

June 2019 Issue Fourteen



Nights Gates, by Hewson Duffy

Editor's Note By Molly Hill

Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language. Henry James

June 2019/Issue 14

Readers and Writers,

In this season of commencement speeches, we'll keep this short and try to remain cliché free, even though while reading through our many writing submissions we are tempted to tell our talented writers— *Oh the places you'll go!!*— the great news being, they are already on their way.

This is one of our largest issues to date curated by students and writers local and far flung who were willing to read thousands of words, respond to late night emails, and meet up to talk about essays, poems and stories. We're proud to put this collection of summer reading in easy reach of your phone or laptop.

Thank you Arushi, Isabella, Kate, Maya, Priscilla, Alexa, Faith, the Minnetonka Writing Center Staff, Sumy Designs, Fuzion Print, Sandhill Studio LLC, ALL OUR STUDENT SUBMITTERS, and our grant givers for helping us get these words and images out into the world.

Happy Summer!

Molly Hill

Editor

Poetry

Stuck By Joanne Park

your name isn't supposed to have layers
when you say it, the taste shouldn't last longer than a moment
it's the kind of sweet that lingers on your tongue
dances around and reminds you of your identity
and dissolves as soon as you lick your lips

but how do i taste the sweet when i possess
a glossy name punctured by two oozing, messy words

stuck at the top of my mouth, sticky with embarrassment
jeong yun. no matter how many times my friends tried to fish it out
i'd clamp my mouth shut and tell them it wasn't important.

that was a lie. obviously i cared about the words that
carved out my existence, i just didn't have the luxury
to break off and share like loaves and fishes
at least, not for a crowd eager to grind it all up into
something they could laugh at, gray sludge from
what was once a fragment of my heritage.

it coated my childhood, a membrane of syllables
not meant to be pronounced with a foreign tongue
but it always was, always butchered
its pink flesh pinned to your American tablecloth
each sound cutting it into pieces to fit a foreign palate
baptized with vanilla and cinnamon that drowns out
ginger, sesame, and soy

they wouldn't just be laughing at me
but my grandfather, who dreamt of how
my name would carry the sky and the stars
walking on water across the ocean to America.
but when they mutilated my name with exaggerated syllables
and mocking tongues, i couldn't carry the world on my back anymore.
i could barely manage the weight of the mess contained in my mouth,
colorful cultural flavors locked away—
i crucified them with my tongue,

saying it to an audience who'd never tasted it before.
a menu they don't care to read but love to critique
arrays of names beautiful to all but the audience
each name got its own package, two sprinklings of preface saying
"i know it's not a common name, i'm sorry"
i'm reassuring *them* that it will be over soon
and it is. i spit it out painfully, and as the name leaves my mouth
jeong yun – so does my comfort, everything spilling out
as i struggle to hold my mouth closed before
i vomit up my pride.

it's funny how protective i am of my middle name
when for most of my life, it was my only name
leaving sticky residue on my official transcript, my passport,
and the standardized test that i hid under the fold of my elbow
worried someone would detect the alien sequence of letters
and make me seem more foreign than i want to be,
forcing me to swallow my name, whole.

Joanne Park is a junior at Archbishop Mitty High School in San Jose, CA who writes and performs poetry. She has previously won a number of awards for the Scholastic Art and Writing competition, been published in the Young Writers Anthology, and edits for both her school's literary magazine and school newspaper. Outside of writing, she loves to compete in speech and debate, where she is exposed to both classical philosophy, current events, and critical theory.

Pyrrho Walks into a Busy Street By Grady Trexler

Rain glances off the glass until I think
It might just break. The only other sound's
The screech of tires, the whir of engines hot.
I've turned the volume down until I am
Alone, and daring thoughts to think themselves.
The only thought there is is one like this:
The cars look like they're made of shadow stuff-
Like blots of ink and sketchy, shiny stars.
Headlights diffracted, bodies in the dark.
Not much like cars at all. If I would turn
The wheel a little farther to the left
And let the car drift into traffic lights
We might just crumple, origami fold
Or we'd pass through, dark specters in the night.

Grady Trexler is a senior at Maggie L. Walker Governor's School in Richmond, Virginia. He will graduate in 2019. In addition to writing, Grady likes to listen to music and debate.

Little Girl Big By Sophia Baldassari

(tiny) little girl; wait
bigger with others;
(not she) little wait,
little looks toward bigger bigger (with friends)
little wants bigger little wants friends;

big joyous, (except for little)
a little wish
to be big

Sophia Baldassari is a Gold Key winner in Dramatic Writing at the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and also won First Place at the Hoboken Library's Playwriting Competition. She was one of the top poets for the month of August 2016 and received the Staff Pick for her poetry on Teenink.net and has had online articles published on teennewsnet.com. Sophia was also a finalist for Dramatic Interpretation in the Hudson County Regional Forensics Competition and will have her play, Jenna Meets Death, performed at Manhattan Repertory Theatre in March 2019. Her selected work as an award-winning actress includes the NYC premiere of The Great Holiday Debate, Meet Me In St. Louis, Twelfth Night, The Proposal, and A Midsummer's Night Dream.

When They Leave By Amelia Ao

When Pandora opened her box
she left behind
my mother's perfume
that bottles the shape of the sunrise,
the taste of rosemary and lavender
dandelion wine and jasmine tea,
and the sound of city lights
and of raindrops and hope
pattering
on our bathroom tiles

When the moon left the sky
it left behind the wrinkled sea
and the smoke of the stars.
It left behind
my sister's mahogany piano
that plays in tune with the colors
of silk rustling through fingertips,
of cracked voices and late-night drives,
of radio static and dancing children,
of sun kissed laughter through silver tears,
and beautiful beautiful heartache

When the saints left this Earth
they left behind
their prayers and us sinners.
They left behind my father's whiskey bottle
which is cursed with the grit
of cold apartment floors against flaming skin,
burning films and lonely pill bottles,
weary cigarettes and tired aching smiles,
empty promises and sunlight through
the church's dusty windows

When the gods leave
We'll be left behind.
The mother nursing
her pink faced child
The couple that sits
with their pinkies lightly touching
The bruised girl

curled on her grandfather's lap
Our frothing rage and our foaming arrogance
Our shining hatred and our glorious truth
Our brutal wars and our crumpled innocence
Our tears and our pain and our faith and our love
We'll be left behind.

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

A Confession to the Moon By Jordyn Slavic

I wonder how we stay awake?
I'm lying down on my soft bed;
I simply never close my eyes.

Your moonlight filters through my blinds,
Crickets chirping into the night.
I wonder how we stay awake?

Cosmic dust settles inside my lungs.
Just thinking about the stars,
I simply never close my eyes.

Only to yearn for your soft touch,
A gentle caress on my skin.
I wonder how we stay awake?

I think of how he looks at me,
I know he sees me differently:
I simply never close my eyes.

How much do I need you now?
I'm wrong about you once again.
I wonder how we stay awake?
I simply never close my eyes.

Jordyn Slavic is a sophomore Writing and Publishing major from Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School. She's been writing from a young age, and enjoys poetry and creative nonfiction.

A Snapshot of Spades: December '95 By Alexis Noga

In her new apartment my mother wears lipstick
the color of raspberries.
The record player gently siphons 60's blues,
she is unapologetic when she sings off-key,
or smokes inside to ease the tension of new sheets.
She's smiling, and its clumsy,
conscious of the gap between her front teeth,
but still, it's honest.
She bridges a blue deck of cards forming,
a kaleidoscope of numbers and patterns.
Her beauty distracts, though she doesn't know.
In my mind, she shuffles again,
each number counting the times she wished she were fearless.

Lexi is a first-year student at Denison University majoring in Creative Writing and Religion. This year she is a recipient of the Woodyard Scholarship and has been published in Denison's literature magazine Exile.

No Place for Human Beings By Sarah Nachimson

As coyote guided them —
through the
rugged,
perilous terrain

youngest ones
wanted mothers,
to feel safe.

children
too young to survive
the treacherous journey
I'll come back for you
Papa said
He never came;

traumatized,
afraid of police officers
constantly worried
about going back.
Remember
the prison.

Sarah Nachimson hails from sunny California and is currently a high school sophomore at Yeshiva University Los Angeles Girls School. She is a reader for Polyphony H.S and an editor for Siblini Journal. Her writing has been recognized through numerous accolades including Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and The Jewish Week. She is published or forthcoming in Parallax Literary Journal and Polyphony Lit.

poem by a student, bitter for no reason By Sadie Derry

Sadie Derry is a fourteen year old from Toronto, Canada. She loves reading, writing, theatre and annoying her friends as much as possible. She hopes to continue to improve her writing skills throughout high school and beyond!

Girl and City: A Love Affair By Shelby Edison

I once wrote and believed
 that Madrid was the Paris
 of Spain
until I stepped foot in
 Seville
where the pavement is a collection of
 marigolds.

Ice cream scoops are served in glass
goblets and coat my fingertips in
milky crystals.

I photograph a red carnation
in a jar
on the table of a café overlooking
the cathedral.

And it starts to drizzle.

I stomp in storm puddles,
dance in the plains
(where it mainly rains in Spain.)

The sun isn't out and
it's far too cold but
look!

A city bathed in silver.

Algae swimming in a fountain while
I snack on
star shaped marzipan
staring at the palm trees,
that tickle sunbeams
which shine into the water.

Dazzle stone walls and brick walkways,
give a dandelion the light to grow,
create melancholy masterpieces and lonely frescos
that become caught in thunderstorms.

But the sun always clears and I find myself in
an orange grove.

Have you ever stood in an orange
grove?

The air is citrus flavored and
the world is tinted
tangerine.

If the day is particularly friendly,
maybe a bumblebee
will buzz by me.
Sing a song in my ear like it's playing
a tiny flute.

Maybe the bee will take a paintbrush
and decorate the pumpkin sky with
amber spirals.

Is it ordinary to feel nostalgic
for a place you stood in for a
mere five minutes?

I am eternally nostalgic
for constellations and
arched doorways crowned with bougainvillea.
For cats that perch on rooftops
overlooking Spanish cities
and ponds fenced in with topiary,
standing against faded brick walls.

I am nostalgic for my love affair
with the city of Seville.

The tapas eaten in cramped cafes
paired with bursts of winter air
travelling alongside olives and
glasses of red wine.

Tender octopus and cuttlefish croquettes
resting on my tongue.

Spain

like the pond in the corner of a palace,
sitting with
a few hundred handfuls of herbs.

I stroll in manicured gardens
under lavender skies
and pretend the world was simpler.

An orange grove.

A carnation.

A dash of saffron.

Shelby Edison is a writer and student at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, Texas. Her poetry has previously been published in Teen Ink. When she is not writing, she can be found with her nose stuck in a piece of classic literature.

Aubade #1 By Christina Wang

Sky was pitch,

bit of blaring red coming from a stray light.

Great white flood lamps illuminated all corners of the Earth,

skewing existence to be perceived as more simulation in this one dome

rather than reality everywhere. I decided, in that moment, that if the world were to go dark like this,

I wouldn't have minded.

Tall grass tickled our calves and,
after fifty steps in any direction, soaked our shoes,
letting water squelch out with every step.

Eerie, chattering intimacy between this ground, myself, and the stars enunciated only by
the crackle-pop of sneakers against rolling rocks.

We searched for gold.

The careful yet clumsy actions
slipped between needle-forked branches,
tiptoed over densely-packed roots,
and eased through fascination with the sizes of spiderwebs and pinecones.

A love for adventure plus this messy corporeal body. But then,
in entire darkness, a discovery of Pre-Atlantis and dirt.

A discovery of something that is inherently wrong but not necessarily immediate.

A plunge beneath the tidepools.

Humorous relief molded of Georgia's red clay and the distance between branches.

Empty hands but a subconscious fulfillment.

Skies slowly raised their curtains and the pink
peeked over the horizon and stretched.

The hills soon relinquished their bedsheets of morning fog
and out came a blue so large and deep I forgot the sky and the ocean had long separated.

Christina Wang is a student writer at Milton High School. She has been recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Competition. She was also an Atlanta Youth Poet Laureate Finalist. She is an editor at VOX Teen Communications, and has been published there as well as Crashtest Magazine; the Suoo Magazine; in her school's literature magazine,

Globe; and on Teen Ink's website. She speaks four languages and lives her day-to-day life passionately. She is always in search of something interesting.

sahara dreamscape By Hannah Berhane

i feel as though
my spirit has been trapped
in a sunset desert
where oasis is a mirage
wavering out of sight
blinking out of reach

this sahara sun
has left blisters on my soul
and this bitter wind
has swept away
any semblance of faith i had left

and though my eyes water with heat
blinking away sand
my spirit reminds me
that paradise is somewhere beyond this
somewhere beyond you and your sandstorm soul
somewhere past your burning words
somewhere above your tornado laughter

so i will pray prayers coated in honey-sweet hope
and i will tilt my head towards heavens until desert becomes ocean and restlessness
becomes solace

i shall dance on sun-warmed sands until i stumble over the truths beneath me

and perhaps then

hopelessness will become endless dreamscape, and anger will become steady strength,
and mirage will become oasis and i will understand that

this desert is not forever

Hannah is a student at Denver School of the Arts who loves Frank Sinatra, learning new languages, and mangoes. Her work has been published in Canvas Literary Journal and Calliope Literary and Arts Magazine. In her spare time, she plays the piano and daydreams about traveling.

fallen divinity By Hannah Berhane

at dusk they pour from the sky/dazed angels/ falling/pushed from divine heavens/white-gold wings drifting/from candy floss clouds/it's a modern renaissance/dropping onto/beaten paths /trodden on/ by ancient beings/radiating sovereignty/murmuring exalted prayers/ offering themselves/ as sacrifice/ to the tides/falling below/ the ebb/ and flow/ of forgotten dreams/ floating/ in isolated stupor

Hannah is a student at Denver School of the Arts who loves Frank Sinatra, learning new languages, and mangoes. Her work has been published in Canvas Literary Journal and Calliope Literary and Arts Magazine. In her spare time, she plays the piano and daydreams about traveling.

