



ISSUE THREE

Non-Fiction

NYSSMA Warrior

By Michelle Zinger

As I neared the school, the aroma of freshly cut grass seeped through the car window. My dad halted to a stop and as I hopped out of the car, I instantly noticed the large football field and roaring stands. It was just a normal, regular day. A day like any other that could change a distant other. As I rounded the entrance, I saw another boy (about my age) carrying a full size violin. I took note of the tension on his face. Wondering if he had gotten into all-county and similar thoughts most likely railing through his head, edging at his mind. I continued on my way into the school to be greeted by a mildly welcoming room of friends, old teachers, and peers.

As I unpacked my violin my hands trembled with the thought of what was to come. But I knew this year was different in many ways. For starters, it seemed like a competition now more than ever. I worried about how much I had riding on this. It was a nerve racking thought. I dusted off the instrument noticing things unseen to the naked eye before. Like the sticky spot right behind the front, on the top right shoulder of the violin. Or the rosin goop at the bottom of my bow, closest to the frog. I tightened my bow and slowly attached the 4/4 chin rest to my full size violin.

Walking over to the registration desk, I saw my old elementary school orchestra teacher. She reminded me of the first time I had gotten into all-county. I couldn't believe my luck, I thought, as she told me I would be going on the big yellow school bus all the way to a new county to play violin with some of the best players in our county. Although, in the back of my mind I knew it wasn't luck. It was my skills of playing that allowed me to achieve and grow as both a person and a violin player. I thought back to the day when we were allowed to choose an instrument we wanted to pursue throughout our lives. I wanted to play a band instrument because I thought it was cool! I didn't have the lungs for it, however. I guess you could say it was fate, or just my terrible ability to play the trumpet, but I ended up choosing violin. At first, I hated it and felt like I was being forced to play, but my mom told me to keep going and to never give it up. So, I pursued it and now, it's more than just my hobby. Now, looking back, that felt like just a distant memory, nothing eternal.

Breaking my thoughts like a wave casting a ripple effect, my dad said "C'mon Michelle. We're going to be late if we don't get a move on." I followed him out the door to the audition rooms, leaving behind the sound of chatter and worry as the door closed shut. "What's the room?" my dad wondered.

"It's S205" I answered. Hurriedly, we fast walked to the room running past anxious kids and tedious faced judges, seeing old friends, people I recognized, and the sounds of music blasting throughout the school. Music everywhere. Once we found the room, we looked for my time.

"10:45- Michelle Zinger" my dad said as he read down the list.

"Yep, this is it", I replied. I slowly scanned my judge, looking her up and down. It seemed like she hadn't a care in the world.

I pondered whether she actually enjoyed the job of being a judge. I always wondered why people became judges if they didn't want to. Why wouldn't you do something that you loved? I put down my case and dropped my blue, J.Crew sweater along with my drawstring bag on the floor. Handing my dad my empty case filled with my empty hopes, I mentally prepared myself for the audition. While doing this, I started to realize that everything would be okay. It didn't matter what the score was as long as I did my best.

"Ready?" the judge asked, coming out of the room.

"Yes" I answered, and maybe, for the first time, I actually meant it.

Michelle Zinger is currently in ninth grade at Mamaroneck High School. English is one of her favorite subjects because of the freedom it allows to express your deepest feelings. She feels that writing is not only a passion, but also something so priceless in our society.

Michelle has been playing violin since the third grade, and won the poetry live competition at her school along with some of her other peers. She loves to spend time with her dog, take pictures, and explore.

The Psychological Impression of the Hindu devotees towards their god

By Arjun Dahal

God! Definitions can vary from person to person with their own answers inside their range. Those who believe in him, place their complete hopes and beliefs, hoping for their betterment. Humans on the basis of their caste, creed and religion have their own moral way to please their god to receive blessings according to their same hopes during their prayers. All devotees are extremely loyal to their god and are willing to do anything just to please him.

I am by birth a Hindu and by caste a " Brahmin", typically considered as a holy man to make prayers and perform rites and norms for the sake of all people irrespective of their caste and creed. Hinduism is considered as the oldest religion on the earth. By my academics, I am a student of physics and mathematics rather a priest by my caste. So, when it comes to the word god, I am bounded within certain limits by my professors, as I am a student who needs to deal with the physical reality rather than fairy tales. Also, by my religion, which does have some accounts, though considered as highly paranormal and supernatural by our modern society, I am obliged to follow them either blindly or consciously. I do fear, if I resist those norms, then the general people may outcaste me or even may throw stones at me, stamping me with an ink of insane.

Recently, my family decided to hold a " Shreemadha Bhagawata Sapataha Gyana Maha Yagna". a seven-day long ceremony of divine stories delivered in a form of speeches depicted by my religion. It ended up by teaching the devotees, how to pave their way to heaven at the end of their life.

Well I must confess to my holy gods and ask them to forgive me as I conducted a series of experiments through the second day till the seventh day. It is considered as Immoral to put a question or conduct an Experiment involving the name of god. Also, when it comes to the name of god, Hindus have 3.3×10^8 number of gods and If we consult a highly religious leader the number may even increase. Nevertheless, the limits of my religion, I got success in my experiments allowing me to observe the psychological anomalies of the people regarding their devotion towards god. I may be a bit weird to say, but the people in the ceremony resembled to me as a flock of sheep, where the leader leads and the rest follow the leader, dumb, deaf and blind. This was visualized vividly by the way of their prayers and the mentality they had, during their time of prayers. In the theology of Hinduism, 'Lord Shiva' is considered to be the godfather of the gods and his son "Ganesha" needs to be worshipped at first in order to complete the norm with success. All other gods are considered as highly powerful, but the majority of the people pray to them with higher devotion.

It all started on the very first day, when the way of prayers by the devotees caught up my attention and left me as dumb, watching all the incidents that move on every second. During worship and prayers, the people were giving high priority to "Shiva" and "Ganesha" and the offerings made to the god were significantly higher than in comparison to others.

On the second day, as per my experiment, I personally did some mischiefs to know how much I can fool the general people in the name of god and indeed I succeeded. In the place of the same two gods, I personally put some flowers, money, fruits and other offerings and the result came as per my prediction. Except for some, almost all people gave high priority to the same two lords almost neglecting the others.

I thought it was unfair to neglect the other gods, so on the third day; I gave high priority to other gods, neglecting the previous two gods. At the end of the day, I found the offerings were almost fair to all of them. I was amazed by the result, no one forgot to worship the first two lords, but also provided a fair prayer to all of the gods.

On the fourth day, I increased the offerings to all of the lords but by biasing, giving more priority to the same two lords. At the end of day, after prayers and worship, I noticed that the fund and offerings collected were almost five fold greater than the previous day.

In the remaining last three days, I repeated the experiment in the reverse order because I knew, on the last three days; the crowds were going to increase. Despite the number of people attending the ceremony, the results also repeated.

The conclusion was clear to me. Even in the name of god, the holy disciples of the god prioritize to only those lords, where the offerings are at peak. They are not making prayers to their lords for the deeds they (lords) had done, or to obtain blessing from them. Instead the people are worshipping because the rest had done so, as like the flock of sheep, where the sheep imitate the works of their leader.

To be more concrete on my conclusion, I hurried to all nearby temples and the results were the same and in fact much bolder. In generalization, most of the people had no idea on their worshipping and prayers to their gods. A few of them had answers, but not factual and meaningful.

By my knowledge and academics, I know these things are irrational. On the other hand, I have found myself as one of the sheep in the flock. I have no idea on the existence of god, but honestly, I am not an atheist. I have been counted as an educated person by my country census and yet I am stuck in the boundary of religion and science.

Despite my literacy, I am obliged to follow the same centuries old traditions and beliefs, deaf, dumb and blind. The psychological impression printed on our brain by our ancestors gives me the clear meaning upon the attitude of my society towards the gods, but I have no idea how to deal with them either knowingly or unknowingly. I have been following the same things and still, tending to follow as my ancestors did as my mates, friends and families do. Nevertheless, of the limits of my religion, I got success in my experiments allowing me to observe the psychological anomalies of my society towards the god. I must stay inside the limits of my religion, but now-onwards, if I am going to make a prayer, I am going to treat all of the gods fairly.

Arjun Dahal is a twenty- year- old student, studying BSc. in Physics (BSc. 4th year running now) at Tri- Chandra Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He is highly interested in the fields of Physics, Mathematics, Music, Literature and Philosophy. This is his first publication.

