

March 2019 Issue Thirteen



Blue Symphony, by Amelia Ao

Poetry

Knowing By Ritika Singh

A crowded room
too much nothing
to be entertained

The riddled grand
piano
Never been
and never being played

The ashtray
overflowing
In and out
the people going

Stuck in ended lives
Yet still knowing

Ritika Singh is seventeen years old and lives in Andover, MA.

Girls Made of Night By Isabella Frangiosa

we are the girls made of sky,

the scent of midnight woven into our skin

and stardust makeup adorning our eyelids.

constellations spread across our cheeks,
comets and shooting stars woven into our hair
as we dance in circles around these distant earths.

beautiful girls,
constructed of starlight and poetry,
moonlight and wondering,
ethereal and wild and oh-so free.

more goddess than human,
we glow with a certain kind of light
the one that you can't help but bask in
and worship our infinite galaxies.

Izzy Frangiosa is a fifteen-year-old sophomore from northern New Jersey. She enjoys reading, writing, playing softball, and watching movies with her friends. She hopes to one day pursue a career as an investigative journalist.

Pleasantly Surprised By Anishi Patel

With a line borrowed from "Thinking about Death" by John Koethe.

I can't pretend to find the right emotion; I'm no actress. That's why they hired you.

Small smile here, please. Pucker your lips, just a little. Eyebrows up. There. Pleasantly surprised. Now hold it. I'll help.

There is humor in the death of a fly at a spider's hand, and now your face knows it. Amusing, to have lived a short life and died a long death.

There is sadness in the celebration of a birthday, and now your face knows it. Depressing, that experience is only a byproduct of life.

There is brevity in the permanence of death, and now your face knows it. Comforting, that you need only be remembered for so long.

Perfect.

Action.

Anishi Patel is a young writer from the Bay Area. She edits for the Sibliini Journal and her school's literary magazine, Soundings. When she's not at speech and debate practice or

writing newspaper stories, Anishi enjoys taking long drives with Herbie, her orange Jeep Wrangler and drinking macchiatos, the Peet's kind.

Patchwork By Benny Ajaero

It's a fiery day choked by ash
And drops of gloom snuff out the light
Rain drops, warm on sun-soaked skin as
I simmer in the storm's stone vise

Pink petals gleam through globs of gloom
Magnetize my blood through my eyes
Closer, they pull me by my heart
Away from doom to awe's respite

Treading barefoot on cracked gravel
Splintered sticks crushed beneath my feet
Nearing closer, I see that the
Blushed roses are not what they seemed

A patchwork of beauty and death
Once scornful thorns, now in torment
Pink, forced brown by blight as
Their flawed facade falls in fragments

Benny Ajaero is a high-school student at Concordia College, in the IB Diploma Program. He was born in Nigeria but now lives in Australia. Benny enjoys writing poetry and programming in his spare time.

Tyburn #1 By Chidiuso Ajaero

The Heart-broken Smirk

Smirking,
Faking,
Hurting,
Breaking.
Looking past those smirking, faking lips,
Feeling for that hurting, breaking heart.

Chidiuso Ajaero is an eighteen-year-old bookworm, calligrapher and environmental advocate. When she is not making the acquaintance of her characters, she loves spending time with her siblings and dreaming of Hogwarts.

Third Empire By Eliza Browning

So we walked further, into the deepening waters of the past.
Maybe the sky over America today is not quite so blue,

maybe the distance is less between the here and now:
all those hours tug at their chains, unwind like acts

of destruction. What will this world bring? In cities,
the temporary background to our living, forests resurrect

themselves in concrete. The lakes split their dams,
rivers untame and run their old routes, subway tunnels

flood and streets coalesce into islands, the real estate
of the modern- West 27th settled by a flotilla of ducks.

What new migrations will there be? Maybe the seasons
will shift and we'll have blizzards in June, maybe March

leaves will paper the ground- what sound will that hold?
What can we buy from selling your hair? The trees

will swallow their dollars, the oceans will rise and
spit out their dead and we'll live in the mountains again,

expatriates from the lacework of frames we once
called home, a symphony in steel and iron-stippled light.

Eliza Browning is a first-year English and Art History student at Wheaton College in Massachusetts. She is a 2018 graduate of the Adroit Journal Summer Mentorship Program and a 2019 YoungArts Winner in Writing. Additionally, her work has been recognized by Hollins University, the Connecticut Poetry Society, the Eunoia Review, and the Rising Phoenix Review, among others.

i thought i told you
to keep the cat out of
the microwave. he's
gotten in there again and
we'll have to pay, worse explain
the deep scratches on the sides
of the little oven. finally
he has stopped spinning on
the flimsy turntable but look at him,
wrinkled neck craning to get
a better view through
the stained window. it seems
warm in there, away from
the icy roads
where just last week
a car going ninety sped off
the nameless cliffs and was
swallowed by the aching
earth. the microwave
catches heat in
the static darkness, away
from outside where each
brittle branch reaches out like
a lonely arm.

Amanda Huang is a junior at Millburn High School, where she is a senior editor of her school's literary magazine. Her work has been nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and JustPoetry. She has been published in the Rising Phoenix Review, the Word magazine, and in TeenInk. She loves poetry because it is a beautiful and creative outlet for her thoughts and feelings.

Indignantly Indigenous By Mutiara Carney

you look just like your mother,
they told me and I looked
from her thick ringlets of dark hair
with eyes like ink and skin like coffee
to my father's fair hair
with eyes shut to the struggles he married into
his skin the shade of privilege
and I wished I looked more like him

your lunch smells like dog food,
they told me and I looked
from my warm, welcoming bowl
of Indonesian rendang daging sapi
savory beef stew saturated
with the same spices they
stole and imperialized upon with my people's sweat,
to their dry, pre-packaged boxes
of unseasoned crackers, dull deli meat
maybe canned fruit if they were lucky
and I wished I didn't have to eat lunch at school

you must have gone there with the Peace Corps,
they conclude and the hairs on my neck
rise with the desire to defend my motherland
what they see as a decrepit third world country
engulfed in poverty and problems
inhospitable to its own kin, a nation on its knees
begging for Western intervention
and I wished I was back on an island shore
not their gentrified Bali beach destination
but complete with scattered waste, ramshackle rafts, and callous fishermen
far from their pre-constructed box that
I am still working to crawl out of

you ought to feel oppressed by your culture,
they pity and I crave to dissent
and try to explain as I have to the masses
that my country, not yours, has had a female president
that it is my mother's choice to wear a hijab
just as it is mine not to
but I bite my tongue for ignorance is a wall;
one that cannot be knocked down with my breath
and so I save my words.

Mutiara is a psychology undergraduate at Brandeis University. She enjoys writing about her experiences as a minority in the hopes of reaching an audience that typically feels underrepresented by mainstream media and works of writing. With her work she hopes to evoke an urge to initiate a large-scale dialogue about societal issues and injustices.

A Thousand Words By Valeria W.

When I wrote today I wrote a thousand words
that I wasn't proud of but I was
proud to have started because
when you run, you lose when you stop
and I didn't stop, I ran the length of the thousand miles,
and even if they are the words that were written a thousand times before

I wrote.

Valeria is an eleventh grader in India. She has published her writing on various websites such as Teen Ink and the Marcus Harris Foundation Blog. Works in various genres, especially legal thrillers and poetry, interest her. She would like to take her writing career forward in the future.

a tree poem By Jamie Paradis

Rough gray bark, the
skin of branches that reach
far, dip towards
the ground
Long leaves graze
my shins
I'm on my back
in the grass
watching the
blanket of gray, blue, green

with holes where
sky pokes through.
I never do this.

In 4th grade
the day I got
glasses I looked
at a tree
in my front yard.
I could see each
leaf and showed
my mom my
discovery. I wanted
to share with
the world,
give my glasses
to everyone.

I've been laying here
awhile when I decide
on the house in
the good school district
with a juniper in
the backyard

Jamie Paradis is a seventeen-year-old junior at Newark Academy in Livingston, NJ and an international baccalaureate diploma candidate. She recently won a scholastic silver key for a poetry collection written at the Juniper Institute for Young Writers. In addition

to writing, she enjoys expressing her creativity through dance and visual arts. She hopes to share her work and to continue to expand her readership with others who love poetry as much as she does.

Fiction

Poisonous By Lily Labella

Mrs. Mary Blakely is a small nervous woman with a sharp chin, beady brown eyes, and a finely trimmed crop of oily chocolate colored hair quickly turning grey. Her closet bears a dark value spectrum of royal blue, olive green, and burgundy. Mirroring this dreary palate are the wardrobes of her three sons, who usually don some variation of black jeans and shadowy sweaters. If you were to view the top shelf of her laundry cupboard, you would find it sparingly stocked with Arm and Hammer Baking Soda, and sour smelling bar soaps. A combination lock secures the doorknobs of this cabinet together, and Mrs. Blakely must turn the dial to 15-9-06 to remove her one bottle of bleach with two shaking hands stuffed in oversized yellow HAZMAT gloves. She will not stand for household brand detergents and stain removers, and therefore must douse the family's undergarments and bedlinens with the safest substitute. The dreary dyes of her favored fabrics obstruct smears of ice cream or remnants of cranberry juice.

On the refrigerator door is a red skull and cross bones magnet securing a leaflet from the Poison Control Center, a phone number stamped bright and bold on the cardstock. Open this chilly chamber and you'll find it barren of meats. Peer into her vegetable bin and everything down to the last little green bean has an organic sticker on it- nobody in this house runs the risk of ingesting pesticides. Canned goods are few and far between in the birch wood drawers of her pantry, the expiration dates flagged with post it-notes and brick red Crayola crayon. If you happen to stop by when Mary is hosting Christmas Eve there'll be no shrimp hors d'oeuvres, though everything else is prepared with manic precaution.

Crack open the mirrored bathroom cabinet and note a distinct lack of womanly clutter. No frosted glass dishes of anti-aging cream line the clear racks; the marble counterspace bears no trace of spilled lotions. There is not a makeup bag to be seen, for this housewife goes without. You won't find a can of shaving cream in there either—mighty strange for a house containing three growing boys and one cleanshaven real-estate agent. A variety of soaps, two nail clippers, a tweezer and an eyelash curler reside on the bottom most shelves, accompanied by four fine toothed combs and a scratchy hairbrush on the levels above. The hairdryer resides in a bin perched atop the toilet's water tank, its rubbery black cord coiled about the metallic purple handle. Mary keeps nary a vial of Advil or Motrin, there's not a drop of modern medicine to be seen in this house. Stored in their stead are clear bottles of herbal remedies that emit drowsy perfumes, tucked away beneath the sink under literal lock and key. There are no numbers to spin here, but Mr. Morton Blakley fights a copper padlock to reach his shaving cream and razer in the morning. In the evenings he might battle the Missus, who urges him to switch to an electric clipper.

At night the boys find the most child friendly shampoo set out in paper cups on the tiled shelf of the shower stall for them; protection from excess. Their toothbrushes are carefully arranged on the lip of the sink with pea sized dollops of paste allotted to each brush. Each morning they awake to find their clothes laid out atop their dressers, folded into painstakingly laundered stacks. Outside the home they know to follow the rules- no hamburgers or candy, don't stay for dinner at anyone's house. On the rare occasions when the family goes out to eat, their meals must be cooked to match the coloration of a laminated paper depicting the specific pink of a harmless steak. She takes no chances with the public-school system and sends them off with matching pairs of piss colored rubber HAZMAT gloves and a signed notice; *to be worn in the event of an experiment containing potentially poisonous chemicals.*

Unlike some other mothers in the area, Mrs. Blakely never packs hand wipes with her children's lunches, and won't hear of clipping scented Purel to the straps of their book

bags. She is known to loudly express her opposition upon the sight of such hygienic equipment. “God forbid they squirt that stuff into their eyes!” She rants, “What if a Wet One were to end up in his mouth?”

Mrs. Mary Blakely runs a tight ship, orchestrated around her one golden rule: *Do not risk exposure to poisonous things*. Not once have her babies suckled on the poisonous casing of a Tide pod, or accidentally swallowed a rouge pill. Forever under strict supervision, they still aren't allowed to use art supplies alone. When Halloween rolls around she scours their pillow case sacks for candy of dubious origin, and as they grow she orders their backpacks to be emptied on the kitchen table, her fingers feeling every zippered fold of canvas for that hidden parcel of drugs she fears to find. The boys roll their eyes with her every panicked practice, and stuff their hands in their pockets. They long for the day they'll escape this house of fear and spray Febreze in their dorm rooms. Mr. Blakely rushes to work, where he can slide slick blue pens across page after page, without the ink setting of a tirade of nervousness.

