

September 2019 Issue Fifteen



School's Out, by Maeve Florence-Smith

Editor's Note By Molly Hill

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"We who make stories know that we tell lies for a living. But they are good lies that say true things, and we owe it to our readers to build them as best we can. Because somewhere out there is someone who needs that story. Someone who will grow up with a different landscape,

who without that story will be a different person. And who with that story may have hope, or wisdom, or kindness, or comfort. And that is why we write.” Neil Gaiman

Dear Readers and Writers,

Summer seems to have left us with alarming speed, and we’re here with a Fall syllabus of sorts to ease the transition. There’s a more extensive personal essay section this time, and we commend our student writers for telling stories that are not only deeply personal, but often difficult to articulate and process.

This issue is an invitation to enter different landscapes. Check out Micaela’s world in the Bronx, Sebastian’s accidental adventure at GameStop, and Esther’s reaction to life in San Francisco. Our Anonymous author explains how a book like *Middlesex*, can change the way you see yourself, — and things turn darkly comical in the world created by Katherine where people wake up one morning without— hands, which makes restaurant work especially challenging.

We’re nearing the end of our fourth year of online publication, and looking forward to our first print addition, making an appearance in 2020. Watch for some familiar favorites as well as new work coming together in an anthology that will be our five year anniversary edition—details to follow as we move closer to publication.

Blue Marble began out of a love of writing and reading and a desire to evangelize about the written word. When we were building our online platform we hoped writers from everywhere would find us and share their work, and in turn inspire others to do the same. It’s working. Thanks to those who’ve found us from all over the world.

Keep writing!

Molly Hill

Editor

Poetry

Moving Away By Laura Zhang

My friends are moving away
Only separated by one district
but it feels like eternity
Our memories and laughter
are slowly forgotten as they
discover a life without me
and leave me behind

My brother is moving away
Going off to college where
he'll learn and change into
a completely different person
His future will become his
reality as he discovers himself
and leaves me behind

My mother is moving away
Her new job keeping her
busy on the weekends when
we used to have fun that is
now replaced by lonely nights
as she works to prove herself
And leaves me behind

My father is moving away
To a place where happiness
and calm is hard to come by
His fear and paranoia of himself
threatens to destroy my father
He becomes someone different
And leaves me behind

And I
am staying here yearning for
my life filled with childhood
and old pastimes where there
was no worry or stress or burdens

But I know
There is no going back to the
simple life I now long for
Because everyone is moving on
and I must move on with them
To a new and different life
with many barriers to face
but also new chances to take
I will move on

Laura is a thirteen-year-old eighth grade student attending Longfellow Middle School in Virginia. She loves poetry as well as other forms of creative expression such as photography and writing. Her style of poetry is about her experiences of loss and

heartbreak but also of hope and new beginnings. She wants readers to feel empowered and leave with a message in their minds.

Sestina, Written on a Train By Abigail Sylvor Greenberg

It is nearly too banal for us to understand:

This stumbling train

was the second

one out this morning. We missed the first in wild

disarray. My sister is the difficult one.

When she bends up her contentious form, she will untwist for nothing!

To the unglazed eye, this could seem like nothing.

My sister doesn't understand

why Mom packed her the bruised peach, and me the good one.

Anyway, peaches are too messy to eat on a train,

where one must be mild,

fold hands, and count each second.

A floating nuclear plant stretches and contracts into a second

of chromatic blur. Blink and see nothing

but eyelid. Blink and miss wild

fir, bridges, workmen. The shapes outside the window seem to understand

Each other, in curving forth beyond the train.

And I am like the hot morning air for being on one.

I count one, Garrison, two Valleys, one commuting professor, then a second.

Most anyone can train

herself to relish menial things. Nothing

is beneath celebration. Not even this cracked seat, face backwards. I do not understand

—

My sister rides so silent and mild.

Here is the lull, amidst or after so many wild
days and nights on docks and platforms. We need just one
smooth ride on the Metro North to understand
ourselves as travelers first, and settled or settlers second.

There is nothing
that can substitute a train.

And if my body were a train
—cars linked, tinted in mild
rust, and still going—I'd stop at nothing,
gather my fumes of exhaust in a stovepipe lung, following one
iron track as though it were the best and only place, letting every second
settle like dust at my sides. I suppose I hardly understand.
I wonder how, as it churns like a train, the next plod will flatten these to nothing,
(once wild for their novelty in my hands) these seconds.
My sister lets out one cough, then another cough, then we get off, before I understand.

Abigail Sylvor Greenberg is a high school student living in New York. Her writing has been recognized with more than sixty Scholastic Writing Awards and nine National Medals. In addition to writing, she enjoys watching comedy and drinking coffee.

Dandelion By Jennie Tian

In America, they see an outsider.
Blinded by my complexion:
A porcelain figure without the white sheen.
Their instinct says I can't possibly be one of them.
But when I open my mouth to speak
Their senses debate the existence
Of such a familiar foreigner.
"Are you mixed?" they'd ask.
Mixed.
As if that's the only acceptable answer,
As if I can't be part of two worlds.

In China, they see one of them.
The comfort of a familiar face,
Another blossom in the bouquet.
But this veneer is fragile, too.
Shattered as soon as I open my mouth to speak,
Words laced with a distant tongue.
"Are you a foreigner?"
Their unspoken words
Singeing me around the edges,
Melting the mold I was supposed to fit in.

At first they saw a flower
Just where I belong.
But instead they see a dandelion
A weed all along.

Jennie was born in Boston, and has attended school in Massachusetts, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Her favourite subjects in school are English, History/Humanities, Drama and Fine Arts. She has a passion for reading, creative writing, geography, psychology, and aspires to be an author in the future.

Artisan By Brittany Adames

In another life, I clawed the world
from the back of my throat

and cradled it to the bone
without making a single sound.

As a child, I would stream my thumb
across the stippled hairs on my father's

chin—pressed my palms against
the shelf of his belly so I could become

familiar with what is human.

The first boy I fell in love with

carried himself in a long stretch
of pauses—deliberate and full-fledged.

We learned to love with the rhythm
of a labored breath—hushed by

our own inability to keep
ourselves taut and undamaged.