Striving for Oblivion

By Elli Ratner

Am I dead?

I don't think so.

I hear voices, but I cannot quite make sense of them. They seem far away.

I hear my heart in the beeping of a machine. Too fast. Then too slow. Faltering. Panic in the voices around me. I am sliding in and out of consciousness. My senses are beginning to dull. I can no longer feel the cot beneath me or the voices around me. I am a feather drifting away. Gravity has released me and now I am shooting across the solar system at a thousand kilometers per hour. All around me is blackness. I revel in the alluring emptiness.

But gravity has decided to take a hold of me again, dragging me back down to Earth. I try to resist but now I can feel the cot beneath me and the soft cotton of the blanket draped over me. I try to move but there is a pain in my arm. Something sharp moving under my skin. I force my eyes open. Everything is hazy and it takes me a few seconds before my vision clears. The culprit preventing me from moving is an IV needle, taped onto my elbow crease and hooked onto an infusion pump, which is dripping a clear liquid into me. I feel the chill of the liquid that is being dispensed into my veins.

As a matter a fact, I am hooked to several machines. I suppose I must be in a hospital room. The walls are a faded yellow. In the right hand corner there is a paper towel dispenser above a dark blue counter with a sink. The color matches the leather chair next to my bed. The one my mother is sitting in. My mother. She looks worn, like she has aged several years since I last saw her. She is speaking to a doctor. A tiny woman with dark hair, skin, and eyes. Their voices are low.

I am laying down, but the cot is tilted at an angle, allowing me to inspect my body. I am clad in a powder blue hospital gown and I can see little white stickers, the size of quarters, dotting my arms and legs. On my finger is a white clip, the kind they use at a doctor's office to determine your pulse.

Noticing my movements, the doctor turns to face me.

There are two of her and both of them seem to be blurred along the edges. My eyes are camera lenses, focusing and unfocusing. Clear and blurry. I have so many questions I want to ask. Where am I? What's going on? What are all of these machines that I am attached to? Why am I still here? What went wrong? But I am unable to form coherent sentences, and my words tumble out nonsensically. She says something. I can hear the words but I cannot register their meaning. "Is that the earth quivering beneath me?" I wonder idly. Or is it my body that's trembling? I'm so tired. I am heavy. I am sinking. My eyes close of their own accord.

When I open them again, I realize I must have drifted off.

The doctor is gone.

My mother is dozing.

A nurse is attaching wires to the little white stickers and attaching said wires to a machine. It takes me a moment to find my voice.

"What's going on?"

I sound like a heavy smoker.

She explains to me that the little white stickers are electrodes and they're measuring my heart's electrical activity. Normally, once the procedure, an EKG, is done, the electrodes are removed. But I was a special case. Apparently I had this same procedure a few weeks ago (I could not recall this but then again, I couldn't remember my own name so I suppose that's not too surprising) and the results were normal. But now they are dangerously irregular. They are worried my overdose had permanently damaged my heart. They want to monitor me. The clip on my finger is so they can keep track of my erratic heart rate. I will be transferred soon.

In a different city.

More specialized.

I have to strain my brain just so I can comprehend her words. I miss details, but I am able to grasp the gist, which is an improvement.

I try to sit up, but again there is a sharp pull in my arm. The nurse adjusts the IV and presses a button on my cot. I feel the back end of it rising, gently nudging me into a sitting position. "Why do I need an IV?" "We are trying to wash all of that medication out of your system." "Isn't that what pumping someone's stomach is for?" "We weren't able to. By the time you arrived, the drugs in your system had been absorbed into your bloodstream. We weren't able to use activated charcoal either." And then it really hit me. I had failed. I was still here. I am crying. I don't usually cry in front of people, and would never, ever let myself cry in front of strangers. But I am crying, sobbing actually. Tears rake my body.

I am terrible at living and I am terrible at dying. I am choking on them. Why can't I do anything right? I can't breathe. I can't believe that is happening. Nothing feels real. This is someone else's nightmare.

I am shaking. I did so much research. I prepared. What went wrong? I can't be here anymore, I need to get out. My body shakes like a leaf. It is a separate entity from me. I stare down at it, repulsed. I wonder what it's feeling. What's making it convulse? What's making it gasp for air? What's making it claw at it's own skin as if it is trying to escape itself. I just want to be nothing.

I want to be a part of nature. To disappear into the infinite expanse of the universe. To be recycled matter. To be nothing and to be everything. No more racing thoughts. No more flashbacks. No more panic attacks where my heart feels like it is trying to burst through my rib cage. Where I am a fish out of water, gasping for the oxygen that my gills cannot process. No more long periods of numbness with intermittent intervals of depression so severe that I cannot get out of bed. No more long sleepless nights, where the little sleep I do get is infested with nightmares. No more waking up soaked with sweat and silently screaming. I explain this all to the psychologist, who comes into my room hours after having been injected with a sedative medication.

He was a small, frail, and balding old man with thick glasses that were almost bigger than his face. "What do you have nightmares about?" "My father." "Do you want to elaborate?" "No." "Was there a history of abuse?" "Yes." "Has it been reported?" "Yes." I've driven him into a dead end so he changes tactics.

"Besides flashbacks and nightmares, how else does your PTSD affect you?" Is that not enough? "The majority of the time, I am watching myself go about my day to day life. It's like watching a movie. The life belongs to somebody else. Therapists tell me it's a defense mechanism, that it's just my brain is trying to protect me. That way when he would hurt me I wouldn't be there to feel it. But I feel out of control and powerless. I am a bystander in my own life." His pen is scratching away at the paper it writes on.

“How does this make you feel?” “ Hopeless. Helpless.”

“Where do you see yourself in the future? What do you expect from yourself?” What future? “I will never be able to go to college, or hold a career, or have a family. I will never amount to anything. I have no purpose.” “Do you do poorly in school?” “No.” “Then why do you believe you won’t be able to get into college?” “I never said I wouldn’t be able to get in. I said I won’t be able to go. I’ll get in. I’ll manage a couple months before it is too much for me. And then I’ll have to drop out. Same goes for a career. I’m useless anyway. And if anyone’s crazy enough to marry me, it won’t be long until they realize what a monster I am.” “So you don’t have many friends then?” “No. I have friends” “I’m guessing they don’t think you’re a monster?” “Most of them don’t know me. If they got to know me, they’d hate me.” “Why?” “Because I’m a terrible human being.” He closes his manila folder.

“Is that why you tried to end your life?” “Part of it.” “How do you think your death would affect those around you?” “I mean people would be sad. But they’d be better off.”

“What about you parents? Don’t you think you would break their hearts?” “They’d benefit. Mom’s always complaining about me being a burden. And according to my dad I’m a waste of space. And money. And time. And resources. And everyone would be better off if I was dead.” “Do you like your father?” “No.” Then why do you take so much stock in what he says?” “I mean it’s all true. My brother is like the sweetest guy in the world and he’s super honest, and he says I’m stupid and sadistic and mean and egotistical and well a lot of other things. And my dad’s a horrible person, but my mom is actually a very good person and even she’s always mentioning how expensive I am and how much space I take up.”

“All children are expensive.” “But I’m particularly expensive. I have a lot of health issues. There are so many different doctors I need to see plus all of the different procedures I need to have plus the different medications I need to take. It all adds up.” I wait for the psychologist to fire out another question, but he was silent. He took off his large glasses, wiped them clean, and placed them carefully back onto his crooked nose.

After an eternity of silence he spoke again. “I’m not supposed to share personal stories. I’m not supposed to do anything besides assess whether or not you are eligible to be hospitalized...” “Am I?” I interrupted. He ignored me. “But my sister’s son was a bit like you, very anxious. Very depressed. Unlike you, he self-medicated. When he was twenty-two he died of a heroin overdose. That was twenty years ago. It still eats her up. She blames herself. She thinks about all of the ways she could have prevented it. She wonders why her love wasn’t enough.” There were tears in his eyes now. I had to look away, ashamed. “I understand you believe you chose the right course of action. But believe me, it would have destroyed your mother. There is no benefit from losing a child.” Silence. “Good - luck.” The lump in my throat was too big to allow me to speak. I just watched him walk out the door. I heard him saying something to my mother. After a few moments she walked back into the room. Her eyes were red and puffy, her face seemed gaunt. And suddenly I missed her. She was right in front of me, but I missed her so badly it ached. I reached out for her and she took my hand.