Poisonous thoughts are difficult to protect against, but Mrs. Blakely's faith takes care of things quite nicely. The Catholic Church is a coordinated effort to keep her sons pure, and if not for Mr. Blakely she would douse all their ailments with Holy Water. Her third son is Simon, after Heaven's doorman. He and his brothers attend religious instruction dutifully, and without comment. For our misguided Mary there are no poisons in the chapel and church of St. Anne. She begs Him to grant her children defense against injected toxins when they must be given booster shots or seasonal inoculations. Anxiety pins her to her knees.

Mrs. Mary Blakely is lucky that Hideaway Drive is so small, that the rural town is not so large. She is under no scrutiny; no one mocks her openly when she prays aloud to ward off poisons. They pity her for sure, with her undyed hair turning frostier by the minute, her worried hands and pursed mouth setting a wedge between herself and her loved

ones. They cannot fathom what has driven her to such extent. Indeed, the deep frigid tendrils of this fear are embedded in the very essence of her Catholic soul.

Every poisoned mind bears the tale of its baptism, and Mary's happened long before she was a Blakley. The day was damp, the sky a swirling with soapy clouds. The air felt sweaty, but there wasn't any heat. It was one of those autumn days in which the season is being decided. Through the kitchen window came the frenzied clacking of a blender's chop cycle, the percussion of mid-day cooking. Young Mary was reclining on the patio, reading aloud from Richard Scarry's *What Do People Do All Day?* Her little brother Matthew kicked a soccer ball back and forth across the soft-earthed yard, although she told him multiple times to sit still and listen.

"Come back here and follow the words, Matty!" She insisted, ever the encouraging sister.

"But it's boring, an' we've already read that one." The five-year-old protested.

"Good readers reread." She quipped, a quote from her much adored first grade teacher.

Matthew didn't want to read and continued to muddy his sneakers by dribbling the grubby black and white ball, kicking with the fraying grey laces of his sneakers the way he was taught. Seeing he wasn't in the mood Mary set the book down and leaned back on the pillows that smelled like wet grass clippings, squinting into the sky's colorless dome.

"Mary!" Called the soccer player, "The ball got stuck in the bushes!"

"Again?!" She hollered back, hustling over to where Matthew was crouched near the foliage on the edge of the property.

“I kicked too hard. It’s all the way back there.” He extended a small dimpled index finger to indicate where his toy had landed.

Mary tiptoed around the thorny plants to the one that held his beloved ball hostage.

“Found it!” She exclaimed, and Matthew performed a dance of victory, stomping vigorously on the summer worn grass.

Mary grabbed the sphere with both hands only to find it was sopping wet. She shrieked in surprise and lobbed the ball back into play. Her hands were grimy with dirt, and she wiped the filth on her capris before maneuvering back into the yard.

Her brother didn’t remember to thank her; he was busy inspecting one of the prickly shrubs, fingering a sticky red-orange berry. It resembled the dewberries Mary had learned about at day camp that summer, a tiny wild fruit that was fun to mush between one’s fingers. A few adventurous campers had gone so far as to eat them, harmless as they were. The Bellham hedging had never been unsafe, so Mary plucked a berry off for herself and popped it in her mouth. It tasted like the sweet-sour candies their father brought home from the drugstore, with sharp little seeds in place of sugar granules. The substance went down easily, the aftertaste like a starburst of tart orange razzberry.

“Try one, Matty! These are the ones we had at camp.”

Her little brother dutifully chewed and swallowed his own berry, exclaiming at how good they were. It did not take long for them to consume a short handful, after which the initial effects wore off.

The pain began in Mary’s stomach, a slow churning of acid reacting to the foreign food. Just a few sharp firecracker spells, like breaking wind on the inside, nothing to complain about. Then the inferno ignited, and her whole midsection was ablaze, the thick sloppy taste of play dough in her mouth, forcing the floodgates open as the berries reunited

with the soil. She smelled it coming up, like burned pomegranate, slicing a scorching path up her esophagus. This physical pain was nothing compared to Matthew's tortured shrieks, sonar missiles shot from his tear streaked face. The sight of his hunched form and tortured expression was a blur.

The kitchen's blender stopped, and a panicked chef let the screen door slam shut, dashing to the aide of her children, murmuring a symphony of concern.

"Jesus-God, what did you eat! Mary tell me, what is it? Where does it hurt?" Warm hands flanked her back, and here is where Mary's memory stutters.

She felt her body burning and the bile rising up again. The ground moved beneath her, her senses like foggy spectacles. Matthew's sobs slipped away, and he was laid on the couch with glazed eyes and red skin, a crust of vile green about his mouth, his dirty shoes marking the upholstery. The beeping of a landline phone, a tumble of words, her hands around a cold metal bowl, her insides convulsing and surging forward, spilling into the reflective depths, the clammy red splotches on her palms. This day became one of infamy, another story of what poison can do.

A little girl marked by a misidentified berry metamorphosized into this woman governed by fear and precision. Next to the crucifix on her bedroom wall is a framed Matthew, who is not dead, but suffered like Him; a victim of deceit and poisoned thorns. In their names she rises before the sun each day to micromanage four separate lives around the belief that harm will come to them.

Whatever will become of her? Will Mrs. Mary Blakely ever see the end of her poisonous panic? Or shall she be laid to rest a victim of childhood mistakes and unconquered dread, the woman who never waxed her floors or dyed her hair?

Lily Labella is a sophomore in high school, and hopes to one day pursue a career in either writing or teaching. She loves little dogs and floppy hats, and the authors that inspired her to write are Laura Ingalls Wilder and Jeanne Birdsall.

A Writer in New York By Alexa Malto

Perhaps it's the gallon of coffee shooting up your veins, but you swear the blank page mocks you. You wait for a newfound sense of inspiration to hit like an in-denial alcoholic waits for liver disease: sluggish yet inevitable. Your chipmunk cheeks rest upon the calluses of your hands as you wait patiently for that eureka moment to kick in. Or the two Advils you took for the tension headaches plaguing your temples. Whatever comes first. Pouting, your exhausted eyes register the only two words remaining on the document. In all your unadulterated glory, you manage to type out your full name and the date in a size twenty Comic Sans font.

Regardless if it's the growing shadows under your eyes or the usual insanity, you know one thing for sure; Mark Twain would and could kick your ass for calling yourself, this five-foot-two failure of a Filipino, a writer.

In an attempt to lift the fog, your solution to this early mid-life crisis involves more coffee than necessary. Your taste buds can't help but crave that familiar aftertaste of Guatemalan beans and Splenda. The aroma of roasting coffee beans give you some semblance of hope that maybe, in your twenty-four years of life, everything will turn out fine in a typical sitcom kind of way. However, this is reality, and you're old enough to understand not everybody gets (or deserves) a Prince Charming and a happily ever after.

You pour yourself the coffee until it's filled to the brim and ready to spill on your alabaster countertops. Whispered prayers leave your chapped lips that this will be the

spark to an eternal flame, the first page to a novel long overdue. The drink kisses at your lips, shy and steady before emptying its content into your throat. Boiling coffee settles inside your empty stomach and sloshes around with a half-eaten sesame bagel from dinner. For once, you're not satisfied by a mere sip of the drink but more barren than the Sahara.

The ends of your long sleeve rub against your mouth like sandpaper to a shoe to remove coffee stains. In God's perspective, your issue as a failing author is but minuscule, a speck of stardust floating in the vast galaxies beyond you. At the end of the day, you chose this life with the idiotic idea that you could write; that 11th grade English teacher of yours fooled you into picking up a pen to write angsty poetry. But, before figuring out how not to bury yourself deeper into a grave, this is all you can do now: coexist and try not to interfere for those with excellence running through their veins.

Never did you imagine yourself here, sipping coffee that's as mediocre as yourself and debating whether to steal a car. Or run as fast as your stubby legs can move and hide in yet another metropolis under a different alias. Oh, who are you kidding; your career drowned itself in a puddle before anyone realized you lacked everything to enter the sea of novels. Because, if you're being honest with yourself, a rarity of sorts, you're a writer that never quite grasped the ability to write well, which is a slight hitch in becoming an aspiring author.

Fate, what a funny, funny thing.

It's quiet—the kind that swallows you whole and spits you out with nothing more than lethargy and brittle nails. These days, you are exhausted of being exhausted. Collapsing into your single sized bed, the fake silken sheets wrap around your legs like pythons to prey. The pillowcase soaks up the oils from your skin and salt-water tears dripping down your acne-scarred chin.

A bottle of cheap Pinot Noir rests upon your nightstand, waiting to rid itself into your empty stomach. Your fingers wrap around the bottle, sudden as if your body depended on it. Cocking your head back, you press your cracking lips to the opening as the drink burns your throat dry. You didn't want to go to bed like this: (somewhat) drunk on a half-opened bottle of Pinot Noir with waves of pity lapping around your ankles.

Why did you want to do this alone? Why did you want to drown in debt in a New York apartment? Why did you want to kill the spiders without Mom's guiding hand? Why did you want to be twenty-four and *unhappy*?

The bullet-shaped raindrops bang on your window, almost asking permission inside the apartment. Maybe they can keep you company before the roses fade from your cheeks and light disappears in your eyes.

Your tongue jumbles into cherry knots tangled at the seams as your mouth opens. A soft sob escapes your throat before placing a shaking hand over it. You can't speak as if you swallowed the ocean whole, painful like salt burning your throat dry and bleeding.

You hate to admit it, but you miss your mom; you're twenty-four, and it's unbearably clear that you still can't function without her arranging the sock drawers. It's been an eternity without her as the distance grows larger with every mere step away from your past life. But, she's not the one that left everything behind; you did.

After everything—hair dyed platinum blond, crooked teeth whitened to blind a passerby, six-inch heels to appear more regal than before—deep down, you're still you. You can reduce the size of your nose, buy denim blue contacts like the sky, pretend your name is Karen Rose to a new boyfriend, and still be you. Because no matter where you go, your shadow follows, and everybody knows a shadow can't lie as well as a smile.

But you failed, and now everything is falling apart at the seams; your facade is breaking, your walls are shaking, and God, that one sitting on cotton candy clouds, knows the

person you need doesn't want you anymore. The ghost of your past self rips off these masquerade masks, nails clawing at the disguises hiding whoever the hell you've become. Until it's gone—all of it. Now, lying in the bed with dirty tissues and golden satin sheets is a hurricane where a person should be.

After everything you've done to leave, your fingers tremble and dial the number you've suppressed for too long. Then, you hear it; the voice of a woman you thought was dead in your life.

“Hello, who is this?”

“Ma, it's me-“

The line ends, static fills your ears like unwanted thoughts and Elmer's glue, before you can breathe another word, another cry.

Alexa Malto is currently a sophomore at Bishop Moore Catholic High School residing in the sunshine state, Florida. She has had no prior publishing other than the Blue Marble Review. Other than writing, Alexa's free time consists of re-reading her favorite novels, sipping coffee at midnight, and eating leftovers with her family.

The Language of Flowers By Aliyah Fong

Islamic burials aren't like Western ones.

This is a fact Amira learns at the age of ten.

But before that, life was sunny and saccharine sweet, served with a side of hard caramel and candy floss on Saturdays, at the place Baba used to take her to before they'd visit Mama's shop, to breathe the air of oxtails and tulips, see the rows of flowers sprouting different colors in variations Mama called *arrangements*. *Floriographic language*, she called it, leaning above Amira with her hijab that smelled like rosewater and an apron with little dogs on it. *Flowers mean different things for different occasions, but most customers these days prefer looks over substance*. Snip the thorns off roses, clean the leaves of gladiolus, wrap marigold and daphne flowers in plastic and tuck them in between vases.

Ambrosia— reciprocated love, bittersweet— truth, ivy sprigs— affection, poppies for consolation and snapdragons for deception.

Amira loved the pretty pink roses Mama would always sneak her in school, at home, and in the shop.

I'm happy you're the joy in my life, I love you.

Afterwards there were relatives and friends speaking in hushed whispers; both in Indonesian and Urdu, hugs and kisses, somber speeches and cries, prayers and du'a, white – too much white. Her neighbor sends them a bouquet of thornless white roses.

Innocence and love at first sight. Disgusting.

Islamic burials are not like Western ones; at least they take care to not shower her with thoughtless, empty flowers like Western ones would.

Do.

—

She falls for him too quickly.

