



ISSUE TWO

Non-Fiction

First Dose of Belle

By Garrett Bledsoe

Being the new kid at a school can be an exciting change, but at the same time it can be nerve wracking. Now, imagine your first day at this school full of strangers is actually your first time at a public school altogether. Sounds pretty terrifying I know, but it wasn't as bad as you'd think.

Back in the year 2006, my family moved to the outskirts of Belle Missouri. It wasn't a huge move, just about thirty minutes away from the only home I'd ever known. One thing was for sure; the scenery was entirely different from what I was familiar with. I had come from a small neighborhood where I was a few feet from other people's homes and small businesses. Now I was surrounded by blue skies, wooded areas full of creatures, and of course the empty road that lead us there. I didn't even care that my family of six had to cram into a doublewide trailer, that's how much the new area interested me. Too bad I didn't share the same enthusiasm for public school.

I was home schooled my first three years of education, because certain Linn teachers were unethical. It wasn't so bad, I got to stay home in my Batman pj's and go on "field trips" with my mom and brother to the grocery store. I even got social interaction during swim class with my best friend from my pre-school days. However, I was still neurotic about public school. I was a short and stout eight-year-old boy with thick glasses that made my eyes look like tiny hazel planets, so I was a dorky looking kid. What countless movies and TV shows had taught me to believe about school was that kids like me got bullied. Of course in all of these shows and flicks, the nerd ultimately wins in the end and everything works out. Being the pessimistic eight-year-old I was for some reason, I was sure that I would get beat up and someone would take my lunch money and I wouldn't win in the end.

Unfortunately for me, the time had come. I had rushed my porky little self to get ready; because there was no way I'd miss the bus on the first day. If that had happened surely word would spread and I'd be labeled "The Bus Misser," or so my eight-year-old brain thought. My big brother, Braxton, and I scampered out into the dew-covered grass of the dim gray morning. Braxton didn't seem even a fraction as terrified as I was, and he was going to the middle school! Everyone knows middle school is three times as dreadful as elementary. Again, I was eight. Anyway, the enormous bus pulled up and opened up to reveal a rather pleasant older lady named Susan. She smiled warmly at us and invited us on her bus. As we sat down no one threw trash at us or called us names. Maybe the day wasn't going to be as bad as I had thought.

The day went by fairly quickly after the long bus ride. My teacher was very pleasant and all the other kids greeted me with smiles. At this point, I was starting to believe the events of movies were greatly exaggerated. The only real downside was my classroom smelled of skunk. I kid you not there was this foul odor of what I could only assume was a rotting animal. I couldn't theorize about how a classmate must bring road kill for lunch all day though, I had to actually pay attention in class. Everything was going fine too until I accidentally called the teacher "mom". This caused some "cute" girls to giggle quietly and my face to light up like a red sun. The teacher just smiled and carried on with the lesson.

By the end of the day, I had done a complete emotional 180. No longer was I stressing over the dangers of TV show bullies, instead I was enthusiastic about all the new people I'd met and the magic that was recess. I'd even made my first new school friend and he rode the same bus as me. Even more importantly though, I had actually talked to girls, real girls that I was not related to! I was having the time of my pudgy eight-year-old life and the happy train didn't stop there. When we got home we were greeted by the wonderful smell of delicious fudge brownies. What a pleasant first day.

Apparently being the new kid isn't always as bad as Hollywood thinks. There were no wedgies or humiliations, just new people to meet and experiences to be had. Of course this was only the third grade, a whole new set of fears would be invented when middle school reared its hideous face. That's a story for another day though. Just kidding, that's a story that won't be told.

My name is Garrett Bledsoe, I'm eighteen, and recently graduated. I wrote this reflection piece for my Creative Writing class. In that class I've grown as a writer to the point of being confident enough to share some stories. Thank you for reading.

What My Room Has Taught Me: The Survival Guide

By Ashley Apel

If not chosen correctly, the color of your walls will eventually get on your nerves.

“Grey walls are proven to make people feel dreary and depressed,” was something my dad told me as I contemplated what color to paint my bedroom walls two years ago when I first moved in to my new home. “I would know. I had grey walls at one point in time. I would never paint them that color again.”

Sure, I took his advice. Does that mean I made a wise, well thought out, home designer choice at the age of fourteen? No. The color I chose for my walls ended up being on the opposite end of the grey, depressing, spectrum: lime green. And when I say lime green, I mean bright, obnoxious lime green. The type of green that should only exist in any interior design in the carpets of a bowling alley or a movie theater. This sickly green could also be mistaken for the color of a neon green expo marker: the type of marker you’re afraid to draw on yourself with, as you’re afraid somewhere within the hypochondriac center of your brain that it’s going to lead to radiation poisoning of sorts.

If there’s anything to take from this, it’s that if you’re gonna regret the color you choose for your walls, find a way to cope with it. Personally, I don’t mind the walls much, since they add an interesting contrast to having all black furniture. But with black furniture in mind...

If you invest in black furniture, be prepared for a dust blizzard.

With all black furniture, dust gathers noticeably. It does this with every color of furniture, but the thing with black furniture is that you just know. It’s visible. Too visible. That bothers some people, understandably. More often than not, I find myself scowling at the dust that gathers itself upon the furniture I’ve just cleaned two days prior to this new dust’s arrival. With that being said, you’ve got to really dig down and ask yourself if you’re willing to put up with black furniture’s nonsense. Personally, I’ve found that I don’t mind.

Roommates are annoying.

It’s late on a Saturday night and my room is silent. My parents are away, and it’s my job to watch the dogs; meaning all three of them have to sleep in my room. Tank, the largest of the puppy crew, wakes me up in the early hours of the morning by pressing his cold nose to my face. Even though he didn’t want to go outside when it was raining at eleven o’ clock, he decides five in the morning is the best time to go. Angel, the old and delusional pup, snores so loudly that she’s probably able to wake the dead- which is what it’s like trying to wake me up throughout the night. My dog Louie, who normally sleeps in my room, is sleeping contently on the pillow at my feet. Suddenly, the weight on the pillow at my feet feels light, and next thing I know, a dog’s tail is right beside my head, tickling my nose.

“How were the dogs?” my mom asks the next morning.

“They were fine,” I say, feeling the bags weighing heavily under my eyes. “No problem at all.”

Carpets are more comfortable than you think.

I remember the first day I moved in to my new house. Two years ago, about a week or two before Christmas. My new room was filled with new, bare furniture and a mattress with boxes piling the

top. I was tired and lacking Internet access: the fatality of an adolescent. As I lay on my new, crème colored carpet, the softness overcame me, and I fell asleep. I woke up to my stepdad knocking on my door, asking if I'd woken yet. He then slid open his iPhone to show me a picture of myself sprawled out on the carpet, sleeping, again, like the dead. "This one's going on the Internet," he said, laughing. Luckily for me, it didn't.

Moving a lot isn't so bad.

You'd get annoyed with moving eight or nine times throughout your life and never having stayed at a school for more than two years, too. It gets tedious. But once you realize where moving so much got you and where you are now: those lime green walls aren't so bad anymore.

Ashley Apel is an eleventh grade Literary Arts major attending LPPACS. She lives in Burgettstown, Pennsylvania with her family, three dogs, and two cats.

I'm Sure They Know Too

By Danielle Tondreau

Please, Corinne pleaded, handing me a small novel with the words “Franny and Zooey: JD Salinger” printed across an otherwise blank cover.

Note: I did not read much at all while growing up, whereas my currently begging best friend had consumed entire libraries by the time puberty hit. Her house was lined with shelves of literature and, needless to say, I had heard similar pleas before; too many books tossed my way to count.

I cannot tell you exactly why, whether out of best-friendship or boredom I am unsure, but there was something about this time that made me listen. And I listened as I read, not only hearing but finally feeling as if there was somebody else who was not one for emptying [their] face of expression, who was sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody, and who wondered whether they could continue running back and fourth forever between grief and high delight—someone who, not to be overly cheesy or banal, also felt lost and alone. After this I read everything Corinne suggested. Since then she has patched me with pages upon pages of literature, always sure to shower me in Salinger and Rumi whenever I am spilling sad energy everywhere.

When I was little, I spent much of my time alone. At any given moment I had two places to live—Mom’s and Dad’s—though throughout my childhood the total racked up to nine: a condo, a townhome, two apartments, and five houses. Having two working parents and a brother who found his escape elsewhere made one thing, throughout all the moving, all the change, consistent: both houses were often empty.

Each morning I would wake to the ringing of my bright red old-school alarm, popping out of bed to prepare myself a breakfast consisting of sugary cereal or waffles doused in syrup. I would walk to and from school, afterwards peering into the fridge and pulling out soda after soda, gulping them down as I watched TV for hours on end. On the rare occasions in which my parents came home before bed, my mom would lay down in her room as voices of strangers on the TV filled the silence. My dad, wiped out from work, would sit with a cigar in one hand and remote in the other, persistently and methodically puffing, covering his own loneliness in a cloud of smoke. And in the room over my brother would be busy bringing bong and bottle to mouth, creating a rhythm, which combined with the chatter of his friends, served to drown out the steady, underlying beat of his anxiety. Food. TV. Movies. Drugs. We ‘entertained’ ourselves to escape.