In another life, I hear my mother's
voice colored by something that

lingers between a blunted breath
and a windowpane's rattle.

One by one, we learn to love,
our backs bent in a prayer

that never touched our mouths.

Brittany Adames is a Dominican-American writer. Her work has been previously published in CALAMITY Magazine, Bombus Press, Blue Marble Review, TRACK//FOUR, and Rust+Moth, among others. She is pursuing a major in Writing, Literature, and Publishing at Emerson College and currently serves as the poetry editor for Concrete Literary Magazine. She has been regionally and nationally recognized by the Scholastic Writing Awards.

Postcard from San Francisco By Esther Sun

I am in a cold city that smells of saltwater
and cigarettes. Their crests rising, skyward

roads undulate as homeless men sit on street corners,
their cardboard signs sturdier than their clothes.

The trolleys sing, motherly, a chorus of altos
and fussing construction drills. Believe me,

there's more to this than meets the sky. Even now
in summer the wind knifes me; the savior sun;

dirty pastel blocks; blinding upsides of cumulus;
Chinatown glows; concrete after rain; the Bay

Bridge shivers; a silky sheen. Up the hill,
the symphony slogs behind closed doors.

Esther Sun is a junior at Los Gatos High School in Northern California. Her work has received national recognition from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and been published in The Wildcat Review, her high school's literary magazine.

Happiness By Pelumi Sholagbade

I finally learned how to take care of myself.

I'm a smile orange-peel wide.

I'm going to die movie-star happy,

Happy like soda left out on the countertop.

The moon is whiter than death. I drown my plants,

I kiss myself to sleep. I don't talk about birds

Any more. Can't think about what it means

To fall. Won't think about what it means

To fly.

Pelumi Sholagbade is a high school senior from Washington DC. When not writing, Pelumi can be found reading, playing the cello, or failing to fall asleep at night.

Nuyorican By Micaela Gonzalez

I'm from the dark Bronx, illicit and glowing. where all I eat is simmering ketchup, salty bacon, egg, and cheese, teeth muscles chomping, mouth watering.

I'm from Mayaguez, Puerto Rico where the crystal clear water is perfect, but also my purple pulpo, salty white carrucho, and cheesy yellow sorullos take me back.

I'm from set tables of rice and beans every night and

divine ice cream from Rex Cream, just a hint of spice to the mix.

Don't forget about mom's chicken and pig feet, slimy and gooey!

I'm from the bodega on the corner wondering,

"Hey, where's my Cola Champagne?" The only thing I chug down when I go.

I'm from Nana's 4-decade-old apartment 3603 15A

Daddy's raucous basement house on Lake Ave.

On Andrews Ave, Mom and I live a bitter-sweet and spicy heart that cannot be separated....

I'm from a great school with great teachers,

never thinking I could be so well educated.

I'm from my two-story-high-bed with the one medal that makes me proud of who I am as Micaela Gonzalez, where the butterflies take me away

And the lights give me hope to make the world develop equality.

Cars honking, people yelling: Home is where I am a Nuyorican.

I'm from trips with my dad's 80s music, "Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down, never gonna run around!"

Nights of the coqui's orchestra, "coqui, coqui."

I'm from Abuelita Milagros house dreading her to say: "Deja de mirar en el espejo lo va a romper." (Stop looking in the mirror, you're gonna break it!) I crack up every time I hear it.

I'm also from hectic nights of the Latinx version of X-Factor on Telemundo
"Let's go Eric!"

I'm from dreaming of sports—

from supporting family and friends who encourage me with their weight lifting hand.

From people who don't scold me but educate me.

I am putting strength and effort to work hard for my dream to be like Carla Cortijo, one of the first Puerto Ricans on the WNBA. Even though I am what I would say *trash*.

This is a message from a twelve-year-old girl

Chase after your dreams, like a bird looking for its nest.

Micaela is a twelve-year-old Latinx girl, who really takes where she's from seriously. One day she wants to become a published author to help other Latinx girls know that they can accomplish anything, so submitting poems as a young girl is very important to her. Her teacher has encouraged her to pursue this dream; in addition, this is something she thinks will help her as a student in English class.

carnal By Macy Perrine

his knuckles,
folded,
untucked the tag
from the heat
of the back
of his neck

and I shivered.

how intimate,
the curl of his fingers
over the pulp
of his own flesh.

I wanted
to dance my lips
against his soil skin
but instead I
pressed them together
bit my tongue the color
of his blooming cheeks
and shivered
in silence.

Macy has been in love with language for as long as she can remember. She specializes in lyrical and spoken word poetry, and after high school plans to major in creative writing

and become an editor.

Eine Alpensinfonie— R. Strauss, 1915 By Kevin Kong

Night wriggles from tussock and crawlers
infest skin, cold above our arms. Along
mountain's edge, we welcome defrosted pine
into our noses. The water collects
within crevasses of a glacial behemoth.
We spearhead towards the peak, dissociation of
limbs to torso, us to hunting horns.
And through the mist, sun's voice quavers
off-beat into gray, the tempest, and quells
winter's gloom with nostalgia. In the dark,
like scattered seeds of Alpine flowers,
snow braves flight in wind.

Kevin Kong is a junior at A.W. Dreyfoos School of the Arts in Florida. His writing has been recognized by the Florida State Poets Association and the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Teen Ink, Bridge Ink, Canvas Literary Journal, and the FSPA anthology, Cadence. He enjoys playing the cello and eating hotpot.

Fiction

Dollar Store Stars By Esme Kaplan-Kinsey

In retrospect, I think I loved her bed more than I loved her.

She was sweet, don't get me wrong. With that long auburn hair and those freckled constellations on her arms and tiny little upturned nose...I spent an inordinate amount

of time that semester, maybe forty minutes into history or halfway through study hall when I should have been finishing math homework, thinking about those freckles, thinking about pressing our bodies together so hard that maybe I could transfer those constellations onto myself.

If I'm being honest, I'm having trouble remembering her name now. Something classy, no doubt. An Anabelle or a Francesca, maybe. Some name I had no business with.

I know the way it ended was awful. But in my defense, I was young, and teenage morals often stretch at the whim of emotion, especially love.