He's all dark hair and shy eyes, clad in denim and always in a corner with a book, but has the most amazing smile, and when he looks at her, she doesn't feel so alone: *maybe I'm truly not*. And then he grins again, and she tugs her mother's headscarf further around her head.

On Valentine's Day, Amira's fourteen when she receives her first red rose from him.

Passionate love.

He's willing to wait until they can properly date – a fact that makes Amira fall for him harder, and they go slow until they can truly show their affection to each other, under Baba's watch – throwing popcorn at each other during movie dates, studying together in the library, walks under low light when the sky is brushed dark blue and wine purple. He cheats after two months.

He cheats on her with Amira's closest friend, who doesn't bat an eyelash at the whole ordeal.

That night, Amira burns his rose, the one she'd petrified in artificial water, and watches the fireplace lick charcoal black out of the petals and chemicals. Baba is concerned.

Red roses are liars.

She is alone.

—

She grows out her hair, lets it be messy and unruly beneath the scarf she douses with rosewater every day. When she's home, she lets the hijab fall to the floor and reveal a cascade like a lion's mane: *you cannot contain me*.

Her cousins decorate theirs with flowers, especially the younger ones. Amira lets the little girls wear pink carnations in their pigtails: *youth, vibrancy, energy*.

She never lets any ornament or flower touch her hair.

It's almost time for her brother to graduate, and it's almost time for her to enter freshman year. Streamers are bought, the food is cooked, and countless throes of people stream into the Tjoe household on the eve of his graduation, after the ceremony is done

and goodbyes are said to anything-but-life-long friends, and they receive him well, and congratulate Amira for taking on her mother's old shop at such a young age.

"My mother's shop?" she asks. "I wasn't aware that I was."

"Well, it's being shut down unless a new manager steps forward, and your brother is leaving, and your father's taking care of the business parts of it all, so I assumed—"

Without apology, Amira storms towards her father in the kitchen. He has a spoon of sambal in his hand.

"I don't want to work in the shop," she states plainly and clearly.

Baba sighs. "You have an eye for flowers, Amira. If you would just—"

"I don't want to."

Her father sighs. "Your mother would've wanted this."

The next morning, Amira tucks a hydrangea into the pocket of her shirt and runs off to the shop.

"We're opening early," she says to a woman waiting outside, tying an apron around her waist. "Birthday?"

—

She turns seventeen, and on one sunny day in March, a girl from her school walks in and asks for a small bouquet to give to her sister for a ballet competition.

Amira comes out with a plastic cone containing fresh, peach-colored roses, sweet peas, and from the sides, flaring orange blossoms.

Integrity, a lovely time, innocence.

“It’s beautiful,” the girl says, and she smiles. “Orchids are my favorite.”

Did she expect anything different?

“What do they mean?”

Amira frowns, but tells her. She stares down in fascination at the flowers, watching the way their petals catch the light, the stems, the leaves. The girl reminds Amira of a fern; closed up, sensitive, shy.

At least she’s anything but a flower.

“I’ve been looking for a job for a while now,” she says, and coughs into her palm. “Is this place hiring?”

“I’m the head florist,” Amira says, and her tone is cold. She feels a twinge of regret at the way the girl flinches.

“...Are you hiring?”

She should take pity on this newcomer, the girl who is a fern, who tucks herself away like Amira used to, who reminds Amira too much of *herself*.

“We already have enough staff. There’s a coffee shop next door if you’re interested.”

—

Two months pass before the same girl comes in the flower shop.

White poppies for consolation, scarlet zinnias for consistency, to heal a broken heart. Amira gives them to her free of charge along with a packet of tissues to wipe her tears away.

“We’re hiring again,” she says gruffly, then repeats herself in an attempt to be gentler. “What’s your name?”

“Lily,” says the girl, whose sadness has subsided to only a snuffle of her red nose.

Lily-

How ironic that orchids are her favorite.

Amira goes home that night, sets the rosewater scarf to the side, and sits on her bed and stares at nothing.

She has made a mistake.

If she teaches this girl the language of flowers, she, too, will be left with more empty promises and a broken heart for all of eternity.

Lily is fifteen and three years younger than her. Lily wears purple glasses that hide her long lashes and smiles nervously whenever she feels like she's made a mistake. Lily has sea glass bracelets around her wrists – gifts from her parents since she was seven – and owns three dogs at home. She feels like no one really gets her at school.

Amira will not tell her that she is an outcast herself, and now the universe has pulled together some strings in irony, because that's a can of worms she doesn't want to open.

Instead, they spend their days working together. No matter how many times Lily begs, Amira refuses to teach her apprentice about the language of flowers, and instead shows her how to make aesthetically pleasing bouquets, flower crowns, baskets, the like.

Baba feels pleased Amira's taken on an apprentice to take on the shop after she leaves high school for college – while, funnily enough for her, it is the opposite.

Amira cannot be the sister figure that Lily desires.

Amira is not the tutor Lily needs.

“Why do you keep asking me?” she finally says one day, after Lily's tenth attempt to get her to teach the florigraphic language. “I won't teach you it because it's useless.”

“Then who taught you, even though she'd know it was useless?!”

Amira drops the vase; it shatters into a million broken pieces.

“How did you know it was a she?”

Lily doesn't respond, and closes in on herself *again*. Amira is senseless with rage. She wants to pry open the fern, shout louder than a lion's ever roared-

“How did you know it was a *she*, Lily.”

“Your father told me,” she confesses. “I want to arrange with meaning. Like you do.”

Amira laughs, harsh and raspy; salt against wood.

“There's no point in doing so. I do it to honor my mother. What are you doing it for? No one understands,” Amira says, ignoring Lily's protests as she closes the door behind her.

No one understands.

—

The first thing Amira sees after a week when she opens the door is Lily holding out a bouquet of white chrysanthemums, forget-me-nots, and pale pink roses.

My love is true, my love is pure.

“Did-” Amira’s voice is close to cracking. “Did you-”

“I learned from your father. I don’t remember much, but I’m trying,” Lily admits, and meets Amira’s eyes head-on for what seems to be the first time; fierce, unyielding. “You’re my best friend, Amira. You’re more than just my mentor and I’m not going to let you hide away all the beauty you have to give to the world because it was cruel to you once.”

“You understand,” she breathes, and it’s only after a bittersweet smile crosses Lily’s face is when Amira realizes she’s crying. “Someone understands.”

“They can, too, if you’ll let them,” she says, and holds out her arms, letting Amira fall into them and wet Lily’s right shoulder. “They can try like me.”

And so Amira tries.

She posts signs on the walls of her mother’s beloved building; for what they signify, their meaning. Lets customers pick and choose – and beside her is Lily, helping her every step of the way. Drawing people to the right colors of roses, of carnations, talking to them about the aesthetics of floriography and its vast, vast significance.

Yes, they cannot help everyone, but they can try.

And for the first time in what feels like years, Amira does not feel alone.

The chair in the principal's office is so soft that if you sit there for long enough, you can sink into it and never resurface again. That's what happened to John Burkley. He went into the office, sat down in that plush chair, and they strapped him there and yelled at him until he disappeared forever. Rumor has it that the principal sends him food once a week to keep him alive, with no one to talk to but the dust bunnies.

This is the third time that I've been asked to sit in the chair and speak to the principal. Each time before, I've managed to avoid that terrible fate, but it has only gotten harder to escape. I fiddle with my thumbs. No one has ever talked to the principal three times in one year and remained unchanged by the experience.

I sit in the waiting room until a student exits the office, seemingly unscathed. He paces towards his next class with his head down. He looks like a new transfer. A sad smile forms across my face. He'll learn.

"Next," the principal calls through the crack of the closing door. I push it open with the palm of my hand and enter the room.

The chair is older than I remember. The bright yellow fabric has faded to a brownish mustard color, and the stuffing is beginning to come out of it. I peer through one of its holes to look for John, but before I can find him, the principal motions for me to hurry, so I sit down and face her desk.

"Welcome, Jason," the principal says. "I suppose you know why you're here."
I glare at her. I'm not going to give in that easily. The chair supports my weight.

The principal clears her throat. I still don't answer.

"You, young man, are failing your classes. I've called you in to discuss your options. You seem to need a little extra..." she pauses. "Help."

“I don’t need your help,” I mutter.

“Your teachers have told me otherwise. I’ve been informed that you haven’t completed a single assignment in several weeks. Is there a reason you’ve neglected your studying?”

“It must have slipped my mind,” I answer.

She gives me a skeptical look, which I don’t find entirely fair. I did forget about the assignments, at least, after I shoved them down the paper shredder.

She lets her suspicions go, though, and continues. “Jefferson Preparatory has a 100% pass rate. We have a wide variety of resources to help failing students—”

I interrupt her. “John was failing. Did you help John?”

“We have no records of any ‘John’ at this school.”

That’s a lie so glaringly obvious that she knows she has to correct herself.

“I suppose you are talking about Jonathan,” she says.

“Burkley. Jonathan Burkely.”

“Jonathan Burkely was removed from our program for tarnishing our reputation and refusing to obey guidelines. A path you may be headed towards if you are not careful, Jason.”

The chair has begun to sink beneath me. I can almost feel John banging his fists against the inside of the chair in frustration.

“Luckily,” she continues, “the staff here at Jefferson is willing to provide you with several options to assist with the learning process until you have fully adjusted to our rigorous climate.”

“What if I never adjust?” I ask.

She stares right at me. No, she stares through me. Her gaze pierces through my chest and locks on to the chair behind me. She remains silent for a while, attaching my torso to the chair backing with two long metal skewers, and I wonder if she’s going to leave me hanging here forever.

“Don’t worry,” she says finally. “You’ll adjust, one way or another.”

She blinks once, and the skewers disappear from my chest. My full weight rests upon the seat once again, but this time, my rear sinks completely beneath the fabric. I try to push myself back up with my hands, but it’s impossible. I’m stuck.

“Now, do you have any more questions, or may we proceed?”

I decide to stay silent.

“Good,” she says. “Let’s discuss your options.”

She opens a drawer and pulls an old leather book onto her desk. She blows on the book to clean it, and the specks of dust float towards me and dance around my vision. She’s like a witch, casting spells on me, trying to transform me into a frog or a snake, or some other type of slimy creature that she could take home as a pet.

She opens the book and reads from it silently. While she’s distracted, I try to escape the grip of the chair again, but the more I try to loosen its grasp, the further I sink in. My

body folds into a slight V shape. I sigh. I figure I'll have to wait until the principal decides to let me go.

The principal looks up to find that I've fallen further below the surface of the chair, and I swear I can see her lips form a tiny smirk.

"Jason," she says, "if you follow these steps, we will be able to get you out of this *situation* without problems."

Get on with it, I think. I don't dare to say it out loud.

"With your signature, I can write a recommendation for our two step preparation program. The first step is the questioning."

"Questioning? What kind of questioning?" I don't like where this conversation is headed.

"When first joining our school," she explains, "many students partake in activities that are detrimental to our learning environment. Usually, students end all involvement in these activities within their first month here at Jefferson. Occasionally, a few students slip through the cracks. When students interfere with the learning environment, it is necessary to find the root cause so that it can be fixed. The questioning method has proven to be very effective."

It's true. No one at Jefferson Preparatory throws parties, does drugs, or cuts class. I've never seen anyone do even so much as blink during instruction time; everyone writes their notes in neat little columns without ever taking their eyes off of their teacher. They raise their hands to give insightful comments or, every so often, to throw a softball question to a teacher so that he feels good about answering it and being helpful. Then, they go home, and all they do is sit at their desks with their homework for hours. There are no sports teams, no art club, no amateur rappers who think that they're famous because they got three hundred views on YouTube. There are only students, their worn

down pencils, and a desk lamp that never gets turned on because everyone's asleep by sundown. Working here is every teacher's dream.

"So you'll question me, and then what? What's the second step?" I ask. The chair gradually pulls me in further.

"You've heard of our training programs, haven't you?"

I ball my fists. "Training program" is a horrific euphemism.

You see, every once in a while, you'll get a kid who's slow to give everything up. Maybe he's a street basketball prodigy, and his parents sent him here because the colleges won't offer him a spot on their team until he gets his grades up. He thinks he can juggle two things at once, so he spends his days playing ball with his friends, and he stays up too late at night trying to get his work done on time. He only has to nod off once during class for the teacher to send him to the principal's office. They'll have a discussion, and she'll write out a recommendation for a "training program" in New York. He won't be in class for a week or two. No one will notice.

When he comes back, he's just like the rest of them: staring at the whiteboard with soulless eyes. His school calls his parents to inform them of their child's success, and they are elated that their son can finally chase his dream. Except then he tells them that he doesn't want to play basketball anymore. He thinks it's a waste of time.