But as I explored Corinne’s home racked with reading my world widened. It was in this home-library on Sunnyglen Drive that I found a way to engage and explore, seeking shelter and solace in words of faceless strangers, making a home out of the pale pages, loneliness lessening. I am full of holes, of inconsistencies and missing pieces—one day an introvert and the next an extrovert, sometimes simple while at other times dutifully dynamic, always up and down. Though no matter the moment I have found there is always a book to lose myself in so much so that I resultantly find myself. No matter my mood, I read. And because I read, I write.

We are constructs of our environments and our choices, and while it was in my houses growing up that I recognized we model ourselves after our surroundings, it was in books—in my homes—that I learned how to choose what around me to model myself after. I may not be able to avoid the fact that I in part mimic my mother: unsteady, unstable, unsure, and at times all too insecure. And my

dad: dependable, determined, increasingly independent yet alone. What I can choose is whether or not I want to mimic my parent's mentality and momentarily escape feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and the like through mindless entertainment or, rather, actively engage my mind and combat these emotions. As an avid reader I have chosen the latter, and as an aspiring writer I hope to help others do the same.

Throughout the years I have made similar pleas to my parents and brother that Corinne made to me, begging them, Books. Books. Books. For birthdays and holidays I buy them books, hoping they will open them and find the same comfort that I do. If there is one thing I want to make clear it is that I do not blame my family for my loneliness. Sure, my empty houses growing up made me feel empty, but it also taught me that while being alone may not always be a choice being lonely often is.

It was during the days I spent sprawled out on the floor of the Sunnyglen house, reading for hours on end, that I realized this. Not only did I realize that I have control over certain aspects of myself but also that through writing I may be able to pass this realization along. You see, when I was little, I always imagined that there was a factory up in heaven where angels patched us together from an assembly line of parts and pieces; and while I still like to imagine this to be more or less true, I now see that the angels are in fact all around us. Life itself is an incessant assembly line. All of the friends, family, teachers, and authors who have helped piece me together are angels working the assembly line and Corinne is my archangel. So I want to work, to build up as many as people as possible through writing and otherwise.

I do not think my story or my motives for writing to be novel. There are undoubtedly others experiencing the near exact emotions I have and likely countless individuals with experiences similar to mine—our holes aligning and overlapping. And I proudly own this ordinariness. While others may wish for extraordinary, I sit with standard. When your life is just barely outside of banal, the simple solution is to silence yourself, to think you have nothing new to say, nothing to add to this already complicated world. But I'd readily counter that you do.

Tell them how your childhood friend was taken too soon, you too far away to attend her funeral. Tell them of the shock, the guilt. Tell them how your brother fell to drug addiction, years later slowly recovering. Tell them of the relief, of the pride. Tell them how your best friend, your angel, is bipolar, nearly three thousand miles away, struggling, suicidal. Tell them of the frustration and sadness, the anger. Tell them you know how lonely life can be—I'm sure they know too.

Danielle is a rising junior at the University of Michigan, where she is majoring in Philosophy and minoring in Writing. As an avid yogi and aspiring rock-climber, Danielle loves all things active and outdoorsy. Her educational aspirations are primarily centered on enhancing literacy in low SES areas, hoping to enter the nonprofit sector of such upon graduation.

Kingdom of Ladybugs

By Luna Moore

I sat in my imaginary sandbox underneath the twin orange slides on the school playground. Last Saturday was my first time seeing Harry Potter, and I was trying to recreate the scene where Harry writes himself a happy birthday message in the dust. I watched as the other first graders laughed their way through a seventh game of hopscotch. I spent every recess in my imaginary sandbox counting everyone else's hopscotch rounds. My friends Rose and Leyna sat inside the grey, donut-shaped wall that surrounded the playground. Bored of watching other people enjoy themselves, I decided to go talk to them. But as I got closer, I noticed that they had a book in their hands.

"What are you doing?" I pointed to the book.

Leyna glowered at me and hid the book from me. "None of your business. Only Rose and I can read this book."

I crossed my arms and snapped, "Who made you the ultimate ruler of books?"

"It's not like we don't want you to see it," Rose said. "But, you don't even know how to read, so you can't see it." Rose shared a look with Leyna and they both giggled.

"I can read!" I stomped my foot, and they both started laughing.

"Then prove it," Leyna handed me the book.

I looked at the first page of the book, but all of the letters jumped around the page and rearranged themselves until they no longer looked like individual letters, but rather a jumbled blob of my fears.

"L-L-I-O," I stuttered, hot tears falling down my cheeks while Rose and Leyna cackled like a pair of drunken hyenas.

"I can't believe you don't know how to read?" Leyna asked, not even attempting to control her own laughter.

"S-s-stop it," I stammered.

"Look, she doesn't know how to talk either," Rose howled.

"You're stupid," Leyna said.

I turned to walk away, but Rose said, "Luna, come back. We were only joking. You're my bestest friend."

How innocent her face looked when she said it, her big doe eyes staring at me, a sweet smile plastered onto her face. Part of me wanted to stop Leyna from stealing my "friend," but before I could respond, the two of them laughed again. I used all of the strength in my legs to run away from them as fast as I could. I swung open the bathroom door, ran into a bathroom stall, and stayed there until recess was over.

That day I told myself that a kingdom of ladybugs inside my body had frozen my throat, and that's why no words would come out when I tried to read. I wish I still believed that. From what I remember, Rose and I were close in first grade. What confused me was that Rose was always nice to me—except when Leyna was around. When she stared at me with her big, brown eyes that day, I figured she was about to stand up for me. I secretly hoped that she would push Leyna into the road and let her get run over by a massive truck.

Almost a year later, I sat in Mrs. Sontag's second-grade classroom during the first week of school.

“Luna, can you read the next paragraph?” Mrs. Sontag asked. The whole class swiveled around to face me; they were a sea of small, voracious creatures, eager to hear the rest of the story.

“Why would you ask her? She can't even read!” my classmate Bryce said. Oh, Bryce. Little did he know that reading had suddenly “clicked” with me during the summer. Thanks to this new development, and with the help of my mom, I was now quite precocious for my age.

“Give her a chance,” Mrs. Sontag said. She smiled at me.

I imagined the ladybugs trying to freeze my throat, but this time I wouldn't let them stop me. I opened my mouth, and the words spilled out of me like the pounding waves of the ocean. The whole class looked at me, stunned. I was so caught up in the action of the story that I didn't realize I had read two pages when all Mrs. Sontag had asked for was a paragraph.

What brought me back to reality was Mrs. Sontag's soothing voice. “Sweetie, why don't we give someone else a turn?”

I looked up from the book and saw the other kids whispering to each other. There is no way to describe the overwhelming joy that surged through me in that moment. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was an intelligent and important person. The wonderful world of books was finally accessible to me, not just to kids like Rose and Leyna. I soon became the most avid reader in the class, and at sixteen, I now read at the level of a college graduate. If only Leyna could see me now. After first grade, Leyna moved to Germany and could no longer torture me. Rose and her family took a one-year trip to France, and she came back a different person. She apologized for being mean and became a true friend. Maybe she learned how it felt to struggle to be good at something, being surrounded by people who spoke French so much better than she did.

But I've never forgotten how I struggled to read that year and what that taught me.

Sometimes, even now, when I'm standing in front of the class, all eyes upon me as I'm about to read something I wrote myself, I feel that kingdom of ladybugs threatening to seize my throat again. But I swallow hard, remember what it felt like to read that day in Mrs. Sontag's class, to know I had joined that secret club of imaginary worlds and boundless journeys—and my voice comes.

Luna is a high school sophomore in Southern California. She has also been published in *Literally Stories*. Luna has been writing since she was nine and she hula hoops to relieve stress.

The Debilitating Effects of Political Correctness on Free Speech

By Kai Sherwin

“If the freedom of speech is taken away then the dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to slaughter.”¹ George Washington recognized how crucial free speech is to a successful democracy. Our contemporary society has no defined limitations on the freedom of speech; however, there is an insidious undertow threatening to erode this sacred principle: political correctness.

To comprehend how political correctness is shaping the privilege of free speech, one must first understand several major aspects of this concept. The basic premise is that if the pundits and intellectuals can influence how individuals think and act, then they can also influence what is socially “acceptable” language. By imposing their political views on any subject, they create a pressure to conform to these standards. But these standards begin to limit the freedom of speech and expression. Generally, people do not want to be labeled as an objector of popular opinion, thereby forcing them to subject their own ideas to the prevailing ideology. The very definition of political correctness stands as, “conforming to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated”². But in reality, this term has almost nothing to do with politics.

Instead, political correctness has everything to do with the encouragement of group thinking and the pursuit of conformity. Through social intimidation, a diverse body of ideas and expressions no longer flourishes in the diminishing world of American free speech. In addition, a growing aspect of multiculturalism in our society only further contributes to this problem. Proponents of political correctness obsess over their belief that language should not be injurious to any ethnicity, race, gender, religion or other social group. They attempt to eliminate what they consider to be offensive remarks and actions and replace them with harmless substitutes that come at the expense of free expression. For example, a school in California, in an effort to maintain political correctness, sent five students home after they refused to remove their American flag t-shirts on Cinco de Mayo³. The school officials clearly regarded the actions of the five students as offensive. These unnatural filters on free language and expression constrict social exchanges by defining certain views as out of place. This acts as a direct suppression of free speech.

