all exist under the same sky
Farmers in India tending to their crops; the
sun beating down on their necks
A desert nomad in search of an oasis; wander-
lust fills his soul
A businessman in New York City; only living
for his next paycheck
A young child playing in the stoic mountains
of Peru; naive and innocent
An old man chopping wood in rural Russia;
not yet tainted by the world outside
A constellation of lives
Intertwined
Grasping at each other like the hands of lovers
The elixir of life flourishing between
their fingertips
Iridescent we are
Look up at the stars, darling
You're not alone
You never were

by Eliana Wald, Newton, MA

This Land

I am from that place of stubborn superstition, worry stones,
and clovers.

But I have left those emerald fields,
my own Paradise lost, a nightmare never dreamed,
from too much cream and sugar, and ignorance to spare;
I fail to please the gods of graves and Earl Grey galore.
I am the Age of Tarnished Heritage, which I prefer to call my
Radical Renaissance.

Why have tradition for tradition's sake?
What of sinks so finely layered in skin,
the sins of apple pies and mashed potatoes?
This land is my own—but mere imitation,
like learning to cherish Stovetop Stuffing,
gummy with the undying life of a Barbie doll,
when the real stuff rots in the trash by the curb.

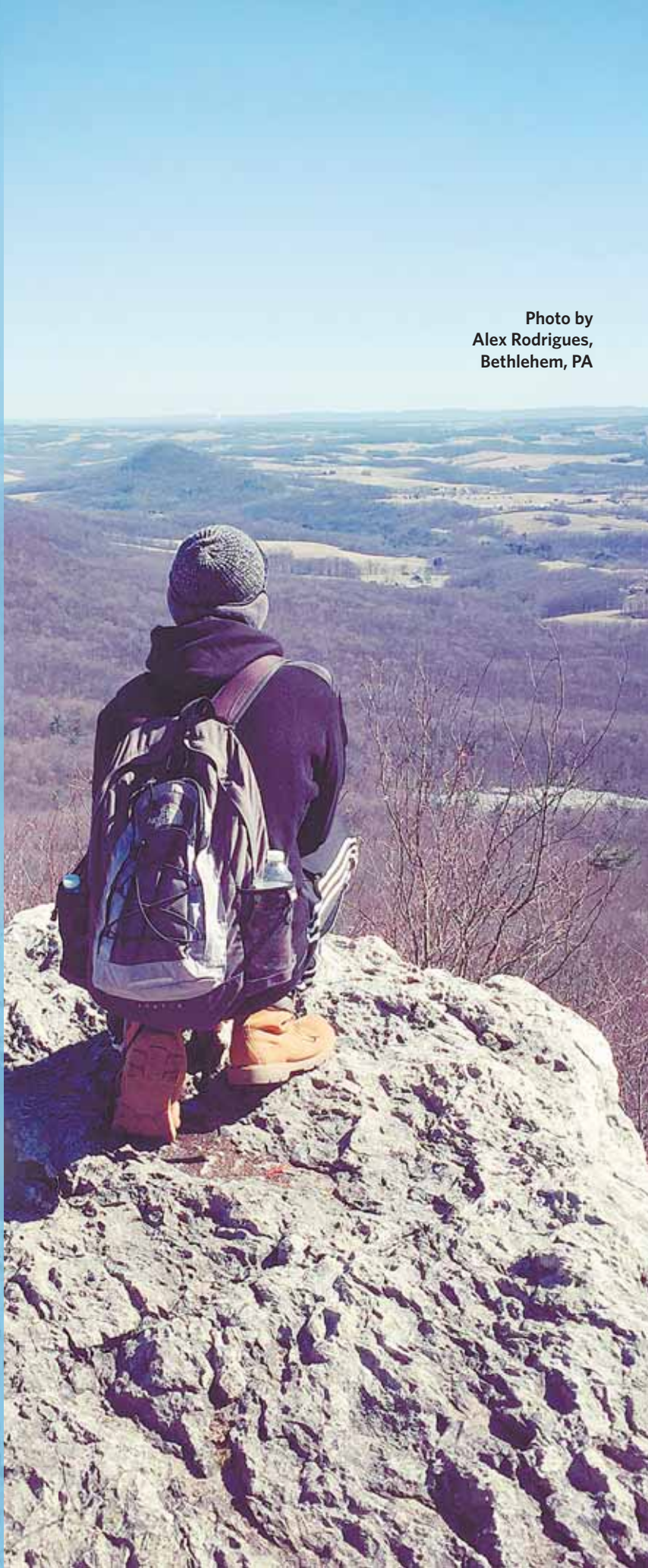
I know best the days I've lived (haunting, stagnant, certain)
I know best my senior dog and sister, one quarter score my senior,
and the timeless hours my parents have given
so that I might know privilege after privilege,
not for king from castle, but for heart from home.
I know best the emptiness of bustling high school halls,
yet I know too the soil of the Appalachians,
and the stillness of a library's solitude at night,
and the slickness of agenda book pages painted in pen.
This land has been built around me, weaved of genes and chance,
to showcase living people, no more bitter ghosts;
achieved realities—so long, abandoned hopes!
and tangible lines of a résumé to deny my own insanity.

I am unraveling.
I am too many things, too much passion, and too much of too
many eventually circles around
me until I am completely out of control, out of form, endless
words and endless ideas and endless chaos that cannot rest, can-
not breathe, cannot stop, never stopping, never never, even as I
lay asleep under a quilt horribly dark blue and cold, just like me.
I am reeling myself back in.
I think of what I love.
Music fills my head, consumes it.
And then there are the books. There I am. I am safe.
This land is the one that I myself have constructed,
and for that is has little structure, like the ocean,
the ever-changing labyrinth of pretention and sincerity:
this land is not yet ripe.

I do dream that one day I will come to create something bigger
than myself.
I do hope that one day I will come to understand precisely what is
bigger than myself,
bigger than angst and ambiguity,
better than shadows under eyes,
kinder than my own standards.
I do lust for a life in which I know my worth for what it truly is,
what I can make of it, love in it, cherish,
rather than what others see it to be.
Because, at times, I believe them before myself.
But, at other times, I refuse to give in.
This land is not yet born,
fertile future awaiting its bloom,
and yet—
it is somehow this land
I am from.

by Tom Garback, Boston, MA

Photo by
Alex Rodrigues,
Bethlehem, PA



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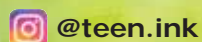


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