Transplant, Vascular

By Marie Zelaya

They say not
All heroes wear capes.
They're right. Some
Heroes are dead.

Bouquets of syringes cling to
Pallid skin. Tubes snake
Between fingers grasping
For air. The stench of
Morphine is reminiscent of
Ancient poppies.

A family decimated
Under fluorescent lights, eyes
Glazed like the curve of
Fine china. Gray skin matches
Gray eyes. Death
Is not like it is
On TV.

Fear rises along with
The bitterness of
Bile. Lights reflect off
Blue masks as if
This were the dentist.
Open wide. So much of
A fuss as capillaries break on what

Must only be
A piece of meat.

Final goodbyes said as
Lips meet cooling skin.
Elevator doors scream
GOING DOWN as
They close, the valves of
A dying heart.
*Go save
Some lives.*

A final gift is given from
The hands of one victim
To another. How ironic that
For each life saved,
One must
Be lost.

Marie Zelaya is a half-Honduran Michigander who lives with her extended family, a cowardly dog, an extremely fluffy cat, and two enigmatic fish. She very much enjoys playing classical music on the piano, eating hot sauce-covered things, and watching Star Trek.

Fiction

Idiots By Gabriella Clingman

Sabrina liked that she was the only teen librarian and usually the only teen in the library. With very few exceptions, all high schoolers were idiots.

The boy who had just come into the library, face buried in his phone, one grimy earbud hanging over his punk rock shirt, was no exception. He was in Sabrina's class, always wore black, never spoke, and smelled like stale cigarettes. He rarely took off his earbuds, whether he was in class or sitting at Sabrina's otherwise-deserted lunch table. Still, he wasn't the worst person to share a table with. At least he let her read and eat in silence.

"What's the wifi password?" he asked. Sabrina had to resist rolling her eyes. Nobody ever visits the library to read anymore. She pointed to the sign with the wifi password, expecting him to stick in his other earbud and walk away, but he didn't. "I forgot my PIN number to log into my digital library account, and it locked me out. Could you look it up for me?"

Maybe he used the digital library to provide his round-the-clock emo music. Sabrina gave him his PIN and watched him enter it into his phone. For a moment, she glimpsed the materials he'd checked out. He had ten audiobooks, ranging from YA dystopian to children's classics to adult biographies. Could it be possible that he read as much as Sabrina? Did he read during lunch, too?

With a few taps, he downloaded the audiobook of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Sabrina found herself smiling. This boy might be an exception to the idiot rule. "That's my favorite book," she said. "I hope you like it."

The boy smiled back. "See you at lunch." He pushed in his other earbud and walked out the door.

Gabriella Clingman is seventeen and lives in Ohio with her parents and parakeets. She began writing stories when she could hold a pencil and often devours creative nonfiction, classics, and graphic novels in one sitting. Gabriella will transfer to Kent State University and double major in Spanish Literature and Translation and Professional Writing. She plans to work as a translator and teach English as a foreign language to adults abroad. Using her experience as an EFL teacher, Gabriella will start a literary magazine to provide a creative space for immigrants and people whose first language is not English to share their stories.

Hercules By Amelia Ao

The feather-haired boy is about to be seven and has just learned to recite the alphabet backwards. He sits perched on his grandmother's lap, playing with a loose thread of her sweater, twisting it around and around his finger, the tip of his pinkie turning whiter and whiter. His grandmother shakes him gently.

"Look up there. That one's Hercules. Are you paying attention *querido*? What do you see?"

"Hercules." But the air is too heavy, and the stars are too bright and he's too awake to really see Hercules. Instead, he sees his sister's plastic earrings shining in the night sky and the flash of pearls against his mother's frail chest. He sees the squares of light their church's stained-glass windows left on his hand. Soon his grandmother's fingers grasp his arm, and they walk back into the house where he crosses another day off the calendar hanging on the refrigerator door. His father kisses his forehead as he tucks him into bed, and he dreams of Hercules.

He's almost ten and has just gotten the bike he's been asking for for years. The kids in his neighborhood don't play with him because they say he's too small and his father's too quiet and his mother's too dead and therefore he must be cursed, so he rides by himself. He likes it outside. He likes the colors of autumn and how sometimes the wind is so cold it's hard to breathe. Somehow, he's not careful enough and skids into a tree. The rough bark scrapes his forehead. A bird's nest tumbles from one of the high branches and he wills himself not to hear the shatter of the eggs. He bikes back quickly, and his father curses when he sees his tears and his cut but then quickly brings a warm cloth to his forehead.

"Tell me what happened *hijo*. What did you see?"

"I hit a tree. I think a nest fell." He sees flashes of red and gold, the tips of bird feathers out of the corner of his eye. He thinks about how wonderful it would feel to be able to fly. His father shushes him soothingly, and his grandmother makes him those potato *tapas* he loves and tells him more stories of Hercules. At night, he remembers to cross another day off the calendar hanging from the refrigerator, and his father kisses him goodnight. As he drifts off to sleep, he thinks of how those baby birds died by the side of the road and how no one ever said anything about it and no one ever did anything about it.

The boy is older now, and his grandmother has just baked him his very own birthday cake, with fresh strawberries and coils of white frosting. He's too excited about the cake to notice the way her hands shake, the furrows on his father's brow. His grandmother reminds him to think of his wish, to envision it sharply in his head. He blows out the candles, their smoke curling into the cracks of the ceiling. The cake melts into his mouth, and he giggles when his sister accidentally gets frosting stuck in her hair.

“So, what did you wish for? What did you see?” she asks him later.

“I don’t remember.” He does remember, but he can’t tell her that he wished she would stop strewing her barbie dolls all over the floor only to shove them under her bed whenever her friends came over, because he keeps tripping over them. He can’t tell her he wished the kids at school would stop asking about his accent because he doesn’t know either. He can’t tell her he wished the cake would’ve been chocolate because chocolate is too expensive. He can’t tell her he wished their father would look more alive because he’s not supposed to wish for these kinds of things. He can’t tell her he wished he could see their mother again. So he just tells her *buenas noches* and crosses another day off the calendar hanging from the refrigerator. His father doesn’t kiss him goodnight until he asks.

He’s in high school and everything’s changing. The kids are getting taller and meaner; the adults are getting shorter and sadder. A week ago, he listened to his sister crying in the bathroom when she was supposed to be asleep. His grandmother keeps coughing. He can’t remember what his mother looks like anymore; he thinks she only appears in his dreams but he’s not sure. One day he kisses a girl on a rooftop. Her laugh is the shape of wildflowers and her lips taste like plum drops and ash. They stand close together and breathe in the dandelion wine of morning.

“What do you see?”

“Nothing.” Another lie. He sees everything.

“Have you ever thought about it?”

“I don’t want to die.”

“I know.”

“I’ve never wanted to die.”

“Is that the truth?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does.”

The young man walks home alone and does his chores silently because his grandmother’s asleep on the couch, and his father looks like his collar is choking him. He crosses another day off the calendar hanging from the refrigerator and doesn’t bother telling his father goodnight. He thinks about what he said to his rooftop girl and hopes to God that it’s at least part of the truth.

He’s too young yet too old now. He has enough memories, seen enough of the depths of this universe, to last him a thousand lifetimes. Sensing the end of the world, he goes into the bathroom and watches his life pass by in the smudges of the mirror.

“What do you see?” He thinks of his poor, tragic, beautiful family. He thinks of how hard he has tried and cried and laughed and loved and lived. He thinks of robin’s nests and vanilla cakes. He thinks of Hercules. He thinks about crossing another day off the calendar hanging from the refrigerator because it’s almost midnight. But he stays in the bathroom. Because he isn’t really sure he can make it to tomorrow anyway.

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

The Art Show By Emma Wang

Nola says nothing even though she dislikes the way the letters run over each other like a herd of sheep on the name tag they had given her the first day at the art museum. *Eleanor (Yuxin) Xia*. She dislikes the way the brackets confine her middle name, her Chinese name, creating an unnecessary pause. A crowd of tourists parts, revealing behind them a miniature sculpture of a contorted woman with little black holes for eyes. Nola overhears a middle-aged woman say to her friend about how the sculpture brings about the fragility of womanhood and a bored amusement fills her, the kind that tickles the back of her throat. She would've liked to stop the woman, to ask her politely to attend the presentation that's about to start in ten minutes, but resists. It is not her job to pick and choose.

Ever since Nola graduated from college two months ago, she has been working as an intern at *Alte Nationalgalerie*, tucked away in a cubicle sorting through strange-looking porcelain pillows until a week ago when her manager arranged for her to guide tourist and, at the end of the week, to interpret a particular piece of art for an audience. Not feeling an immediate urge to tell her parents about this accomplishment, Nola stared at her phone for a few minutes, and then thinking her hesitation pointless had called home.

Nola leans against the white wall as tourists amble by, watching them with a mix of amusement and pity. Just an hour ago, she had spent more than twenty minutes explaining the cultural implications of *The Abbey in the Oakwood* to an elderly couple while watching their rippling foreheads smooth themselves and their heads bob up and down. Nola thought it rather comical that all the tourists, all of her fellow art history grads, and all the other interns, took themselves and their fine art so damn seriously. *Fine art*, Nola thought, *fine art indeed*. They sought meaning in their art and in others, believing paintings to be bigger than life. That is their motto. Bigger than life.

At the end of her sophomore year, when Nola called her father to tell him that she had chosen her major to be art history, the mathematician nearly cried with what Nola could

only hope was pity. She didn't tell him that she too hated art, but joyed in his dismay. It wasn't what he had dreamed of when he held her in his arms for the first time, Nola was sure, but in her mind, the mathematician told himself that nothing ever turns out the way one expects.

A few minutes before her presentation Nola slips into the tiny white room. She doesn't have the PowerPoint she had promised, doesn't have a speech prepared, doesn't want to give the audience the satisfaction of getting something they would've expected. Nola seats herself in the front row and waits for the room to fill up. Indistinguishable chatter surrounds her like a flock of migrating geese. The subject of her presentation, *Monk by the Sea*, feeds off the viewer's desire to understand it, and Nola has been chosen to guide them. As the lights dim and the curator walks to the podium, Nola glances back at the woman behind her and sees it is the same one who earlier commented on the sculpture of the woman. They exchange smiles.

The curator gives a brief introduction to the painting (created in the early nineteenth century by Caspar David Friedrich) and to Nola (a brilliant intern and recent college grad) and the crowd applauds. Nola smiles at the curator as she walks behind the podium. The crowd watches her and breathes as one. As her eyes wander to the back of the crowd she sees a shadowy face ripple in the darkness, and then recognizes that it belongs to her father. She glimpses a small nod and a smile, perhaps out of pity, perhaps pride. When Nola starts she doesn't talk about Theophile Gautier as she has planned. She doesn't say that the idea that morals can be extracted from art is ridiculous, doesn't talk about nothingness and how artists create meaning because of a deprecating sense of self-pity. Instead she gives them the classical interpretation of *Monk by the Sea*, one that art history professors would give in a normal college course. She explains how the vastness of the sky and the smallness of the monk encourage a sense of terrifying beauty. She talks about the historical background of the work and how it all ties together into one beautiful mess of *meaning*. Nola talks until her tongue twists into cursive letters and the crowd bends under her words. When she finishes, the lights turn back on and

the crowd stands up and applauds, taking pride in their ability to understand what Nola has told them. Nola smiles. Looking over to where her father was mere minutes ago, she sees that he has gone, presumably to the bathroom.

Emma Wang is a seventeen-year-old writer born in Xi'an, China and currently attending Indian Springs School in Alabama. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Arts and Writing awards, and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *The Harpoon Review*, *The Mire*, *K'in Literary Journal*, and more. She founded and co-runs the Goya Writer's Workshop, an international online workshop for young writers. On days when she remembers it, she likes to blog at www.lifes-lemons.com. She is usually tired.

Perihelion By Marie You

Solar Seth Smith stays true to his name.

The alliteration rolls off the tongue and I hear it everywhere despite being new at this school. The S's of his name bounce from one pair of lips to another, creating this sibilance, not unlike that of a snake. I hate snakes. I hate overachievers too and Solar Seth Smith is nothing if not an overachiever.

He's the president of the student council and the captain of the senior debate team. He has a royal flush of other titles, ready to be picked out and brandished as weapons.

I think that I will hate Solar because people like him, they sit atop a throne built with their trophies, 4.0 GPA's and all of their parents' love. Meanwhile we stand at the bottom looking up at them, modern gods, apotheoses, reminding us of our inferiority. It's true. There's him, then there's me, repeating grade nine again, a bewildered sheep in the flock.

It astounds me that everyone else would just sit there and accept that their lives revolve around another sun. Accept that their lives are adjectives to another narrative. Accept that their lives will never be good enough to have their own narratives.

I don't accept it. I struggle against the chains of gravity reeling me in, and I try my best to drift from that radiance until I can't see it anymore. That throne. That shrine. That sun.

That is, until I can't.

• • •

At tutoring club, he smiles at me from across the table.

"I assume you are Ida?"

"I am only here because it is mandatory." My words are thin and bruised. He pays no mind.

"Which unit are you working on?" I don't reply, because he is already grabbing my opened notebook. His answer is proclaimed atop the page black in irate biro.

"Space Goddamn Space."