Eventually, the other streetball players show up at his house asking where he's been. They walk up the stairs, open the door to his room, and see a student hunched over a desk, filling out assignments with mechanical precision, and several dull pencils that have rolled onto the floor. He doesn't even look up. Without saying a word, they leave him there. That isn't the kid they're looking for.

No one knows what happens during the training programs. Maybe they're full of unlicensed surgeons who sever brains into pieces with their scalpels, or maybe they hire psychologists to strap students down to chairs and hypnotize them into robots. Only one thing is certain: the training programs change people. The principal ships you off to another state like she's returning a defective product back to a factory, and in a couple of weeks, they'll fix it for her and send it back free of charge. I don't want to be fixed. All I want to do is tell the principal that she can shove her training programs right up her—

But I don't say that. The chair would hear me. Instead, I tell her, "I'm not signing anything. I'm not doing the training program."

"Jason, we have training programs all across the country. We can find the right fit for you. All you have to do is sign some papers. Just say the word, and I'll bring them to you."

"I'm not doing it."

"Jason." She looks at me pointedly.

"You said I have options. I want to hear my other options."

"Jason!" She slams her fists against her desk. My lower body swings beneath my torso and I start to fall until the fabric reaches up to my armpits.

"Don't you understand? You have no other options, Jason. It's the training program, or the chair."

I start to wonder if it even matters anymore, because whether I drown inside of the chair or the principal sucks my soul out of my body, "Jason" will never be seen at this school again.

"What if I choose the chair?" I ask.

“You’d be the first.”

“You’re wrong,” I say. “John did it, too.”

She sneers. “John doesn’t exist. We made him up to scare kids like you into submission. It’s easy to make an example out of someone that isn’t real.”

“Liar!” I say. “You’re a liar!” With every word, the chair pulls me further into its fabric. My shoulders are completely smothered, and my neck sprouts above the seat like a pathetic little weed.

“No one at Jefferson would ever sacrifice themselves for some noble cause,” she says. “Look around you. Does this look like a school of martyrs?”

I think of all the dull, monotonous faces I’ve passed by in the hallways, the perfectly aligned rows of desks in every classroom, the pristine school bathrooms, the deafening silence in the cafeteria at lunchtime, and the resigned, shuffling footsteps of the new students after their first meeting with the principal. I come to a realization: it doesn’t matter whether John exists or not because this school will never change.

The principal reads that thought right off my face. “That’s right. Your idol can’t help you now. It’s time for you to sign the contract.”

“No.”

“What?”

“I said no.” The principal can reprogram a thousand students to do her bidding, but I refuse to let her control me.

Her cheeks flush with anger. “Do you think anyone will care about your sacrifice? No one will even remember you.”

“I’m not doing this so that they will remember me,” I say. My neck is submerged. I tilt my head back so that I can say my final words. “I’m doing this so that you will.”

And with that, I take one last look at her faltering expression, then sink below the surface.

It’s dark. I can’t breathe. It’s mind numbingly dark. It’s dark like the soot on the floor of an abandoned coal mine. It’s dark like the infinite depths of outer space. It’s dark like twenty thousand feet below the ocean. It’s dark like the gaping mouth of a man eating giant. The dark is suffocating me. I can’t breathe. My lungs writhe inside of my body. Thorns of fire pierce my chest. I can’t breathe. Fear seeps into my blood like acid. Pure agony.

I would do anything, *anything*, for a single molecule of air.

I’m on top of the chair again. I’m gasping. Coughing. Heaving. The principal looks at her watch.

“Thirty seven minutes,” she says. “Impressive. I was beginning to think you wouldn’t want to come up after all.”

Air is the sweetest thing I have ever tasted.

She pushes a piece of paper and a pencil towards me. “Are you ready to sign this paper? Or do you want to spend more time with my chair? Maybe a week long vacation?”

I snatch the pencil from the desk and sign her contract. I can’t go back there. I’m sorry.

The tip of the pencil breaks off as I finish.

Her smile chills the air. “I knew you’d come around eventually. Now, follow me. Let’s begin the questioning.”

I get up from that wretched, ugly chair and do as she says. As I leave the room, I can almost hear John screaming and begging me to be the one to make his pain worthwhile.

The door closes behind me.

Jayla Stokesberry is an eighteen-year-old writer who attends Aragon High School in California. She developed a passion for writing when she began to use it as a way to express her inner feelings and her perspective on the world around her. Along with writing, she enjoys playing soccer and spending time with her dog.

The Hunted By Emily Weatherburn

I sit in silence. All it takes is the slightest spasm of an aching limb – an untimely itch that simply must be scratched. I breathe deeply, trying to make as little noise as possible.

He’s still there, watching me. I can’t see him, but that doesn’t mean he’s not there. He’s always there, waiting for that one, fatal mistake that I know one day will be my undoing. He doesn’t know where I am and I don’t know where he is; that’s the game, because it *is* a game. It’s an endless game of dice rolling. Except if I lose, I don’t just lose my dignity. The price is my life, and the reward is his.

I can feel that itch now. It’s in my right leg. I want to look down at it, to check there’s not some parasite hooked onto my skin, but I can’t. Even when I’m being eaten alive, I can’t move – not until I hear that telltale rustle of leaves that tell me he’s leaving. Then, I will run, and, as the dice are flung into the air, I will race for my life.

The itch is getting worse. I need to scratch it, but I know there’s not long left; soon, he will be gone, and I will get to keep my life. I try to calm myself. I can’t let my own fear be

the ruin of me, not when there are so many depending on me. I let out a long breath, thinking of home.

It happens in an instant. Just as a sharp, jarring pain cuts across my leg; I hear a sudden rustling that tells me my hunter is giving up. Too late. I gasp from the pain, and then it is too late and I am running.

I dart out from my hiding place, a clump of densely growing leaves, and flee into the open meadows beyond. He's right behind me, rampaging through the undergrowth. He is close. Too close; there isn't enough time. I speed up, putting all my remaining energy into my legs.

The right one is still stinging, and a suspiciously warm liquid is beginning to trickle down it. I don't have time for it, not for an injury. The smell of blood will only drive my hunter on.

I duck back under the cover of trees: a detour. It's risky, and it might cost me, but it's the only option I have left. I dart around tree trunks and leap over uneven ground. Then, as I skip over a protruding tree root, I feel my leg give way underneath me. The ground vibrates and hot breath skims over my neck, but before he can reach me, I duck, and then I'm on my feet again. The chase continues, but my hunter is now upon me, scraping at my back as he matches my pace. There is barely a claw's width between us.

This is it, a voice whispers in the back of my head. *You're going to die today. You're going to lose the game.* I can almost sense his sharp teeth as they lurch towards me. *You're too late*, the voice whispers.

I stop running. I stand resolute, and, as I do, time seems to slow down. I don't think of the hunter, moments from plunging his fangs through my midriff. I think of home; I think of my tiny, little burrow, hidden barely two metres away from where I now stand. I could

make it. Of course I could, but I can't. Under those trees, my babies lie curled up together, their eyes bright and their mouths hungry.

They will have to go hungry tonight. They will have to go hungry until they learn to feed themselves – if they ever do. *It's better to risk that,* whispers the voice. *It's better to risk it than lead this monster to them. You can't do that. You can't kill them.*

So, I listen to the voice. I don't move, because I can't move. I'm not angry: sometimes, we lose the game.

Sometimes, the fox catches the hare.

Emily is a student of English at the University of Exeter. She has previously had two poems published in Young Writers anthologies and spends most of her time reading and writing.

The Listening Spider By Camila Rueda Torres

It only took two trips for Andres to finish dragging boxes into his new home, if one could even call it a home. It was actually a dark, dingy, and cobweb infested attic that was barely what he could afford near his expensive American school. But it was also a bed, a roof, and permission to use the nice kitchen downstairs. Who needs windows with natural light anyway? After getting rid of so much of what he owned, he was left with only the necessities, including a bow and a cello. Alas, Andres had chosen the musician's life over the lawyer's life, so now he needed to stick to his decision and prove his mother wrong. He made the best he could out of the situation. After all, he knew this would happen, and for that reason he had been secretly saving money and applying for

scholarships, but it would not be enough to survive on for the next few years. Soon he needed to find ways to pay for himself while studying full-time. This is when Mrs. Harvey's kitchen became crucial to his survival. By selling food, especially his popular empanadas, Andres could at least scrape by.

Practice was time consuming. Every day, it was the same routine: applying the rosin to his bow and fine-tuning the pegs. He would sit straight on the chair and place the cello's endpin away from himself. He would lean the large instrument on his left side. Then Andres would begin to play. When he played his cello, the young man was intensely focused. It was this focus that kept him from meeting his shy fan for two whole months after moving into the attic, but he eventually did. After a mostly upsetting day, Andres decided to place the chair and music stand in front of a large poster of Peru's National Symphony Orchestra on the other side of the room because he hoped to be inspired by staring at his dream while practicing. He was in the middle of practicing a challenging yet moving piece that brought out the feverish passion he had been longing for all day when something caught his eye. Set against the background of the Orchestra conductor's face, there was a medium-sized brown spider quietly hanging on to a thread of web. Andres stopped playing to observe the small creature and debate whether he should kill it or not, but before he could decide, the spider started climbing up its thread back into the ceiling. Andres accepted that the decision had been made for him, picked up his bow, and started playing again. Then, the strangest thing happened. As he began playing the cello again, the spider climbed back down the thread to sit and listen. Andres smiled and continued practicing for he had met his first fan, but this confidence wouldn't last very long. After another long day, he came home frustrated and doubting his ability. He questioned if the spider was actually his fan or if it just enjoyed any music. Andres tested this hypothesis by pressing the different music stations on his radio, but the spider never came down while the radio was on. Later, when Andres started practicing, he turned around and saw that the spider had climbed down again.

From that point on, Andres made the space in front of the Symphony Orchestra poster his usual practicing spot, and the spider routinely began coming down to hear him practice. Besides being a motivating force, the poster was a reminder of good memories, specifically his first time seeing an orchestra. Regardless of whether the spider would care to hear Andres' origin story or not, he decided to narrate out loud anyway in hopes that the spider was listening to what he had to say. Andres spoke of when he saw the Orchestra play at the Grand National Theater with his mother for the first time when he was five. He remembered hiding behind his mother's long, emerald green dress as his mother mingled with Lima's socialites. He also remembered not knowing what to expect when the stage curtains opened and then becoming overwhelmed when the music he heard made him fall in love for the first time. Afterwards, the little boy begged and begged to be given music lessons until his mother relented on the condition that it never interfere with his "real" education.

Andres sighed while reminiscing the simpler times of his childhood and longing for the support he no longer had. He wondered if the spider had family and friends to give him company in the lonely attic. Andres hoped so because he had been more attentive to the appearance of his new home whilst simultaneously avoiding cleaning out the cobwebs and spider webs in fear that the spider would be affected. As he successfully played and worked his way through school, Andres felt less stress and pressure. He found that Ms. Harvey and her family loved listening to him play which led him to start selling his services as a musician for private events. Selling empanadas and other food still remained an important aspect to his finances, though. He continued his practice in front of the spider, who would now occasionally linger for a little while after he stopped playing. There was a respectful and secret friendship between the two, since Andres knew that no one else would understand this unique relationship.

At this point, Andres had lied to Ms. Harvey and told her that there were no pests in the attic nor was there any need to paint the walls. While these conversations had technically happened downstairs, Andres suspected that the spider knew that it had

been saved and was thankful for it. Unfortunately, their arrangement as the young cellist and the listening spider would have to come to an end soon. Andres had been offered an opportunity he could not refuse. He had been invited to live with other music students at the house of a well-known professor with many contacts and connections. Once Andres began making plans to leave Mrs. Harvey's attic and had told the spider, it started coming out less and less often.

At first, the spider stopped lingering after the music stopped, but soon it stopped coming out altogether. This made Andres extremely sad because he had hoped to enjoy his last weeks with his friend, but he had to leave eventually. Right before Andres started the process of packing, he had an idea that made him very happy, but he decided to be discreet about it so it would be a surprise. Andres slowly started moving things into his second new home and cleaning out his now old home in the attic. What had started out as a bare inventory of necessities had slowly turned into a bit of a cluttered mess. This worked to his advantage because Andres hoped to stall his move for a little while as he waited for his friend to come out again so they could enjoy each other's company one last time. Andres had moved everything but his poster into Professor Baranski's place. He came back to the attic for the last time to retrieve his poster and pitch his idea to the spider, if it would only come out of its hiding spot. Andres walked into the room and found exactly what he had been waiting for. The spider was hanging in front of the Orchestra conductor's face one last time. Andres then walked up to the spider and presented his long-awaited surprise: an offer that the spider could not refuse. Andres had gone to a pet store and bought a container for spiders. He told his friend that this would allow them to be together longer and that without Andres there, Mrs. Harvey would possibly directly or indirectly kill the spider. The spider continued hanging on to its thread while Andres held up the container to the spider so that it could go inside, but the spider flinched when the entrance inside the box was too close and then started climbing back up.