Elli Ratner is a high school senior whose academic interests include developmental, criminal, and abnormal psychology; environmental policy and sustainability; macro and cellular biology; and peace studies. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing, yoga, running, making jewelry, and interior design.

Afterwords

By Marimac McCrae

I'm on a couch that smells like someone else's house. It's a good smell, homey and fresh at the same time. I slide into the corner seat with apprehension, and my nervousness forms weights my ankles and wrists, manifesting itself in the awkward placement of my hands. I can't get comfortable here quite yet, even though the seat supports me perfectly. I can't get too relaxed quite yet. The canvas rolls out, and I feel another memory forming in the atmosphere of the dimly lit living room as strongly as if there were a temperature change.

Eleven girls lay on the floor next to me in a perfect row. The dim light cannot stick to our skin with anything stronger than a subtle orange glow. My eyes trace over the girls like a piano player would trace the keys of the piano; we both know the harmony of this unseen but understood order. They are all incredibly immobile, but their arms and legs are sprawled out in different directions, implicating a kind of motion that restlessly holds the moment still.

Through the air sifts Vivian's voice reading to us. Bags lay empty, and we lay with them either lost to or claimed by the night. Empty and crumpled in the corner, I feel shadows from the deep creases in the deflated fabric under our eyes blooming like sunflowers. Through the shadows that bloom in the early hours of today, Vivian found her copy of the 3rd Harry Potter book. It is missing both covers, and the page corners are softened by frequent turns. Vivian reads without her glasses, but she reads without missing a word. The girls lay still in their active poses on the couch, like a piano holding out a note at the end of the song. Vivian's story takes us to another world: a world beyond the party, a world that runs to its own music. I lose the lyrics that play in loops in my head in favor of falling into the waking dream of the post-party bedtime story that fills the air.

Made-up stories are caught in books, in lines that run straight on paper, in lines regulated by rules and managed by fonts. I want to catch this one, right now, somehow. The juxtaposition of these stories, the atmosphere's power to transport us, and how motion is held prisoner by sleep and some softened pages. The piano keys so alive have finally fallen silent, and only an echo of us remains lingering in the solidifying air. Through the gaps, the story of our generation reaches all of us individually, I think. I don't know if anyone else is awake and hearing this too. I don't know if anyone enjoys this as much as Vivian and I do. But I do know that my wrists feel unbound, and I sink into the couch with a kind of belonging that I would not have felt otherwise.

But just when I think I am alone, one of the girls rings out with a smile at one of the story's jokes. Then, another one rings out in harmony; she is smiling too.

I don't really know what this all means. These mature girls have let this story take them as its own. Their confidence just hours before comes beaming back to me in the unspoken tongue of memory, and I wonder if this is the side of the girls that I will see when we wake up. Will we be docile or dauntless in the daylight?

The footsteps I left come back to me, shouting in the unspoken tongue of memory. They leave patterns like how-to-dance floors that become the tapestries of the night. They remind me of what happened through their brush strokes made with the remnants of motion. Memories that resonate with me fall to my fingertips, finding their place in an eternally expanding database hidden behind

my locks of thick, tousled hair. Somewhere between an after party and Harry Potter, I discover I am very glad to be right where I am.

I inhale the smell of a house unfamiliar that has become familiar. I know that my last footstep of the night has become one of my favorites. I smile as my sleep-starved eyes close, and the notes of Harry Potter cloud my head and put me to sleep like they always did when I was younger.

Marimac McRae is a rising senior at Harpeth Hall, an all girls school in Nashville, Tennessee. Her work has been featured on Teen Ink and on the RunSmart blog of Olympian runner Malindi Elmore. She enjoys Cross Country, Track, Swimming, and other types of cardio-related pain. She also has worked as an executive editor for the literary magazine Polyphony H.S..

Poetry

Supply and Demand

By Lillian Hua

The two of them wore white to prom,
her thin layers of chiffon flared like pixie wings poised
and we knew it was something magical
if only because the red strings of fate sang
and moonlight glowed where he kissed her.
When wine spilled on her bodice,
she laughed, drunk off the night already anyway,
washed away the truth with bridges from the past,
glanced up once at cesspool skylights
and declared she'd love him for better, for worse,
even after death or college did them part.
(If you have endless quantities of a resource,
does that drive its demand down to zero?)
But distance, it pulls too taut, then plays melodies
on Atropos' lyre until the lines
snap, leaving in the air a diminished seventh, dissonant
but finished. And it was only after the crashes, depressions,
the inflation, consulting, tallies on their palms, debts, cycles
of arpeggios ebbing and flowing and slamming against doors, when finally
they realized the more interest, dopamine rushes,

genuine apologies they wanted from each other,
the less they had to give.

Lillian is a 17-year-old gal with chronic vagabond symptoms, but her heart's more or less obliged to smelly onion roots, so Chicago's lucky enough in that sense. Her work has been nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, New Voices Young Writers, and Sierra Nevada College.

Comparative Advantage

By Lillian Hua

I told her she was a coagulation of serotonin
and rooftop kisses in 3AM thunderstorms.
She stuck out her tongue, turned,
ignited another fire with the sparkly onyx nail
her mother doesn't like her painting, and
shrieked. Her fingertips are calloused
by vivace Mozart and burns. A smile nudged my lips,
so I bent to sweep up the ashes. Later,
in the brick cobweb doorway,
her tears sank into my collar like candlelight,
warm and heavy with the musk of familiarity,
because she was sick of searching for x
and finding B's instead, so
I let her simmer in my arms,
wished she knew how grossly
more valuable the timbre of her laughter
and degree of her social skills (^6—my theory?
she can bridge any separation in the world)
are than the Scantrons and transcripts on which w
plot polar coordinates that only lead us in circles
to the integers we let define us. She shrugged,
lips pressed. $y = zero$.

(I asked her what was more important:

lighting your own matches

or watching, calculating

the rate at which we burn.)

Lillian is a 17-year-old gal with chronic vagabond symptoms, but her heart's more or less obliged to smelly onion roots, so Chicago's lucky enough in that sense. Her work has been nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, New Voices Young Writers, and Sierra Nevada College.

Fragmentation

By Ana Maria Finzgar

the taste of cinnamon in my mouth

burned

my tongue raw

(reminded me of christmas cookies)

the couch we all sat on every day

watching television to ungodly hours of the morning

made me want to destroy the world

(bad dad-jokes never seemed so good)

melancholy never felt more like a harmful illness

and neither did loneliness

partialness has become a routine

it all started with a separation

and ended with being stretched over

two continents to the point of breaking

Ana M. Finzgar is a fifteen-year-old from the Mediterranean. This was her first serious attempt at poetry.”

A Sonnet From an Earthling

By Ana Maria Finžgar

Dear person from Earth,

You are not naturally intrusive, barbaric; you do not unconsciously strive to extirpate the Universe. It is not in your nature to mindlessly kill. Do not let greed that is lurking around the corner lure you into not being human. Be the greatest heliolatrist there ever was; love the earth and pray to the sea.

People who live by the dog-eat-dog rule are far more common than they should be; a paradoxical group of people with rotten hearts and knife-like tongues. Survival is their primary objective; art does not exist. They are inchoate, only breathing, eating to exist, not finding pleasure in anything.

Cherish morals; eliminate envy. Find out your purpose of existing. Ride a camel to Egypt. Swim in every ocean, see thirty-one sunsets in twenty days, buy your mother a flower every day. Gratification and happiness should

be the only objective you have. Graduate from an Ivy League school, write a poem about the universe, do nothing at all and everything at once. And don't not listen to anyone (me). You are a blank canvas and you shall paint yourself.

Your fellow Earthling

Ana M. Finžgar is a fifteen-year-old from the Mediterranean. This was her first serious attempt at poetry.

The Nighthawk

By Jenna Kurtzweil

One night I lay in want of sleep,
but fair Adventure, dark and deep,
was resting, waiting, captivating
every thought my mind could keep.

And so I stole across my room,
drawn by the Fates' incessant loom,
for whispers, swift and promising,
were luring me into the gloom.

I balanced on the windowsill,
undaunted by the creeping chill
of night, for brightly overhead
the watchful Moon hung soft and still.