Political correctness is also used to discredit opponents of various ideologies by labeling them as violators of this code of conduct. For instance, my father is making a film about the early colonialists and their interactions with American Indians. But every time he speaks with an academic, he becomes uncomfortable with what defining terms are politically correct. Should he call them Indians, Native Americans, Americans Indians, or Natives? As a result, my father tries avoiding directly labeling these people because he is nervous about offending one group or another. Consequently, this narrows his potential range of conversation. This is a simple demonstration of how political correctness can put boundaries on free expression.

Declaring that some thoughts and phrases are “correct” while others are not is creating an ever-tightening noose around the freedom of speech. No matter how uncomfortable we are with particularly strident points of view, it’s crucial to recognize that this is a small price to pay to maintain a democratic system that promotes free speech as a basic pillar of society. While I am certainly not promoting inflammatory language, I believe that the channels of communication should remain unfettered from the burdens and limitations of political correctness.

(This essay was previously published on HuffPostTeen)

Kai Sherwin is a junior at a high school in Connecticut. He is very passionate about history and creative writing. In his spare time, Kai enjoys sailing and playing basketball.

Fortuitous Refuge at the 38th Parallel

By Jin Young Cho

The black-capped kingfisher sat on the rusty barbed wires in front of me, gazing at the grass that conquered the mines in the field but now lost its green to the nearing dusk. The hills and fields beyond slowly turned reddish gold and in the distance, Mount Seorak's limestone cliffs lost their white crowns as the frost that capped them, melting, made way for the harbinger of spring. Beyond the barbed fences, soldiers, rifles slung over their shoulders, lit their cigarettes while smoke disappeared in the hovering haze above them. I saw the riflemen, their helmets adorned with the North Korean flag now enameled with mist, shivering lightly from the cold though they were wrapped in thick parkas.

When the black-capped kingfisher, drops of fresh black paint over opaque disks for its eyes, (similar to those of the red-crowned cranes I was searching for), sensed a slight movement, it flew off to the opposite side of the fence and plopped itself down, fixing its plumage. Its elongated beak, saturated in the late copper rays of the sun, nibbled on the vaporizing dew droplets before they could be promoted to the nimbostratus. While feeding on the humidity, it kept a sharp eye out for any insects leaving the haven of woven goat grass. I could tell it was rather impatient, as the layered royal blue feathers on its wings started to form an oscillating gradient of texture from jagged to orderly. It was almost hypnotic; I vacantly, but intently, gazed at its wings' manifold dancers as I took one step closer to the wires.

But I was interrupted. Without a single word, a soldier with a face of stale bread stood ten centimeters in front of me. His oversized sunglasses were intended to look intimidating, but instead reminded me of the Venezuelan poodle moth. Paired with the teacup-shaped helmet, the proud South Korean hun byung looked like an overdressed, but under-budget Ken doll. This image invited a short giggle to peep through my lips and I shyly backed away. I instantly realized this was a mistake. Although the soldier's face was masklike, unchanged, I could feel the rising fumes of his sweat and my descending exhale clash and slice the diffusing cotton of air between us.

"You are not allowed further from this fence. This area is littered with landmines and the 'commies' are aiming sniper rifles at your head—understood?"

I said, "Yes" with a tone marked with deference, but I couldn't believe he used the word 'commies'.

I slowly backed away, leaving the grassy slopes.

The Korean Demilitarized Zone was a lake of land – although geographically sandwiched by the Keumgang Mountain and Cheorwon plains, it was connected to neither. Although it seemed a thread binding the land together, it in fact stood alone as its own complacent entity of abundant peat bogs and virgin soils, instinctively feared by all Koreans but relished by rich fauna and flourishing flora of different shades. In the midst of the peninsula's inner conflict of shoulder angels and devils, the land was slowly emerging as a five-star hotel for diverse wildlife. I was determined to trace all segments of the slithering path of the DMZ, at least the areas on which researchers are allowed, with my own feet if it meant finding the last few surviving red-crowned cranes.

A memory of my grandmother's old cabinet, carved from smeary jade, came back to me whenever I thought of the cranes. It shows two red-crowned cranes soaring to meet above a perfectly rounded

sun, much like the core of the South Korean flag, The sun is of the same red as the crane's red crown – a deep, lustering mahogany. The red-crowned crane, or durumi, has always been a symbol of longevity and loyalty in Korea. I have grown up fanning my grandfather with hand fans, threaded from the fibrous bark of hydrated mulberries and decorated with drawings of the crane's portrait. The ripened mountains and hibiscus flowers were painted merely to fill up the leftover space. But the crane, a symbol endemic only to Eastern Asia, could no longer be found in South Korea. I had to get closer to where the cranes had been last spotted even if much of the 38th Parallel, a 250-mile long and three-mile-wide zone, was a no man's land.

Those who could not read the signboards along the DMZ were the only ones brave enough to inhabit these minefields and isolated wetlands. Despite whether or not they had planned to do so, animals previously thought to be extinct thrive here in larger populations in this seemingly ominous sanctuary. Two Amur gorals were climbing across the stony Southern Limit Line, each with a black line cutting through its steel wool fur, resembling the DMZ itself – except for the fact that the gorals' lines were ones of symmetry. Their ears broadened sideways like wooden spatulas and fluttered exactly once when one of them made a misstep, causing a pebble to bounce off the steep elevated mountains. A few minutes away, an Asiatic black bear snacked on a rather unappetizing concoction of flies and crown grass, shoving its face with the mixture and dropping morsels on its baby-apron-like moon chest. Every single behavior of these animals, which may have been threatened by deforestation or poaching if they had not found refuge, drowned me in calmness, as if I were in a womb. But when the black bear's white chest started fading into the black of its body, I realized that I was running out of time.

Without the sunlight, the fog began to simmer into darkness, forcing my sight to conform to the shadows. I tried to sway away anything that was in front of me, but ended up lathering more fog onto my face instead. Focusing all my senses on my right foot, I carefully probed the ground for the marshy land that red-crowned cranes favor. While I was busy warming my ears with my palms, the bulbs attached to the wires flickered. Then they suddenly switched on all at once, as if to scan me; blinded by the blaze, I scampered through the grass, deviating from my transect.

Gradually, my eyelids began to soothe my pupils and evenly spread out the amount of radiation they absorbed to the rest of my face. After walking for many more meters, my feet finally stepped into a waterbed of mud. I felt a sensitive resonance of luck and felt the barbed wire pulling me closer with a compelling force. When I opened my eyes, my sight was partially bleached by a smudge of absence where the light had hit me hardest. But through my peripheral vision I could see that I was standing in the presence of a tall bird. Holding in my eagerness, I closed my eyes and stared into the single infinity of darkness within my palms until the blotches faded away. I opened my eyes once again. There it was: the crane with outstretched petals of white and grey, outlined by black strokes resembling those of traditional Korean calligraphy. Its sleek neck flowed into the shape of an "S" like the tail of a koi fish as it called to the sky, its red crown embracing the smooth curve of its head and directing my eyes to the tip of its beak. Following the natural bends occurring all throughout the DMZ, I could truly see that the perpetuation of beauty in nature is inevitable regardless of any kind of conflict. The cranes lay safe here and so did other species that claimed this land as a refuge. It is only fitting to call this area a no man's land as it exists solely to protect living species from the clutches of greed for power and domination and the human penchant for violence and destruction. Here in this border symbolic of eternal conflict, the birds and other species after billions of years of evolution, learned to live at peace with each other. It is time that we humans learn it too.

Jin Young Cho is a junior currently living in Manila, Philippines. She enjoys writing about her traveling experiences, and hopes to further explore different cultures all over the world.

Control

By Shareef Dillard

The suspense rushed through my body like oncoming traffic on the highway. My palms were sweating under my boxing gloves and my knees buckled once or twice. Two lions slowly approaching each other preparing to fight for the last piece of prey. We touched gloves without losing eye contact for a second. Then all of a second the bell rung and the crowd went roaring.

Growing up as the youngest child of eight I was labeled the “problem child” and was the most disciplined by my parents. My mom probably received a phone call home about my bad behavior at least once a week. I was involved in several fights and always got caught doing something I wasn’t supposed to be doing. I used to get so angry over the smallest things and just lashing out at people. My mom put me in anger management to see if there was a solution to my anger. After going several times a week I learned the solution wasn’t getting rid of my anger, it was controlling it.

My anger management counselor gave me several tips on how to control my anger in various situations. It seems like whenever I would get into those situations the tips never helped me in the moment. I remember I got into a heated argument with one of my classmates and it got to the point of insulting each other. My counselor told me to step back and count to ten. I tried to do that but he pushed me and I knocked him out. I mean seriously knocked him out cold with one punch. My fist crashed into his face faster than the speed of light. All my classmates praised me for doing so, but my teachers and parents were disappointed. I was suspended for ten days. My mom made me go back to the counselor for more advice.