She loved me, I don't doubt that. I could see it in the way she walked toward me, the way her mouth looked like she couldn't quite hold in the words or the kisses. I could see it when she walked away from me, the way her stride bounced a little more after exchanging a few words.

I may have loved her. I had no frame of reference, see. But I know without a doubt that I loved her bed.

The first time Francesca (Annabelle?) took me home, I felt like a stray puppy she'd pulled in off the streets. She had a maid, for God's sake. She had a cut glass bowl of those nice candy almonds on the kitchen table, and she didn't even eat one as she walked by. Her younger siblings were tiny and perfect, like dolls, but she waved off their piping questions and dragged me up a white carpeted staircase to her cavernous bedroom. And there it was: silken, pink-sheeted love at first sight. When we started making out on that gorgeous, pillow-covered vision, all I wanted to do was sit up, put my shirt back on and look around. Because man, she was pretty cool, but that room was like another dimension. If you land on a planet you've never been to, you're gonna want to leave the spaceship at some point. Even if the spaceship wants you to touch her boobs.

That night, I couldn't sleep. My blankets were scratchy and my pillow was lumpy and my bedframe squeaked when I moved. My little sister was snoring in the corner of the room. You'd think I'd have been used to that, seeing as she'd been sleeping there for eight years, but that night I couldn't stop thinking about Annabelle's (Francesca's?) sister, who had a loft bed draped in lilac and glow-in-the-dark stars on her ceiling.

At three in the morning, my older brother came in, drunk off his ass, slurring angrily when he tripped over the coffee table. My sister sat up and watched with sleepy amusement. I told my brother to puke in the bathroom so I wouldn't have to clean it up this time. Mom yelled at us to go to sleep.

Francescabelle wanted to come eat at my house. I told her no, partly because my brother was always more attractive than me and partly because the image of her scrubbed, vanilla-scented self sitting at my kitchen table made me vaguely nauseous. Plus, I hadn't even told Mom I was seeing her. Plus, my little sister was sick a lot and I wouldn't want Francesca to catch anything. I had a lot of good excuses.

So we went back to her house, up her staircase, to her bedroom, over and over and over. Once, after school, I fell asleep in her bed. When I woke up, I didn't know where I was, but the fluffy pillows smelled like her and in my half-dreaming state, staring up at the folds of the canopy bed, I suddenly wondered if I was going to cry.

That pissed me off, so I rolled out of bed even though my body was screaming for another few minutes of bliss. I walked down the stairs looking for Annabellesca, and the maid told me she'd had to go to her piano lessons but said I could sleep for as long as I wanted.

The maid was this pretty Latina girl who looked familiar for some reason, and halfway through our conversation I realized she was one of the twelve hundred chicks my brother dated in high school. I asked if she remembered him, and she started laughing.

“The one who punched the principal at graduation?”

I said yes, that was my brother, and I laughed too even though he'd spent two weeks in juvie for that and came back bruised and smelling like piss. The maid was very nice and gave me a handful of the candied almonds that I'd been too scared to eat because they looked so pretty in the cut glass bowl.

Later, I told my brother that my girlfriend's maid was one of the girls he'd dated in high school. He looked shocked.

“No way.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Isn't that funny?”

“No way.”

“What?”

“You have a girlfriend?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Franabelle still wanted to come over for dinner, and now my brother started pestering me about it. “Why the hell would she date you, dude? What's wrong with her?”

“Nothing,” I'd say. “She's hot.”

“Yeah, imaginary chicks usually are.”

Eventually my irritation overcame my weird dread, and I told her she could come over for a meal. I spent the days leading up to it with my stomach knotted. Because of my brother, I told myself. Because Mom cooks simple food that might not suit her refined

palate. Because my sister has a cold again and Franabellesca's perfect upturned nose should never be cursed with the sniffles.

We had spaghetti, I remember. Tangled up with red sauce and meatballs. Our table was square, made for four people. We gave Ancesca her own side. She sat up straight and thanked my mother profusely. She was the shiniest thing in the room. She glowed like her insides were full of molten metal. She reached for the loaf of bread at the same time as my brother, and though her hand was half the size of his it still got there first.

My sister's mouth hung open. Snot was running out of her nose, but Mom was too fluttery to notice. When I told Mom I had a girlfriend, I knew who she was expecting to be over for dinner. The girl with the purple hair who sat in the back of my history class drawing dragons all over her textbooks. Maybe one of the girls who would dodge behind the school to smoke a joint between classes. Someone who my brother went out with, someone like the maid. Someone who wouldn't make my mother feel like she needed to scrub the house from ceiling to floor.

My sister said, through a mouthful of meatball, "Your hair is so pretty."

Franabelcesca looked startled, like she wasn't used to hearing this every day of the week. "Thank you."

"Your hair is beautiful too, honey," said Mom, and my sister sneezed her acknowledgment.

We ate dessert in silence. Mom fidgeted with the napkins, folding and unfolding them. I could feel the spaghetti tangled up in my stomach.

I asked if she wanted to play cards or something. No prospect of hooking up, what with my sister sleeping in the same room (God, I missed her bed). She said her dad was already coming to pick her up. She hugged my mother, and I watched Mom breathe in her vanilla scent, and I watched Francescanabelle breathe in Mom's smell of cooking oil

and detergent. When Francesca put on her coat and opened the door, I saw Mom's shoulders relax even as her mouth formed a good-bye.

As we waited there by the curb, my mind was lagging. I was still caught up in the smoothness of her fingers between mine, or the dying embers of her hair in the porch light, or some other physical perfection that made my hormone-riddled body feel airless.

"I had fun," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Your mom is so nice."

"I'll tell her you said that," I said. "It'll make her day."

"Aw," she said, and I looked at her sideways, but her face was blank and her thoughts had clearly moved on. I thought, she doesn't get just how rare it is for my mother's day to get made. She should have noticed my sister's awe-filled snot-sticky stare, how my brother who broke his hand on his principal's cheekbone drew back his fingers from hers like she was electrically charged. I thought, why do I expect her to understand?

It was about then that her dad pulled up in a Porsche, and it was about four seconds after this that I said, "I think we should break up."

Her head jerked towards me. "What?"