"Did you know there is an asteroid named Ida? 243 Ida, in fact."

"Did you know you are named after the sun? Did you know everything revolves around the sun?"

Solar laughs. The cacophony of it is jarring in our little space where there is nothing except the sun and if you squint, an asteroid.

The people neighbouring us turn their heads. I get the impression that he doesn't laugh.

"You are not the first to make that metaphor."

He makes a little smile again, this time sandpaper-rough with too many teeth.

"Did you know that it is lonely to be the sun? Everything revolves around y-, around it, but they are locked into orbit, and never close enough."

A startled snort weasels its way out in spite of myself.

"Did you know it is pretty lonely for 2-something-4 Ida too? Out there pushing against

all the other little asteroids, scraped raw.”

He blinks the vulnerability in his eyes away, and this time his laugh is one befitting of the sun.

“You do know something about space.”

• • •

I come in at the end of the week and he is already there, head bowed as he listens to music. His eyes dart up as my backpack thumps against the floor.

“Trembling Blue Stars,” he declares.

“What?”

“That’s the band I’m listening to.”

“Stars are not blue. The sun isn’t blue.”

“The brightest ones burn blue. Sirius, Canopus, Vega...”

“And Solar?”

His left eye twitches. “Solar isn’t a star.”

“No. It’s a metaphor.”

The silence stretches between us until he smiles like it’s an offering. Offerings, in my experience, are never something given willingly, but given in a false belief that things will be better.

“I guess I am,” --- a laugh that is too loud --- “Solar Seth Smith, bright and blue.”

As I study he points out different concepts to me, and I can tell how much he loves space by the way his eyes dance and crinkle at the corners. I can tell how much he hates the sun by the way he sighs, like the hiss of a deflating balloon.

I can’t blame him.

• • •

The next time when I come in he quizzes me on vocabulary.

“Universe.”

“Everything that exists including all matter and energy.”

“Asteroid.”

“A small rocky body orbiting the sun.” Maybe I am a metaphor as well. I think of 243 Ida somewhere out there.

“Solar eclipse.”

“A phenomenon where the accomplishments of Solar Seth Smith overshadow everyone else’s.”

To my surprise, and perhaps disappointment, he’s calm. “Haha, very funny. Try again.”

“An eclipse in which the sun is obscured by the moon.”

“Good. Supernova.”

“When the bright stars die.”

“Indeed.” His next smile is a classic smile of avoidance. “This is an important concept, care to elaborate?”

“The star runs out of fuel and collapses under its own gravity.” The metaphor hangs heavy between us, and it is a race of “Who will change the topic first?” He doesn’t.

“Precisely. Stars much more massive than our sun go through nucleosynthesis, fusing hydrogen, then helium, fusing way up until iron. Then, boom.”

I don’t remind him that there is no sound in space.

• • •

“What happens to the smaller, dimmer stars then? The sun, for example?” “They turn into white dwarfs. Quite depressing, really.”

• • •

The stars that burn blue, do they ‘die’ quicker?”

“I think you know the answer.”

• • •

Within a few weeks, I notice his attachment to this particular brand of blue energy drink. He drinks two cans during our session and takes out one more as he exits. In the library's trashcan, more blue aluminum corpses. I ask him about it the next time.

"I thought we already covered that bright stars burn blue." His bony fingers shake like an addict's as he dumps the vile stuff into his throat, knuckles white with tension.

With more and more certainty I know that is true. I look at the heartbreaking blue in his eyes, the slate blue that bleeds into deep circles under them, the electric blue tainting his lips, and the protruding blue veins on his china-white wrists. He takes another swig. I stare.

"What? It keeps me awake. Alert. It's my fuel. These days I barely sleep."

"You should sleep."

"I try, but I startle awake all the time. Besides, my house is too big, too empty. I'm a ghost haunting my own house." A drop of blue catches on his collar.

"You should talk to your parents about it."

"It's too trivial for me to talk to them about it. Besides, they'll be glad that I have more time to study."

It saddens me that he is reduced to a machine. This boy, he's so young, yet the weight of a solar system is upon his shoulders, and I don't know how much longer he can hold it. He is the most hardworking, earnest, persevering person in the world, but I don't think he knows that. He is the most hardworking, earnest, persevering person in the world, but I don't think he will ever believe it.

To the sun, its light is never bright enough.

• • •

"Are you lonely?"

"There is a difference between being lonely and being alone."

"I know."

...

At the school talent show I watch him play the violin. He cuts an elegant figure, with his crisp white shirt, polished oxfords, and a tie ironed so straight it might as well be a sword. *The Flight of the Bumblebee* trills in the air, feverish. It's like the bees have tarantism.

The last note is washed over by applause. They clap because he is the sun. I clap because I think I'm the only one to notice that God, his fingers are bleeding.

"I missed three notes." He tells me as he wipes chapped fingertips on his shirt, smearing it with rouge.

"That was amazing, regardless."

A tired smile blooms on his face.

His phone rings, Fur Elise slicing the space between us. He flashes a smile and hurries away. His words find their way back to me in the auditorium, airy, unnatural.

"Mum! How are you?"

"I'm sorry." An angry silence. "Mother, how are you?"

"Of course I understand. You're too busy." To see your own son, I think.

"Not bad. I missed a couple of notes."

"Yes, mother. I will do better next time."

As he walks away, his gait is measured, deliberate, every echo of his footsteps proud and lonely

• • •

When a star supernovas, it does so without warning, in absolute silence.

When the news reaches me, it has already stunned the whole school into choked shock.

He fell asleep in a math class, and when they tried to wake him up at the end, he didn't.

The clique of doctor wannabes is calling it "sleep apnea."

It is a wonder he did not burn out quicker. The websites say sleep apnea sufferers have poor sleep and weak hearts.

The graveyard of blue cans was a testament to that.

• • •

At the assembly, his parents walk onstage, with the heavy tread of the guilty. They killed him.

Look at them! They remind me of old leather couches at garage sales that no one ever buys. They are hunched over, worn with age, their skin shriveled and cracked.

I remember what Solar told me seemingly eons ago, and I snort, making a thousand pairs of eyes glare daggers at me.

“What happens to the smaller, dimmer stars then?”

They are white dwarves: once stars in their own right, but never bright enough. No one remembers them, those burnt out bodies tucked away in black pockets of the universe, bitter and small.

So, they force-fed their dreams of stars and legacies to their son, a son who was stupid, who never disappointed them. I wonder what they saw in him, did they see a boy, or like everyone else except me, a star? Did they see a reflection of themselves?

They walk downstage, the mother minuscule against the monstrous bouquet of white roses the principal gives her.

I desperately want to scream at them, ask them if they are happy now, but I gather they haven't been happy for a long time.

A girl makes a speech, her words graceful, sympathetic yet absolutely worthless. She talks about his perfect GPA, his perfect smile and his perfect manners.

Solar's existence was pathetic, really. No one will remember *him*. They will remember the sun. He is the person everyone will lament about politely at the high school reunion. He's the cautionary tale they will tell their friends and their children. He's the picture they will stumble across in their faded yearbooks decades later, stare at, then cover with a turn of a page.

His parents will cry.

I will grieve.

• • •

I go online and search for Trembling Blue Stars' concerts. If they are playing near me, I will buy two tickets, one for me and one for Solar.

They disbanded years ago.

• • •

We stand at his funeral. It is a gloomy, sunless day as if the universe mourns for him. His parents sob, ugly in their oversized black suit and bloated dress.

They place white and pink flowers on his casket. I follow suit and gently lower a few strung together hydrangeas. They are blue, a last commemoration.

The last shovelfuls of dirt cover the dark isolated little world where he, the sun sleeps. I close my eyes. Something in me shudders, whimpers. With my exhale, the water streaming down my face dissipates into the dust and joins him.

Marie You is a ninth grader in a small Canadian town. She enjoys writing, drawing, eating an unseemly amount of chocolate, and listening to "It's not a phase, Mom," music. You can find her nesting in a library with Arthurian lore in hand, or plopped on a sofa typing up her newest ideas.

The Woman in the Mirror By April Wang

Women disappeared every couple of years in Cathy's town. Spread out and swallowed by the endless rolling green hills, or so the townspeople said. They were never interested enough to find out. Cathy refused to be the next vanishing act. Unlike the others, Cathy was willful. Always kept herself busy, her husband would say. But just like the others, Cathy was confined to her house. Something about the trouble that bored housewives stirred up made the town wary of women like her. So Cathy did what she does best—kept herself on her toes. She color-coded all the pillows on her polyester couch, then rearranged them in order of what color looked the best where, vacuumed

both her vintage rugs and the beige minivan, and reapplied her makeup for no one but the mirror to see.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and Cathy was spread out against the afternoon lull. Time was poured into the ravine of the day, and for the first time in her life, Cathy could not mop it up. She had checked her makeup in the corridor mirror three times, but only the third time did the woman in the mirror speak up.

Hello, my life, the woman in the mirror said. Cathy started at the sound of her name, glancing down the corridor. She peered at her reflection in the mirror, suspicious of the drooping corner of her lips and the brown eyes staring back at her.

Cathy said, *What? What life? No life of yours.*

Don't be so surprised, Cathy. You knew I was coming.

I did?

It happens to everyone. You know, when the hills start to roll and the afternoons start to stretch out on your lawn...You get it.

I don't think I do, Cathy muttered to herself. She could feel her limbs spreading out against the afternoon lull, painfully aware of time's slow crawl around her throat. How had she become unstuck from the mirror?

But no matter how much Cathy refused to be the next disappearing woman, she was drawn toward the woman in the mirror. Her reassuring, drooping smile and familiar brown eyes captivated Cathy, and talking to the mirror was refreshing, like she had found new pillows to rearrange and take her mind off of her husband's tired, concerned eyes.

So the women talked. They talked about her husband's receding hairline and his little whiskers that he called a mustache. They imitated his stubby hands brushing through and through his thin hair and the way he raised his left eyebrow whenever he said something condescending. Cathy felt her body piecing itself back together, and light

flashed off the mirror's glass, and the woman in the mirror flickered, and all worries were swept aside like dust. The woman in the mirror vanished, reflecting nothing but walls and light. The woman-less house yawned, the way a cat does after devouring its owner. It was nine o'clock in the evening, and the husband finally returned home to an empty house and a still mirror.

April Wang is a student from Southern California, Shanghai, and Chicago. She has been influenced by the quiet rain of Irvine, the chatter of Shanghai pollution, and the rolling cornfields of Illinois. Her work has previously been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers and the Word of Mouth Literary Arts Journal. She edits for HerCulture and the Beckman Chronicle.

My Girl Lights Fires By Avra Margariti

Bella slips into my bed reeking of smoke. She lays her palm against my cheek, and the oily residue it leaves behind makes me think of gasoline.

"What time is it?" I mumble into my pillow.

I try to roll over and face her, but she nudges me back and slings an arm around my waist.

This isn't the first time Bella has swung by after hours. Usually, her visits are accompanied by a fifth of vodka swiped from her family's liquor cabinet and a batch of kisses, delivered silently and breathlessly so as not to alert my mother sleeping down the hall.

She nuzzles my neck. "Don't worry about it. Go back to sleep."

I blame my next words on my dazed, surreal state of neither dream nor waking. “Did you miss me?”

Bella’s laughter rolls like thunder and lightning through my body. “Very much.”

When I wake up again Bella has gone, the sooty outline on my white sheets the sole proof she was ever here.

The next morning, my entire class is abuzz, an aberration from the expected lethargy of early-morning homeroom. My friend Markus leans against my desk.

“Hey, Laura. Did you hear about the fire in the old warehouse down Starfall Lane?”

“What?” I sputter, suddenly parched.

Markus nods. His crooked bangs swish back and forth with the force of his enthusiasm. “The entire west wing burned to a crisp last night. We used to play Spin the Bottle there. Crazy, right?”

“Crazy...” I bring the end of my braid to my nose. My hair still carries a faint fireside whiff. I remember with a jolt that it’s Bella’s and my one-month anniversary tomorrow.

Although we have different class schedules, Bella always manages to steal a pocket of time for me. My feet propel me through the hordes of students toward her locker. Faraway flames hiss in my ears.

“Where were you last night?” I blurt the moment I reach her, forgetting to be casual.

“In your room, being your own personal dream catcher,” Bella replies.

Her warm chestnut eyes glimmer as her red-painted lips stretch into an easy smile; the picture of innocence. She leans in to kiss me, but I place a finger on her mouth to stop her approach. Her lip piercing brushes against my skin and sends a sizzling current coursing through me.

“Anyway,” I say, trying to mask my labored breathing behind faux-indignation. “Don’t you have a class to get to? I’m not tutoring you if you fail.”

Bella’s unapologetic laughter rises above the bustle of the hallway. She opens her locker to retrieve her textbooks, and I peek inside. A picture of us, taken on an amusement park date a week after she asked me out. The strawberry-colored teddy bear I won for her that same day. And pressed up against the bear, books of matches stacked in haphazard rows and a set of ash-stained clothes. I look away.

This is all so new, so fragile. I don’t want Bella’s secret to complicate things between us.

I don’t wait for her after school. Instead, I trek past the gentrified part of town, to the old dirt roads running along the waterfront. I pause when I reach the abandoned warehouse, a pigeon-gray smear against the blue of the sky. Tilting my head back, I take in the entire dilapidated glory of it.

The first thing I notice when I squeeze through the gap in the chain-locked gate is the blanket of ash underfoot. It must have rained down from the cracks in the ceiling. It sticks in a thin film on my white sneakers and stains each fingerprint when I try to wipe it away. The big stairway leading to the upper floors is intact, and so are most of the rooms.