Then swiftly, as if by a prayer,
a Nighthawk, slicing through the air,
appeared to rest abreast my lonely
figure, as I waited there.

She peered at me through ebon eyes
that sung of shadows, old and wise,

and as she loosed her beak to speak
I listened raptly, hypnotized.

“O Raven-girl, your time is near!
Why must you wither, crouched in dreary,
pallid light? The ballad of your life
is raging! Fly from here!”

I quickly rose, enraptured by
this dark messiah, knowing I
could never flee my bruised and bloodied land
until I learned to fly.

So I, held captive by her claims,
entranced by she who called my name
so boldly, whispered “mold me as you will
and make us both the same.”

Within a moment, I was changed
and all my features rearranged,
eclipsed by feathers, weathered claws,
and eyes that saw myself estranged.

At this, although the light was dim,
I saw the Nighthawk, old and grim,

take to the skies; within her cries

I heard her final crooning hymn:

“Behold the waxing Moon, and then

look closely as it starts to wane.

Like ragged Ships and rugged Men,

here and there, then gone again.”

And just like that, she disappeared,

elusive as the Sisters, weird

and wild; the night once more was mild

and wretched dark no longer feared.

I soared on borrowed wings that night;

bathed in the strange and spectral light

that washed the world, I twirled and balanced,

wraithlike, on the winds of flight.

I skimmed and sailed the velvet sea

that roiled and tossed and cradled me

between the hats and crooked backs

and shadows strewn about the streets.

But Dawn, the Ever-present, curled

her back, and gilded wings unfurled
to usher in the rush of din
that ripped me from my Netherworld.

I woke, as I am wont to do
When Night concedes her glory to
the crystal-patterned mists of Morning's
journey into swirling blue.

And through my window, fading fast,
my loyal Guard did set at last,
obscured and blurred by wishful clouds
that shimmered like a lake of glass.

A lake with waves much stronger than,
or dreams that fade beyond my ken.
Like ragged Ships and rugged Men,
here and there, then gone again.

Jenna Kurtzweil is 19 years old and hails from Palatine, IL. Along with her responsibilities as a student at the University of Illinois, Jenna is always looking for new opportunities to experience life through travel, literature, music, and all forms of storytelling. Jenna has also been published in *The Noisy Island*.

Law of Diminishing Returns

By Lillian Hua

“Thus it is on the one side a study of wealth; and on the other, and more important side, a part of the study of man.”

—Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*

Dad blurs his days by clipping moments into IVs
and transfusing them into strangers. Meanwhile,
I'm waiting in the E.R., telemetry flattening,
eyes bloodshot from incisions ten years old—
1 to 10 how much does it hurt, well, I'll say 9
and save the 10 and the morphine for the day he
might forget to measure the seconds and attach his own IV.
(“Now see, love,” he'd say, “forgetfulness signifies a great mind—
if you juggle so many difficult things,
it's natural if you accidentally drop a few of them”)
it's hard to treat a patient 2000 miles away.
Dad used to scrape dishes with bitter detergent suds,
cracked fingers and a sliver of blood because that's
what creates the sheen on the brims of our creaking railroads
and chipped jade. at home was he misty-eyed, lauded, an art professor,
underpaid, just an art professor. In the west, then,
was he christened Chinese piece of crap;

to that he lowered his eyes and just thought
about mom and my brother across the pacific.
He changed his name eventually to Employee of the Month
and now he thumbs the American middle-class dream with one hand
while pinching nickels with the other to save them for me.
shortly after he stopped answering when mom asked
when we'll have enough money for him to be satisfied
and come home, I injected my last vial
of saline to disinfect the dehiscence every time he left
on the cheaper 6am flight back to los angeles.

Lillian is a seventeen-year-old gal with chronic vagabond symptoms, but her heart's more or less obliged to smelly onion roots, so Chicago's lucky enough in that sense. Her work has been nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, New Voices Young Writers, and Sierra Nevada College.

Money Travels

By Ruth Isaacson

I feel someone pick me up off the ground.

It's a little girl.

She crumples me up in her pocket and my journey begins.

Her pink rain boots splash as she runs into the candy store.

"Spend me, spend me," I chant

All of a sudden she takes me out and lays me on a counter and I am given to the cashier.

I stay in the cash register until his lunch break,

then he looks around and shoves me into the pocket of his baggy jeans.

From there I am given to a woman at McDonald's.

She presses me into the hands of a man sitting on the street corner, holding a cardboard sign.

Who exchanges me for a small package of mints. Now I belong to the clerk.

The clerk takes me on an airplane

Suddenly I am converted into euros

And he puts me on a restaurant table, where I am picked up by a young waiter

And spent on a pair of heels as red as a stop sign.

The merchant grabs me and shoves me in his pocket

and brings me to a building called a bank

And I'm thrown into a vault. I spend years and years there

Until finally I'm rescued by a burly man in a black mask

The sound of sirens and the quick patter of feet overwhelm me.

All of a sudden I fly out of the bag and into a murky puddle, splash,

I lie there, awaiting my next journey.

Ruthie Isaacson is a ninth grader at Gretna High School! When she's not writing, she's reading, playing tennis, or competing at show choir! She also represents her school as a student council leader!

Never Let Go

By Samantha McCabe

Hold my hand,
hold it tight.

Do not
let go

I am,
as they say,
drifting away

Drifting
And/or floating
And/or flying
And/or gliding

Away

Away from you,
and him,
and her,
and them.

From us,
and me,
and together,
and love.

So hold onto me,
grasp my hand.
Because without you,
I am drifting away

Now don't get me wrong,
I like to drift.
It's an eye-opening experience.

How?

Well, let me tell you.

You,
my friend,
are rooted.

I,
on the other hand,
am drifting all around.

Stuck in place,
solid in your position,
you can only see 120 degrees

I can see the whole world.

Do you understand now?
Because I no longer do.

I miss my beliefs
And/or faiths
And/or convictions
And/or views

Mine

I want them
to be mine
again

So hold my hand,
hold it tight.
Do not

let go

Because I am drifting away,

and I want to be

steady once more.

Samantha McCabe grew up in Asia and is now living in the U.S. She loves to read, travel, and listen to music.

If You Give...

By Jezebelle Rocha

If you give Abraham his ipad....

Chances are he'll watch youtube videos for the rest of the day.

If he watches youtube videos for the rest of the day chances are he'll ask for the charger for his ipad.

Chances are he won't get up to get it for himself so he'll ask for someone to go get it for him.

If nobody wants to get him the charger, he'll complain about getting up to go get it.

When he gets up to go get the charger from the living room he'll realize he wants a cup for water.

If he wants a cup of water chances are he'll look around the kitchen and ask for a snack.

When he asks for a snack he'll ask for a cookie.

If he asks for a cookie, chances are he'll ask for a cup of milk.

If there is nobody in the kitchen to serve him a cup of milk, he'll come to my room and ask me to serve him a cup of milk.

Chances are, knowing Abraham, he would have eaten half the cookie before getting the cup of milk.

If you give Abraham a big cup of milk...

Chances are he'll ask for another cookie so he can finish off his milk.

He'll sit at the counter and play on his ipad some more knowing that his ipad is plugged in.

Forgetting that he left his cup of water on the edge of the counter

He'll probably knock down the cup of water by pulling on the charger.

When he knocks over the cup of water he probably won't tell anybody about it.

He'll unplug the charger and take it with him to the living room so that it doesn't seem like he dropped the cup of water.

If he doesn't clean up the water..

Chances are either my sister or I will end up stepping in it when we only have our socks on.

Knowing that we will try to figure out who spilled the water, he'll skip away laughing.

When we tell him to clean it he'll say "No not doing it."

Chances are he really won't clean up the mess

If you give Abraham his ipad he'll make a mess.

Jezebelle Rocha is just a normal creative writer who never enjoyed writing anything in English or in other classes. As a senior she began to enjoy her Creative Writing class when she was able to write freely. She was first published in her school's Literary Journal and also performed at her high school's open mic night.

Promise Me

By Kara Peter

The crabapple trees, arthritic spinsters in the winter
have reprised their roles as brides
plump and delicate in ivory/ fuchsia/ coral.

The wind whispers subtleties
and spring considers summer
the way a child leans over the sidewalk's warm breath
and ponders anthills:

very intensely
and then not at all.

Kara Peter is an 11th grade student who is inspired by thunderstorms, mountains and good books. She lives within her imagination.