The second time I went back to my counselor she told me to just walk away whenever I feel like I’m about to explode. I was sure this would work. One day at my high school and upperclassman confronted me about something I said about him to his friend. He towered over me like the Willis Tower with his fiery red hair and his huge eyes filled with hate. I wanted to punch him in his guts so bad but I decided to just walk away. While walking away he called me out of my name. When I turned around there was a huge crowd surrounding me. I felt like I was in a big arena and I was as small as a cell. I was so angry and I could no longer keep my composure and control. I ran up to him, leaped up a little bit and punched him right in the eye. He was knocked out cold as ice. The arena went quiet and everybody stared at me in amazement. I couldn’t believe I knocked him out either. Then the crowd went wild with excitement. Once again everybody praised me for what I had done. This time the punishment was worse. I was expelled from my school and had to transfer to another school. My mom didn’t know what to do. So my dad decided to put me in boxing.

The first day I walked into my boxing class it felt as though my trainer already knew who I was personally. He told me he heard I was one of the best, and instructed me to put on gloves and meet him in the boxing ring. The bell rung and every punch I threw he dodged. He didn’t even try to punch me back. He asked me if I was tired and I said no and I told him to fight me back. He didn’t hesitate to hit me and every time he hit me I stumbled down a little bit. I began to get angry, and he could tell. He hit me one more time and I got dizzy. I knew I couldn’t fight anymore. I started to cry because for the first time in my life I felt defeated. He told me that I had great potential but before he could teach me fighting skills, he would teach me control and discipline. He told me I should never get angry in the ring. We trained together for 6 months and I learned control, discipline, and finally some proper fighting skills. He said I was one of his best students and he was ready to let me compete.

The day of my first fight I was confident that I had all the skills mastered to beat my opponent. The bell rung and the crowd went roaring. This was no easy fight, we went round for round and he seemed to meet my every punch. I began to get mad because I started to feel defeated. I started to fight with anger and began to lose control of my focus and skill. He was beating me badly. Then I remembered all the things my trainer taught me. I got focused again and the moment he left his right guard down, I stuck him with all my power. He stumbled and fell and was so dizzy he couldn't get up. I won the fight, victory was mine again.

I learned so much from boxing. It taught me how to control my anger, discipline, and respect. I learned how to take my gift and use it in a positive setting instead of one that gets me in trouble. I don't know where I would be without boxing in my life.

Shareef Dillard was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. He is now a sophomore in college at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. His major is business marketing with a minor in international business.

Best of Both Worlds

By Caitlin Ju

“How many of you want to be doctors?” Hands flew up all around me, and looking around the room, I saw that only one other girl and I did not have our hands raised. Upon being asked what she wanted to do, the girl confidently answered, “Neonatal nurse.” Well, never mind, that left just me, as always undecided.

I could not help but feel inferior in that moment; everyone except me seemed to know what he or she wanted to do in life. My classmates at the STEM summer program I attended last summer had figured out what they wanted to achieve most, finding a passion to make a living out of. I had witnessed their joy when they peered at hydra through microscopes or added herbs to chick embryo and their undeniable eagerness to seek answers to their infinite biology questions. It never felt the same for me, at least I could not see myself doing these things for the rest of my life. Simply put, I had not found my passion, and ironically my pursuit of passion was starting to feel like an obligation.

My classmates were lucky in my eyes; it happened their passion for medicine aligned with society’s views, specifically that of Silicon Valley and many immigrant parents, who saw the medical profession as “practical.” It is undeniable that many of the students in my school feel that same conflict between preserving their passion and meeting their unwritten commitment to their parents and heritage when choosing their career path, and those who do not “honor” this obligation are viewed with envy, awe, and often doubt.

I saw my friend set aside her love for art, because her dad had told her if she ever became an artist, she would become “homeless.” Another friend who dared to choose psychology as her major was immediately viewed by others as incapable of having gotten into the same college if she had specified any other field. She wondered why no one saw that psychology was what she loved and why everyone immediately judged her for having shunned her “duty” to join the masses of students who are accepted into STEM, business, and law fields. She realized she may not be the one every family member bragged about at Thanksgiving dinner, but it was a decision I respected and feared I would be unable to make for myself. Maybe everybody’s condescending judgment toward my friend was because of the natural STEM-gearred environment we live in in Silicon Valley, or maybe it was because we all covet her ability to pursue her passions without regret.

Instead of forgoing either my passion or responsibility, I have chosen to find a balance between the two, hence attending that summer program, clearly intended for those who had already decided their path in medicine. I wanted so badly to like medicine or in fact anything that could enable me to finally answer the age-old question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” with confidence.

The truth is everyone wants to find the balance, but few achieve it. For most, the search for what brings them joy begins in childhood, dictated by parents. My childhood was littered with ballet, art, swimming, tennis, piano, and cello classes, just to name a few. Every summer was filled to the brim with a new program, whether it was horseback riding or rocketry science, and every hour set in stone. As I grew older, I decided which programs I wanted to attend in the hopes that by some miracle, that would be the program where I could discover my career. My life would be so much easier, I kept thinking, if I just liked computer science, like my dad and sister, but programming classes always were constant battlegrounds for my sanity.

When I first received emails from college counseling programs promising to identify my college major and career, I laughed at the thought of students voluntarily allowing themselves to be packaged and labelled by people who knew so little about them. Now I recognize the allure of having the burden of such an enormous decision placed in someone else's hands, but this enormous decision is still one I insist on making myself.

In all honesty I know that I could not and would not force myself to commit to something for the rest of my life based on one program I attended as a kid or the personality test results of a college counseling program, but others, often because of financial pressure, are unable to make such an easy statement that they would never abandon their passions. My mom faced this exact situation in college when constrained by her family's circumstances, she had to decide between medicine and accounting. The latter was a much safer choice, because choosing pre-med and not getting into the competitive medical program after meant, as she once told me, "becoming a pig farmer." However, her choice, in turn, to major in accounting, forgoing her passion for medicine, has to some degree granted me the means and support to decide my career based on what I love, and I am not going to let it go to waste.

That is why I refuse to quit my school's newspaper staff. On the surface, people are justified in their assumption that I should not stay. It does not help my GPA, requires extensive dedication outside of school, and the stress ages me ten years every deadline night. But writing is my passion, and unlike my search for that "perfect" career, does not feel like an obligation. Where else but in my school's newspaper class could I write seven stories about topics I truly want to write about, whether it is my opinion on China's One-Child Policy or a feature on the STEM gender gap, every three weeks? It is in newspaper that I find myself asking questions to better my reporting, design, and writing skills with the same enthusiasm I envied of my peers at the medical summer program. Looking back, my natural curiosity of the topic and the feeling of fulfillment I gained were indicators that this was my passion. Even if I do not pursue journalism as my major, I know because of that warm, proud feeling it instills in me when I see my work published that I will always make an effort to incorporate it in whatever career I choose.

As I look to the future, my dogma is those who believe it is fine to sacrifice their current passions for their obligations are also believers in delaying happiness in the hopes of achieving it later. It is always happiness for later...but I refuse to believe I am naïve for wanting happiness now.

Last summer I did not find my passion for medicine, like I had hoped, but I still do not believe a choice must be made between passions and obligations. I will continue in my search for the best of both worlds.

Caitlin is a current junior at Saratoga High, a member of the school newspaper the Saratoga Falcon, and an avid reader, artist, and tennis player. As her community holds an alarmingly strict interpretation of success, she felt it necessary to share her story about her own struggle with passion versus obligation.

Poetry

Cartoon

By Natalia Coiro

I wish I was a cartoon
Dancing to my own theme tune
With no physics to tie me down
Full of fun just like a clown.

I could have a thousand lives
Impaled with a thousand knives
And still stand tall
And fight them all.

I wish I was a cartoon
As crazy as a loon
Your imagination's the only wall
Your dreams, a power to rule them all.

Natalia is sixteen-years-old and lives in South Africa. She is British and American. She started writing poetry when she was in a place to help her with depression. She continues to write but has started to move to film to express herself.

Let Me Guess

By Ellanora Lerner

Let me guess:

It is two in the morning and you are reading obscure eighteenth century poets under the covers

Wondering if there was a time when someone felt like you.

You've always hated the early, early mornings because they make you think of things you'd rather forget,

At least there is so no one around to hear your tears.

Let me guess:

Your friends have started telling you you'd look good in bikinis and you've started dreading summer for the first time.

They complain in the locker rooms at lunch but you are the one who pinches fat between your fingers.

I heard you once looked up black magic spells for losing weight,

You know you're too smart for those fad diets they advertise in magazines.

Let me guess:

You have nightmares where no one is your friend,

The next morning you text everyone you know, it will be forty-seven minutes before anyone replies and by then you will have thrown your phone down the

deep

dark

pit

in your stomach where it belongs.

Let me guess:

You have only ever cut yourself open by accident, but once you trailed a knife along the inside of your wrist.

You burn your toast until it is hard and black and it scrapes up your gums

Citrus juice seeps into the cracks in your skin,

It stings,

That's the point.

Let me guess:

You tell everyone you are scared of heights but sometimes you find the highest roof you can and look down until you are dizzy.

The truth is,

You're aren't scared of heights but you are terrified of falling.