Markus might have been exaggerating, but it still looks bad. The west wing is torched, every wall kissed by the flames. The fire’s memory lingers in the blackened charcoal spots and the scorched detritus accumulated on the floor. A smell of burnt hair permeates the air like a faulty hairdryer.

I imagine Bella standing in the doorway just as I am, the flames casting shadow and light across her face, her silver lip-ring glittering like a fire-forged gem. Goosebumps bloom across my skin, and I don't know if it's due to unease or awe.

—

“So,” Bella says, “how should we celebrate? I'm told one month is a milestone. Most high school relationships don't last past it. I don't know what the statistics for same-sex romance are, but you get the gist.”

Her voice is nonchalant, but her eyes dart around the hallway without landing on anything and the toe of her shoe scuffs against the scarred linoleum floor.

All week, I had giddily filled page after page of my planner, trying to come up with the perfect anniversary date. Something classic, like dinner and an indie movie, or maybe something daring, like a romantic picnic where the entire town could see us. Instead, I find myself saying, “I've got too much homework. Plus, Mr. Ramirez hinted at a pop quiz tomorrow.”

I tell myself that I'm putting the date off because of smoke and suspicions. But a little panicking part of me has wanted to pull the fire alarm on our relationship even before I visited the warehouse on Starfall Lane.

“Oh.” Bella frowns for a moment before she paints a bright expression back across her face. “I could help you study. I know you're a nervous wreck right before a quiz.”

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I really need to ace this test.”

“Don't worry about it,” Bella says, her smile reassuring. “I'll find some other way to entertain myself.”

I let her walk me to my next class with a searing certainty that I will be following her tonight.

—

Groggy, jittery, exhausted, I look for Bella first thing in the morning.

“I know what you did last night. I followed you.” I want it to sound like an accusation, but my words are tired, losing steam.

Bella shoots me a smile, gone before I can decode it. “You think I didn’t know? You’re not as sneaky as you think.”

I think of last night, the dumpster fires Bella left like trail of breadcrumbs across town.

“Why are you doing this? Don’t you know it’s dangerous? Not to mention illegal.”

“I love watching the flames. They’re beautiful, and they make my heart quiet.”

I stare at her, unable to process her words. I expected her to deny it, or at least weave some lie. Not this crippling honesty. Her smile contains the duality of a child making mischief and of a girl being humbled by a force of nature. It makes my throat tight with anger. With *longing*.

“I only burn things people don’t need, and I’m always careful not to lose control of the fire. There are no witnesses. It’s only me and...”

“Your messed-up hobby?” I snap. I can feel the cracks forming between us, a hairline fissure growing bigger, and I’m not sure if it’s her doing or mine.

Bella's smile turns small and hurt before fading altogether. "Laura, come on. Talk to me. What is this really about?"

I take a step back when she reaches out to link our fingers together. For the first time since I met her, I evade her touch.

My breath rasps in and out of my throat; my tongue tastes like ash and charred meat. I don't even know why I'm so angry. It's because of the fires and the secrecy, sure. But as I stand there staring at her open expression, I realize something else. Maybe I'm looking for a reason to fight because I don't know if our relationship can withstand it.

The truth is, I've been having doubts about us. They creep up when Bella is away and I start wondering why she would ever go out with me when she could have any boy or girl she wanted. They spike when boys I've known all my life ask if they can get a ticket to the 'lesbian show.' They cut deep when I watch the news, read the statistics, or when I hear the whispers in the hallways. And now, all of those worries are threatening to engulf us and the anniversary date I keep postponing.

"I... I have to go," I say, moving farther down the hallway, away from Bella and all the confusion caused by her presence.

She doesn't try to stop me but instead calls after me, "I'll be at the shipyard tonight. Please come."

Her dark eyes follow my retreat. I can feel their concern, their tenderness. The sensation of her gaze lingers even after I've burst out into the parking lot.

The truth is, I'm scared of the connection between us, those tight wires that quiver and pulse with electricity. I've never felt anything close to this before, and I don't know if I should embrace it or run away.

I'm afraid of getting burned, and it has nothing to do with matches or tinder.

—

Deep into the night, I lie in bed, thinking. I bury my nose in my pillow, but I only catch the scent of lavender detergent and my everyday shampoo. There's no trace of smoke. No proof that Bella was ever here. I get up and pace around the small space. My room is catalogue-perfect, everything in order—just as I like it. The only thing out of place is inside my drawer, tucked beneath my diaries and old school notebooks. I take out the box of matches I swiped from Bella's locker and twirl it between my fingers for a few minutes. A package so small. So harmless. So full of chaos and possibility.

I take the matches with me back to bed. At times I feel like my whole life is scripted, but this is new and unfamiliar. I want it to fill me with excitement, but my brain knows all too well how to be scared. So I bring Bella's face to mind. I imagine the way my pulse gets out of sync whenever she's near, another diversion from its steady, boring routine. Holding the matchbox makes me feel closer to her, somehow, and I don't shy away from the feeling.

Somewhere from within, I draw the courage to light the first match. I watch the tiny dancing flame, transfixed by the way it consumes the match's stick body. I don't notice when the flame reaches my thumb and forefinger. My fingers get singed, and I drop the dead match on my bed sheets. I imagine Bella beside me, taking my hand in hers ever so gently, teasing me a bit before she kisses it all better.

Lurching to my feet, I put on my coat in one swift motion. I don't feel scared walking the empty streets alone at night. I know Bella will be waiting for me, and that certainty is enough to light up the world.

The old shipyard has been out of use for decades. These days, it's an ancient, corroded husk whole generations of kids have been utilizing to ride their bikes and smoke their

weed in secret. I've never done either of those things, but the thought of breaking the rules makes me feel like liquid fire is flowing through my bloodstream. Even before I've woven my way through the labyrinth of metal and decay, I catch the telltale gleam of flames.

Bella stands before a small open fire. Her hair is draped over one shoulder, a red scarf coiled twice around her neck.

"You came."

She doesn't disguise the relief in her voice. She keeps surprising me, this girl. We've been friends for almost a year and girlfriends for longer than a month, but I still don't know her all that well.

I *want* to know her, pyromania and all.

"This wasn't exactly the anniversary date I had in mind," I say.

I join her at the fire. For a few moments, we stand side by side, watching the flames flicker and tremble in their pit.

"Help me find more kindling?" Bella asks.

The fire illuminates her profile. Her eyelashes cast elongated shadows against the honey-tint of the flames against her skin. It's beautiful. The fire. Her smile. Everything.

My breath catches in my throat.

I say, "Will you show me how to make the fire stronger?"

Her smile turns brilliant. I follow her around the shipyard. Together we gather dry branches and bunched-up newspapers to bring back to the cinderblock pit.

Bit by bit, I feed the fire, making it bigger, stronger. I watch the flames climb up to the night sky, blazing orange against pure black. I close my eyes, and the flames paint the back of my lids strawberry-red. The crackling sounds combine with the smoky smell to touch a place inside me, somewhere close to my heart. I don't know what it is that makes Bella's heart so loud and unruly that only starting fires can soothe it, but her presence has always quieted the maddening whirl of my brain.

I reach out blindly and grasp Bella's hand in mine. Our fingers interlace, and I feel more right than I've felt in a long time.

"I'm sorry I've been so afraid," I say, trusting that Bella will know I'm not referring to the fires.

"It's not your fault," she says gently. "I know you came out of the closet because of me. Maybe you weren't ready. But you should know I'm here for you, even if you don't want us to be together anymore."

My eyes fly open. "No. I want you."

I didn't come out to the world because of Bella; I did it *for* her. For us. I wanted to be the kind of girlfriend she deserved, not someone trapped, ashamed, and afraid of her own shadow. And maybe I failed at that last part, but not anymore.

Bella smiles, fire and stars and determination in her brown eyes. "And I want you, too."

I'm the one who initiates the kiss. It's sweet like a sugared fruit at first. Slow, maybe a bit tentative. I pour all the love and frustration of this last month into it, all the uncharted hope I discovered within myself tonight. Then her piercing rubs against the inside of my

lips and sends sizzling sparks of electricity from my tingling mouth all the way to my toes.

When our mouths part, Bella laughs and pulls me into a hug. Entwined, we stand before the fire. I close my eyes again and allow the warmth to envelop me.

Avra Margariti is a queer Social Work undergrad from Greece. She enjoys storytelling in all its forms and writes about diverse identities and experiences. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Forge Literary*, *The Colored Lens*, *Argot Magazine*, *The Arcanist*, and other venues.

Just Not Sad Enough By Danielle Sherman

The rejection notice feels cold and heavy in my hands.

I sit in a chair outside Ms. Bates' office—Ms. Bates, the counselor and school newspaper editor. You wouldn't find a single comma out of place in those sports articles. So, in a way, I already know why I'm here. *You did this to yourself, didn't you?*

Once the tick of the analog clock has faded to white noise, the wooden door swings open, and Ms. Bates beckons me inside. I wipe my palms on my jeans as I sit in the plastic chair; Ms. Bates has a swivel chair, a testament to her superiority. The door clicks shut.

Ms. Bates is a short, brown-haired woman; it is easy to imagine her with two kids in college, maybe a boy and a girl, and their university stickers are definitely slapped on the bumper of her Subaru. Not that I've ever seen her car. She gives me one of those smiles so often found in educators who are convinced they can change kid's lives, but there's a bit of quinoa still stuck behind her incisor.

“Jess, how you’ve been? Thanks for coming in today,” she says with the same stale sweetness as the lollipops in the glass bowl beside her nameplate.

“Mhmm,” I say, because my heart’s already beating fast.

Ms. Bates must have sensed my anxiety or seen the way I fiddle with the paper in my hand, because she sits down gently as if the two of us were on a teeter-totter. “Don’t worry, honey, you’re not in trouble,” she tells me. “I just happened to see something I wanted to talk to you about. You know how I’m in charge of the school newspaper, right?”

“Yeah. It’s really good,” I say lamely. It’s actually pretty bad.

I feel that prickling sting behind the lids that renders it difficult to sustain eye contact. When Ms. Bates opens up her desk drawer, my will flies faster than the weird kids who sprint to the cafeteria, and I finally break. My gaze shifts to the lollipops and their vibrant cellophane wrappers.

“Well, honey,” Ms. Bates continues, “I read all the submissions the students send to the newspaper, and that includes the little writing contest we held last quarter. I read the entry you submitted. You like to write?”

Ms. Bates is not the baseball coach, so I truly wonder why she throws me curveballs instead of getting on with it. But I smile despite the little squirrel that’s squirming around in my stomach, and my fingers fold the corner of the rejection notice. “I guess,” I say. “Just for fun.”

“It’s always good to have a hobby. An outlet.” Ms. Bates sagely nods behind the rims of the glasses she bought at Costco. “But when I was looking at your writing, I saw some things that concerned me.”

“Oh.” I glance down at the rejection slip, at the note that asked me to come see Ms. Bates Thursday during lunch. I had expected this to happen before I had even received it—I had expected this to happen as soon as I turned in that stupid story. But the part of me with pencil shavings for a spine still wants to tell her that I really am a good kid, that there is nothing strange going on, and there is no need to worry. I keep my mouth shut with an effort.

At last, Ms. Bates withdraws the papers from her open desk drawer and sets them between us gingerly, like the ink is gunpowder. “I want to talk with you about this,” she said, “not to punish you, but just to understand.” She’s going for the motherly warmth of a cozy hearth, but it feels more like the frying circuits of an overheated computer.

I stare at the papers and the sloppy staple holding them together. I had wanted to get the staple at a perfect forty-five-degree angle, but, as usual, things hadn’t worked out the way I wanted.

Ms. Bates clears her throat and speaks to fill my silence. “Let’s see here.” She looks at the typing slathered across the pages but doesn’t actually read it. “Your story was about... pirates? In... space?”

“Mhmm. They go on an adventure.”

“An *adventure*.” I notice a slight raise of a penciled-in eyebrow. “With all kinds of *action*, I noticed. A swordfight. And the ending...”

“What is it?” I lean forward, eager to get this over with, but I can feel those pencil shavings at the same time, coalescing into a hard ball of lead. I am determined not to give in.

“Well, it’s happy.” Ms. Bates puts her thumb beneath her chin and an index finger over her lips, her features furrowed. “Your characters, they win the big battle. They end up

friends, and all of them are alive. Do you see how a counselor like me would be worried about this?”

I shrug and shift lowered eyes to my name printed on the incriminating evidence. “I guess so. Doesn’t mean anything, though. It was just an idea I had.”

“I don’t think so, Jess. To me, this sounds like a cry for help.” She reaches out her hand as if to pat mine but stops just short for dramatic effect. “I’ve seen many teenagers call out to me through their writing like this. And as someone who cares about you, I don’t want to ignore the warning signs.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with me, really. Just what’s so off about it in the first place?” I demand, surprised at my own boldness. “What is so horrible about stories and fantasies?”

“It’s just not... It’s just not sad enough.” Ms. Bates sighs, but I think she’s excited to have a hard case to crack. I can tell she’s secretly impressed with how artfully she extends her sympathy. “The other kids, you know, didn’t write this kind of stuff,” she says. “Sarah Williams wrote about high school heartbreak. Casey Johnson wrote about his abusive father. That’s the kind of thing teens are *supposed* to write about. Those are the kinds of submissions the newspaper likes to receive.”

“And you aren’t concerned about *them*?”

“Of course not!” An impatient grin pulls at the woman’s thin lips. “Kids are always filling up their pages with angst and darkness. That’s what makes it art, isn’t it? That’s what makes it good!”