"Bye," I said, and I ran into my house. And then I started laughing hysterically because I knew that I was the worst person on the planet and I already missed her and especially her bed and I somehow didn't regret any of it.

I bought a pack of the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars at the dollar store a few days after. Turns out, anyone can afford those things. I put them on the ceiling over my sister's bed.

Her nose bubbled excitedly, and at night sometimes I could hear her singing to her constellations, but pretending they were the ones singing, in a constant loop of comforting and comforted that was only meant for her but sometimes made the knots in my stomach loosen a little.

I've heard that it's common for people to fantasize about their ex-lovers. I don't remember ever doing that with her. Hell, I don't remember much about her; her name was probably Jacquelyn or something. But I have to admit that many nights, when the glow-in-the-dark stars were the only source of light in the room, I could not keep myself from dreaming about her bed.

Esmé Kaplan-Kinsey is a eighteen-year-old writer from Petaluma, California. She is the founder of her school's creative writing club and editor of the school literary magazine. She is a two-time finalist at the Youth Speaks Grand Slam Final for Slam Poetry in San Francisco, and her work has been published or is forthcoming in Teen Ink and Amaryllis. When not writing, Esmé enjoys acting and making music.

Francis Forgets By Rachel Zhu

Frances is afraid of the rain. She is afraid that the water will soak through the bricks of the buildings, which will soften like pound cake in milk and collapse. And so when it begins to drizzle Frances takes the bus (the bus is safe, because it is waterproof) into Central Park (the park is also safe, because there are no buildings) and she waits by the reservoir with a red umbrella until the storm passes. Sometimes it is a long storm, or there are multiple thunderstorms, and on those days she brings a beach chair and a blue blanket so she will not get arthritis by standing in the cold and the wet for too long. Sometimes when it rains for days she has no choice but to go home, and lie in bed, and feel afraid.

When home Frances takes the little white bus tickets (the ones that look like receipts, for the cross-town buses), folds them in half the long way, and slips them into a jar she has on the ground by the mirror across from the door. She says she will send them all to the mayor to show how environmentally harmful he is being. After this Frances reopens her red umbrella which she closed in the lobby, and sets it out to dry on the terrace, where there is a black cat figurine. Frances knows it is bad luck and has been the source of many troubles in late years, but is afraid to throw it away in case it was a gift from her daughter. She does not remember. The beach chair is left propped against the cat, as kind of a curtain to obscure Frances's fear. But in reality she is not afraid of very many things; only the rain, black cats, and the feeling that one day she will forget her daughter. She knows she is very forgetful already; this is because every month she finds a new dried plant on her windowsill that she has forgotten to water. Sometimes she lets things stay on the stove too long and they burn, but she is not as afraid of fire as she is of rain because the bricks in the building are not flammable. Besides, her kitchen walls and floors are of granite, which ought not to burn either.

But fire is not what Frances thinks of most of the time after she steps back into the apartment from the terrace. Most of the time, she thinks about if her daughter is going to visit, and then she thinks about her grandson. Then sometimes Frances goes to take the garbage to the compactor room and sees the man who lives across the hall, except she has forgotten about him. He has lived there two years now, and she has welcomed him with brownies almost thirty-four times. He has helped her pull the Monet print off the wall and then put it up again almost ten times, because she keeps forgetting and wondering why the Monet is not on the wall, or why it is still on the wall.

She is not so terribly lost, though. She still reads the newspaper and does the crosswords in the bathtub and hangs her rose-printed sheets out on the balcony so that at night they smell like Park Avenue sunshine. Sometimes when she is bored she sits on the couch and pulls the comforter up to her chin and thinks about nothing, but thinks that she is thinking about everything. Sometimes she thinks about the man who owns

the pickle shop two blocks away who talks to her when she pays for her sweet marinated red peppers, and then she thinks about the doorman who has the night shift downstairs, and sometimes she only sits and stares at the little mark on the wall from twenty-some years ago where there used to be a nail. Frances is sad when she does this, but barely realizes it, and instead considers it a routine time to ponder the world.

Maybe Frances is also sad when she goes to sleep, because she pulls her blanket up to her chin and stares up at the ceiling. Occasionally she stares long enough to remember what it was like staring up at other ceilings. She remembers pink walls (hers at six years of age), gray walls (his at twenty-seven), yellow walls (theirs at thirty-one). She wonders what color he painted his walls after he moved out and moved in with someone else. Usually while staring at those walls she remembers the feeling of smiling. She does not really smile because the lift of her lips takes too much energy, and besides, there is no one to smile to except for the ceiling light. If Frances looks at it for a long enough time it begins to look like a face.

She is not afraid of death, really, only afraid that when she goes to heaven she will not know anyone there. She is not sure of what she will do if no one speaks to her. What if it is crowded, and there is no place to sleep, no beds for her to lie in and no walls for her to stare up at? She has said this to the drunken man on the street corner whom she lets sleep in the living room (this is safe because she knows him and does not forget him like she does the man who lives across the hall. The drunk man, his name is Joseph and he is an actor). He repays her for her kindness by knitting her scarves and sweaters.

There are few events in Frances's life, unless one counts the flowering of one of her succulents every few years. Otherwise there are events such as when she takes the piggy banks, stuffed with change, to the bank down the street, or when the young woman above drops cigarette butts onto Frances's terrace (they often land in the aloe plant). Every couple of years her daughter and grandson visit from California, and Frances invites them to dinner and they eat roast pork and beans and tomato gazpacho

in silence, because there is nothing to say. Frances's daughter asks how she is doing, and Frances says she is doing well, how about you? And then the daughter says she is doing well, too, and William has just started his first year of elementary school, and William looks outside at the black cat figurine that is sitting on the terrace because he has nothing to say either. There are minutes of silence, and then Frances asks how Emily's husband is, and Emily says he is busy and could not come, but did say hello. Frances says hello back, and then they sit and wait for William to finish so they can sit some more.