Andres was embarrassed that his plan hadn't worked and frustrated that the spider was going back up once again until he realized that the spider had climbed to the last spot Andres could possibly see it and stopped. To convince it to come back down, he put the container down, which quickly worked. He and the spider stood there for a little while and silently said their goodbyes. Then, Andres carefully removed the poster from the wall without disturbing the spider. The spider was now blended into the color of the wooden walls, but he still felt the presence of the listening spider. Andres began walking towards the door and looked back one last time inside the attic before closing the door behind him.

Camila Rueda Torres is a Colombian-American high school senior who is currently working on a capstone project in which she is creating a collection of short literature. She enjoys spending her time reading books, appreciating art, and discussing politics.

Dragon Heart By Cora McHugh

"Ivy, come down! Mother will see!" Rosalyn shouted from the bottom of the wall. Ivy smiled down at her sister but stayed where she was, balancing on the stone wall that ran along the back of the garden. She stayed because this was one of the only places she didn't feel awkward and wrong, up here on the tallest part of the wall. As close as she could get to the sky, the place where the dragon inside her longed to be.

Movement on the other side of the wall caught her eye. Some changelings were playing in the field near the edge of the cliff. They were a fox, a deer and a unicorn, playing some sort of jumping game, leaping and tumbling over and around each other, all thoughts of predator and prey forgotten in the fun of the game.

"Ivy!" Her mother's voice jerked her from her observations. "Come down here now!"

Ivy didn't understand why it was, that every time her longing for the sky was even a tiny bit relieved, her mother would storm out of the house and force her back down to earth. As she reluctantly began to make her descent, her mind wandered back to the changelings. How she envied them. She would have given everything to be with them. Not as she was, but as what she was meant to be: a majestic flying animal of immense size and beauty. Not in this awkward, cramped body her mother would not let her leave.

With a small thump she reached the bottom of the wall. Rosalyn looked up at her with worried eyes. When their mother was like this you just had to stay low and hope she didn't notice you. Ivy reached out for her sister's hand and gave it a small squeeze.

"Best you hop off down your hole until the worst of it is over. Thanks for trying to warn me."

Rosalyn gave a weak smile, which Ivy returned, and ran off towards the door, staying as far away from their mother as possible.

Ivy began to trudge back towards the house. She took her usual seat by the window at the dining table and started to slowly eat her dinner, looking longingly back outside all the while. After she was finished she looked back at her mother, then at the door. The meaning of this gesture was not lost on her mother but nor was it appreciated.

"Absolutely not, go to your room now!" This was not the first time Ivy's mother had lost her temper at Ivy for climbing the wall and Ivy was sure it would not be the last.

Why does she not understand? Ivy wondered as she grudgingly climbed the spiral staircase to her attic bedroom. But, then again, it was obvious: of the three of them, she was the only one that had a strong soul. Her sister's rabbit and mother's eagle were so faint that it was almost impossible to tell if you didn't know them. But Ivy took after her father.

She wondered where he was now. He had had a strong soul, but he had given in to it before Rosalyn was born and her mother would not even speak his name.

“Ivy.”

She stopped, halfway up the stairs, and looked back at her mother.

“I love you, you know that, don’t you”

Through all her anger Ivy knew in her heart it was true. She nodded, “ I love you too”

She sighed and continued her climb. Her father would’ve understood.

—

The last rays of sun spread across the sky like fire, lighting Ivy’s face with a golden glow and casting a long dragon-shaped shadow across the roof. She lived for these moments, when she could sit undisturbed in a high place and watch the sunset over the town. Behind her the sea sank into the shadow of the cliff, slowly fading from bright aqua-blue to the dark shade of navy that it always took on during the hours of darkness.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Ivy started. She hadn’t heard anyone come up on the roof. Then she saw it. It definitely wasn’t a human but it was not a normal animal either. It had a changeling’s distinctive silver circle on its forehead which meant it was a person who had followed the calling of their soul and become the animal they truly were at heart.

“Who are you?” Ivy asked. Although she already had a faint suspicion of who the snake was, she wasn’t sure yet though just the thought made her heart thump.

“I used to have a name,” the serpent replied, “but names have no importance in the animal world, I am here to help. That is all you need to know.”

The burning disc of the sun finally slid over the horizon and gave way to the grey velvet of dusk. Ivy gave a last, longing look up at the first silvery stars. The snake spoke again. “If you feel it calling as strongly as I think you do, then go before she can lock you away for good. Your mother loves you but she has no way of understanding what you’re going through. Say goodbye to your sister and run, to the cliff would be good. Once you are there you will know what to do.”

Ivy gave a brief nod “Will it hurt?”

“Yes. But it will be well worth it. It will stop the yearning that has been hurting you all your life.”

“But my mother, I can’t just leave her, and Rosalyn, it’s hard enough for her already but with me gone...” Ivy trailed off, unable to finish. “Who are you really?”

“I believe you already know.” As Ivy’s father looked up at her she knew for certain that it was him.

“I can’t just go.” Ivy looked back at the town, twinkling just like the sky above it, as if had become a part of the sea and was now reflecting the brilliance stars as clearly as it’s watery counterpart.

“Rosalyn understands more than you give her credit for, Ivy. She is a very strong girl,” Her father said gently. “And I watch over the house, though your mother does not know it. Rosalyn and your mother will be absolutely fine.”

“So I should just leave them, leave everything I’ve ever known?” There was a touch of anger in Ivy’s voice now, she didn’t know why.

“I never said that now, did I?”

“What do you mean?”

“You forget how much your mother loves you, Ivy. I am sure she will happily allow you to come back after you change.”

“She didn’t let you come back.” Ivy sounded skeptical.

“She was angry at me, it was only natural. I left her just before Rosalyn was born, I left her without warning, I left her to care for a soon to be born child and a two year old.” Ivy’s father bowed his head. “I regret I did not tell her.”

“I need to go now.”

“Yes, you do. Goodbye my daughter”

—

“Rosalyn, Why are you in here?” Ivy asked

“I heard you talking to father, so I came in here to say goodbye”

“How do you know about father?” Ivy was puzzled, how could her little sister have known when Ivy herself had never once sensed another soul in the house or grounds?

“He comes to me every night and we talk, you never listened when I tried to tell you so I gave up and kept it to myself” Ivy nodded, this made sense for some reason.

“So you know why I have to go, why I can’t stay here any longer”

“Yes.” then suddenly Rosalyn’s eyes filled with tears and she ran forward and embraced her older sister

“I’ll miss you”

“I will too”

—

The grass was long and dry on the other side of the wall. As Ivy jumped down into the sea of waving stalks the first rays of golden light pierced the twilight gloom. She heard a shout from the other side of the wall. It was her mother.

Ivy began to run. Soon she came out of the long grass and onto the strip of shorter deep green stalks right before the cliff edge. Here, she stopped and turned. She could see Rosalyn waving from the top of the wall and her mother sprinting across the field towards her. Tears streaming down her face, Ivy started running again.

When she reached the cliff edge, she leaped. Far, far, far below her the waves crashed with bone breaking force onto the rocks, showing white foam on top of the dark and swirling water. Then she fell, down towards the crashing waves and the rocks below. And as she fell she felt as if her chest were tearing open, like something inside her had finally woken and was now frantically trying to claw down the walls that held it inside of her it hurt but not in a bad way, ivy closed her eyes, then, suddenly, she could see herself as if she wasn’t her any more. With a roar of joy, Ivy spread her wings and flew upwards, leaving her old broken body to fall into the turquoise waves.

Cora McHugh is a thirteen-year-old Australian high school student. She is a dedicated bookworm and aspiring fantasy writer. Her first two stories were published in anthologies by Write 4 Fun, an Australian schools writing competition.

Non-Fiction

Tea and Coffee By Alisha Ahmed

The bustling sounds of the cafe swirl together with the pleasant aroma of freshly-baked croissants and imported coffee. I sit on a barstool that's too tall for me; fingers drumming idly against the hardwood countertop as the Torontonians mill outside in the sub-zero weather. After I grab my drink, the barista and I exchange smiles as I retreat back to my perch; content to people-watch in the wifi-free cafe. The couple in the corner share a mocha, the vivacious group of teens fool around with their whipped cream; swiping dollops off each others' cups. The child shrieks as he burns his tongue on the hot chocolate and his mother laughs as she braves a sip of her coffee. I sit happily with my elbows propped up against the table and my London Fog in one hand. With each sip, the warmth spreads throughout my body, imbuing me with newfound strength like a gentle hug. My body relaxes; exhausted after a long day of school, and my mind slips back into buried memories of places I've been. Places that don't even seem real to me now.

Tea and coffee, it's so simple, isn't it? Something so pure, a part of lives across the globe. Six places. Six experiences. Wildly different, yet all united by a common thread.



In Toronto, it's routine. The amorphous blob of commuters that rushes through Union Station, snippets of conversation flitting through the air like butterflies. There's a small stand in the corner by the GO train platforms, tucked away and temporary.

In Toronto, coffee and tea are usually just means to an end. The byproducts of study sessions at Starbucks, furious all-nighters, the nervous hours before an exam. Simply for the aesthetic sometimes, the look of having a drink in your hand. It's that thing you only drink for the little boost of caffeine; a stimulant to keep you awake. The drink is only there as a necessity to keep you awake in the morning, keep you running through the day.

Of course, there's beauty in it as well. Beauty in holding the cup close to your face, the steam warming frozen skin as you chat with your friend. There's the beauty of being a regular at a local coffee shop, the barista knowing exactly what you enjoy.

The whole notion of *bigger is better*, with the fancy lattes and frappuccinos. Drinks that are almost as much sugar and fake saccharine syrups as they are coffee, but to some, they still taste wonderful. There's that amiable, beautiful culture of individuality in places, accented with the warm, inviting aroma that welcomes you with wide-open arms.



In Saudi Arabia, it's pure. قهوة عربية (qahwah arabiyya) they call it; Arabic coffee. Served in ornate tea sets, gold handles and shining teacups that sparkle as if touched by the stars themselves. The beauty is in the serving of it, not simply the drink. It's constantly there, at breakfasts and social gatherings, served in those elaborate glasses.

The drink itself is bitter and dark, a pitch black colour that mirrors the night sky. An acerbic liquid that flows down your throat, the taste of sugar notably absent. It's not unpleasant in the slightest, it brings a certain aroma of purity, tainted only slightly with hints of cardamom, and other rich Middle Eastern spices.



In Italy, it's espresso served in cups smaller than the palm of your hand. Somewhere off the coast of Positano, there are jagged cliffs on which small vibrant houses of a stunning array of colours sit. At the place where the cliffs meet the vast expanse of glistening water, there lays a small town. Lemon trees and small dinghies dot the shoreline where a coffee shop sits, filled with neighbourhood residents and tourists alike.

Some old men lounge there, on creaky white plastic chairs under a large umbrella (although it is not raining *or* sunny) with small cups of late-afternoon espresso in their hands. They're talking animatedly, catching up on something I will never know.

It's a bitter sharp taste, strong with a smell that packs a punch. It can be downed quickly, and gets your head buzzing a million miles an hour. I've always found the machines the most fascinating, though. Hulking contraptions of gleaming metal; hissing, steaming, brewing, and doing all sorts of fantastic things that somehow translate into a wonderful cup of coffee.

The coffee itself is so varied, based on the different times of the day. Milky is for the morning, and espresso is for any time of day. It's as much of a social call as it is a drink, and the delicious coffee is as smooth as the words of the company brought by friends and family.



In Istanbul, Turkey, it's black tea, and the most delicious apple tea I have tasted to date. It's not just a drink there, it's a way of greeting, so ingrained in that society it's almost considered rude to refuse.

Walk into the lobby of a boutique hotel to check in? *Why yes, I would love some tea!*

The tinkling sound of silver chimes as the door to a carpet shop opens, and suddenly a tea-tray with small cups of black tea appears. Glasses that curl perfectly in the palm of your hand and golden spoons with ornate handles to stir in saffron sugar cubes. Sitting on plush cushions, surrounded by hand-woven oriental carpets of deep, royal colours, the sweet tea brings way to soft conversation, doted with the sharp notes of the drink.