Ms. Bates waits expectantly for my enthusiastic reply, but I just cross my arms and stare at a stain in the floor carpeting. I was already familiar with this fact; I had read the newspaper countless times and marveled at how eloquently ninth-graders had

described their depression in tear-smearred letters. Some pieces were even written entirely without capitalization—a real showstopper.

But I didn't understand—still don't understand—why suffering makes something more meaningful. Why despair makes something better written. The stubborn child inside of me, the one who appreciates a positive emotion every now and then, refuses to nod along with Ms. Bates. I can feel our teeter-totter rocking back and forth.

Still she is determined to convince me. “You are a good writer,” Ms. Bates tells me, fishing for all the best movie lines she could remember, “but you could be a *great* one. There's just something missing, and it alarmed me, that's all. Usually I'll see at least one mention of a coffee shop to symbolize tortured artistry and loneliness or maybe some nostalgic flashbacks in italics. But I couldn't find any second person in your piece, and that sent up a big red flag.”

“I was just trying to be unique,” I say, nearing exasperation. “Kayla Dawson has published a sob-inducing little memoir about her eating disorder in the past *five issues*. I thought maybe happy could be new or interesting or powerful or—”

“But happy isn't deep.” Ms. Bates shakes her head. She leans back in her swivel chair and laces her fingers like a therapist closing in on the eureka moment. “People always like some good oppression. The stories of all the emotionally damaged and internally conflicted children are just so *important*. Their voices deserve to be heard—or do you disagree?”

I realize that Ms. Bates is on the offensive now, and I have leapt right into the sugar-sticky mousetrap of that deceptively welcoming lollipop bowl. “No, I—” I shake my head vehemently, because God forbid I find those such-important stories too dramatic, too flowery, or too unoriginal. Those kids have already been through enough as it is. Could I dare disagree with stricken lamentations?

“Jess, I know the advertisement asked for short stories,” Ms. Bates continues, eyes gleaming now that the kill is near, “but that doesn’t mean fun little adventures anymore. At your age, excitement is shallow, and innocence is privilege, and standard narrative structure is just so *naïve*. Can’t you think back on anything that made you cry or gave you trauma? Any racial or religious persecution? Not even a broken friendship? Because that’s what impresses people—it makes you sound so very *intellectual*.”

The fervor in her voice and the almost-wicked shine to her eyes warps Ms. Bates to resemble a rabid animal, if only for a second. In that moment, however, I feel a cold kind of dread that presses its clammy hand around me until I shrink into myself. Her words don’t make sense to me, but a persistent thought, a hopeless desperation, prods the back of my mind. *You want to get published in the newspaper, don’t you?*

“It’s just that everybody’s trying to make themselves seem different in the same exact way,” I protest meekly.

Ms. Bates gives me playful, narrowed eyes; she knows she’s already won. In the end, I am no match for her and her swivel chair. She might say this only goes to show that satisfying conclusions are the least interesting.

“I’ll tell you what,” she says, tapping a finger to my sorry excuse for prose. “I can see you’re coming around, and I know you have real potential. We’ll try an exercise to fix your mindset. I want you to give a second try at this submission, and maybe this time you’ll see things in a new light.”

I think about my name on the rejection notice, and then I mentally transfer it to the contributors’ segment of the school newspaper. My words printed on pages other people will read, even if the words are slathered so thick with emotion you can’t quite see the point underneath the shiny surface. I bounce my head lightly and offer a small smile without showing my teeth. I get off the teeter-totter and out of my chair, but I leave my story behind.

A day later, I sit with my notebook in my lap and chew on my pencil eraser, but instead of drawing doodles and constructing plot outlines, I close my eyes and pretend I'm a space pirate. Except I haven't won the grand battle; the enemy's cannons were just too loud, and their swords were just too sharp. I imagine that all my friends have been killed, all my treasure stolen, and all my hope extinguished—maybe that I even lost an eye, so I have to wear an eyepatch now.

Then I write about how sad and lonely I am, taking care to use second person when I'm actually referring to myself, and including one-word paragraphs to showcase true flashes of genius. I throw a skull in there for a real edgy metaphor. When I'm done, I think I feel better. Like a real writer.

Still, the acceptance notice feels cold and heavy in my hands.

Danielle Sherman is a sophomore in high school who wants to pursue a career in writing and editing. She is currently a First Reader for Polyphony Lit and has been published in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards' past anthologies. Aside from writing, she loves soccer, art, and her local library.

These are the Stars By Jieyan Wang

The stars are made in the Cave. Every few months, on Flying Day, glowing cubes the size of refrigerators rise from the mouth of the Cave. They're blinding white, electric blue, and tangerine orange. People from the Surface gather in picnics to watch the cubes rise until the boxes become little more than pinpoint lights in the night sky. Then they go home and forget about the stars until Flying Day comes again.

Gumby used to be one of the picnickers. Before illness swept them away, his parents took him to watch the birth of the stars every Flying Day. Now, a lady in a black-and-white suit is telling him that she will take him to the Cave. She explains that she called all of Gumby's relatives, but nobody would take him. Gumby asks if he can gather his things. The lady says no because that'll only make it harder from him to move on. Then, taking his hand, she leads him into a white car.

As she drives, she assures him, "Don't worry. There's always a place for you."

The lady leads Gumby below the Surface, winding down stairs of black rock. The flashlight in the lady's hand is the only light they have. After walking for an hour, the lady announces that they have arrived at Gumby's room. She pushes open the metal door. Inside, there is a mattress rolled out on the floor with a blanket on top of it. A stack of new clothes sits in the corner along with a flickering oil lamp. Gumby is exhausted, but the lady has a broad smile on her face. She hands him a stack of pamphlets. A few of the titles read *For a Brighter Day: Exercises for Forgetting the Past*, *The Wonders of the Sky*, and *Why the Stars are a Better Place than the Surface*. Gumby promises that he will read them. The lady's smile widens. She says that she hasn't seen him cry yet; he's such a strong boy. Then she walks out of Gumby's room, heels clattering on the wet rock.

A different lady wakes Gumby up the next morning. She gives him his schedule and another stack of pamphlets. There are so many classes he needs to attend: astronomy classes, cosmology classes, getting-over-your-fear-of-heights classes, planetary science classes, universe appreciation classes, horrors-of-the-Surface classes, loving-father-sky classes and accepting-your-fate classes. He even has to attend a mandatory "Moving on from Tragedy" seminar, where he and the other children go through exercises to help them forget about the past. In one of the exercises, they are asked to imagine a time

when they were upset and they ran to their parents. Except, instead of comforting them, their parents ignored them and continued going about their business.

A few days into his stay at the Cave, Gumby meets his counselor. She shakes his hand and asks him if he feels like he's begun moving on. Gumby tells her that he thinks there's something wrong with him. All the other new children he'd seen broke down in tears at least once a day, but he didn't. Ever since the lady told him that his parents died, he felt a sort of numbness. It never occurred him that the classes he takes are supposed to be hard; some days, his parents feel like little more than a distant dream. The counselor assures him that this is normal. It can happen in cases of extreme shock. She advises him to grasp on to this detachment because that will help him move on faster. Not every child is lucky enough to have this chance.

Gumby begins making friends with the other children. He likes the children here better than the ones on the Surface. They are nice to him and interesting. One of the children, Lily, is nearly sixteen years old, far older than he is. She can see fairies in the Caves. They whisper in her ear, telling her all the dark secrets of the Surface. Gumby asks her how long she's been here. She answers that she's been here for ten years. Her parents sent her to the Cave when they found out that she could hear things that they couldn't.

"No worries," she says, "they never understood me, but the sky does."

Every day, Gumby asks the other children to tell him their stories. What were their parents like? How do they like the Cave? What do they think the sky is like? Some are still too broken to speak. Others are like Lily, going on and on for hours about how they want to see the sky, how badly they want to leave the Surface. He is often asked if he didn't like his parents because he hasn't cried yet. When they find out that his parents loved him, they tell him that he is strong. They wish they were like him.

Two months later, Gumby experiences his first Flying Day in the Cave. All the children are gathered under the mouth of the Cave. In front of them, there is a towering stack of white, blue, and orange cubes. The children whisper and point at the height of the stack. A lot of them will be picked today. A man and two women stand in front of them. The man is holding a piece of paper in her hands. He clears his throat and informs the children that the names on the list are the ones that have been chosen.

He begins to read off the list. With each name he says, a child steps forward. The two women help them into a cube, and the cube begins to glow. Halfway through the list, Lily is called. As she walks through the crowd, Gumby tries to catch her eye, but her gaze is locked on the blue cube in front of her. She doesn't look back as she disappears into the box. There are a few children who burst into tears when they hear their name. They beg that they aren't ready; they still love the Surface. The man reading the list tells them that they were all picked for a reason. It was decided that they would move on better this way. When he is done, all the cubes are glowing. The women lift each cube up towards the Cave's mouth. When they let go, the cubes float up. The remaining children watch as each cube shrinks into dots against the black fabric of the night sky. Then they are told to go back to their rooms and prepare for next day's classes.

That night, the alarm bells ring. They ring when someone tries to run. Gumby sits up in his bed. At first, he thinks that the alarms will stop soon. Nobody ever makes it far. But it keeps going. He opens the door and peers into the hallway. People are shouting, wielding blinding flashlights and clutching leashes of barking dogs. As Gumby watches, he wonders why the child is running. What do they love about the Surface so much? On the Surface, it is cold. Children in the Cave don't have a place on the Surface. Yet there are always children that try. They must be desperate. When the flashlights and dogs

disappear down the hallway, deciding that the runaway isn't here, Gumby finds himself rooting for the child. He imagines them finding a new home on the surface, with a mother and father that love them with all the heart of the world.

When the alarm quiets and the people turn off their flashlights, Gumby feels something squeezing his chest. He returns to his room and feels something inside him boil over. Before he reaches his bed, he is crying.

The next morning, Gumby finds out that his counselor is gone. His planetary science teacher tells him that the girl who tried to run away was under Gumby's counselor, giving the counselor one too many runaways. Gumby asks what happened to the girl. The teacher says that she was immediately put into a cube and sent to the sky. Nobody noticed the lone star making its way to the sky. He insists that it was for the best; it was the only way to help the girl move on.

When he sees the fallen look on Gumby's face, he says, "Don't linger on this. She's in a better place now. Now, let's learn about the wonders of Jupiter!"

Later that day, Gumby is introduced to a young woman with strawberry blonde hair. Her name is Alice. He asks if she is his new counselor, but she isn't. She's a volunteer from the Surface, and she will be gone once a new counselor is found. Her smile is bright, like sunshine. She isn't weighed down by things that trouble the children of the Cave. When Gumby tells her about the girl that tried to run and about how he wished that she made it, Alice doesn't reprimand him or tell him to forget about it. Instead, she folds him into her arms and tells him that she knows it hurts. While his tears soak her shirt, she says that while she is in the Cave, she'll always be there for him.

For the next few weeks, between his classes, Gumby visits Alice. She tells him stories about the Surface. Stories about sunlight and birds and spring grass. He knows that he's supposed to forget, but he keeps coming back. She asks about his life on the Surface and listens when he talks about the arithmetic classes at school and the oak tree in front of his house. Sometimes he falls silent during his visits because he remembers how blue the sky is in the daylight and how gold the trees are during autumn. Each time Alice takes his hand into hers, letting him know that he is not alone.

One night, Gumby can't sleep because he's thinking about the Surface. He wants to see the sparkling blankets of snow again and listen to the whispers of the wind. So he writes a letter to Alice. In his letter, he tells her all the things he's been thinking about, how the Cave air is always stale, the moonlight never reaches underground, and the oil lamps in the hallways look like ghosts. When he's done, he folds the letter into his pocket so that Alice can see it tomorrow.

After breakfast, Gumby takes out his letter and heads to Alice's room. When he enters, she isn't there. Instead, there is a man with gray-streaked brown hair. He introduces himself as Gumby's new counselor.

"What can I do for you?" he says. Gumby shakes his head and tries to back out of the doorway, but the counselor spots the paper in his hands and asks to see it. As the counselor reads it, his face is expressionless.

When he's done, all he says is, "Read it yourself."

Gumby reads the letter and wants to disappear into a corner. In the letter, he is begging. He is delusional. He pleads Alice to take him with her when she returns to the Surface. He says that he can't go another day without seeing the sun. He wants to stay with her. He asks her to take care of him. He promises that he'll be a good boy. He'll do his

homework first thing after school and clean the dishes for her. When he grows up, he'll think of her every day. When she's sick, he'll be the one to bring her water and food. Despite anything the world might say about them, they'll love each other. He'll cook for her when she's too old to take care of herself. For as long as she lives, they'll never feel alone because they have each other, and that is more than enough.

When Gumby looks up, he's sobbing. The counselor pats his shoulder and looks pityingly at him.

The letter, of course, isn't for Alice. It's for his parents.

For next two weeks, Gumby doesn't leave his room. When the children bring his food to his door, he only eats enough to stay alive, letting his shirts become too big. He lies in his bed all day, staring at the flickering oil lamp. When his legs begin to wobble when he tries to stand, his counselor intervenes. He tells Gumby that he's doing himself no favors by starving himself and pushes a plate of food in front of Gumby.

"You can grieve now," the counselor says, "But at some point, life must go on."

During the following weeks, the alarm sounds again. Every time, Gumby secretly hopes that the child made it. When he sleeps, he still dreams of the Surface. But they are only dreams. He knows that his parents are gone. The Surface that he wants is gone. His future is with the stars, cradled in the arms of the sky.

On the next Flying Day, Gumby is chosen. He knows he's not ready, but he doesn't try to hide when he hears his name. Only when the box is closed above him, and the cube is lit a fiery orange, does he let his hands tremble. Even though the other children can't see

him, he can see them. He tries to remember their faces, watches as children he knows and doesn't know get called. Before he's done trying to remember, the cubes are all filled, and they begin ascending.