Dying Remembrance

By Archita Mitra

it's been a year or a yesterday, since i gave you up
and stalked our memories, rewinding, over

and over, the tape recorder of my past
till the faded songs, stutter and hiss

(their or our) words drowning in themselves
like a strange, surreal painting

where ancient rooms metamorphose
into real, liquid nightmares, contorting-

and i wish so desperately
to be worthy (lucky) enough

to remember the details,
the smoky ends of half-finished conversations

that never went the way i imagined
but still magical enough, to tuck away

like a secret special present
from someone never meant to be;

the line from a poem, or song
that could uncover the invisible scars

tattooed across my soul and skin
once soaked in the moonshine of forevers

from the padlocked universe(i was exiled from)
spiralling farther and farther away

each time a song/painting/conversation/poem
dies

and the phantom limb of love
stutters, breathless
in limbo.

Archita Mitra is a wordsmith and visual artist with a love for all things vintage and darkly fantastical. A student of English Literature at Jadavpur University, she is also pursuing a Diploma in Multimedia and Animation from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. She has won several writing contests and her work has appeared in numerous online and print publications including Quail Bell

Magazine, eFiction India, Life In 10 Minutes, Teenage Wasteland Review and Tuck Magazine, among others. She occasionally practises as a tarot card reader.

You can read more of her work on <https://thepolyphonicphoenix.wordpress.com/>

Storytelling

By Vivian Tsai

We hunt for treasure chests; we chase
the tails of Flopsy, Mopsy; race
through sprinklers tipsy-topsy-tall
till bedtime falls upon it all.

We conquer garden gnome by gnome
and crown the carrot patches Rome.

I was the sidekick, you the sage
to fairly rule our Golden Age.

And then, in autumn, comes the bus
concocting fumes with spit and fuss.

You shift your backpack, say goodbye;
I sit along the curb and sigh.

I count sheep while I wait, then roam,
then skip rope till the cows come home;

I wander through our garden-realm
and wonder how to take the helm—
then stumble, see a gnome or three,

our pinkie-sworn-off enemy,

but still I sit, begin to talk

and tell our old jokes, knock by knock.

And soon these knocks evolve to tales
of ventures new, with ships and sails,

Venetian boats: vessels to tell

the loneliness I now know well.

And as you vanish, day by day

I learn to spin the sad away.

See, here's the thing: when you took flight

I first began to learn to write.

Vivian Tsai currently studies computer science and applied math at Johns Hopkins University. She spends her free time doodling, writing letters, and playing tennis with friends.

Fiction

Fortissimo

By James Vaughn

He was always tapping his foot. Everyone his whole life suspected he would turn out a little strange like this. A little too tall, a little too ugly. On the perfectly smooth skyrail, his tallness and ugliness was especially obvious. Connor Hall, assigned mechanic by the Employment Council, looked out of place standing inside the skyrail. Below his tapping foot, through the glass floor, the city zoomed by. Since he lived in one himself, Connor could practically hear all the noises of the expansive one below. The latest technological development, the robotic newscasters, always predicted the news hours before they actually happened. He could already hear their sickly automatic voice boxes delivering the sunny weather with metallic monotony.

To pass the time, Connor began to whistle. He tried hard to remember a song, but nothing came to him. So he made one up himself. His too-tight uniform didn't allow for much breathing room, but grew used to it over the past couple weeks. He accepted that uniforms simply weren't made for someone of his height. The whirring of the skyrail engines and the hushed whispers of people around him weren't enough to dilute the loudness of his off-key tune. But, Connor thought, at least I know how to whistle at all. Most people can't! As far back as Connor could remember, the Education Council had always mandated that children at the age of five were required to attend Council-sponsored schools, where they became subject to intense curricula intended to drive out any remnants of annoyingly childish fantasies. Like whistling. Somehow, however, his record skipped and he's been stuck with the childish habit ever since.

Ahead of Connor sat two young women dressed in freshly pressed business attire, their facial expressions as stiff as their clothes. They glared daggers at Connor while talking loudly amongst themselves, doing little to hide their blunt opinions.

"That's just unnatural," the first remarked, her lips pursed in annoyance, "and he's not even performing correctly! Only the Council Choirs are allowed to perform musically."

"Well," began the other, hair taut in a perfectly calculated bun, "for every litter there is a runt, isn't there? Even at that height."

The two synchronized chuckles that followed sent pangs to his heart, so he stopped whistling. Seeming satisfied, the women returned to their usual conversation, remembering to check their watches impatiently. The skyrail docked at the Station, where Connor was commissioned by the City Council to fix some underground pipes in the heart of Una City. At first, he was excited about the mission; he would finally be able to prove his worth to his Engineering Department back home. He would have liked to be assigned to the Council Choirs at 16, but wishful thinking was already drained out of him by then. The Employment Council was wise in picking him for the mechanic career. He wasn't good at anything else, after all!

Outside the station, Connor swathed his lungs in musty city air. His mind was enveloped in the chrome, steely tones of the metropolis: Beeping machinery, chugging steam vehicles, hissing technologies and hissing people. The city moved like a clockwork model.

Connor walked with a light cadence, his feet carrying him to the center of the city square. The people of Una City were strangely quiet here. His eyes wandered, taking in the various gaits and languages the people practiced. After looking on at a few older, slower moving gentlemen, Connor stared at little shell-like objects caressing everyone's ears, no doubt feeding them the news for tomorrow. Connor felt in his pocket for his own shell. It was cold.

Around a corner, he discovered some tempting fruit vendors and decided to indulge himself in an apple before getting to work. He walked around the square to the very last vendor in the row of salesmen. The old man lounging behind the apple stand seemed friendly enough, so Connor picked out the juiciest looking apple of them all, his mouth watering at the prospect of indulging himself in fresh fruit rather than his typical bland mush. The old man smiled at him and presented his open hand to Connor. When he placed a coin in the vendor's hand, however, the man recoiled his spidery hands, his face scrunching in disgust.

"Is that not enough? I'm sorry. Here, I have more-" Connor fished through his pockets and presented a few more smaller coins to the vendor. But when he looked directly in his eyes, Connor winced at the sight. The man's eyes were a cloudy haze, an unnatural whiteness that stared blankly at random directions. He was blind. Connor had never seen a blind man before. It just simply wasn't the way things were. He felt sympathy for the man, and almost brought out more money to give, but he was quickly interrupted.

"Begone! Horrid creature!" The blind man raspy voice spat, "your hands. They're unclean."

Though he was indeed blind, Connor could sense the venom in his eyes, the blistering anger that bored right through him.

"Unclean! Unclean! Unclean!"

The blind man groped madly at Connor's wrists before he could pull away, the apple dropping to the floor unceremoniously. The man turned Connor's palms over and shoved them in his own face. The man's grip tightened, his crumbly fingernails digging into the soft underside of his arm, turning all fingertips involved red. People started to crowd and mumble around him. Connor clenched his jaw and managed to pry the blind man's claws from his wrists amidst his wails. The man burst into a final teary fit, throwing apples randomly in a seething, all-consuming rage.

Connor skirted around the narrowed eyes and pursing lips, the white-hot wash of shame cloaking him in a horribly visible aura until he finally lodged himself in an alley of disquiet.

Emotions welled up inside of him, things he hadn't felt before, or at least in a very long time. Somehow, this was freeing. His heart was racing and fluttering, as if it had grown wings, leading his feet where they wanted to go instead of where they needed to. Hoards of people scowled at him as he ran back out, and Connor immediately stopped to compose himself. He didn't want to attract the attention of the police for disturbing the peace. So, Connor put his hands back into his pockets and aligned himself back on his engineering mission, frowning. He should have torn the apple away from the blind man's stand when he first came up to it.

He stood above the large manhole and waited. Someone was supposed to have moved this already. Looking around, Connor saw none save the occasional rat. In this back alley, the streets seemed darker, the formerly perfect angles of the buildings tossing shadows all around him with reckless abandon, layering darkness upon shade. The air was thick with a living silence, and Connor drew a breath. Deciding not to wait any longer, Connor adjusted his tool belt and bent over to dig his fingers into the manhole cover. The silver inscription on the manhole read:

WARNING. DANGEROUS. PROCEED WITH CAUTION.

PRAISE THE UNA CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT FOR KEEPING US SAFE.

His nerves riddled his mind with excited doubts. He wasn't entirely sure he should be doing this. Then, his heart again gained wings, feathering blood rapidly through his veins. Never mind all that, he thought.