The tiny glasses are practically expected, wherever you go. It's the famous tea, or apple tea if you're young, that marks the conversation and the experience in every new place.

Bottomless, tinted with an array of different spices, each sip like fireworks of flavour in your mouth.

Prepared with the utmost care, shaken with a perfectly steady hand, pride taken in a good cup of a drink that's synonymous with the country itself. It's part of the culture, with its absolutely gorgeous flavours, so prominent wherever you go.

So simple, yet it's still such a specific taste; one that you yearn for even when it's been years. It's world famous and so divine that even when you barely remember what it was, you still recall that it was something beautiful.



In Egypt, it's strong and sweet, with a pitch black colour. The light feeling of the Egyptian tea and copious amounts of sugar taste good together, the black tea exciting your taste buds all the way through.

It's a strange idea, drinking scalding tea in a boiling hot country, yet somehow the liquid feels good against the blistering heat, the sandy expanse.

It's a hazy memory, of a warm day and the sight of towering pyramids in the distance. The smell of sand and fresh sizzling meat on the jam-packed streets of Cairo. The thick

scent of car exhaust fumes mixed with that of the perfume stores. A small side-of-the-road restaurant with a neon orange shopfront that served the creamiest pasta, and a bittersweet black tea that came in small yellow satchets.



At home, it's achingly familiar, a presence I haven't lived without. Pakistani chai; half milk, half strongly brewed black tea, and some white sugar. A dark caramel colour, and a smooth milkiness that tastes like home.

I've been carrying it for as long as I can remember. In the evenings, to my parents, at functions, to my family. After dinner, there's always a call around the group as to who wants tea, and at a certain age, it's almost a proud feeling when you get asked, like you're now officially a bit older.

It's not like it is in Toronto's culture, where you have to be "old enough" to drink caffeine. My childhood was dotted with sips, it was a conversation piece. It's not so much as something to keep you going fast, it's something to slow down upon. Siting with a cup of tea in your hand, surrounded by friends and family, the floating feeling of fervent *joy* invoked by being surrounded by loved ones. That's the feeling that accompanies tea in my culture.

It's sweet and creamy, not bitter, fruity, or ridden with any exotic spices. It runs across your tongue like the smoothest honey and scalds your tongue if you drink it too early. It's the mark of happy post-dinner conversation, stretching late into the dwindling evening.



As rich in history as they are in taste, these drinks stretch across continents, political lines, and cultural divides. We're brought together by this simple act, the drinking of tea or coffee. And it varies so much among the 7+ billion people on this earth.

Tea, chai, te, thee, شاي, thé, coffee, espresso, قهوة عربية, café, kaffe, kava, kafè, whatever it is you call it, we all love to drink it. It's so familiar, to so many people, and it's unbelievably *exciting* to see how it tastes in the countless other places across the world.

I savour the last sip of my tea latte, watching the residue of the tea leaves and the moisture at the bottom of the cup run together like ink on a wet paper. The cafe seems silent for a moment, all the little conversations are just background noise as my mind wanders back to all the places I've seen. I smile, and think fondly about everywhere else I have yet to see.

I suppose the best way to find that out, is to get out there and go.

So, let's find out.

Alisha Ahmed is a high schooler from Toronto, Canada. She loves long car rides with friends, the view of the city at night, stargazing, and going to different cafes in cities around the world. Alisha can often be spotted thriving at the library or in a bookstore, curled up in a corner reading *The Great Gatsby* while drinking a mug of black tea. Her work is forthcoming in *Advance*, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, and *Plum Tree Tavern*.

Brain to Body By Greta Starling

Dear Greta,

You don't have obsessive-compulsive disorder. Saying so would be self-diagnosis, and you're not allowed to do that. Your mom almost forbade you to use the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders for research because she was afraid it would cause hypochondria. Don't prove her right. Everything you're doing is normal.

Examine your hands. When you make a fist, the crevices turn white. Your knuckles are white and bumpy and the skin around them is patchy red. Your skin is cracking, which shouldn't surprise you— you've been washing your hands repeatedly because you can't get sick this winter. Sickness would make you miss school and that would make you fail. If you missed school, you wouldn't know what to do. You'd fall behind and you wouldn't be able to catch up, so go wash your hands again. You don't want to fail, do you?

Don't bother using the Country Apple lotion this time. It won't heal your hands, only prevent the cracks from bleeding for another day. Besides, it will make your pens and pencils slide out of your hand, so it's not safe to use until you're done writing.

Speaking of writing, have you finished your homework? Keep your lined paper out— you have to study for history. Grab two colored pens, a pencil, an eraser, and a white-out pen. Start by writing the chapter heading and the first term on the list in one colored pen. Scrawl everything you know about the term in pencil, and then check your notes. Add everything you forgot in the second colored pen. Repeat for each term; the finished guide will only be five or six pages. Think of this as preparation for the twenty- page guide you'll make for finals. When you're done, you'll know the chapter, but you should still force your father and your friends to quiz you. You were told to get a good GPA freshman year, which means don't get anything less than perfect. It'll be impossible to get into college otherwise.

When you're satisfied, put the guide in your accordion folder and take out your laptop. Open up your novel. Tomorrow is workshop day and you need something for the others to read. They sometimes skip a week, but that's not a valid excuse for you. You need to write.

Your main character is Julius, and he does have obsessive-compulsive disorder. He's not like you. You don't. No one has diagnosed you, so disregard the signs. Ignore the time you yelled at your dad for plating your waffles because you didn't see him wash his

hands. Anyone would have. Ignore all the times you ordered your ice cream in a cup instead of a cone because your hands weren't clean and you didn't want to touch your food. When everyone else gets cones, they're not being safe. Your so-called abnormal habits are the only thing keeping you healthy and passing your classes. Listen to me: you don't have obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Put on some music while you write. You've made a playlist for Julius with songs like "Monster" by Imagine Dragons and "Control" by Halsey. You couldn't relate to him otherwise— you haven't turned into a monster. There are no demons or awful energy in you. There's just me.

Write about a test like the one you're taking tomorrow— a test that could ruin your future. That's not a rare thing. Every test could ruin your future. Write about checking answers multiple times and still fearing your grades. Write about feeling that something is impossible and having that fear make it impossible. Write about the things I make you do because everyone should do them. They're normal.

When you don't know what to write, don't take a break. Keep writing. You believe in your ability to write in a way that you haven't believed in your ability to do anything in a long time. If you want that belief to stay, you can't stop.

Don't allow making your characters hurt— making them wash their hands a thousand times and have intrusive thoughts and lie in bed just staring at the ceiling because they have too many thoughts to sleep— let you stop hurting. Don't stop rubbing your hands raw with sanitizer just because you need those hands to write. You also need health to write. Don't turn your intrusive thoughts into story ideas. *What if this campfire burns down the forest* shouldn't become *what if the government sends a group of hydromancers to stop wildfires in California?* You need to focus on finding the fire extinguisher just in case. Don't tell yourself you can work out a plotline at night— do it now. You know that when you go to bed you'll be too busy thinking about everything you've done wrong, ever.

Writing for school took your sanity, so don't think writing for yourself is going to give it back. Not that you have obsessive-compulsive disorder, of course.

Sincerely,

Your Mind

Greta Starling is a high school sophomore. She enjoys reading and writing; some of her favorite books are by Adam Silvera and Becky Albertalli. She has been writing for most of her life but this is her first time being published. Follow her on Instagram at @greta_writes.

Crossing the Continental Divide By Stephen Fuller

Crossing the Continental Divide is my idea. In the past year, I've attended two bar mitzvahs and, watching my friends being welcomed into the land of adults—or something like it—I feel like I'm missing out. My family isn't religious, so there'll be no ceremony to mark my own passage from childhood. Casting about for a way to prove my mettle, I picture myself straddling the definitive ridge at 13,000 feet and somehow talk my dad into going.

This is our first trip with just the two of us. Our usual hiking companions can't make it this time, and we know better than to ask my mom, who has a long list of reasons she thinks our beloved pastime is crazy. My dad and I have been backpacking together since I was nine, mostly in Tennessee, North Carolina, and our home state of Georgia. We meet hikers from all over on these trails, and it's not like passing someone on the street. There's an instant connection, a sense of community and common objective. We strike

up a conversation with anyone we encounter. We unite to tackle common challenges. Hiking the Conasauga River Trail when I was thirteen, we had to ford the river more than thirty times in thirteen miles, assisting some nervous hikers whose names we never caught. A lush canopy of trees hovers above these southern trails, so it feels to me as if we're all exploring a protected world together.

After flying to Colorado, Dad and I catch a train in Durango and get off at a trailhead in the San Juan Mountains. From there we plan to spend six days making a loop in the Weminuche Wilderness. On each trip we've taken, I've carried more in my pack, and now, at fourteen, I split the load evenly with my dad. We bring just the essentials: tent, sleeping bags, water purification system, dishes, utensils, stove, first aid kit, food, and a food canister to keep bears away. And, because June is early in the season, we've brought an ice ax and crampons to help us traverse any lingering snow.

I can't get over the immensity of sky out west. Without the familiar tree canopy, I feel like the shell of my known world has been peeled back. The only other humans we see are thru-hikers making their way from Mexico to Canada. They've been charting their progress to arrive at the high elevations in Colorado just as the snow becomes passable. Their entire journey will take four to five months. We share some food with them, and after they move on my dad says I'll have to make that 3,100-mile trek with my friends.

Dad's a quiet man. When he spots something noteworthy he lets out a little laugh, and I know to look in the direction of his nod. As we hike along a ridge, we see melting snow forming icy blue pools on the plateaus below us. The sun-warmed water spills off the mountainside, creating cataracts that rush into the canyon. Some of the beauty sneaks up on us. We trudge toward a field that looks from a distance like a swath of unremarkable green. When we get up close, yellow and white wildflowers turn their faces to us, like shy girls who still know they're pretty.

With a starting point of 8,900 feet, we climb thousands of feet every day, but with all the ups and downs from ridge to ridge most days we lose nearly as much as we gain in elevation. When we hit 12,000 feet, a thick pad of snow, packed down by its own weight, coats the trail. But the path reveals itself to us, and we never quite lose our way.

On the third day, we reach the Continental Divide. My dad takes a photo of me with one foot on either side of the boundary, and then we head on. The terrain is no different.

It's when we're ascending a pass on the fourth day that Dad runs out of steam. For years, I had to run to catch up to him. Now, he lacks the strength to carry his pack. I carry my own pack 400 meters, then set it down and run back and shoulder my dad's. I do this for about three miles, while he slowly makes his way up the trail.

When we reach our campsite, we rest for a long time before I set up the tent and make dinner. A flame-bright sunset outlining the mountaintops dissolves into boundless space as the weary sky casts down her first bright star, silvery and steady. Thousands more trail behind. And we both let out a little laugh at the beauty just out of reach.

Stephen Thomas Fuller lives in Marietta, Georgia. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Straylight*, *Defiant Scribe*, and the *Kenyon Review Young Writers Anthology*. He plans to major in chemical engineering, and he spends way too much time daydreaming about extravagant backpacking adventures.

Expect the Unexpected By Lydia Ryan

A few years ago, I heard a quote that Mr. Rogers had said about what happens when tragedy hits: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping'" (Fred Rogers). This quote took me back to the day of June 1st, 2011. I woke up thinking

it would be a normal day. I went to school and once leaving I noticed the greenish eerie tint the sky held. It was an extremely hot and humid day, so a thunderstorm to change this was long overdue. I walked a mile home like I did every day and once home I was greeted with my grandmother rushing me inside. She informed me with a quiver in her voice that there had been tornado warnings.

The weather alert alarm is a noise I will never forget. To this day, whenever I am watching T.V. and the test alarms come on, my heart races, and my mind goes back to the day of the tornado. After a half hour of watching my two brothers and I, my grandmother began to sense our unease as we looked out at the green sky, wondering if the warnings were something we should take seriously. In a panic, we called my mother, who was late getting home due to traffic.

She answered the phone as if nothing was wrong. She said calmly, "We get these warnings every year, we live in Massachusetts! We have nothing to worry about." By the time she got home, the calm in her voice had vanished. She had heard that the tornado had formed, and we had minimal time before it came our way. She grabbed snacks and rushed us into the basement knowing we could be down there for a while. From the basement, we heard the roaring winds and loud thunderous sounds. It was as if a God was banging on the sky. I looked out the tiny window we had in the top left corner of my basement and saw debris flying all over and witnessed the windows of my mother's car shatter. I looked away, hiding my face. We began to pray, "In the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit, Ame- CRASH!" All we could hear was glass shattering, and the crashing of an object into our house. We huddled and attempted to wait for it to all pass, but knew our house was in a fragile state and worried it could not stand any more of the storm.