William is bored and he looks at the cat and then he looks at the Monet and he looks at the old television in the living room and then he looks at the plaid jacket that is hanging on the tall, ornate coat rack. If there is nothing else to look at William will look at the shoes under the bench and the jar under the mirror and maybe into the mirror, but never at his grandmother because he has nothing to say to her. Sometimes Emily hugs her mother and pretends to ask her to come to California, but both she and Frances know no husband wants his mother-in-law in the house, and so Frances says that she is too old to leave New York, and Emily insists that she is young, so, so young. William looks at the carpet and holds his mother's hand.

Sometimes when it rains and one of Frances's succulents is flowering she brings it into the park with her. The people on the bus wonder why she is holding a small painted blue pot with a miniature cactus and a long trail of white flowers coming out the middle, but Frances says nothing. If it is night and she falls asleep on her beach chair the small blue pot tumbles out of her hands and into the mud, where she finds it when a nice man wakes her up. Then she gathers all the dirt that was spilled from the pot and slips it back in on the sides, and then looks sadly at each little white blossom, as if to apologize. And when she goes back she is shivering and the doorman with the night shift tells her, again, that the rain will not soak into the bricks of the building and make them soften, and she smiles and says she knows. Then he asks her why she goes out if she knows, and she replies that she knows but does not really know—that she knows in her mind but her

heart, where the fear lives, has not quite gotten the message yet. It may have been lost on the way.

Maybe in a few months or a few years Frances will forget her daughter. So that when there is knocking at the door Frances will open it to an unfamiliar face; she does not know anyone this young, she is sure, apart from the mailman and the new man across the hall. Maybe her grandson will be there, too, and she will wonder if they have gotten lost, or perhaps come to the wrong floor. She will ask who they are looking for, and then her daughter will know. But maybe that will come slowly; she will forget many things before she forgets them. She will forget to take the garbage to the compactor room, to bake brownies for the neighbor who just moved in, to pay for her peppers at the pickle shop, to think about life and heaven and smiling when she sits on the couch or the bed and stares at the white around her. Maybe Frances will forget to be afraid of the rain.

Rachel Zhu lives in New York and is a current junior at Horace Mann School. She is the cofounder and Editor in Chief of Horace Mann's creative prose magazine, LitMag. Outside of school, Zhu writes creative short prose and poetry, and is also an artist and ceramicist. She draws influence from her Chinese background and culture as well as classical European and American works of literature. Through her work, she hopes to inspire other Asian Americans to express their stories and experiences through the world of humanities and art.

Our Town By Katherine Xiong

We realize later that the day everyone in the township lost both hands — no clean cut, just a rude awakening to two drying, painless stumps at the end of our arms — should have been declared a state, if not national, emergency. This shit doesn't happen often! The least we could get is some recognition. Instead we got Dr. Selwyn accepting bids for an experimental treatment that's supposed to regrow limbs like lizard tails, and those

Veterans Association guys, Ray and Eddie, volunteering to lead workshops and support groups for our new lives without hands. Also a lot of screaming and anarchy and this-is-an-outrage stuff on TV in the first few days, but none of us had time for that. Panic is for morons who can afford to miss work, as Samira likes to say.

So here's how the day goes: us girls get up individually, clear our cauterized stumps of the nastiest clots, and drag our sorry asses in with five minutes to spare. We're forgiven, obviously, for skipping makeup and leaving our bedhead in place, though Manager David draws the line at ditching those neon-pink fifties uniforms. That alone sets us back about an hour. By the time we do manage to get the doors open, we have a line of pissed-off, balding weirdos who must be from out of town, since they've still got fists to shake at us. David greets them all with a yellowing say-cheese smile and leaves us four, all handleless, to fend for ourselves.

It takes a few minutes in the kitchen for Haruhi, our high schooler, to ask how the hell we're supposed to get these orders out. It's lucky our pancakes only take one trip to the microwave and the cooler's right there. But these plates have a long way to go. We'd leave them on the counter, but expecting customers to come up to the counter for their food? Unthinkable.

"Well, let's test it out, Haru," Samira says. She wiggles her stump at the steaming heap of brown on the table. "Group effort, ladies. Wrists out." Except Haru's tiny, and our first attempt to balance a plate on her twiggy wrists ends with the pancakes sliding off onto the floor.

So we improvise. Have her hold the plate in her teeth? No, too heavy. Hold it between her elbows? Haru's too weak. Piper suggests having her juggle it with her knees like a soccer ball, and really, Samira's blank stare is what she deserves.

Finally, Samira throws her stumps up and stomps off to get the whipped cream. Piper and I look at each other, then at Haru, who's holding herself ramrod straight like she's

afraid to let herself move.

“Put it on her head!” Piper’s a genius.

It takes both of us crammed onto one step stool to get the platter to balance, but we manage it. We’re just lucky we picked Haru, whose head is surprisingly flat.

We hop off the stool as Samira returns with the whipped cream tucked into the pockets of her apron. She glares for a moment, holding the canister by her wrists, and then she yanks the cap off the cream with her teeth and pushes down the nozzle with her tongue. She didn’t shake it enough, though, so it comes out gloppy, an oozy lump that splats in a pool of liquid.

“That’s, like, three health code violations right there,” Piper says.

“What, the tongue thing?”

“No, dumbass, that whipped cream job,” I say. “Atrocious.”

Haruhi’s eyes fly to her hairline, and before we can stop her, she whips her head back to look, sending the platter facedown to the floor. I’d wipe it up, but I can’t hold a mop at the moment and one look at that rancid fluff has me convinced that it’ll give me blood poisoning. Instead I strike a movie pose – wrist flared against swooning forehead, backside against the counter. Woe is us.

The three of us start giggling, Piper and me doubled over and Haru like she can’t believe she’s allowed to breathe, but then Samira laughs. She’s laughing so hard that she can’t keep hold of the canister, and it lands with a splat in the middle of the mess. Which makes us go even more nuts.

Anyway, that's what we're doing when David comes back in with a tray of muffins in his translucent, veiny hands—because (and I forgot to mention) he's also an out-of-towner and none of this is his problem. We only pause to laugh harder and cover our mouths with stumpy wrists when he shakes his crooked finger at us, saying, cut the shit.

Katherine Xiong is a freshman in college who's doing her best. Her most recent work has appeared in *One Teen Story* and *Body Without Organs*.