Ellanora Lerner is an eighth grader who loves books and feminism and poetic things like sunsets. She hopes to write a novel that is both chillingly dark as well as enjoyable and direct a gender swapped Broadway revival. She has been previously published in Stone Soup and Teen Ink and her work can be found at sometimesithinkimpoetic.tumblr.com

Him

By Michael Cheng

As the leaves rustled in the breeze
like a whirlwind of denigration
he watched the traffic lights turn and turn and turn,
clutching the depressing paraphernalia of his trade,
lost in a perpetual state of penury.

With fleece frayed, in tatters unkempt,
his battered, homeless body whimpered through the night,
alas he could not rest for
the etheric blazes and illicit deals
inevitably came calling.

The angst in his eye as deities passed,
hollering goading prods, he agonized
for life was his offense, a wicked transgression,
as one whose sole existence
amounted to the gelid 6th and Allegheny
and the asylum of the big house.

Yet he loitered there
in wait for the noble traveler
the shrewd sympathizer
the proof that indeed,

someone was looking out for him.

How I wish I hadn't turned away
with just one quick glance
for that instant slipped into
the coffers of my recollections
for, perhaps, an eternity.

Michael Cheng is a sophomore at Lower Merion High School. He enjoys writing poetry and has been honored with multiple keys in the Scholastic Writing Awards. Outside of writing, Michael also adores science and foreign affairs. He loves exploring.

This is the Color

By Hannah Berman

Yes, this, this is the color.

The color of her tiny bed sheets,
because no one expected it would be a girl.

The color of his model airplane
that he builds himself, with balsa wood and Elmer's glue,
and launches off the roof directly into a puddle.

The color of his breath
at the end of the first date
as they sit, limbs entangled, on the porch,
when all he wants to do is kiss her.

The color of their souls
as they walk along the windswept tides
of the ocean, after the sky has been cut open
and has fallen in deliberate wrath,
with a thin line of foam marking the former height of the water.

The color of the porcelain
they are given on their wedding day,

that they didn't register for
but her sister thought looked quaint,
which they almost use the day he gets his diploma,
but it never makes its way down from the high cupboard.

The color of Carolyn's sneakers
on her first day of kindergarten
at the big public school down the street,
as they say farewell to her at the door
with poorly concealed emotions
flying out of their grasping fingertips
they watch her skip into the void, unafraid.

The color of her smile
as she looks out at the dunes they used to traverse together
recalling his twinkling eyes the day he asked her to dinner,
the way he sang to little Carolyn,
his infernal habit of leaving the kitchen light on to attract moths,
how his mind stayed sharp when his body went numb,
and the way he used to place his fingertips
on the small of her back just to remind her he was there.

Hannah Berman likes singing more than talking and really would like to be a Disney princess some day.

Unrequited

By Farah Ghafoor

A fat, unrequited love is searching desperately for answers, and the body responds with a spasm of disgust and points inward to the place resistance lays, chewed to a nub. Love finds a police state, with them circling like vultures around a mouth, poking around a hollow waistline. All have fled, but one, only one stubborn citizen remains, and she lays half-starved in the body's hands, no whines left on her tongue between teeth chattering a depression. Love's flabby, soft arms cradle her, weeping for her flesh, flayed with self-hate, because she can't accept love as much as she wants it.

Farah Ghafoor is a fifteen-year-old poet and a founding editor at Sugar Rascals, an online teen literary magazine. She believes that she deserves a cat and/or outrageously expensive perfumes, and can't bring herself to spend pretty coins. Her work is published in places like alien mouth, Really System and Synaesthesia, and has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Find her online at fghafoor.tumblr.com.

Your Inner Kid

By Jefferson Woodridge

Remember the wonders of being a child,
back when the nights were spooky and the days were wild?
When a tickling finger left you beguiled,
and gray old objects clad in dust quickly restyled?

~

There in the corner, a dirty cardboard case,
but look again, a shuttle ready to travel through space!
Or an entity of speed for winning a race,
Anything old can become an imaginary place!

~

Backyards turned to lands of fantasies,
Woods of mystery were formed by scattered trees!
Plains of rolling hills or the Seven Seas?
Feeling the breath of a dragon in a summer breeze!

~

The creak in the night was something to dread,
And an unknown beast was waiting underneath your bed!
Your door cracks open, you certainly are dead,
but it is your mother giving you a kiss on the head.

~

Growing out is bad, although growing up is not,

When you keep your kid alive, you will learn an awful lot.

And being creative is never all for naught,

as long as you remember what your inner kid taught.

Jefferson Woodridge is a sophomore at Grand Island Senior High in Nebraska. He enjoys storytelling in most formats be it writing poems, plays, novels, songs, and even acting.

mall scene, lexington

By Serena Devi

a very old man in a camo baseball cap moves through fayette mall like the last monkey among machines a mortal before the multicolored pantheon of waifish models leering from the forever 21 storefront he is an artifact, a rusted axe blade jammed in the gears of a woodchipper girls in tiny fringed shorts slither around his legs like snakes with plexiglass fangs when he was a boy he watched his father break a runt puppy's neck, tell him mercy was a bone shard severing the spinal cord so quick and clean he was a god once, his kind now a stout brown woman's errant stride knocks his walking cane askew things weren't supposed to change like this, all at once like a rug pulled from beneath his feet.

Serena Devi is an eighteen-year-old poet and screenwriter from Lexington, Kentucky. She plans to study journalism at NYU in Fall 2016.

Taht (Throne)

By H.B. Ackan

My grandmother's hands bear the rough soil of the harvest while

Working her fingers around the yarn, piercing

Beads of dried peas and bent rose petals as she makes her

Last granddaughter's holy crown.

And on the stove sits a steaming pot of dolma nearby:

A baker's dozen she made with those rough hands,

Spooning the seeds out the fat red bell peppers

Carving lids of their popping stems

Old men hunched

On their old backs,

Tired of their old scarlet blood.

My grandmother's lips bear

The sweet songs of lore that

Sing of legends in the village house, muttering

The sorrows of men as she creates her

Last granddaughter's divine scepter of tears and tales.

And on the stool lays the Quran,

Her deepest companion, which passed from her mother,

Who, with her delicate fingers and the blessings of God,

Wrote every slipping letter

Twisting tongues
That have whispered the words of Allah
For a thousand years, and will a thousand more.
My grandmother's heavy heart bears
The thick fluid with which I am kin,
Kin with the mad men who stormed through
The rolling plains of the Orient,
With striding horses pummeling the ground under their gate,
Their wooden bows hanging in slow, piercing silence

Blood that fought to
Place each hunted bone
On my sacred throne.

H.B. Akcan currently attends the Global Studies Academy of Clements High School. She is an avid reader, writer, and binge-watcher. Her work has been recognized by the Columbia College's National Young Authors Contest and she has submitted her literature portfolio for the Davidson Fellowship.

Fiction

Doodles

By Ujwal Rajaputhra

She was so focused.

Sapphire eyes stuck to the marble notebook like they were meant to be. Every time she looked back up at the white board, I'd stare at the graphite doodles dancing across my beige desk. One was of King Kong, except he wasn't rampaging on the Empire State Building; he instead had an apparent affection towards the Eiffel Tower and very, very large berets. I don't think there was anyone who wouldn't want to see a mutant, French-gorilla movie.

My fingers gripped my pencil lightly, turning and twisting it between the blue grids of my paper. Today, it was going to be French King Kong vs. British Godzilla. A cup of tea in his talons and Union Jack scales would do the job.

She looked back down.

Okay, I wasn't really sure when she was looking at the board or not. I had to look out of the corner of my eye so I wouldn't come off as creepy, even though I probably was. Our legs were touching so slightly it shouldn't even have been noticeable to anyone sane. But of course, to me, it was the biggest deal in the universe. My thigh was as stiff as a branch, and every breath I released shuddered as it slipped past my lips.

She looked back up.

My head ducked so quickly my forehead almost slammed into the tabletop. I could barely register the incoherent babbling my teacher was letting loose. It had something to do with numbers, I was pretty sure. My No.2 twirled in my fingers and I fed Godzilla some fish n' chips.

"Andy," a voice boomed ahead.

I almost didn't look. If I did, she would notice me for sure. This wasn't a good first impression.

Figuring that acting like even more of an idiot wouldn't help me whatsoever, I looked up. "Yes, Ms. Birch?"

My teacher balanced her frail weight on the board sill. "I may be old, but I'm not blind."

"What do you mean?"

She rolled her eyes. "Just pay attention and actually write down some math once-in-a-while."

And with that, her back returned to my view and class resumed. A couple of curious eyes lingered on me for a few seconds, but everyone gets bored eventually – I was the epitome of that principle. And King Kong was begging for a croissant-club.

By the time the clock struck two and metallic ringing echoed throughout the humdrum halls, I had a whole sci-fi, action-packed, romance-induced movie scene planned out. I wouldn't have hesitated to get out of my seat in any other class, but I had to make sure she left first. Any eye contact and I would probably melt in my Converse. I crumpled the paper in my palms like playdough and made my way towards the door. Stray beams of buttery, spring sunlight had managed to infiltrate the gray barriers of this prison, lighting the room with an uplifting-but-solemn aura. My hand swiftly tossed the international-monster extravaganza into the cerulean recycling bin.

"Don't forget about the other one." Ms. Birch eyed me from her chair.