My mom stood up and told us to follow her. She told us that we were going to huddle, stay together, and run to my neighbor's house, hoping their living conditions were better than ours. I knew from the sound of the crash that our house was in bad shape, but I

never would have thought I would walk up the basement stairs to see a fully grown pine tree taking up the space of my living room. My younger brother yelled, "It smells like Christmas in here!" not old enough to realize the tragedy that just occurred. We were all in shock but came out of it quickly as our adrenaline kicked in. We stuck to our plan and stepped outside to run to our neighbor's house. Once outside, I looked out at what used to be my neighborhood, now a space covered in huge pine trees, cables, and wires. I looked to my right, to see the Cathedral High School scoreboard on my neighbor's lawn. We lived a mile away from Cathedral. It was all too much to take in at once, yet we kept running, being careful of downed power lines until we arrived at my neighbor's house. They let us in willingly, and were relieved we were okay. Once the wind died down, we walked outside again. The whole neighborhood was checking on each other, asking if everyone was okay.

If not for my neighbors' care and motivation, I would have never left my basement. After seeing the effect the tornado had on my neighborhood, I was afraid it would happen again especially with the unsettled weather in the days following the tornado. Once returning home from my neighbor's house the day of the tornado, I went straight to the basement and did not come upstairs for 2 weeks. It was my neighbor George, the kindest man you'll ever meet, whose words pushed me to leave and go outside. He softly spoke, "Everyone misses you. Let me make you a promise. I promise it will not happen again. I want you to come upstairs one time, and if you hate it, you can stay down here forever. Just come upstairs and see everyone that is helping."

It was amazing to see people come together immediately after the tornado. Everyone helped each other out in a time of need. I saw families I've never seen before pulling wagons filled with bottled water and sandwiches for the neighborhood, along with the National Guard attempting to normalize the neighborhood I used to call home. It took the entire length of the summer for us to be able to see the ground of our backyard. At some points, we had up to thirty people at a time volunteering to help clear out our debris. As for the tree that split our house, our neighbors cut it all up, cleared it out of my

home, and used a tarp as a temporary wall. The tornado brought us all together as a community and made us respect each other all the more. Block parties on the yearly anniversary date of the tornado became a ritual and the tornado soon became a story to tell.

Lydia Ryan is a senior at Minnechaug Regional High School. She hopes to be a journalist in the future. She enjoys hanging out with friends, binge watching her favorite TV shows, and spending time with her two brothers.

Eight Days In By Mia Ogle

Based on a true story

It was Monday morning and my second week of kindergarten was about to begin. Mom was rushing around the kitchen frantically, letting slip the occasional obscenity. She liked to swear in all different types of languages so “FUCK!” as well as “SCHEISSE!” ricocheted off the stove top she was bending over, each shooting straight into the ears of her young children. Judging by the frequency with which these words left her mouth, I appeared to be the only one who cared about the language my younger brother was being exposed to. I thought back to just a few days ago when a rubber duck with bright red fire decals painted on its wings had mysteriously come into Wyatt’s possession. He had marched into the house and informed us all: “I know, what I’m going to name my duck: Fuck! The perfect combination between fire and duck.” I, being six, and two years older than Wyatt, was frankly appalled. But my mother could not stop laughing. Once again, I was forced to take control of a situation really better suited for an adult.

“WY GUY!” my mom yelled, “EAT YOUR FOOD.” Wyatt sat planted on the carpet several feet below me studying a book entitled *The Complete Star Wars Encyclopedia*. It took several attempts before my mother could persuade him to peel his eyes from the pages and acknowledge the plate of food in front of him. Even then he just stared off into space, no doubt imagining what he would do in the event of meeting his personal hero, Luke Skywalker. I examined his round face, wondering how I was ever going to break the news that Luke Skywalker was not, in fact, a real person. Wyatt’s face was by far the fattest face I had ever come into contact with. His cheeks engulfed the majority of his features and when he smiled, they came dangerously close to obstructing his eyesight. After overhearing a conversation between my aunts about the magic of plastic surgery, I could not help but wonder if we would be able to afford the clearly much needed cheek reduction for Wyatt.

After breakfast I decided to head to my room and spend the remainder of the morning reading on my bed. I kept one eye firmly planted on the clock, knowing nobody else would be doing so. At 8:00 am I alerted my mother that we should really get going as school would be starting at 8:30. Upon receiving this information she nearly had a heart attack, and frantically began to apply lipstick and straighten out her disheveled bathroom. “LET ME JUST FIND MY KEYS!” she exclaimed. Ten minutes later I returned to the master bedroom and found the contents of my mother’s tote bag sprawled across the bed and yet another tote bag being emptied on the floor below. “LET ME JUST FIND MY KEYS!” she yelled again.

Another ten minutes later and I stepped out of my room only to be bulldozed over by my mother, now in full-blown panic mode. Her hair was sticking out in four different directions, she had lipstick smeared across her teeth, and beads of sweat were slowly making their way down her forehead. She sprinted through the hallways, ripping open every drawer, and searched under every piece of furniture. I began to do the same, trying to stay calm but silently praying that my eighth day of kindergarten would not be

ruined due to my mother's stupidity. I heard a loud bang quickly followed by a "FUCK," emanating from the hallway and sighed. It was then that I realized Wyatt was missing.

I found him perched on a cushioned chair in the office. His Star Wars encyclopedia lay sprawled out on his lap. After a short wrestling match, it became clear to me that it would not be easy to remove him from the chair, and I decided to save the tussling for when we actually had the means to operate the car. I silently vowed to burn *The Complete Star Wars Encyclopedia* and jogged back into the living room. My mother was pacing back and forth across the carpet cradling her iPhone.

"Bob, I think you are going to have to take the kids today, I can't find my keys and..." I heard my father's muffled voice cut her off mid sentence.

"Honey, school started ten minutes ago what are you talking about-".

"I KNOW SCHOOL STARTED TEN MINUTES AGO BOB, JUST BRING THE CAR HOME".

"Ok, I'm at work it's going to be around 20 mi-"

"JUST BRING THE CAR!"

"Ok," my father ended the conversation, clearly terrified of what my mother had become.

Fifteen minutes later we found the keys. They had fallen underneath the couch cushion in the living room. Five minutes after that my father arrived at the house, sweaty and confused. Upon surveying the scene, he promptly got back in his car and drove away.

"WHERE IS WYATT?" my mother bellowed. We entered the office and found him perched in the exact same position I had found him minutes earlier. I lunged to tear him from his book, but his gigantic cheeks got in the way and I fumbled several times before I

was able to get a good grip. I began dragging him to the car but heard my mother exclaim “WAIT, WHERE ARE MY GLASSES?” from behind us and promptly put him down, abandoning all hope of ever leaving the house.

At 8:50 my mother closed and forgot to lock the front door. We were on the road by 8:55. I realized halfway through the car ride that Wyatt did not have on any shoes but decided not to say anything for fear of having to go back. At 9:15 I stood before the front desk looking apologetically at the lady writing up my tardy attendance pass. She stared down at me, reached for a pencil and asked, “So, why are you late today?”

Mia Ogle lives north of San Diego and is a sophomore in high school. Her bedside table is piled high with books written by funny women. In her free time she watches sitcoms that aired in the early 2000’s.

Your Apologies By Jefferson Jensen

I never have really liked apologies. Hearing people give them out has always made me feel some level of guilt for whatever reason, more so when I’m on the receiving end of them. I basically cringe at the soft and occasionally weepy voice that floats out those delicate words, as if they’re some beg for forgiveness. I get it, you feel bad, but let’s just move up and out past this time and forward. Leave the past behind please.

I suppose that’s an odd sentiment for somebody like me to hold anyway. Who would dare think that I, somebody who has vowed their major in college to be history, would want to move on and be done with the past? I can spend day after day in the lecture hall while my stocky

grey haired professor rambles in monotone about the revolutionary nature of sowing barley seeds in the ancient Middle East and to the disgust and horror of my peers feel

enthused. But, when people mess up and sin against me, all I want to do is go into stasis and sleep till the next day. Wake up, shower, try and move on because whatever has happened has happened and actions cannot be undone.

It was last December that apologies had become a recurring theme in my life. I had come home in the middle of the day after an argument with my girlfriend and we both needed space. As I opened my front door the reek of bleach and industrial soap stung my nostrils. I knelt down to shake the saddle bag from my shoulder and rest it beside the living room's pink sofa. As I rose again my head tilted to my staircase to notice naked pillows on top of it. The cases had been removed. The hallway light was on too.

"Alex?" I called up to my brother. A man in black dashed from some room and ran down the stairs, his heavy boots cracking on every creaky step like thunder and lightning. The next second moved at the speed of a minute. Absorb every detail of this scene, burn into my mind forever so that every time I try to sleep I see it. A young man in a baggy black jacket that went over his waist stomps in a rush towards me. His light coloured eyes framed in the ratty black mask over his face. His gloved hands tracing my banister as he heads down so to steady himself, knowing he needs to be careful not to lose his step. Running down stairs in heavy winter boots is not an easy thing at all. As he swears death threats, my mind goes numb and tries to decipher what he's saying. Is Alex wearing a mask while cleaning because the fumes are bad for his lungs? Is he yelling at me because he wants me to get out and not inhale the fumes? Oh wait, this isn't my brother. This is a robber. Yeah, I'm about to be robbed. A pistol's handle hammers into my jaw and I can taste the blood touch my tongue from the very second my lip rips. Iron.

After a day of gory details, of being beaten, hooded, tied up in my own home and dazed by a concussion, I stood outside of the emergency room in the December frost without shoes, without a jacket, without a phone or wallet or keys. Most people who have been violated cannot think well afterward. Their minds are tied up in their emotions, in their trauma, in confusion. I was not like that, and in fact was so calm after the fact that

detectives arrived in my hospital room to accuse me of staging the crime myself,— for why else would somebody be collected and have their wits about them after being assaulted and robbed? Apes. As I stood there waiting for my ride, my mind went to one thought: Beth. I have to tell Beth. Oh my god, how have I not told Beth? Well, I was robbed and was a bit busy until now, but seriously I need to tell Beth!

I struggled to get a hold of her, after all it was 2018 and nobody had phone numbers memorized. In the car my mother told me that she had the phone number of Beth's sister from some event or another a year ago. I called her, I texted her, I begged her to tell me Beth's phone number. Her response? 'Oh just message her online.'

Thanks for the help, Stace.

My sense of time was distorted, and I'm sure that was in part due to the fact that my skull had been batted at half a dozen times, and the whole experience seemed like a practice in surrealism. Some seconds felt like minutes and some minutes felt like hours and some hours had passed and felt about as fast as an eye blinks. Needless to say that the twenty minute ride home took my mind on a slow motion tour of the rush hour traffic between my house and the hospital. I got home, scrambled on to my laptop, which had been thrown across the room by a burglar but was still functional, and I messaged her a brief summation of what had happened. I told her I was okay and asked if she would please see me. And did I mention how slowly time was passing at this moment? If twenty minutes is two hours in post-assault time, then imagine the eight and a half hour long wait between my message and her response. It's about two in the morning, and I'm wide awake because sleeping is now an impossibility before I get the first message she sends me after learning that I'd been pistol whipped to the point of a cracked rib.

'Omg that's fucked.'

I have never cared for apologies. I have spent years feeling uncomfortable with receiving them, plagued by some sense of guilt for somebody being sorry and for some

inexplicable reason why. It could very well be some sort of self loathing that deems myself unworthy or maybe something about the shame of people when they lend me their sorrows.

While I can pretend that on the early December morning I wanted to simply move on and forget the past day, move on and forget the argument, move on and forget the robbery, move on and forget that that was her response I cannot allow myself to. Every night I see the light eyes of a wild man as he hunts me through my house. Every night I remember that was her first response. Those are the words that will be ingrained in my memory whenever I recall this day. Those are the words that will float through my skull as I make ill fated attempts to sleep.

People say their apologies to me. Don't say you feel sorry for what I've been through. Don't wish me well after everything. Please, don't lend me any apologies, don't lend me any empty words. I don't want a false utterance about how you understand when you don't, about how things will get better. I don't need your downtrodden words to make me feel safer. All you need to do to show you care is be there, not detached from me via the single sentence of a text.