Dust on the Sawed-Off Shotgun By Zoe-Aline Howard

It was that five o'clock quiet. That near dinner, husband-isn't-home-hush that Mary drew close to. She was working flour through her fingers, kneading gluten into a biscuit dough and hoping for an even rise that Ed might even compliment if she kept the oven steady and hot. There was a familiar taste of Mississippi pollen on her breath and a yellow day of work under her fingernails.

She held the storm door open with a dusted Mary Jane, its match cleaned by a fresh breeze. Without the lulled hum carrying from the kitchen, it would seem no one was in the steaming home. Wind brought Spring in from the porch, with the dewy smell of honeysuckle and St. Valentines Day. There were framed portraits on a table by the wall. Three of her children when they were young: Charles at twelve with a cheeky grin; Jane Ellen almost grown, with her dark curls and doe eyes; and Missy, seven, lips already sweet as sugar. Mary kept in the drawer beneath them the photo of her angel, in a coffin at three. Over doilies stained yellow, pictures of her grandchildren. In the center was a photo of a little boy with a cap-gun Ed had passed down against Mary's wishes. A boy so young could hardly hold the truth of a bullet in his thoughts. He sat in a child's rocking chair on top of the couch cushion, grinning at Jane Ellen through the lens. Each frame carted memories in the afternoon light.

The dough was stiff and clung to her warm hands in the humidity. Mary rolled it thick and cut circles with the lip of an empty peach jar. She washed her hands and covered the tray with a damp cloth to rise until supper. Her mind wandered down Depression tracks as they always did before evening. She counted her blessings again. The one nice brown dress with pink ribbon on the hem, the record Jane Ellen and her husband had brought on their last visit, the beef she and Ed could afford again. She hummed the melody of *In the Ghetto* and thought of the still fresh babies her Jane Ellen had at home. Her youngest grandson and his sweet kisses captivated her mind a moment. His hair was blonde as sand and fine as talc powder, but his mother's had been too. By sixteen he'd have a full head of dark horse hair.

A truck crushed down the gravel drive. Three footsteps echoed up the porch stairs, disjointed. Mary busied herself with collard greens, halving and dousing them in fat on the stove in a choking simmer. The figure in the doorway turned her in panic, and hand to her chest, she exhaled relief and hugged her son. He held himself against the doorway, like his shoulders held the weight Almighty.

"Now Charles, you know better than to scare an old woman!" She rubbed his cheek with her thumb. She could smell the habitual alcohol on his breath. She spared him the loss of her temper. "You go and wash up if you're staying for supper. It'll be ready before your father gets home."

Charles left the kitchen in mud-caked boots. Leaving a trail on the mopped linoleum, he ran his fingers along the wall and balanced his weight against the wallpaper. He paused at the photos and turned them down on their faces. He felt too old to cry, too broken to be home. Tile kept the bathroom cold and the water colder against his cheeks. Flushing himself with the chill, he began to sob. He closed the door.

Mary continued to cook, adding a third helping of collards to the simmering pan. She worried not, but rejoiced at Charles's return. Her heart was near to bursting with

tremors of a filled nest.

The biscuits continued to rise. Her husband would walk in any moment, hungry and distracted. There was leftover chess pie from the church group in the fridge that she'd been saving for Valentines' Day, but she could serve it as a treat for her two men. She smiled to herself and washed a floured bowl.

"Charles, bring another set of napkins for yourself when you come." She spoke to the sink and herself, "I would have folded them real nice if I'd known you'd be home. Such a shame I'm already behind." She looked over at the counter. "Why, the biscuits won't even be ready in time."

She waited for her son to respond and took the tray of dense dough to the oven. The creaking door flooded the warm house with the evening chill. She called again – "Charles? What're you doin' back there? Your father will be home soon and he'll wanna know what you're doin' back- Charles?"

She sighed and worked her way down the hall, kicking over the shoe and letting the door swing to a close. Two fingers all veins and knuckle closed the latch. She looked over the fallen frames. A cough cut the hall in two. Mary turned. Her son was leaning against the bedroom door frame, his eyes red and hands shaking. His eyes still held tears, years of them. They twinkled like a movie star's – that's what Jane Ellen had always said, that Charles was handsome as a show horse – and something was missing. Mary held composure and spoke again,

"Charles, what's going on?" She held herself but her tone slid cussedly. "Why did you come home tonight?"

Her son's demeanor shifted again, becoming anxious. Charles's voice crumpled beneath his throat and a sob rippled back. "Mama I never, Mama I- Mama I didn't want to hurt anyone." He had lost his grip, as he'd done when he was younger. She had been sure he'd

outgrown it, having watched him hold Jane Ellen's little baby the previous Christmas Eve.

She prayed to Almighty that Ed might walk in the back door and took her son by the shoulder. It was stiff and knotted. "Charles, what have you done? Answer me- why did you come here-"

Charles swung back and forth along the door, exposing his arm and the sawed-off shotgun from the linen closet. "Mama-" He lifted the arm and lowered it, staggering in breath and stance. The house settled into its covers, and Mary began to ache, aware of every closed curtain and private space in their little home. "Mama-" he crooned, a small boy again.

Mary held her necklace and released a prayer with her tears. The house was quiet. A stormy wind cracked against the latched door and pleaded for entrance. Mary hushed it with will, praying that silence would hold until Ed's truck pulled in. She damned herself for the smell of collards boiling over. Her movie star little boy cried to himself, 'Mama, Mama, Mama.' She remembered the days when he sang to her and brought her bracelets of wildflowers, the days when she couldn't feed them more than the previous evening's leftovers- if there was a serving left. Days when he still loved to run amuck with Missy and get into more trouble than Mary had the energy to manage. She kept in her mind the little grandson she wanted to hold. She held only herself.

The fat from the collards rushed in rivers over the edge of the pot, the greens simmering down to a green syrup. A smoke flooded out from the oven, stones of flour calling out for safety. The house was hot and loud, festering wounds of the evening. "Mama, Mama, Mama-"

It was just one shot. Then the world kept its quiet.

Zoe-Aline Howard is a Kernersville, NC local and Early College graduate entering her college years with an Associate of Arts and high, high hopes. Beyond studying forms of poetry and reading fiction, she enjoys creating digital zines. In the fall, she will declare herself a Pre-Creative Writing major at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and begin her literary journey in full force.