I gave her my signature, clueless expression. She sighed, extending her finger towards the desks – her desk. My eyes locked onto the egg-white sheet slumbering on the table next to mine while my feet quickly shuffled towards the mysterious object. The paper shivered between my fingers.

It was everything mine wasn't.

The silver bricks and cream mortar of the walls were sketched so perfectly I had thought it was a photograph. Sunlight was obtusely shaded with motley hues of gray. Even the pencils were silhouetted against deft shadows with sharp strokes of graphite. Everything was so detailed and realistic – on point. But I paused when I spotted the bottom-left edge, and began to crease the corner of the sheet.

Hunched over and intricately shadowed was my lanky self, a sly, shadowy pupil staring at me from the corner of its eyes.

Ujwal is a junior at Montgomery Township High School in Skillman, New Jersey, where he is the president of the Planetary Conservation Club. When his fingers aren't thundering upon a keyboard or suffocating a ballpoint, Ujwal loves to watch movies a little too late at night and loop his Spotify. He aspires to attend film school and manifest his stories on screens big enough for the world to see... with a nice, generous bucket of popcorn, of course.

The Last Bus to Trayton

By Katie Sarrels

I pride myself on being an observer. The beautiful things in this world, natural and man-made, have never ceased to amaze me. I love watching winter transform into spring, seeing a train pull into the station, smelling chocolate chip cookies fresh out of the oven, and listening to the dialogue of two sparrows at the crack of dawn. I love it all, but I enjoy observing people the most.

On this particular day, I was sitting at the back of a near empty bus traveling from Otega Bay, a seaside tourist hub, to Trayton, a rural town on the other side of the mountains. The bus had just made its last stop on the edge of town and it was now making its way towards the mountain road. On a normal day, this trip would take an hour and seven minutes, but it was raining and the bus was expected to arrive later than usual.

I watched as water droplets ran down the window to my right. Some of them fell straight and fast while others took their time, sometimes getting swept up in another droplet's path to the bottom. Looking past the rain, I could see the road start to slope upwards and the roar of the bus's engine signaled the start of its climb up the mountain.

This trip was the last run of the day and there would be no other bus until the next morning. The bus driver was tired and ready to end his ten-hour shift. He was looking forward to spending his weekend off with his wife and watching the fifth season of *Mad Men*, one of their favorite shows. Since it was raining, his wife would expect him a little later than usual and have a nice cup of tea waiting for him upon his return. Though it would be eleven o'clock and well past dinnertime, a warm meal would be placed on the dining room table, because his wife insisted that he eat a proper meal, not one from a paper bag. The bus driver was especially excited for tonight because he had finally saved up enough money for he and his wife to go to Hawaii and was planning on surprising her with the plane tickets over dinner.

This bus trip was not popular by any means and functioned primarily as a commuter route for the residents of Trayton. However, on this trip, a tourist couple sat two rows back from the bus driver and their six-year-old daughter lay sleeping across their laps. After much disagreement, they had elected to stay with relatives in Trayton rather than pay for a costly hotel in Otega Bay. The woman insisted that the long bus ride was a small price to pay for saving a hundred dollars a night and the man soon gave in.

The woman didn't want to stay with her relatives either, but she realized too late that she had underestimated the cost of the trip and they could not afford to stay in a hotel for the next week and a half. She knew that if her husband found out, he would want to end the trip early and she would have to tell their daughter that she couldn't see the dolphin show that she had very much been looking forward to. The woman planned on telling her husband about their financial trouble after the trip was over and then working longer hours so they didn't have to worry about the money that they had overspent.

The man might have noticed their savings slowly disappearing had he thought to check, but he had other worries on his mind. He had been fired two days before the start of their trip, but by then, the trip was already planned and paid for. He knew that his wife needed a break from work because her

accounting firm had just finished a busy season and she was exhausted. If she found out he had been fired, the man knew she would cancel the trip and insist that she work even more. He also didn't want to disappoint his daughter who had been looking forward to seeing the dolphins for weeks. When planning the trip, his wife assured him that they had saved up enough money and he decided that they would be fine until he could find a new job. He resolved to tell his wife that he'd been fired after their vacation, and had already lined up several interviews for when he returned home. For now, he just wanted the three of them to enjoy their family vacation.

The bus was nearing the top of the mountain and the rain had started to pick up. The bus's headlights forged a path through the shadows that clung to the rock wall and the mountain's inhabitants vanished into small crevices to avoid the bright light. I found myself thinking that I might like to follow them and explore the mountain, but the thought was fleeting and vanished altogether as the bus rounded the corner.

There was a person, a woman, sitting at the middle most row on the left side of the bus. She had been there since long before I arrived and was a mystery to me. She sat quietly, gripping onto the backpack in her lap, and stared out the window into the rain. I did not know where she came from, why she was here, or what business she had in Trayton which was unusual for me, but I wasn't one to give up easily. I managed to gather, from the pins on her backpack, that she loved marine animals and, from the faint song fragments coming from her earphones, she loved listening to classic rock.

It wasn't much, but I was content with knowing that and turned my attention out the window. We had reached the top of the mountain and a view of the town of Trayton was barely visible through the rain. Lights from the town shone through the darkness in place of the moon and the stars which, on this night, were covered by the storm clouds. Most of the residents had gone to bed, and the few that hadn't were either on this bus to Trayton or waiting upon their return.

At the last stop before the mountain, a lone man got on the bus. He had a tough appearance complete with an unkempt beard and weathered clothes. These features caused most of the passengers to shy away from him in discomfort. Noticing their gazes, the man had chosen to sit towards the back of the bus as to not disturb the others. It was amusing to me, their weariness of this sailor, because out of all those on the bus, he was perhaps the most kindhearted.

The sailor had been traveling up and down the coast of Peru with his shipmates bringing aid to civilians after a devastating earthquake. His disheveled appearance was a result of a mild storm he and the rest of the crew ran into on their way back up the coast. He had battled the storm all through the night and was looking forward to reuniting with his wife and son after three weeks of separation. After a good, long sleep, he was planning on taking them camping at a little cove in the mountains. There, the sailor would point out the different types of trees and, just like every time they had gone before, he would listen to his wife tell them about the different species of birds, and watch as his son attempted to catch squirrels that got too close.

The bus driver, who had paid special attention to the sailor to make sure he paid his bus fare, would never know that the sailor also loved watching *Mad Men* with his wife or that he too understood the allure of a warm meal waiting at home. The couple, who shifted in their seats as he passed, would never exchange pleasantries with this man, or ask about his family waiting at home. They would never consider that this man could understand the selflessness behind the secrets they kept from one another, or know that he had a child the same age as the little girl who lay sleeping in their laps.

The bus started its descent and I turned my attention to the pine trees whose tops barely reached the edge of the road before dropping off down the side of the mountain. The rain was almost blinding and the once tiny droplets were now buckets of water pounding the side of the bus. The rain weighed on the branches of the pine trees, dragging them down, and the wind, which was starting to pick up, made even the strongest of trees sway. The bus's metal walls had previously hidden the wind's presence, but now the windows shook and the roar of the bus's engine was lost in nature's fury. It would be a stormy night in Trayton, but even then it was beautiful.

Otega Bay, where I had just left, was full of hazards, crime, and drunken mistakes. Though I visited often, I knew I would not like to live there. Maybe I was biased. I often visited larger, more chaotic cities, so maybe I relished the peaceful, isolating nature of towns like Trayton where nothing ever happened that would make headlines. Or maybe these small towns really were more beautiful. They always seemed more peaceful and inviting. Their sky always looked clearer, their birds more cheerful, and the people less burdened. Maybe one day I'd have to stick around and find out, but as for tonight, I had work to do.

The storm had by now turned violent with claps of thunder and streaks of lightning. The little girl had awoken with a cry and now sat wailing on her mother's lap. Her father stroked her hair softly, whispering words of reassurance in her ear. The mysterious woman clutched her backpack tighter and was now looking at the road ahead. Maybe she often got car sick, or perhaps she wasn't used to taking bus rides, especially in such conditions. I couldn't tell. The sailor seemed the most at ease. He had been through many storms on open water and the events outside didn't seem to faze him. Instead, he looked towards the couple comforting their daughter until he caught the attention of the little girl. The girl stared back at the sailor, rubbing her left eye with her fist. The sailor grinned, making silly gestures with his eyebrows, until the girl laughed and smiled back. The girl's father looked back at the sailor and nodded his thanks before turning back to his family.

The bus driver had done his best to stay vigilant, but the ten-hour shift, combined with his restless sleep the previous night, slowed his reflexes. Lightning cracked above them on the cliff, illuminating the night sky for a fraction of a second. In the next instant, a large tree, with burn scars across its trunk, dented the road fifty feet in front of the bus. The driver slammed on the brakes, but the road, wet from the rain, refused to grip the tires. The bus slammed into the tree and was forcefully turned towards the guardrail. The little girl was crying again and suddenly, we were airborne. The family's suitcases flew down the aisle towards the back of the bus where I was sitting and hit the wall to my right. The mysterious woman and the sailor gripped the seats in front of them, but slowly, they began to rise up off their seats. The bus driver was knocked out cold from the impact with the tree and would not wake.