A freshman and merit scholar at Concordia University in Chicago, Jefferson is an avid reader and a history major. He has been previously published by The Westerner. Jefferson's favorite poet is Wilfred Owen, and his favorite author is Anthony Burgess.

Art

Bubbling Dreams, Blue Symphony, Self-Portrait By Amelia Ao



Bubbling Dreams



Blue Symphony





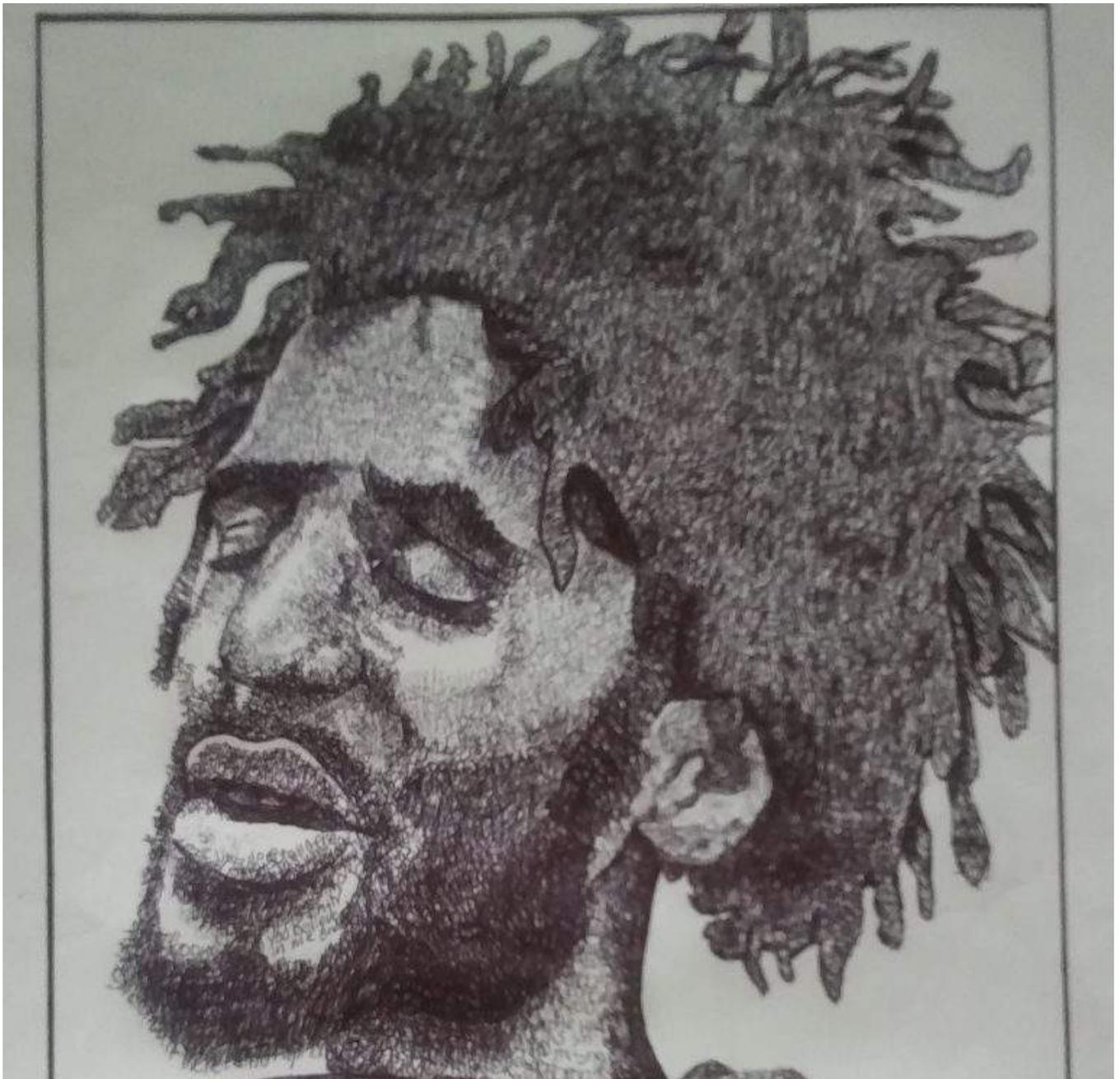
Self Portrait

My medium for these submissions is just color pencil. I really just try to look at the things around me and the emotions inside me for inspiration. For the dog, I tried to reflect a human kind of longing in his expression—he is dreaming of the red string, and yet he looks wistful and longing of something from the past. I feel like animals are really are natural counterparts and so tried to mirror a human emotion in his eyes. This was connected to my self-portrait, which portrays me looking towards the future while thinking of the past. For the shells I just really loved the curves and shapes they formed together and tried to convey the sound of the ocean through the image. I thought the color blue would be a fitting theme for the nostalgic, wistful feel I wanted. My creative process isn't really a process; it's just picking and choosing from

certain experiences and things I'm lucky enough to witness to try and piece together an emotion or message. I've loved art for as long as I can remember, ever since my first art class at five years old. It's something I hope to keep doing for the rest of my life.

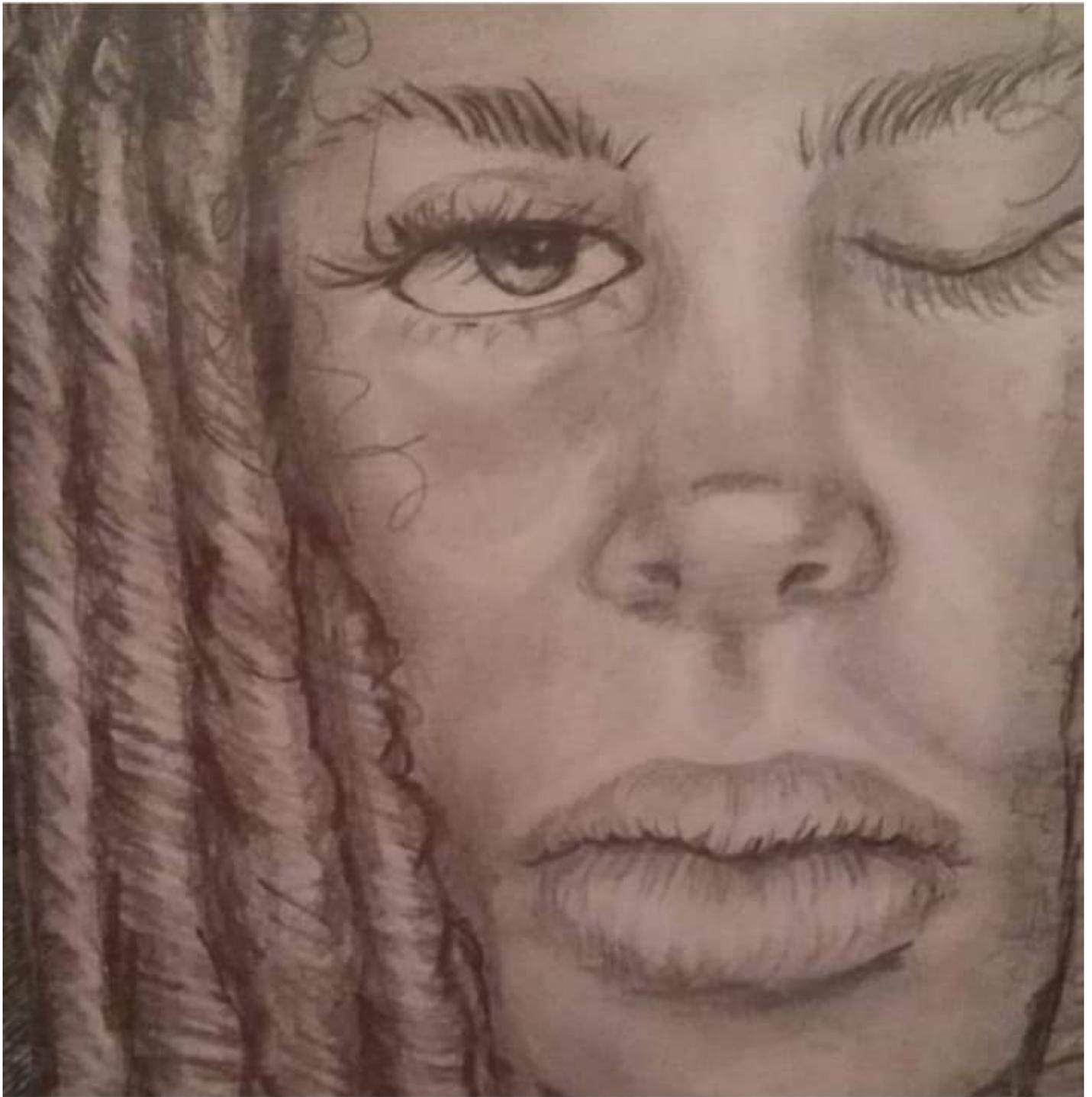
Amelia Ao lives in Wayland, Massachusetts with her parents and sister. Art has been a fundamental part of her identity, and she's excited to be sharing her work.

Cole World, Golden Girl By Denver Evans





J. Cole



Golden Girl

I was born in Jonesboro, Arkansas and lived there almost my entire life. I'm the eldest of eight children. I am fifteen and first found my love for art in sixth grade. In seventh grade, my art piece "Myself" was selected to be displayed in the Arkansas Young Artist Exhibit. I love drawing people. My school art teacher told me " You always find a way to put a person in your artwork!" I love painting mostly because if I make a mistake it can turn out to make my artwork

beautiful! I think my grandmother inspires me the most. She beat leukemia and throughout it she was filled with humor or joy every time I saw her. She didn't let it affect her.

Denver Evans is an aspiring artist in Jonesboro, Arkansas. She loves art media such as acrylic, pencil, and charcoal. Her artwork was a part of the Arkansas Young Artist Exhibit in Little Rock. She won principal choice at her school district art show, and attends Jonesboro School of Art.

Book Review

Flowers for Algernon By Oscar Wolfe

Recently in school, we had the opportunity to read the classic novel, *Flowers for Algernon*, by Daniel Keyes. Obviously, I chose to read it. When I started it, I realized immediately that it was something special. It follows the story of Charlie Gordon, a thirty-two year old man with the mental age of a child, living in New York in the 1960's. When he is chosen for an experiment that would triple his intelligence, his life turns upside down. The story is told in the form of progress reports that Charlie wrote throughout the experiment to show his progress. As Charlie's intelligence changes, so does the writing style. It is written a little bit like this at least in the beginning.

In case you're wondering who the heck Algernon is, he is the lab mouse that was used to test the experiment before Charlie. The success of the experiment on Algernon is the reason the scientists were confident enough to try it on a human subject. But when Algernon's mental state starts to deteriorate, well, no spoilers.

This book is so well written that it truly seems like a current news article. But, in case there is any confusion, it is not a current news article; it's fifty-three-year-old fictional

story. However, this is not to say that it is an easy read. It is an extremely complex book that takes time and effort to get through, especially about 75% of the way through. That's when there's a bit of a boring part (but it gets good again so don't give up on it). But, if you don't want to read the whole novel, I have good news for you. There's a short story version. Of course, the short story doesn't have nearly the detail that the novel does.

Overall though, *Flowers for Algernon* is one of the best, most thought provoking books that I've read in a long time. It put me into the mindset of multiple people all in one. I was able to see how the same situation could be perceived dramatically differently by someone mentally impaired, or a genius. It ultimately looks at how society reacts to different people, and how those people react to society. I would suggest it for anyone probably in high school or maybe middle school. The reason I wouldn't suggest it for anyone younger is that there is quite a bit talk of sex but mainly I don't think a young kid would have the patience to make it through. But enough of me, go read it!

Oscar Wolfe is the founder and lead writer of That is Great!, a blog about great stuff—from science and politics to entertainment—aimed at kids and teens. Oscar has interviewed many celebrities, politicians and business leaders including Sen. Al Franken, Henry Winkler, Billy Crystal, Laura Marano, Lizzy Greene, Kyle Rudolph and Evander Holyfield. He has written for *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine*, appeared on the American Public Media podcast Smash Boom Best, and been featured on Kare11 News. His award-winning short story, *No Paine, No Gain*, was published in the 2015-2016 selected works from COMPAS. Oscar, 14, is an eighth grader at Hopkins North Junior High where he is a member of the student council and participates in cross-country, wrestling, and track as well as band. He has appeared in numerous plays at school, the Sabes JCC and Stages Theatre Company.