Non-Fiction

Trigger Warning:Him By Charlotte Herd

He would stroke my thighs, caress my shoulders, and linger his hands when he should not have done so. He came up behind me, put his arms on either side of me and placed his hands on the desk, trapping me between his pale arms. He planted his chin on my shoulder, positioning his thin lips right next to my ear. He whispered something but I was never able to recall what it was, my brain was in too much shock to process whatever he whispered into my ear. I was only able to focus on what he had just done. He would sometimes place his hands on my lower thighs and slowly move them up, stopping only below where a schoolgirls uniform skirt would be hemmed. He once took me by the arm, and placed his hand on my lower back, pushing me along even if I didn't need to be guided into wherever he was taking me. I had told this man my issues, my worries, things that ran through my head. He was essentially a father figure to me. I trusted him, but unfortunately, he deceived me.

I joined Academic Decathlon at the end of my sophomore year after the coach and a friend managed to convince me. I walked into the classroom where the interest meeting was being held in with a couple of my friends. We had heard the basics before from the coach, one topic, ten subjects, and some competitions.

I quickly started to gain a liking to the club. I would show up to the classroom after school to catch up on practice or just to talk to the coach. I ended up trusting this man a lot; I would tell him about my struggles with classes, my mental health or anything that bothered me. I soon realized that I trusted him too much. He took advantage of me and my vulnerability. He knew things that went through my head and so he went behind my back. I should have known how manipulative he was from the minute he beguiled me into Academic Decathlon. There were multiple times where I was uncomfortable under his touch and even his gaze.

During English my heart was racing, it was the last class of the day which meant I had to go to practice for AcDec right after. My body was filled with anxiety; I did not want to see him again. The bell rang, my vision got blurry as I gathered my things, getting ready to leave. The ink on my papers started to bleed as my tears fell and created puddles of black and blue. I stuffed my belongings into my bag, not caring if they got torn since they were already ruined. Everyone had already left the classroom; it was just me and my English teacher. He tried making small talk, asking if I was working later that day but quickly abandoned his question and replacing it with “Are you okay?” That only seemed to make things worse, he kept telling me that it was okay and asking me to tell him what happened. After calming down enough I explained why I was upset, I explained why I was crying and explained why I didn’t want to go to practice. I explained to him that one of the people I trusted the most had taken advantage of my weaknesses and used them to make me feel repulsive.

He looked at me for a while, his hand covering his mouth but I could see his jaw dropped. He kept looking at me as I cried in the desk I had used to demonstrate how the man I trusted had touched me and betrayed me. After some time of us sitting in the dark he apologized,— he told me he would have to tell my principal about this, that he couldn’t just listen to this and go on as if he didn’t hear something.

It was Thursday, February 1st; I had just gotten back from my internship and walked into my US History class. We had a big test and I had studied for this. I was confident. The teacher passed around the test, wished us luck and let us begin. Not even five minutes into the test the teacher got a call. She answered and said "She's taking a test right now, can she go in later?" Throughout the rest of the call she made eye contact with me so I knew I was the subject of the conversation. "The principal wants to talk to you." I walked into the office, my heart was racing. I pushed the door open and saw her sitting behind a desk cluttered with papers, an empty seat in front of the desk and another chair occupied by a school security officer. Seeing the security officer in the office made my heart drop. My vision got blurry fast, my face got hot and my knees started to feel weak. The principal and the officer shared the same look of concern on their face, I was handed tissues and told to take some seconds to calm down. "Your teacher told us what happened. We just want you to tell us what exactly happened."

After explaining to them how I had my body violated by this man I was asked to write out the report. Making it the third time I had to explain what happened. My parents had not known yet but I decided on telling my sister what happened that night when I got home. She was furious, she went on and on about how messed up it was for him to do that, how no one has a right to touch me like that, how it's important to stand up for myself in situations like this. Eventually I had to tell my mom, shortly after I was forced into talking to district detectives, Child Protective Services, and even more district detectives. This went on for the last half my junior year.

At some point after the second meeting with a detective, he stopped showing up to work. A handful of people knew the reason as to why he was gone; the rest of the school did not. A rumor about him breaking his hip started going around the school, this was better than people knowing the truth and blaming me for his absence. People later started to realize that he had been gone for longer than the recovery time for a broken hip. Soon, teachers started gossiping as well, everyone wanted to know why he was

gone. Being in a classroom where half the class was spent talking about this made me want to crawl out of my skin.

My English teacher ended up having to be the one to put in grades for his class while he was gone. I felt guilty for this; I saw his workload pile on because of something I could have kept to myself. I felt guilty for everything that happened because of me deciding to come forward. I regretted it, "if I would have not said anything things would be better." This is something I constantly told myself. I blamed myself for him not being able to work. I blamed myself for my teacher's increased workload, I thought that since he wasn't here, his students weren't able to pass the AP test for his class. I blamed myself for all of these things.

My senior year he came back along with the nightmares; dreams of him doing worse things. I wake up in cold sweats and lie in bed until my alarm clock goes off signaling me to get ready to face him at school. Because even after being investigated I had to sit in silence while he got to stay on paid leave and keep his five-figure wage. So, I sit in my classrooms in fear that one of my dreams will no longer be a dream but a reality. I avoid his hallway at all costs and risk getting to class late. My friends have gotten annoyed of this and I can tell, anytime I refuse to pass his den they roll their eyes as they turn around, but I notice. I feel bad for it but I can't change it, I want to be braver and face him and show him that I don't care about what he's done but I can't.

Born and raised in Dallas, Texas, Charlotte is an eighteen year old who during her free time enjoys listening to music, making jewelry, and practicing her embroidery skills. She will be attending Texas Woman's University in the fall of 2019 and plans on majoring in Kinesiology and later becoming an Occupational Therapist.

The room didn't have any side windows, only an overhead that let in a little bit of light and a lot of noise from the screaming kindergarteners on the roof. Zen music was being played a little aggressively to tune them out.