After the bus hit the ground, it was about twenty seconds before it stopped rolling. By the time the bus had reached the bottom of the mountain, it had been completely destroyed. The windows were shattered, the right side was dented in, and the passengers lay scattered across its interior. I got up from the floor, though technically I was standing on the roof now. I walked over to the little girl and tapped her shoulder. She stirred and looked up at me.

"Who...who are you? I didn't see you on the bus."

"I'm sorry, the bus crashed. Come with me," I replied and held out my hand. She hesitated, but finally placed her hand on mine and I pulled her to her feet. I said, "Let's go get the others," and began walking towards the front of the bus. The same thing happened each time I approached the

others. They'd ask, "who are you?" and, "what happened?" and I'd tell them, then reach for their hand.

The bus, twenty-three minutes from town, would never arrive. The little girl would never get to see the dolphin show. Her parents would never know each other's secrets, nor care to remember their own. The warm meal waiting for the bus driver's return would eventually grow cold. The sailor had, unbeknownst to him, already visited his family's camping site for the last time four months earlier. And despite it all, each of them would take my hand smiling.

That's the strange, beautiful thing about death. Everyone, when their time comes, accepts it. They grab my hand and only a few ever look back upon themselves. If they do, it is only for a moment.

As I was leading the group of people away from the bus, slight movement to my right caught my eye. The mysterious woman was lying outside the bus and stirred as if waking from a troubled sleep. It all made sense to me now. I was not meant to know her story, at least not yet. Sometime in the near future, I would return to Trayton and see the mysterious woman again. On that day, her story would become clear to me, but not before.

I turned back to my companions. For today, my duty was to them. In life, people never stop and notice the little things. In death, I'd like to think they start to understand the beauty I see in the world, and I always take a little time to show them. I show them the beauty of the howling wind, the chilling rain, and the flickering lights of town from up above. I show them, then I move on, to another town, another group of people, and a new, beautiful day.

Katie Sarrels is a freshman at California State University Long Beach where she majors in both Film and English. She hopes to work as a producer for a major TV show, but her biggest dream is to one day write an original crime novel.

Deja Vu

By Ellanora Lerner

When I back into the driveway dust flies up and I grimace as the underside of my car scrapes on a mound of dirt. Mom's old black jeep was suited for this, but my new silver car, which I bought with my first paycheck after the raise, is used to city life. I walk up the green steps, pull open the screen door, and step into the empty mud room. As soon as I enter my breath catches and I reach for the doorframe to steady myself. It's not just the lack of old cookbooks and Martha's old rocking horse, though that's striking, what throws me is the utter lack of life that made this house what is was, made my childhood what it was. There's no laughter that echoes through the hallways, no one to interrupt my journey with a call of my name. Instead I'm left alone to stroll around the edges of the room until I reach my corner. It was always filled with shoes, lined up and organized. Martha's shoes, on the other hand, were never organized. She would toss them off as she rushed inside, probably after her curfew. She never untied her sneakers either, just shoved them on as she rushed out the door, probably late for something. People made fun of her for her constant movement and incessant tardiness but at least she had places to be. They made fun of me for the hours I spent in the backyard poring over my fantasy novels and the careful moments I spent arranging each shoe by color or by type depending on my mood. Now I slip off my loafers, taking a moment to line them neatly so they make a ninety-degree angle with the wall, a practice of mine ever since Ms. Jasetti taught us right angles in the third grade. They look strange, too professional and too grown-up to be here. But that's life, dress shoes replace sneakers.

Nostalgia crowds this house like dust but it's not until the kitchen that it slams me in the chest. The stove is off, pans are sitting in boxes on the counter, even the smell is fading. In my mind that smell is always the same, fresh bread and chicken soup and my mother's perfume. But in reality it was always changing, a reflection of what was for dinner that week and which family members had helped cook on Friday night.

I leave that room as quickly as I can and find myself in the dining room. Great- Aunt Esther's mahogany table is gone, along with the sideboard that got picked up at a tag sale. The radiator looks strange without the other furniture and the omnipresent flowers. When I close my eyes I can see the blue vase filled with pansies but they're wilting. For a moment I am shocked because Mom would never let the flowers wilt. Then I remember why I am standing here, then I remember that the flowers aren't even there anymore, Martha must have taken them. I'm glad she did, I would have given them fresh water and left them for the next family. That's what Mom would've wanted me to do.

My room is right at the top of the stairs on the left. It got sealed off after I went to college and it always made me uncomfortable when I came back to visit. The layer of dust made me feel old and out of place, so I would dump my stuff and go downstairs- to people who made me feel young and right. Now the old bed, desk, lamp, are gone. The green paint I picked out at seven is still there though, I wonder if it will still be here in another twenty-five years or if the new owners will paint over it.

When I place my hand on the wall I can feel my heartbeat pound back at me like a recording. I open the closet and see my teenage years locked away, the worst parts stuffed in corners. I am tempted to root around. Re-read Tolkien and re-watch Bill Hienk beating me up in front of the multiplex.

Instead I slam the door then lean against it. Breathe in, breathe out, some things are better left alone. I head back down the hallway.

The hospice bed is still in Mom's room. Martha wants it out but when she called Jones's Hospice Supplies all she got were automated tellers who tried to explain how to raise and lower the seat. Martha hadn't wanted her to come home, if it were up to Martha she would still be on life support at St. George's Hospital. If it were up to Martha she would still be alive. I think Martha blames me sometimes for her not being here. I know Martha blames me sometimes for her not being here. I won't try to tell her how much I wish she were still alive too. I won't try to tell her how much I blame myself too. But I know this is what she would have wanted. She wasn't the kind of person who would've wanted to be kept alive by machines. She wasn't even the kind of person who would've wanted to sleep in a moving bed.

The bed is the only thing left in the room except for the hatbox. I've never seen inside the box. I didn't even know the box existed for years. I'm not sure how much she looked at it, or how much she thought about my dad. The box is still here because no one wanted to take it. No one even wanted to look inside it. I could look inside it now, I wouldn't even have to tell anyone. But I honored what she would've wanted to the point that it caused her death, I will honor it now.

I pick up the box, bring it downstairs, out to my car. It goes under the seat, the keys go in the ignition and I pull out of the driveway.

I'll probably never go back to that house. Martha says it's going on the market as soon as that bed is gone. Martha's the one who's taken over the project. She's the one who talked to the realtor. I just showed up, signed some papers, and took the box no one wanted. Just like always Martha is the one with the plan, with the drive; that's okay I have a well-paying job and some spare time.

I make it halfway down the highway before the road begins to blur. I pull over at the McDonald's, the same branch Mom used to take us to when work was bad. I loved those days because she gave me the money, finally an acknowledgment that I was the older one, the more responsible one. For a moment I could lead Martha by the hand and feel like an adult while she made both of our Happy Meal toys run in circles. Of course she was the one who stood up and pulled me out of the linoleum booth and back to the car. Of course Martha always won the power struggle in the end. If she was here right now she would be the one taking charge, telling me whatever I'm doing isn't healthy. I almost wish she was here to make me get a salad and go home but she's somewhere outside of Boston with her numbers-minded husband and their kids who think I'm vaguely interesting.

I think about Martha and her nice suburban home for a long time. I wonder if she is happy with her life, I wonder if my mom was happy with her life. I wonder if I should try harder to be happy with mine or if I should leave well enough alone and settle for content. I sit in silence for a long time watching commuters and tired families rush in and out of the restaurant until the tears start to fall. I'll miss that house, it holds the last vestiges of my childhood. But the tears are for my mom.

Ellanora Lerner is an eighth grader who loves books and feminism and poetic things like sunsets. She hopes to write a novel that is both chillingly dark as well as enjoyable and direct a gender swapped

Broadway revival. She has been previously published in Stone Soup and Teen Ink and her work can be found at: sometimesithinkimpoetic.tumblr.com

Ghost

By Rachel Husk

The sound starts off quietly, and I barely even hear it, a gentle swish swish. David stirs next to me, and I slap his arm, mumbling at him to shut up. He continues to steal the covers and swats at me halfheartedly, barely awake.

Another swish swish a few minutes later, followed by a sound similar to nails against a wall.

“David shut up...” I say again, burying my head in my pillow. “For God’s sake.”

“I’m not making any noise,” he whines.

“Your nails are clacking against the headboard,” I say.

He mumbles something under his breath, but buries his hands under the covers nevertheless.

Eeeeeeeek.

Okay, that definitely wasn’t David.

Eeeeeeeek. Swish swish.

“Nat, you’re doing it now,” David says, shaking my shoulder.

“No, I’m not.” I turn the lamp on. “There’s something else making that noise.”

David moves to lean on his elbow, eyes looking still blurry from sleep, but he takes my hand. “It’s probably just the house. It’s old.”

Eeeeeeeeeek. Swish swish swish swish.

I look over at him, eyes wide. “Houses do not make that noise.”

He starts to look a little worried. “Uhh, maybe it was wind.”

“David this is how every single cheesy horror story starts out. ‘Oh it was just the wind.’ Next thing we know, we’re dead,” I say.

“Nat—”

“I’m serious.”

“Well, what do you think it is?” he asks, skeptically.

Swish swish swish. Eeeeeeeeeeeek.