I want to do this.

Connor's hands shook, the exerted force threading miniscule sweat beads over his pores. After some effort, he managed to toss the manhole aside, exposing the pitch-black sewer entrance. Curious, he lay on his stomach and peered down through the hole, panting. The blackness of the plunge below complemented the gray midday shadows above. Barely visible rusty rungs invited Connor inside. Grasping the first with his hands, Connor swung his legs down into the expanse and lowered himself into the sewer. His palms itched with a strange current.

One foot after the other, Connor gradually lowered himself further into the pit, eyes fixed on the gray sky above, a small slice of the increasingly disappearing world. Connor breathed in and comforted himself with songs he did not know. He sang random words, sentences for himself and the sky above, eventually settling for a simple yet invigorating melody.

Ooo-ah

His voice echoed throughout the chamber, sending sound waves back to his own pleased ears, encouraging him to go on..

Doh De La ah...

Suddenly, he stopped. Chills echoed through his body. No one could hear me calling for help. He gripped the rungs tighter and looked back up. The sky was barely visible now. He must be almost there. No turning back now.

La Lee Lo...

His voice quivered.

Connor's foot touched down on slimy ground. His muscles relaxed and he sighed. Letting go of the rungs and wiped his hands on his trousers, he ahead at the tunnel. Once his eyes adjusted, he could make out vague black shapes tucked in the sides of the tunnel, hunched silhouettes that gave Connor a feeling of old, of ancient things that hadn't been seen or touched in ages. He spent time standing and wondering if any person has even been down here before. Eventually, Connor reasoned that the

sewers were waste, and nobody ever wanted to confront waste. It just wasn't the way things were done. He ran his fingers along the course tunnel walls, feeling out the brick and rough mortar, the blood circling round his fingers cooling and charging with the same mysterious energy as before. A strange wind whistled by his ear into the darkness beyond. Connor followed.

When he came upon the shapes he saw earlier, he realized they were just heaps of garbage, waste dumped into more waste. Connor cracked his knuckles with his thumbs, almost disappointed by the discovery. What if he was in the right place after all and this is just another job? Just another assignment to do, to go home and report back to the Department, to eat and sleep and work day in and day out, over and over...

No.

That wasn't enough. It never was. To him, it just wasn't the way. His way. He thought of the chuckling women in the skyrail and closed his hands into fists, his knees starting to feel weak. I'm not waste, he concluded. His bottom lip started to tremble, so he bit it sharply.

The slippery floor propelled him forward, gifting him a forward-facing momentum. There must be something here for him. He could feel it, could hear it calling out to him from deep inside the tunnel. It was here. A shape. Almost...

Connor stopped, blinking at what stood before him. He reached up and rubbed his chin raw, curious yet confused. In the center of the tunnel laid an old, rotting contraption. He approached it, his humid breath filling the space between him and his discovery.

It was old, very old. In fact, he didn't even think he recognized the materials it was made of. It was in a state of decay, its curvy body rotting away, bathing in the musk of the muggy environment. At the front of the object lay ivory rectangles separated by smaller charcoal ones, the small planks aligned in a perfect line. Intrigued, Connor approached it, his head pounding in apprehension and excitement. It was in terrible condition, but he grazed his hand against the body anyway, the frame of the object still achingly beautiful. Its smooth surface was softened by layers of dust, dirt and sewage. Some rectangular pieces were missing and it stood on only three legs, but yet the craftsmanship of the thing displayed that it was once greatly taken care of. Suddenly, Connor's foot slipped on the sticky floor and his hands pushed into the keys. A loud resonance rang throughout the chamber, electrifying Connor's nerves. A smile stretched across his face, heart now thumping madly. It felt as if his heart wanted to burst out of his ribcage and land directly onto the instrument in front of him. But he could do better. He moved his fingers around more delicately this time. Deep and high sounds broke through the barrier of stillness, leaving Connor's fingers outstretched and trying to reach the outermost keys.

He played individual notes. Then multiple at once. Some sounded fragile, others deep and rich. Not all of the sounds Connor produced were beautiful, but was nonetheless organic. And so, here in this sewer, Connor played. He formed a simple melody and sang along, passions alight. His heart skipped beats, but he wasn't keeping time. Maybe, Connor decided, the world above was decaying. But here! Here there was music! Who would want to live in a world without music?

Connor's physical body melded with his sense of sound, creating tangible, fleshy harmonies that seemed to only be extensions of himself.

In the next few weeks, Connor Hall visited his symphonic sanctuary regularly to "maintain" the underground pipes. He still tapped his foot incessantly, but now, when he whistled along, he planned new melodies that he might play. The stares were more frequent now, and he adored them. Many thought him to be mad, and he welcomed them to think so.

One day, when standing above the entrance yet again, Connor instead felt pangs of sadness instead of excitement. He looked back at the streets bustling with people, then back at his tunnel. It couldn't be enough. He couldn't go on hiding in waste to become waste itself.

He never returned.

All around him droned robots and robotic machinery, an opera of gilded chrome. He could hear all the deafening mechanical jargon. Connor shoved his hands in his pockets and felt for his earshell. For a moment he held it like a helpless fly in between his fingers, but finally broke it with a satisfying crunch. He looked up at the skyrails and the building above. I want to see the sky, Connor thought bitterly, I want to see the clouds. Pushing through the waves of automaton zombies, he felt hot tears slide down his cheeks. He was moving faster now. He remembered the music he created. The discoveries he had made. The beauty of it all. The passions he wanted to share with the world. The passion of free will. He no longer thought of his job, the blind man, or the stares gawking at his oddities. He was free.

Connor finally reached the grand city entrance. Looking out onto the green world, he saw in the distance small villages and even smaller cottages, areas he had neither seen nor heard of, there all the time. He looked back at Una City to shrug away that world. Not his way. He turned back and faced the unknown ahead, whistling a tune of a song he did not know. There was more to this life than some Council telling him where to go. He wanted to find out all about it.

Connor ran.

James Vaughan is a young writer studying English at university. His passions for reading and writing have earned him many awards in the past, forming a reputation as James has won numerous local contests.

Richard

By Allie Antonevich

Refrain from mixing feelings with mixed drinks.

He has a blonde spot, I remember thinking when I first saw him. I'm going to name it Richard.

It's been two years since I made that observation, my mushy mind concludes, and I still don't know his name. I'm sitting alone at the bar, with two martinis settling in my empty stomach, but I see him from across the room. My attention turns back to my drink that sits before me, my finger tracing it up and down. The condensation on the glass beads, and my finger pushes them down, down, down to meet the cool wood on the table. I see it expand on contact, and I press the pad of my fingertip onto it, feeling the cool liquid adhere to my finger.

It had been a rough day. I rub the water back and forth between my thumb and forefinger methodically as the events flash once again before my eyes. I was inexplicably fired, for reasons I will never share, and John just broke up with me before I left the office, via text, telling me that I had too many disorders and that I needed serious help. My ego had shattered into a million pieces; my mind had turned to Jell-O, and the only place I could think to go to was my favorite bar, Martre.

As I sat with my own quiet thoughts, I came to the utter realization and fascination that the only two things I knew about this man were that he had a blonde spot (named Richard), and that he always ordered a whiskey, neat. I liked that I didn't know him. It meant that there was still a space between us; the connection had not yet fully formed.

I wonder if he has noticed me, I think to myself as I resume the tracing up and down the glass once more. I wonder if he has a special identifier for me, like, dry martini, or brunette with bangs, or, if he's a real special guy, maybe enchanting goddess. I almost scoff at myself, at my ignorance. I can only hope he even knows what I look like. Or maybe, I thought further; he doesn't even have awareness of my existence. I didn't like that thought. I hated it when my brain came up with hypotheticals. I didn't like it when it turned against me, primarily because I thought that it was the only thing that stays with me through all this shit.

Rick, the bartender and lankiest person I've ever met, slides me the bill. He takes my empty glass in exchange, and I reach for my wallet. My purse is small, but it still takes me quite a while to dig around for it. When I do locate the worn leather zipper wallet, I fumble with it, my fingers feeling large and clumsy.

Once I hear the satisfying zip open, my vision becomes rather blurry as I try to take out a twenty. I spit out a laugh as I my fingers fumble over the faded bills.