Two men lift up Gumby's cube, and he is floating. When he leaves the mouth, the Surface opens up before him. His breath catches. There are the picnickers that choose not to remember why their stars glow. Children are running around, laughing and pointing at the cubes. Gumby waves at them, knowing that they can't see him. For a brief moment, he sees himself among them from what seems like a long time ago. In the distance, there are city lights. They form an ocean, dotting the black canvas of the buildings. They are the stars of the Surface.

In a few minutes this view of the Surface will be snatched away from him, and all he will be able to see is the stars and the sky. They are not the home he would've chosen for himself, but as his counselor tells him, it's the only home he will have, and he will always have a place in this world.

Jieyan Wang is a high school junior in Moscow, Idaho. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Canvas Literary Journal*, *The Blue Nib*, *Lilun Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is also a First Reader for *Polyphony Lit*.

Non-Fiction

Pent-Up, Penned Down By Ayesha Asad

There is a field ahead of me, stretched wide, colored brightly, bedecked with flowers. I run, frenetic, fervent, towards this glamorous carpet, this bountiful gold mine, searching,

yanking cornflowers from stems, azure petals falling, torn violently, dust on my clothes, petals in my hair. I have not found it yet.

There is a vault ahead of me, untouched, secretive, not a soul in sight. Gemstones glitter, rubies glint. I am drowned in a waterfall of gold; the gleaming coins bury me, consume me, strike my head – and yet I pay no heed. It isn't there, either.

I am surrounded by mahogany; I am sick of it. I have the urge to topple the bookshelves; perhaps it would be a small mercy for the books to rain on my head, denting my skull, extinguishing my fire. Pages scatter everywhere; ink is bleeding; I want to gouge my eyes out with that pen – *that pen*. Oh. The pen. I've found it.

I am victorious, fists thrusting into the air. I possess the pen. It is mine; it belongs to my soul. I sit down, triumphant, pen poised over a blank page. I wait for my personal sovereign, my priceless pen to guide me.

It does not. It is only a pen.

I am seething, incensed. Fire dances in my eyes, the product of an untamed beast, an enraged demon. The pen is white-hot in my hands; the tip glistens with blood, devoid of its standard ink. The sharp point seems more suited to piercing through flesh rather than paper. I imagine it skewered through me, ink bleeding out of my chest, a utensil that is proficient at betrayal. *How could you do this to me, I wish to rage, when I gave up all the world's riches for you?*

The pen appears to smile, a malicious grin, the Cheshire Cat of utensils. *I cannot guide you*, it whispers.

All this effort, and even the pen cannot help me? I have been waiting *far* too long – how am I supposed to write, how am I supposed to compose a story – wasn't the pen the most integral gear for my machine?

I suppose it isn't, and I suppose I knew that, deep inside the recesses of my mind, but then there were other voices protesting, "*I am too afraid,*" or "*I do not have a real story to tell,*" and perhaps I took them to heart more than I desire to admit. I waited in vain for the pen, expected, or wishing, more likely, that when the tip of the pen touched paper, and the ink spread out, crisscrossing, blotting clean sheets, the magic would have been stimulated and the story produced. This was why I sat in front of a paper for hours on end without a single word to present for myself.

What was I afraid of – failure? Certainly, fear consumed me – I was too afraid to publish my writing; I was too afraid to make that one leap forward – because I was waiting for the day that I would be unafraid, that magical moment when all my fears would dissipate and thus, I would step out of the shadows into the clamor of the literary world.

What was I waiting for – a real story? When would I create it; when would the ideal pieces fall into place, click like the perfect key for a lock, fit like the matching parts of a puzzle – what time would be best to write, to fashion a flawless, criticism-free story?

Never.

I was wrong – so wrong, in fact, to presume that fear vanishes. Fear does not ever completely vanish from one's soul; one cannot stamp out fear, it cannot be made extinct. Rather, fear is always present, and the true conquerors of fear are those who, despite their fear, keep pushing hard, or channel it into their work to create something extraordinary.

I was wrong – so wrong, in fact, to believe that I did not have a story to tell. For this is my story, right now, and my pen did not guide me in writing it. It may be easily criticized, but that is storytelling's inherent nature. It need not be flawless, because nothing ever is.

But it is *my* story. No pen can ever claim it as theirs. And I am proud of it.

Ayesha Asad is an aspiring writer and a high school senior with an eclectic variety of interests that include painting, reading, and singing. She lives in Texas, and is particularly fond of watching (and playing) soccer games.

The Quiet Art of Fasting By Kiran Khan

The first memory I have with the concept of fasting, was when I was younger, maybe three or four. During the month of Ramadan, my parents woke to eat sehri at three in the morning and refrained from eating or drinking anything until 8pm. They crept out of their bedroom and into our small kitchen like clumsy thieves in their own home.

Drowsily, I would wake to the sound of their quiet, almost non-existent whispers. In a state between awake and asleep, I would follow the sounds of their voices to the end of the carpeted balcony overlooking our uncharastically tidy living room. I watched them from the balcony with my head pressed between the old fashioned wooden rails. My sister had discovered my parent's ritual before I had; she would routinely watch them. I would locate her in the dark with her legs dangling off the side of the balcony and her chubby fingers tightly gripped the rails that prevented her from falling. We watched them together: me rubbing my eyes in a struggle to stay awake, and her with an unblinking gaze directed toward the soft light in the kitchen.

On a typical night, my mother would always enter first, turning on only the most necessary light and we heard the pop of the fridge opening. She turned on the stove and paused to yawn as it slowly came to life. My father would trudge into the kitchen next, his footsteps dragging on the carpet as he headed directly for the coffee. My mother always made eggs. She prepared them in different ways in hopes of not boring herself into eating nothing. The smell of egg would reach us on the stairs causing my nose to wrinkle and a gagging feeling to go up in my throat. I choked it down not wanting to alert our parents of our eavesdropping on their meal. My mother never toasted herb bread

for fear that the toaster “bing” would wake us up, but she stopped when she discovered my sister’s legs peeking out from the end of the balcony. After that she never bothered to keep it quiet as she cooked, casually banging the cupboard drawers and noisily washing her frying pan. My father preferred one cup of water filled to the brim or a cup of coffee now and then. He would bring it to his perch on our then new couch and sip it quietly. They ate in almost silence, but on occasion, my father would make my mother sputter out in laughter the way he always does. When it came close to sunrise, my mother took her coffee cup and sat beside my father on the couch. They watched the clock and calmly took their last sips. After the time for eating ended, they sat there for awhile. My mother looking off into space; my father with his arm stretched, drumming his fingers on the stain free couch. Slowly they crept back into their room whispering for us to do the same. This meal fascinated me. It seemed so different from what my dining experiences had been. They always ended with me content and eager for the next meal.

It seemed daunting to fast from sunrise to sunset. It wasn’t until I had reached the age of eleven that I realized the power of food. When I fasted my first day, the hunger I felt tore through me, and I took deep breaths to avoid thinking of my favorite food. Walking beside my mother in the grocery store, I felt hungry for the strangest things: Lime soda, pastrami on seed buns, grape popsicles, chocolate rice crispy treats. I could feel the texture of them in my mouth, and walking past them was almost impossible. When it came close to sunset, I sat at the kitchen table watching my mother place steaming plates of food on the table. I sat on my hands, for I didn’t trust them to obey the determination of my mind. Instead, I pictured myself piling up all my mother’s hot dishes and eating helping after helping (she always made the best food when she was fasting). However, when the water hit my throat, I knew I wouldn’t need it. I drank that first glass of water within seconds, my only goal being to quench my thirst. The second glass of water I took my time to feel the taste of it as it slipped from the cup and into my awaiting mouth. On the first bite of food, the wave of fatigue floating around me instantly disappeared. I no longer felt like slumping down into my seat. I ate my meal taking every in every flavor, the carefully seasoned chicken, the luxuries in the thick crust of bread.

The simplest meals were the grandest; spaghetti and meatballs turned from boring to an adventure of silky noodles and chunky, rich meatballs. Never have I ever appreciated marinara sauce more in my life. The delectable treasures of dessert in all its glory. Thick cake that melts in your mouth, the chocolate frosting oozing along the side. On the evenings we joined my grandmother to break fast, I would eagerly bounce in my seat as she served us. Mountains and mountains of rice mixed with meat and spices and vegetables. Hot garlic bread crowded the table as did several jars of spices, a tomato dish concoction, butter chicken, and as always my mother's favorite okra cooked indian style with every flavor. The entire meal was nothing short of heaven.

You have never tasted food until you have tasted the food after a hard fast. To realize this is to recognize how the simplest of food tastes to the majority of the world. My parents knew, that's why they woke at three, and fasted till eight, they knew it was worth their hunger to experience the hardships of other people. That's why my mother never made a lavish breakfast but rather a simple egg. It's why my father drank only his cup of water. It's why I now know that to start my fast I'll only need a simple egg or a cup of water. The meal before the fast was not the one I was most excited to eat when fasting. But something about it was so fascinating years ago on that carpeted balcony.

Kiran is a fifteen-year-old aspiring writer and self-proclaimed history nerd who enjoys reading, babysitting, and annoying her little sister. She is also passionate about Gun control and pursuing her dream of living on the beach.

A Note on Difference By Lauren Ho

Many children dream of the novelty of pulling over on the highway and standing on that specific point that would enable them to have their two feet in two different states. There is a certain exhilaration that comes with conquering the un-lifelike phenomenon of physically being in multiple places at once. While many people have experienced

having one foot in two places at the same time, the vast majority of the world population has never had this opportunity before, and the very concept of being in two places at the same time may come hard to wrap one's head around. All my life, I have had one foot in two different places, one foot in touch with my American upbringing, and the other in touch with my Chinese heritage.

I grew up in Hong Kong. I went to a local, Cantonese-speaking school for pre-school, and it was clear, given my home background, that I was dissimilar to the other kids. There was one other girl with light brown hair and hazel eyes, a British father and a Chinese mother. We bonded over the fact that we were the only ones who spoke English as a first language, and while we both were the receptors of funny looks, I was the one that the looks were more directed at because of my pitch-black hair and darker-than-hazel eyes. I moved to an international school from kindergarten to grade ten, and everyone there was just like me: Chinese people speaking English. This was my bubble, my safe place, my home. I was on the inside, those who were different from me, were on the outside. Anywhere outside of those school walls, I became the odd one out.

This was always hard for me. Whenever I would take taxis, I would say my address in Chinese, and they would make some snide comment under their breath about my tones being off. When I would yell for the minibus driver to let me off, the whole bus would turn and look at the Chinese girl who spoke broken Chinese. Even our family friends would prod me to speak Chinese to tease me for my American accent. Whenever my mom would take me to get my hair cut, the hairdressers would talk to me in Chinese, and I would act like a clueless English-speaker because I was embarrassed by my American accent. I could understand them when they expressed their disapproval to my mom for my inability to speak Chinese. Last year, I took an internship at a nonprofit, English organization that strived to teach English to local kids. It was to my surprise that everyone in the office spoke Chinese with one another, and again, all eyes were on me. I became friends with the other interns, though much of our friendship was built upon finding humor in my "foreign Chinese." Although I found a way to laugh it off, I always felt

excluded and emotionally looked down upon when they all spoke in extremely fast Chinese with each other at the lunch table, and I could not keep up. I felt belittled when my boss spoke Chinese to me, and another intern had to translate for me. The shock in their eyes when I opened my mouth and spoke English only emphasized the piercing words that came out of their mouths, telling me that I was “not Chinese enough.” There is great emphasis placed on grades in Chinese culture. At home, I was told that I didn’t care enough about grades, and it was in fact, everyone’s obsession with comparing their grades to mine that made me want to leave my old school.

Because my mixed ethnicity had always been “the norm” and embraced at my international school in Hong Kong, I came to the US with the hope that my American-ness would be ever so slightly more embraced, that my apparent lack of care towards my grades (in Hong Kong) would be okay.

When I came to Proctor, I was told that I cared about grades too much. In part, it was that I unexpectedly felt that the expectations were higher for me because I was Asian, and I have always been one to conform to meet expectations. I was afraid that if my grades weren’t at the top of the class, that I was somehow a disappointment to Chinese culture. I felt that as a minority, it was my duty to represent my country and make Hong Kong proud. At the same time, people were surprised by how “non-Chinese” I was, with an American name, American accent, and traditions to celebrate American holidays. My mere ability to speak English came as a surprise to many whom I met.

When I was fourteen, I had my first full immersion in a gymnastics camp in Pennsylvania. I was the only Asian there. The girls were taken aback when they found out they I knew how to use a fork, that I could see when I smiled, that I had eaten ice cream, that I had never eaten dog (and in fact owned a dog that I love very much), that I wasn’t a kung fu prodigy, and that I wasn’t an A+ student in math. My last name “Ho” was the ongoing joke of the cabin for two weeks. This was the first time I was asked what my real, Chinese name was. They did not believe me when I told them that Lauren was my real

name. Most of the other girls caught on, but for the sake of the ones who didn't, I told them my name was Ping Ping Ding Ho, and so I was for the rest of the camp. I can laugh about it most of the time, but when it comes down to it, sitting in the dining hall with my friends at dinnertime and hearing them talk about American shows they watched as children still does make me feel excluded as the Chinese person.