I pull the covers up over my face. “Oh no. It’s a ghost.”

“What?”

“It’s a ghost!” I stage whisper. “What else swishes into the night?”

David rolls his eyes. “Ghosts don’t make noise.”

“How do you know that? You ever seen a ghost before?” I glare at him.

“That doesn’t even matter because they’re not real,” he says.

I freeze. “Not real? Not real? You have got to be kidding me...”

“Ghosts do not exist. And to prove it to you, I’m gonna go downstairs right now.”

David moves to get out of the bed, but I pounce on him before he has a chance. “You are not going anywhere!”

“Yes I am!”

“No you’re not! How are you going to survive all by yourself?”

He stops struggling from me for a moment. “What?”

“We don’t know how many of them are down there. And even if there is only one... you’re not exactly the most likely to get out unscathed.”

“Unscathed?”

“I hope you know that if I wasn’t here right now, you’d be dead.”

“Natasha, I swear to God—”

“Please please please don’t go down there. I’ll never forgive you.”

He sighs. “Fine. Fine, I won’t. But know I’m not doing this for you, I’m doing this for me.”

“How are you doing this for you?”

“I really don’t feel like getting up anymore.”

Swish swish swish. Eeeeeeeeeeeek. Swish.

“Is the door locked? Oh no, we’re gonna die,” I say.

I’m still clutching to him, and he rolls his eyes, but pats my back reassuringly. “There, there.”

“Shut up. You think this is a joke.”

David squints at me, suspiciously. "Is it a joke?"

"No," I say.

"Why are you even afraid of ghosts?" David asks. "I mean, if they're invisible, how can they even hurt you?"

I swallow hard. "They can move things without touching them. They can pass through walls. They can create wind and set things on fire."

"Why?"

"Because ghosts are vengeful, that's why."

"Do you know anyone who's dead who'd want to kill you?" he asks, thoughtfully.

"Not that I can remember," I say. "What about you?"

David shrugs. "No one dead, anyway."

"Dang it."

"Perhaps this ghost just simply forgot to bring something with him into the afterlife and is asking if he can have it back in the nicest way possible," he says.

Swish swish. Eeeeeeeeeeeek.

I scoff. "Yeah right. I bet they've got everything in the afterlife."

"Maybe they forgot their diary. That's something you would do," David suggests.

"This is your fault anyway," I say.

"My fault?"

"Yes. I told you this land might be haunted."

"Are you actually joking right now?"

Swish swish. Eeeeeeeeeeeek. Swish.

"No, I'm not," I say. "We're going to die and it's all because you wanted this house."

"You wanted this house too!"

"Yeah, but I would've been fine in another one. You were pretty set on this, weren't you?"

"Just because the people who lived here before us died, doesn't mean that it's haunted ground."

“Just listen to yourself! They died here!”

“That’s generally what people do, Nat!”

I groan. “This is ridiculous.”

“You’re the one who thinks there’s a ghost in the house,” he says.

“I’m being reasonable…”

“Generally, I don’t think reasonable people believe in ghosts.”

“You’re just saying that because you only hang out with reasonable people.”

“We have the same friends.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Don’t you think that if there was a vengeful ghost, then we would’ve already been dead?”

I listen for the noise, but it doesn’t come back. David, looking very pleased with himself, tells me to please turn the lamp off so he can get at least a few hours of sleep, and promptly turns around, burying his body back underneath of the covers. I don’t fall asleep, and I don’t go downstairs the next morning until David wakes up. It’s not the last time we hear the noise, but David buys me earplugs, so it works out okay in the end. For a ghost haunting, anyway.

Rachel Husk is twenty years old, and goes to Bowling Green State University. She is majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Women’s Studies.

Art

Relax/Crossing the Lanes

By Aditi Chandra



Relax



Crossing the Lanes

These photos were taken in the streets of Bhopal, my hometown, which has quite a laid-back lifestyle. On a moderately hot day in April 2016, I peeped out of my car. People, lives, things, scenes shifted quickly before me, without giving any notice. In these moments, with the wind gushing through my hair, I came across these men who were simply relaxing, standing in the middle of nowhere as vehicles whizzed past them. Their postures and expressions seemed to place them in the center of the universe. As a photographer, I was keen on capturing the composition and the story in each element these photographs would convey. For me, photography isn't just a practice; it's more of an art of storytelling, a channel of communication. Though these photographs are just some shots of street photography with not much technique employed, the story they speak of, fascinates and imparts immense satisfaction.

Aditi Chandra is a junior from Bhopal, India. She is an amateur photographer and her works have been previously published in Textploit, Teen Ink, ArtRefurbish , Cargo Literary, Moledro and Alexandria Quarterly among others . She also serves as the Art Editor at Inklette Magazine and Phosphene Literary Journal. You can find her at aditichandra.wordpress.com.

Old Friends

By Shera Bhala



Old Friends

I reside in an old, historic house in Kansas City, Missouri. Because my house is so unique and often has beautiful lighting from the many windows, I take photos there a lot. I am inspired by many different photographers, and one thing they always emphasize is the importance of taking as many photos as possible. Over time, I have also learned that usually, the first image that you capture will not be the perfect one. I try to take a lot of shots from various angles. My photo “Old Friends” was one of many. I saw my mom and our cat, Daisy, sitting on the windowsill together in our living room. So I asked them to hold still for a minute and captured quite a few photos. When I first saw the negatives, I fell in love with this image. I really enjoy the subjects, setting, and silhouette effect of it. I aim to portray a variety of human emotions, and I really believe this photo does just that, as it depicts loving and warm feelings.

Shera Bhala currently lives in Kansas City, Missouri and attends the Pembroke Hill School. At Pembroke, Shera is an Arts Focus student, with an emphasis on photography.

February 7:18 AM

By Miranda Sun



February 7:18AM

I was eating breakfast on a school morning when my dad shouted for me to look out the window. The clouds were in full fanfare and the sky was this marvelous blue (I did tweak the photo to bring out more of its magnificence, but what you see is pretty much what I saw). It woke me up instantly and I ran to go get my iPad, which I use to take all my photos. This photo was taken at 7:18 AM on a February morning, hence the name. Then, while I was standing outside in my backyard taking photos in my pajamas, my breakfast forgotten, an airplane flew into view, and I knew I had the perfect shot. I love bright blue skies, and this one made my day.

Miranda Sun is sixteen years old and loves to read, write, draw, take cool photographs, and drink lychee bubble tea (although not all at once). She has been nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and has had multiple works published in *Creative Kids* magazine, where she serves as a Senior Contributor.

Lilac Sky

By Emma Hickl



Lilac Sky

This photo was taken on my back porch. We live on a farm, and I feel like this picture shows that. You have the trailers and barn in the background, the cows if you look closely, and our farm truck. I love being able to see the firewood at the edge of the picture; it gives it a natural feel. I was shocked at how gorgeous this view was, it was so bright and vibrant and I had never seen such a view before, it made me happy. I love this picture, sunsets are so unique and you never know how they're gonna look that evening.

Photography gives me joy. I love being able to capture God's artwork through camera, even though no matter how hard I try I can never capture exactly how beautiful it is. Although photography is amazing and I love it, there is nothing like being able to feel the true warmth of the scene shining on your face. With this lilac sky, I feel that happiness.

Emma Hickl is a student in her sophomore year of high school. She is interested in photography as well as writing and wants to use those interests to show God's artwork and tell of his glory. She strives to live an adventurous and full life.

See You in the Summer

By Matti Youngblood



This photo was taking at my grandmother's house in Grannis, Arkansas, at which time I had recently began experimenting with backlighting. This was one of the first photos I had taken with the sun in the frame, and now, I shoot with it in the frame whenever possible!

Matti Youngblood can be found taking pictures, writing, or reading while listening to music.

Walks of Life

By Henry Hu



Accept



Grief



Solace

With a strong focus on storytelling, most of my artworks are personal and intentional. I always like the idea of presenting arts as a complete sequence / collection. Each individual collection, consists of multiple pieces, often in the same style, grouped by specific themes, concepts or stories.

My works explore subjects that interest me personally, some touch on life itself. As a huge fan of films and music, they do heavily influence my artworks in certain ways. I am fascinated with classic films (30s-90s), it's unbelievable the things filmmakers achieved back then. Currently, I absolutely admire films by Paul Thomas Anderson, Terrence Malick, Nicolas Winding Refn and Woody Allen just to name a few. Most of their works progress me significantly as an artist. Off the top of my head films such as, *After Hours* (1985), *The Master* (2012), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Annie Hall* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) mean a lot to me personally. With music, I like me some indie folk, soul, r&b, jazz and hip-hop, mostly storytelling albums. Deeply in love with that new James Blake LP right now.

With the Walks of Life collection, Grief was one of the earlier pieces done in the series. Some of the works in this collection are vaguely inspired off my life encounters or just my thoughts / takes on certain paths / philosophies of life. I would say the pieces off WoL are some of the more grounded, challenging and reflective works I have done. The collection is incomplete, and I will continue to work on it.

Hong Kong bred, Sydney based. Henry is currently an engineering/ architecture student, also working as an architectural student while taking a break from Uni. His love for art will ensure more new work is on the way. To view more of Henry's work, please visits: henryhhu.com