It takes me a good two minutes before I hand over the money to Rick, who waits patiently as he dries an already-dry glass, a flat expression etched onto his face.

"Keep the change, you," I say and my mouth opens slightly as I wink to him. I try to be seductive, I always do, but I think I give off more of a murderer vibe. Rick gives me a meek smile and curt head nod in return, and I begin to swivel out of the barstool.

The murmurs of the customers, dim lighting, and two martinis have made the bar turn into a bubble. I feel stuck on the inside, the cheers and laughter entering my skin and seeping through my bones. I can't see much, my vision has turned a bit blurry, but I do still see him. I see him and I see thick red framed glasses and I see a white T-shirt I want to inhale so I can smell his smell and I see a freckle on his jaw and I see Richard, sitting right there in that little patch of mousy brown hair.

He laughs to his friend, takes a swig of his beer, and his eyes track the room when they suddenly fall upon me. I stand there, mouth slightly agape, and electric currents zing through my veins, all the way down to my toes until they shoot back up to my chest. I begin to float up, up, up above the crowd at the bar.

He gives me a quick smile and a tilt of the head, and then he places the attention back to his friend. I'm still standing there, the mixture of martinis and emotional turmoil playing a sick game on my social cues.

Eventually my feet drag me forward, and I navigate through the crowd to find the door. My hand grips the cool steel knob, and I turn slightly to look back to the place where I was just standing. That place. My heart, still beating, remains there. My mouth finds the nook in my scarf, and I bow down to face the cold as I open up the door, and am greeted with the harsh reality of life and responsibility.

Allie Antonevich is a senior at Lexington High School. She enjoys writing for her school's newspaper, *The Musket*, as well as her personal writing blog, *In Other Words*. Allie also loves obscure what-if questions, making zines, and keeping journals of her fairly average life.

Grade Four, Wrong Height

By Penelope Evans

I changed shape at school again. I know I promised mom that I would stop doing it. But part way through choir practice at lunch, my notes started singing out shaky and scratchy, and I felt this crawling on the back of my neck like I didn't fit in my skin anymore.

So I hopped down off the stage and told Ms. Leavenworth quickly that I needed to use the bathroom, and she nodded absently at me.

I was still clutching an empty sandwich bag of goldfish crumbs when I leaned my head against the cold bathroom tile and felt the world growing around me, and seconds later I was blinking through cats eyes at a sharp smelling world. I slunk out around the corner as a boy was entering the bathroom, and down the mostly empty hall. Everyone was somewhere else right then, out on the recess yard or in the library at practice or at home eating lunch.

A girl carrying a lunchbox and a book looked at me in surprise as I hurried down the hall towards the classroom. I felt her eyes on me as I slipped in the door and I waited for approaching footsteps but none came. I slunk through the legs of the desks and chairs, pushing my body against backpacks hung off the back of chairs and dangling sweaters. Then I made for the back of the room where the small bookshelf stood, and I wedged myself into the space between it and the back wall, curled up small and tight.

I felt like I needed to be safe from something. I don't know what exactly. Mom is always asking me that. The therapist, a woman with a nice voice in a sparse office, asked me too. Everyone wants to know when I'll stop changing and hiding. Other kids who change shape don't do it at school, except to show off.

Other kids my age are already good at controlling it. They don't feel like their skin isn't fitting. They aren't looking for somewhere to hide.

"What are you scared of, Ricky?" my mom asks when she's tucking me in and suddenly the blankets go loose, and I am a tiny lizard, watching her with wide black eyes. I see, from a distance, the creases in her face deepening, as her expression becomes a frown—no, a look of disappointment. Is she disappointed in me or herself? I don't like either answer.

Curled up into my little space beside the bookshelf, I tried the question again. What am I scared of? Why don't I like being me?

I heard footsteps finally in the doorway, and wondered if it was that girl who saw me in the hall. But then I heard them approaching the corner where I was hidden, and Ms. Harris knelt down.

"Ricky?" she asked, like she wasn't entirely sure it was me in there. The only person who always seems sure is my mom. She looks down at the squirrel on the counter and somehow she knows that it's me. "Ricky?" Ms. Harris asked again. So to give her some indication, I uncurled a little, enough to dip my head down. She sat back, dropping from her heels onto her butt, sighing.

“Ricky, what happened? Ms. Leavenworth said you asked to go to the bathroom and didn’t come back.” I blinked at her once, and twitched my whiskers. Ms. Harris is a good teacher. She’s stern, but fair. Ms. Leavenworth is a little less predictable, but a nice choir director. She has patience for all the younger kids. I still feel like a younger kid. I worry that for me, her patience will become exhausted. My mom and the therapist are not mad at me, they’re just confused. They’re waiting for an answer. Ted C. in the grade above me, shifted into a horse once by accident, and he laughs about it all the time. He’s not scared of anything. I worry that my mom and the therapist will get tired of waiting for an answer. I promised mom I wouldn’t slip out of choir anymore. Or class. I promised her if she let me quit basketball, I wouldn’t change into anything small at recess, where I could get trampled on. Most other kids don’t have to negotiate this with their parents. Even other kids who can do what I do.

I crawled out from my corner and changed back into a human, and like pressing a reset button, my skin didn’t feel too small anymore. I didn’t feel all tingling and sweaty. I was still clutching the empty goldfish bag. Ms. Harris sighed again, giving me a smile that was sad, like she was trying to puzzle me out.

“It just happened,” I said. Ms. Harris nodded.

“It’s okay, Ricky,” she said.

“Are you going to tell my mom?” I asked, feeling my heart clench tight in my chest.

“This time, maybe we can say you just took a long bathroom break,” she said. Can you go back to choir practice for me?” I nodded, walking quickly through the mess of desks and chairs for the hallway. When I arrived at the door of the library I lingered still a moment outside, and I could hear the voices rising for the skylight inside the room, high soprano of youth ringing out in the room of worn paperbacks, metal shelves, rough carpet underfoot.

I imagined for a moment, a new shape for myself, a small songbird with emerald green feathers, the rich sweet tone my new voice would make. But I pushed open the door with small human hands and I walked into the room on human feet, sneakers with no laces. I watched Ms. Leavenworth’s eyes fall on me, and like a well-conducted choir, the student’s eyes followed. And I took my place back in the row of students, and the song soon started again.

When my skin grew tight, voice ringing up to the skylight and back to me, I stayed standing where I was, and I stayed human shaped and the songbird I had imagined in green and gold with a voice like small bells crying out, I let him fly on without me. I let him become something separate from what I am.

Penelope Evans likes writing more than any other kind of work. She studies at the University of Toronto, and edits for her college newspaper. She believes that, generally speaking, the key to good writing is adding more bears.

Mother's Tale

By Norah Brady

It was dark. It was darker than dark. It was pitch.

Then the light lit between my mother's fingers. The match flared, reflecting off her eyes, Mother watched it, smiling. I could never know what she was thinking in these moments, in the silences that came before words. Her head seemed in an entirely different world.

In the cavern we sat, breathless, as she held the fire up, up until we could see the tips of the dripping stalagmites clinging to the cave's ceiling far above.

And so she began, as she did every time the village was attacked, speaking in a hushed voice. Her words a song.

"Children," she murmured, "remember the old days."

She suspended the newly lit match in the air. It flickered minutely, perfectly balanced in the thick darkness of the cave. The rasping sound of a match being lit burned the air, and Mother held up another flame to set by the first. She repeated the action until we were surrounded by a circle of flickering fire. Warm light settled across Mother's features, bathing them in a soft glow. It was then that the story came tumbling out of her chest like some great river. It came to life off of her tongue and from the depths of her being. We listened, awed.

"Remember when magic still ruled the earth, and dragons were the crown of heaven." Her voice was mellow and smooth. Outside our ring of matches, the adults of the village grew closer, searching for my mother's voice, just a whisper among silence.

"And a dragon ruled this land, for where we stand is a powerful place, laced with magic." She smiled down at us. She was lovely, my mother, with downy hair like that of a baby raven and eyes that could pierce your soul. But this story always turned her weary, and lost. She was the only one with her gift in our village, perhaps the whole world. The rivers of magic were close to running dry.

"Our ancestors were foolish, however, and although dragons are peaceful creatures, they believed this one wanted to devour them." Mother paused. "And so, they vowed to kill it, and rid the beast from their land."