When I tried to mask my Chinese side and "be more American," it raised eyebrows. With my dark hair and eyes, I could never be "American enough." When I tried to embrace my Chinese side, it still raised eyebrows. With my American accent, name, and mindset, I was also considered "not Chinese enough." I could never be accepted as fully American because of the way I looked, but I could never be fully Chinese because of the way I was raised. Much of my life, I have had the blessing of being able to be in two places at once. The trouble is that my two feet are welded down to their respective sides and no matter how hard I try, I will never be able to be in one place fully. This made my identity frustration hard for people to understand because it's hard to wrap your head around unless you've experienced it.

One day, someone told me I was not a "real Chinese." Given the persisting struggle of finding myself that I was already facing, this comment stung and made me question my identity like I never had before. Looking in the mirror, I didn't see a Chinese girl or an American girl. I didn't know who I saw. It hurt because I knew the comments at lunch or dinner tables weren't intended as attacks. It hurt because they believed that I was not like them. Suddenly, I didn't have my two feet on either side of the border; I was floating somewhere in the middle, alone.

In its twisted way, sharing commonalities with more than one group of people made me different. People tried to tell me that being multicultural was a gift, that it made me more worldly. However, how could they understand the curse in this blessing if they had never lived it? I grew angry, sad, frustrated, and lonely. I would look at this angry, sad, frustrated, and lonely girl in the mirror, and the emotions would only amplify

themselves. I started to withdraw myself more and more, isolating myself to hide from the embarrassment I felt by the eyes that were following me, as the American in Asia, and as the Asian in America.

The last few months have been the peak of my battle with my identity, and as I reach the falling action of my narrative, I am starting to see the resolution, the light at the end of the tunnel. But I'm not there yet. Sometimes I try to focus on the perks of being multicultural. While I may not always feel like I belong or like I am included, being multicultural has given me opportunities to pursue things that I want to pursue. I have been lucky enough to have the chance to teach Mandarin to a group of local kids at Andover Elementary School. While this does help, I am in the process of learning a much more important lesson. Who is on the outside and inside is a notion created within our subconscious intelligence, because really we all just exist in this space. We all just exist in this beautiful, magical, wonderful world.

Looking in the mirror, I don't see a Chinese or an American girl, I just see me. I see me, constructed and built from all the treasures of a Chinese culture intertwined with the riches of an American upbringing. I see me, shaped by the memories, loved ones, struggles, and joys. The fact is that this blessing in disguise will always keep me from being fully and wholly a part of one group, but getting to live this surreal phenomenon of being in two places at once is a truly beautiful thing.

Lauren has just graduated from Proctor Academy in New Hampshire and is headed to Middlebury College in the Fall. However, she was born and raised in Hong Kong. She has always loved writing from a young age, particularly discovering new words that help her find beauty in her day-to-day life.

Personal Gravity By Cecilee Henstrom

Bunk beds are the staple of childhood and every night at the top I laid on my back, looking up at the mosaic of constellations that my snoring brother had puddied to our ceiling. Glowing, five-pointed, plastic, light green stars watched me nightly while I slept. I always thought it was strange that they were five-pointed and that they were green. I mean, I had seen real stars before. I knew they were not green; scientifically they can only be red, orange, yellow, white, or blue. Basically, every color but green. And they were not five-pointed, they were dots. But it wasn't the differences that made them so hypnotic, it was the one crucial similarity: they glowed in the darkness.

I learned very early that you're able to withstand most discomfort for a large payoff. That's what it was like when I was about six years old, laying on top of my dad's black CRV, stargazing for the first time. My pigtails stuck out of my knit hat, I was bundled in blanket after blanket. I felt the bars of the roof rack trying to rearrange my spine as I sprawled out next to my dad. He was twice my height, and his legs from the knee down hung off the back of the car. Above, a twinkling canopy spread in every direction. I realized why glitter was always so fun; it mimicked the stars with its shine and sparkle. Questions bubbled up inside me like I was a mini Plato or Galileo.

"Why do stars flicker?" I asked. "Because the temperature of space between us and the star changes"

I thought that made sense, they shiver and shake.

"What are shooting stars made of?" "They are rocks that burn up when they get close to earth," Dad pointed to one as it streaked across.

"What is that purpley stripe down the middle?" "That's the Milky Way, it's what we call a galaxy."

“Can we get to them? What do they look like up close?” Dad sighed into a small laugh, “We can’t get close because we don’t know how yet and they’re really really hot, hotter than the stove. But, we can see them with really cool, big telescopes.”

“Do they have five points and are they green?” “They don’t, Silly.”

He answered best he could. When he was little, he’d wanted to be an astronaut, but time and a bad case of motion sickness stumped him. Instead he was content with a fascination for space, a programmable telescope, and star chart apps.

From that night on he’d wake me up and carry me downstairs for meteor showers and eclipses. He pointed his telescope and held me up to the lens until I was tall enough to lean down. At the end of high school, we packed up the car and the telescope and trekked to my aunt’s house to witness 7 ½ blissful minutes of a solar eclipse.

Dressed in ripped jeans and a grey hoodie without shoes, without socks, without parents, without plans, my swing launched into the air and back again, over and over. The swing set was cool—the air cooler— and I swung through twilight into the Milky Way. My mile walk had helped clear my head. Behind me, frogs gently croaked and the creek gently danced. When I was little, I loved swing sets because they gave me community.

As a teenager I instead loved them for the solace they gave me from my crowded house and crowded thoughts: a chosen isolation. The wind made my nose go numb a little bit and I wondered what it would be like to swing up to the stars, to grab a handful and stuff them into my hoodie pocket. The masses of incandescent gas held a companionship for me, one that didn’t require clarity or appeasement. Stars were so unlike people.

In unchosen isolation I wanted to pull the stars out of my pockets as I sat at lunch with only my PB+J for company. With a star in my pocket, I could touch heaven at my uncle’s

memorial, maybe I could briefly tell him hello. I could be swallowed in a star's gravity when I was blown around by my first broken heart, when I wasn't asked to Prom. I could feel far away and powerful because I had space with me.

My eyes like saucers tried to soak up the lights of New York City. A million man-made stars flicked and glowed and danced when I looked outside the window. They wrote their own constellations. After four days at what felt like light speed, exhaustion and homesickness were deadweight in my bones. One last day in the city that never sleeps. The gravity of a final museum on a weekday afternoon sucked my mom and me inside.

Comfortable converse, with worn rubber soles, echoed across the glossy wooden floor from room to room as if they were clicking pumps. Frida Kahlo called my name, and Salvador Dali, Pollock, Picasso, Rivera, Rothko. I responded to each by examining their brushstrokes. Where the colors crashed into each other like cosmic collisions I saw the creation.

I turned to respond to another artist begging my attention, and alone, stars stared me in the face. "A Starry Night" swirled around my eyes and my brain. The painting captured the whole universe in blue and yellow lines, and I was alone here, observing its concreteness. Head slightly cocked, my weight leaning on my right converse, hugging my elbows across my body, I brooded for fifteen minutes. Without the frequent accompanying frustration, colors, thoughts, and feelings dashed through my brain, whirling like the paint itself. The stars we see in our sky take at least four years for their light to reach us. The stars in this painting take only as long as it takes us to blink. In another way, since it was painted in 1889, the stars took 130 years to reach me; Van Gogh sent them.

Newfound freedom is dangerous and filled with potential. A year into college, a car jammed with six girls, each under two sweatshirts, a blanket, hat, gloves, and boots, drove three hours to the Bonneville Salt Flats. We were armed with two boxes of pizza, a bottle of Mountain Dew, six camping chairs, a banjo and a telescope. The Salt Flats offered two things: 1) salt and 2) a big sky. After the sunset and an impromptu photo shoot, the sky aged into a dark, rich blue. The pinpricked sky was deep and I could feel the universe expanding as the sky rolled out, unobstructed, in every direction. It was like I was lying on top of that CRV again.

The salt had no animals and no bugs that I could see. Although the wind whipped our hair around, everything else felt completely still. My friend, Natalie, played faint banjo music that was whisked around in the air and carried up toward the stars. A stillness and silence settled into us. It is remarkably difficult to get six twenty-year-old women to sit quietly together for longer than five minutes, but we sat there for three hours with only a few scattered words between us.

There was one interruption to our nighttime daydreams. Red and blue lights spun in the distance next to Natalie's parked sedan along the highway. I'm never going to space, but I felt like I got the closest to the speed of light that I could, that night, gunning my car across the barren flats toward the lights. As we got closer, the car came back to earthly speeds.

"Good evening, please don't tow that car!" I called out urgently but respectfully as my car rolled up.

Sent from heaven above, the most handsome twenty-something-year-old policeman with striking eyes turned around and said, "Oh I'm not ticketing it, I just wanted to make sure everything was okay."

He carried on, and we carried on. When we looked back at the sky, we saw those eyes and shooting stars spin like sirens.

Space had given me solace since I first met it, but it morphed into more. I could look at the sky and fall into it. My imagination played connect the dots to create any picture I wanted, so that night I drew constellations of banjos and eyes and cars.

My old childhood bunk bed was sold years ago, and we didn't have the ceiling full of stars anymore. Time traded it out for twin beds in the same room, then a new room in a new house, then a college dorm. Six little green, pointed, glowing stars imitating Ursa Major sat above my roommate's head. Only five glowed because the sixth was always lit up by the streetlight that snuck in through a slit in our blinds. They were stuck there from some other young woman trying to get a degree to propel her into her an uncertain future. Maybe she also had stars on her ceiling when the ceiling felt so much bigger. Maybe she feared the dark or had as many questions as I did on the roof of the CRV. Maybe she had just gotten them at the Dollar Tree on a bad date.

Stars are bright spheres of hot plasma, held together by their own gravity. My gravity came in the moments that I saw the how the world spun, why the world spun, and where I was, spinning. When you learn about space in elementary school most people either feel empowered or insignificant by the astounding scale, but I always just felt understood. There are approximately 250 million stars in our galaxy, let alone the trillions of other galaxies spinning and growing. There are approximately 250 million ideas that rush around my mind, let alone the trillions of other thoughts that run through it, spinning and growing.

Cecilee Henstrom is a Journalism student at Brigham Young University. She loves the power that words have to connect and inform people who would otherwise carry on

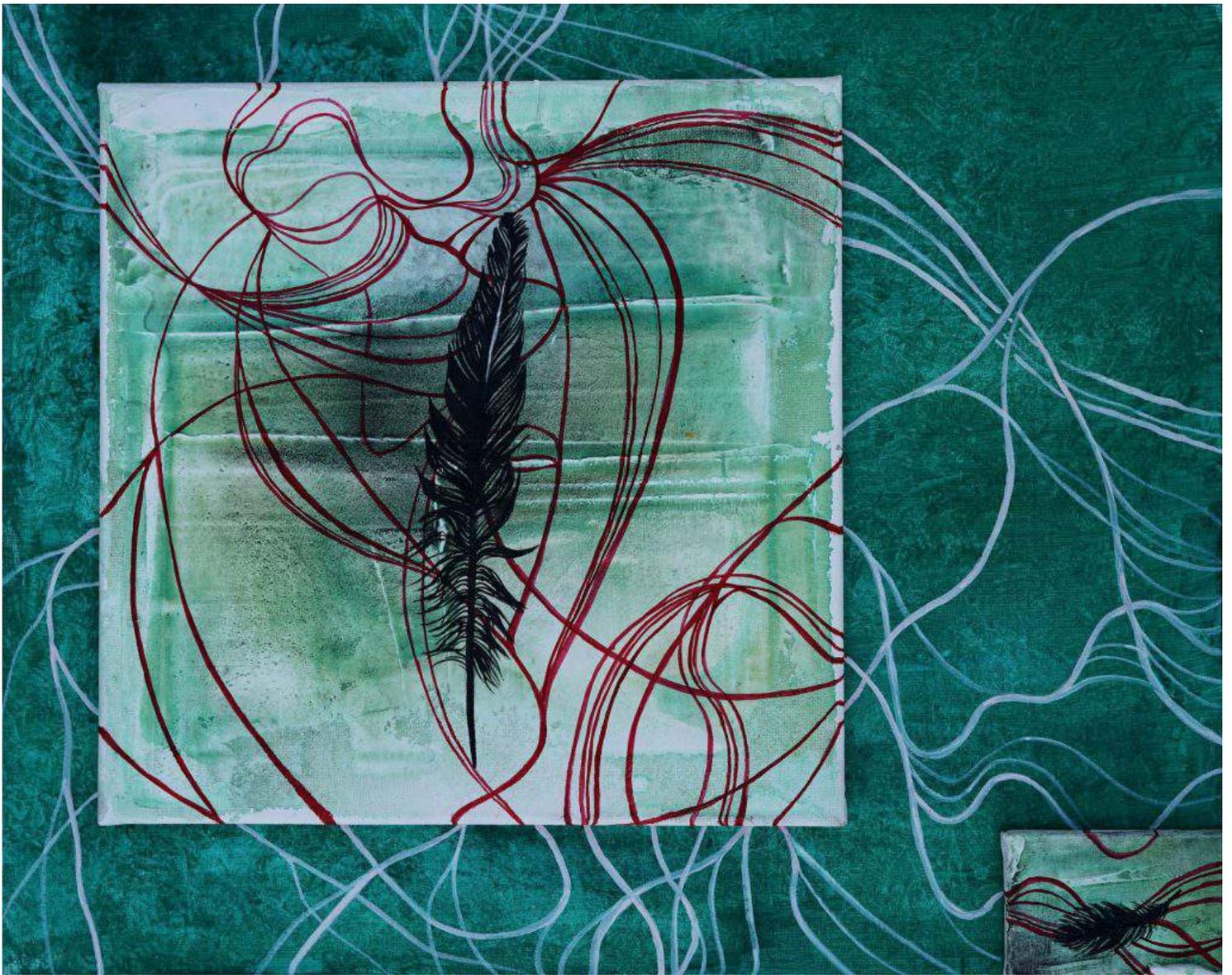
unconnected. Some of her hobbies include: perfecting situational humor at 2am, re-watching CSI, and embroidery.