The girl ran, raced through the forest, leaves and branches stinging her bare arms and cheeks. Her eyes were streaked with unwanted tears. Her face was red and defiant. She put her hand to her waist every other moment, securing the knife dangling from her belt. Her breath came in short gasps, her chest heaved. She stopped, then heard again what had made her flee. A roar, a bellow, and a splitting of the air and earth came rumbling across the mountains.

"The dragon folk were quite peaceful," Mother mourned, "that is, until provoked." We looked at her apprehensively. "The maiden, sent out to kill the dragon with her magic, hid in a well, terrified by the fatal beast chasing her through the forest. She calmed her nerves and tried to steady her pounding heart."

She stood very still at the bottom of the well. The stones were covered with moss and damp. There was a suffocating silence. And then again, a growl as loud as thunder. She was shaking. Water lapped calmly at her ankles, cold and unforgiving as the truth. Truth said she would have to kill the dragon, or it would kill her. The shattering roar grew closer. The girl's heart turned and twisted sporadically. Her hand hovered above her knife, eyes flitting from place to place. She was trapped by her own fear and all she could do was wait.

“It was then that the dragon looked down the well with its terrible red eye, and spotted the maiden. The young girl knew the only thing left to do was fight. And fight she did. The dagger was sharp, fresh off the grindstone. The girl knew this. She knew many things, but she was still so blind to many things. She did not know how much she would come to regret her choice.”

The girl flung the weapon straight into the pupil of the dragon, straight into the endless depths of knowledge and power held in its gaze, and the silence was broken.. The dragon howled in tortured agony. A thick viscous mist poured from its eye. His bright scales shimmered as he bucked and bowed, driven mad in rage. The girl took her chance and scrambled up the side of the well.

“The maiden reached into her vast supply of magic and tore the beast's heart in two,” Mother said quietly. Her eyes grew dark and misty, remembering. The girl was shattered. Her magic was powerful, powerful enough to kill something wise, majestic, and beautiful. The dragon lay still and unmoving, its fading soul fluttering away on a breeze like a scrap of mist. It shimmered, drifting away tranquilly, almost peacefully. Its end had been anything but peaceful, and the girl fought the urge to cry. Her heart screeched. Her heart was the one being split in half. Her mind was the one driven mad by pain. The girl sobbed because life would go on without the magnificent creature now lying on the ground. She lay in a pool of the dragon's crimson blood and screamed for the unfairness of life. She cried herself to sleep on the dying embers of its bones.

“The maiden returned the next day, sore and soaked with blood. Some say she died of grief. Some say she was reborn as a dragon the following day. We will never know.” We sat in silence. The matches flickered. Mother sighed, a long contented sigh. Then her tone grew dark. “What we do know, is that ever since this tragedy took place, we have been at war, an unjust, unneeded war that selfish men think is necessary. I want you to know that dragons were once peaceful, once our friends.”

We nodded, clinging to each other tightly.

“Now, children, sleep,” she murmured. And we did.

The next day we stumbled out of the hiding cave. There was a boat coasting out on the smooth bay, white froth churning up behind it. The clouds were bird feathers and the heavens were pale like watercolor and seemed almost transparent, stretched across the dome of the sky. We watched the sun rise higher, then slowly made our way back to the village, frightened of what we might find.

The dragon was gone, leaving behind them the remains of our village.

We slept on ash that night, looking up to the stars for comfort.

“Goodnight, dear ones,” my mother said quietly, “and hope for a better life, someday, hope for golden days and nights, hope for peace.” And as I looked over, her eyes flashed with fire. Then it was gone, as quickly as the wind.

Norah Brady lives in Boston with her family, two cats, a typewriter and many, many books. She has been published in Stone Soup, her school’s literary magazine and Write the World’s collection: Young Voices Across the Globe.

Art

The Lumberyard

By RACHEL BOWNIK

This photo was taken in Rogers, MN. The train that runs through that area usually delivers stacks of lumber making it a place where a lot of teenagers hang out. Before taking the picture, I found a leather jacket and the beret (as seen in the picture) and I thought that these would help make an interesting character so it looks like this girl just usually wanders around places like that to just stop and think about life.



Rachel Bownik is a photographer and filmmaker from Minnesota.

The Golden Hour

By HIMANK JAIN

This picture was taken at Shahpura Lake, which is a very beautiful public garden in Bhopal City. On one fine summer evening I was just sitting there and I saw this fisherman trying very hard to catch fishes. Every time he caught one it just slipped through his hands. But he didn't gave up and tried again and again untill he succeeded in his task. This picture was taken at around 7:00pm which is the period shortly after sunset also known as Golden hour and it is believed that best pictures are clicked in Golden hour so that is how I decided to photograph this. Photography for me is the thing which is connected to my soul and it has also brought many changes in the way I see the world around. Photography according to me is not only about clicking pictures but it is also about the little things and emotions we observe and try to capture them which others can not see. Photography for me is the love affair with my life.



Himank Jain is nineteen years old and lives in India. He is a hobby photographer and has been in this sphere for the past one year. He loves photography because it gives him a chance to make people see the beauty of nature and various cultures around us. He believes that stories are best told through pictures, and pictures speak more than words.

Harlequin

By RACHEL ZADER

I've been an arts model for a few years, but started costume design just a year or two ago. I'm fascinated by the unconventional – designers like Alexander McQueen really inspire me for that reason, but working and studying a field like law enforcement (I'm a criminology major) leaves little room for creativity. Discovering a way to collaborate with visual artists and photographers through photoshoots like these has become a great outlet to explore the possibilities of the unusual and creative!



(Model) Rachel Zader (Photographer) Dan Rappa

Rachel Zader is a fashion model, artist, fraud examiner, and demon slayer. She lives in Oakland.

The 45th Parallel

By KATE BISHOP

I live in Leland, Michigan. I drive past a little sign on the side of the road indicating the location of the 45th parallel every day on my way to work. Leland is a small town, but its natural beauty attracts a lot of tourists during the summer months. I think it's important to capture the unseen phenomena of my hometown during the less populated seasons and, by extension, the entirety of the 45th parallel — not just its more well-known locations. The parallel passes more notably through cities in France and Italy, but also through Croatia, Russia, Mongolia, Canada, and other, more obscure cities. This image is the view from my house. Sure, you can see Lake Michigan like anyone in Leland can, but the unique perspective in this photo belongs only to those standing on my porch. There is a lot more to Leland — and the parallel — than just what initially meets the eye.



The 45th Parallel

Kate is a sophomore at The University of Michigan, originally from Leland, MI. She is studying International Studies with a concentration in Comparative Culture and Identity. In her free time, she enjoys photography, poetry, coffee, and bonfires.

The Vision

By DANIEL MARQUEZ

The Vision is a piece that details one's travel into the inner soul. A plethora of the mind's inner environment may be obscure, bemusing, unsettling, magnificent or incomprehensible when journeying far enough, such is the case with the small bird located in the lower right hand corner of the painting. But when we dig far enough and allow our minds to be vulnerable to new possibilities and opportunities, albeit some uncomfortable findings along the way, a bridge of understanding will form. That is the awakening of an emerging imagination. The painting depicts the obstacles we face when we try to discover what lies underneath until a link carries the mind to open up to the refulgent treasures within. The vision of self.



The Vision

A native philosopher of Saint Paul, Minnesota, Daniel Marquez is a creative entrepreneur who's thoughts and ideas carry him throughout the wonders of living wholesomely. A writer, reader and artist, his journey can be followed on demieuj.blogspot.com.

Kashmir-Paradise on Earth

By AARSHI JOSHI

The photos were taken during my first trip to this disputed valley of Jammu and Kashmir in northern India. The place has been in constant turmoil; militarily, politically and economically; with the only respite being its natural beauty and the warm hearted citizens. Kashmir has been termed as 'Paradise on Earth' but many people fear to visit this place. When I traveled there, I noticed that the locals welcome everyone with open arms and are excited to show their home to us. It is always hard to comprehend that such a beautiful place, where nature radiates peace is marred by violence. My photos have always been inspired by Nature and I feel that it has the power to make humans realise the futility of power and war, as well as result in creation of their best works. It has been my hope that one day people realise this and give the valley what it deserves, serenity and happiness.



Aarshi Joshi is from Delhi, India. She is currently pursuing History Honours from Delhi University and hopes to go on a backpacking trip around the world, along with her camera. Her interests lie in anthropology, tennis, supporting feminism and children's rights.