Art

Dreamer, Separate By Elaine Han



Dreamer



Separate

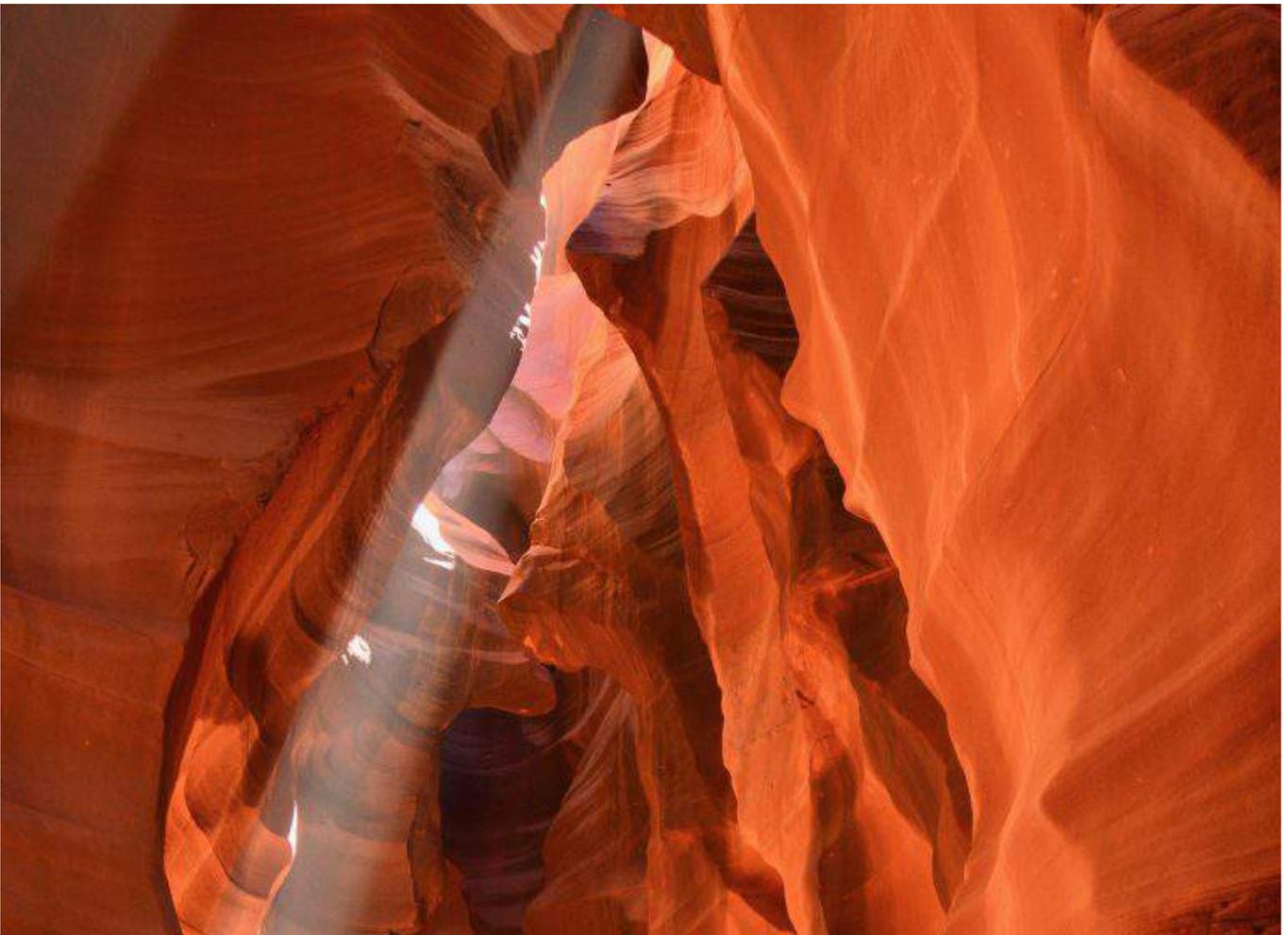
I used different methods for each painting, as I love exploring different medias. I try to keep my mind open towards many creative possibilities. My creative process for these pieces comes from my perspective of balancing between reality and dreams.

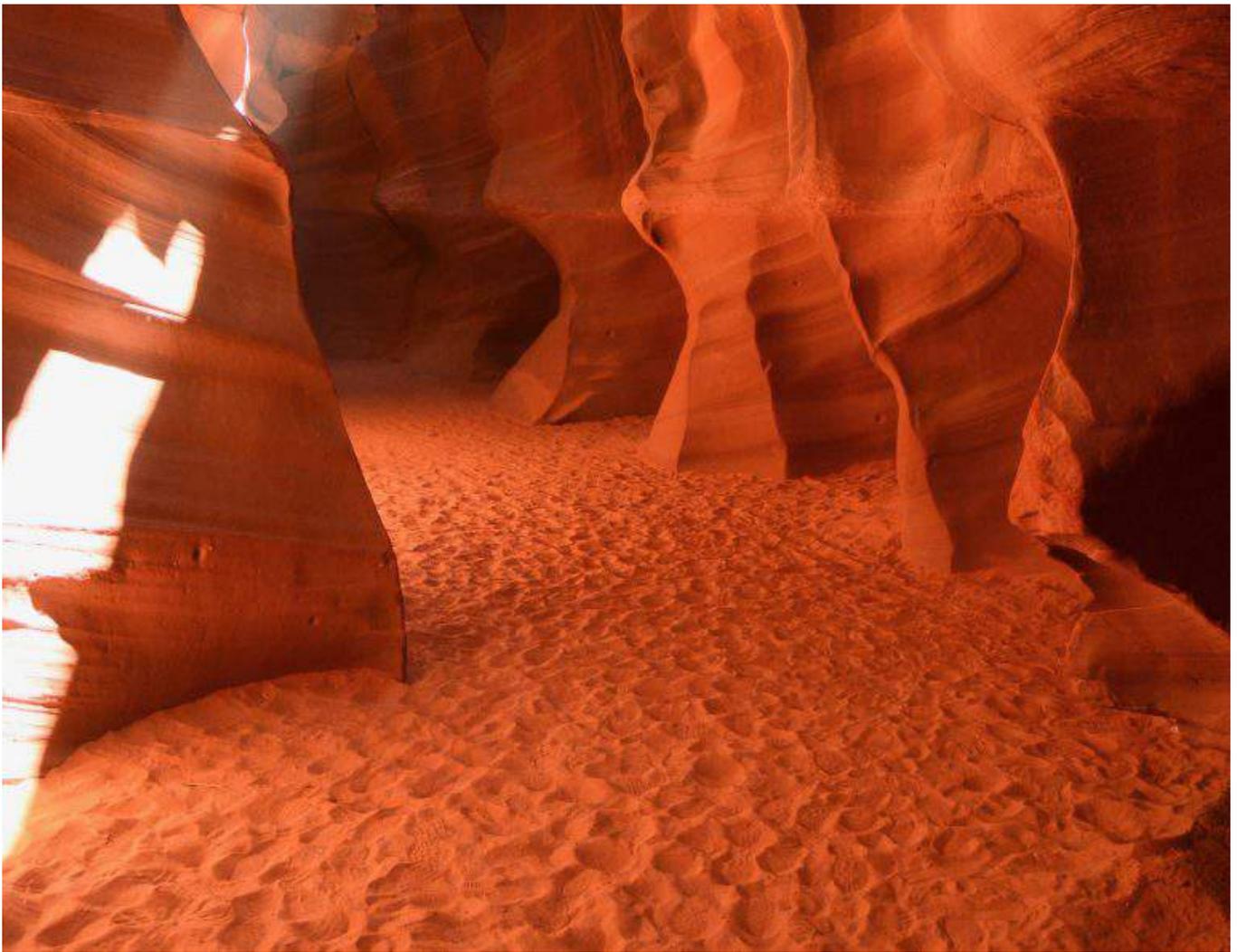
In the piece, "Separate," the lines show movement. I saw feathers in my backyard that are carried by wind. The feathers can be very quiet and still, but the wind can carry them to different places, thus showing the many possibilities in life. In the piece, "Dreamer," the young woman in the center of the piece is me, and the letter "E" is my initial. The rigid box that I am within represents reality. The sharp lines coming off the box on the left are glass, which depict

the struggles of reality. The feathers are light and they resemble dreams. To me, feathers mean hope and freedom.

Elaine Han is a junior at Palo Alto High School in California. As an artist, she enjoys using pencil, watercolor, and mixed media to express herself. Last year, her charcoal still life was exhibited in the Mitchell Park Library. Two of her favorite artists are Jacob Lawrence for his expressive subject matter and bold usage of color, and Pablo Picasso for his unique shapes and vibrant colors. Outside of art, she enjoys playing the piano and emulating Lang Lang. She also enjoys yoga. The medium for her two pieces includes mixed media and pencil. The theme of her series revolves around the concept of feathers.

Light, Life, Sunrise By Avika Patel





Light: This picture was taken at Antelope Canyon. Created by a series of flash floods, the canyon has a smooth finish and intricate array of channels and passageways below the walking surface. As the sun shines down through the slits above, beautiful streaks of light project on the sandstone and create a warm red hue. While walking through the slot canyon I took this picture from a lower angle to create a powerful aura and draw attention to the light stream that stood strongly capturing our attention.





Life: This picture was taken for my AP Language visual podcast on Perseverance. Perseverance, to me, is standing up for what you believed in life and continuing despite the setbacks you encounter. I wanted to create a montage of items in my home that were important to me and showcased my personality. The aerial angle was used to signal all I can do is go up, and perseverance is the best trait to have in that process.



Sunrise This image was taken at Arches National Park. Created by a process of weathering, thawing, and crumbling, the arches are special formations that have been formed throughout southwest America. I took this image during sunrise, hiking up the mountain at 5am, and setting up my camera for the majestic sun to rise up and cast its light along the smooth underbelly of the arch. Standing strong above the horizon, I took this image from a lower angle to highlight the majestic sky and warm colors of the beautiful morning, while also showing the deep canyon below the prominent arch.

Avika Patel is an avid high school photographer in Southern California. In addition to having her photographs published on multiple platforms, she is a twice-published author for almost twenty school districts and the American Association of University Women. When she's not out with her camera shooting the most beautiful landscapes, you can find Avika programming, playing tennis, or solving escape rooms with her friends!

Mrs. Dalloway By Hewson Duffy



Mrs. Dalloway

Hewson Duffy is a junior at St. Anne's Belfield in Charlottesville, VA. He has been published in Polyphony Lit and Aerie International, and recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. As a complement to writing, he enjoys practicing photography.

Diwali By Jay Kumawat



Diwali

Ripunjay Kumawat is fifteen years old. He is very fond of photography and wants to pursue it as a career. He is an amateur photographer right now, and more into photography of flora and fauna.

Book Review

The False Prince By Hossein Libre

Jennifer A Nielsen's *The False Prince* is a stunning fantasy novel. Neilson uses good sensory description to set the scene for Sage's life and also has strong verbs that will keep your senses awake; such as *Mott was tall, dark skinned, and nearly bald. What little hair he did have was black and shaved to the scalp.* Also this book has lots of twists and turns. Neilson keeps the readers at the edge of their seats and wondering what will happen in the upcoming pages. As the lies unfold, the truth is revealed and the truth may very well prove more dangerous than all the lies combined.

The False Prince is the first book in the Ascendance trilogy. The Ascendance trilogy includes *The False Prince*, *The Runaway King*, and *The Shadow Throne*. *The False Prince* is a finalist for the E.B. White Read Aloud Award and has also spent several weeks on the NYT Bestseller List ranging in position from #4 to #14.

One of the memorable things about this book was its plot. In a faraway land, a civil war is brewing. To unify his kingdom's divided people, a nobleman named Conner devises a cunning plan to place an imposter of the kingdom's lost-long son on the throne. Four orphans are forced to compete for the crown, including a clever boy named Sage. Sage knows Conner's motives are more questionable, yet his life balances on a sword's point: he must be chosen to play the role of the prince or he will be killed.

This is a story about standing up for what you believe in. Sage had to stand up a lot. He was forced to treat a servant meanly, but he treated her with kindness. The second theme is standing up for your rights. When everyone told him to go one direction, he went his own way, and he usually made the right decision.

The main character is Sage, a young boy from the kingdom, Carthya. His friends/enemies are Mott, Conner, Roden, Tobias, and Imogen. Some of them crafted him into the person he was today by hurting him or by loving him.

Neilson's strong visuals helped readers see the orphanage, the palace, and the castle. Neilson will fill readers heads with questions that will keep readers turning the page. Some of the questions the readers might be asking are: Who will become king? Will Sage survive Conner's tests? Will the kingdom unite under one rule?

Neilson's fantasy novel *The False Prince* is definitely worth readers time and money and is a 10/10. *The False Prince* is perfect for anyone who loves lots of twists and turns. If you want a story that you can't put down and that will keep you at the edge of your seat, pick up a copy of Jennifer A. Nielsen's *The False Prince*.

Author: Jennifer A Nielsen

Genera: Fantasy

Hossein Libre was born in Tehran, Iran but currently lives in the United States in the college town of Rolla, MO. He speaks Persian and English. His dream is to become a soccer player and play for Manchester United FC. He remarkably loves reading and writing, and his favorite books include *The Ascendance Trilogy* by Jennifer A. Nielsen, *The Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan, *The Summoner* series by Taran Matharu, and *Timeline* by Michael Crichton.