It was the last period of Friday, *Tefila*, Jewish prayer, except through the lens of meditation. It wasn't a very important class to my school's administration, and any Friday event that needed to be squeezed into the schedule inevitably came at the expense of meditation Tefila, which in turn came at the expense of real Tefila, where we would actually pray, like our Jewish school advertised. I had written about this in the student newspaper I started, which had survived a prolonged battle with the school for two years. Every two weeks, on Thursday, my small staff and I printed dozens of twenty-page copies, and on Friday we gave our hard work out to the whole school. I had thirty copies in my backpack.

I'd been late to Tefila, and when I ran in the door, I could tell I'd upset the atmosphere. I shrank back a little, abashed, but looked over to see a friend David laughing, and so I smirked and tossed my backpack into a corner. Now, I was slouched in one of the hard chairs like my friend. I had my Miami Beach hat pulled tight above my eyes, my coat zipped, and my glasses pushed up on my nose to focus. I joined him in his little bubble of showy cynicism about the opening five-minute silence. I looked around for something to do, recalling that I'd survived the last few "meditation Tefilas" by reading my book and doing homework. It came as a crushing realization that I'd left both of those activities in my locker. I couldn't actually meditate; it hurt my back, and it made me feel moronic. I thought of passing the time by making jokes with David across the room, or indulging the expectant eyes of the a few middle schoolers in the room who'd heard I was funny. The last few times I'd done this on and off. This time felt different, though, or, probably more accurate, I felt different. I shifted from the chair onto one of the folded blankets on the rug.

That day hadn't been great, just in general, which had started with my latest math test. The lesson had moved really fast, and the practice packets we'd been assigned confused me. I got most of the questions wrong on the packets, which I got handed back for corrections, got the same questions wrong, and got back for corrections again without being told how to do the problems. Shockingly, I got a seventy-nine. I hated our teacher, and I hated the class. I knew none of the skills we were using I would use again, as a humanities student, and additionally, the class was unbearable. Singapore Math, the curriculum we used, went so fast, and didn't ensure that the students really knew the material, instead using a continuous bombardment of new work to let stress hammer in the material. Most of our classes were like that. I can't totally blame them, though. I wrote my newspaper articles like that.

I wanted to ace my retest, on which I could get up to a ninety, so I got all the practice packets I could from my teacher, and woke up early the day of the retest to do all of them. I studied the study sheet, which didn't have a sizable portion of the material and I suspect had been copied from a different website. I got a seventy-nine on the retest as well. Above the grade, my teacher had scribbled a sardonic note. When I told her how hard I had studied, and that I had in fact really tried to get a better grade, she gave me a taut, pointed smile, and admonished me for managing to get a failing grade even after studying. In general, I thought as Laura's rotating fan wafted air across my face, I was getting dumber. You always think that, I countered in my head. Calm down. Just think about philosophy, or something.

Instrumental music floated around the room, punctuated every once in a while by a percussive stomp from the kindergarteners. One of the fifth graders was playing with the fake candles. Otherwise, the room was still.

Laura loved meditating. Her posture was perfect as she activated only a few fingers that deftly swiped her little pestle against the copper bowl. "Okay," said Laura, as the vibrations rose up to each person in the room. The meditating people slowly opened

their eyes and smiled, while the ones who were picking at the carpet lazily lifted their heads. I felt a little stifled in my coat, so I quietly unzipped it and let it fall off my shoulders. “Let’s go around the room and share some things that we’re feeling today. Remember after you finish, you say *Dibarti*, which means ‘I said,’ and then everyone responds, *Shamati*, — ‘I heard.’

I heard... who doesn’t want to be heard?

She turned to her left. “You can start.”

There were four boys in the meditation Tefila, compared to easily three times that number of girls, and a woman led the whole thing. The energy in the room was, now that we had come out of the individual meditation, decidedly effeminate. (*Dibarti*, said the girl. *Shamati*.) It was a little annoying, because that meant that any social part of the class operated by a totally alien set of rules, which discouraged the boys from sharing. The other times, I either hadn’t shared or made a joke out of it. I wasn’t some sort of teenage girl who desperately needed everyone to hear her bland thoughts (*Dibarti. Shamati.*) about how weekends and breaks were fun, just to engage in a dangerous social theater. I looked over at David, who seemed bored to the point of self-reflection, and to Laura, whose face was a serene mask. The girl sharing giggled, and finished her thought. Laura smiled at her expectantly. The girl looked confused and then embarrassed, and then she giggled again. “Oh yeah. *Dibarti*.”

Shamati.

Laura looked towards me. I hadn’t figured out what my joke was going to be yet. I was going to mumble, “pass,” but for some reason instead I softly recounted a summary of my sadness about the Math test. I left out the part where my teacher had somehow made it a mark of shame that I’d studied since 5:00 in the morning, or where she walked away before I could respond. I just said that getting the same seventy-nine had made me feel

depressed about myself and my intelligence, and that I felt angry and sad. I did. *Dibarti. Shamati.*

When everyone was done, Laura brought out a little packet and started to talk about a teaching she'd found. "In the day," she said, "You're supposed to do all of the commandments and pray with your community. In the night, though, you're supposed to study, and build your faith." A few people gave their ideas on why this was before Laura referred to the scholar whose work she'd brought in. "In the day, you spread kindness and joy, like the sun coming up and spreading it's rays across the land. It illuminates everything and touches everyone. In the night, when there is no sun, you must look to yourself, and spread yourself and your happiness inward, and sustain yourself until the dawn."

Somewhere in the middle of her teaching I removed my hat. It was too hot, and besides, it blocked my vision of the top of the room. Now, as we went into the ten-minute meditation, I took off my glasses, and wiped the sweat off of my nose. My periphery swung open without the limits of my glasses frame, and the fan's air drifted on my eyes, and the magnified center I was used to faded away. The whole room went equally out of focus, and became a swirling haze, but at the same time it became clearer.

I wondered if any teachers would come to harass me when I went to hand out the newspaper. It didn't matter, I thought. Just be in the moment. Just be with yourself. Don't try to pursue anything. Don't try to be anything right now. You'll read when you get home, after you hand out copies of the newspaper and before you start on your Math homework. Don't think about philosophy if you don't want to, or do, if you want to, no, not your goal, not your projection of yourself, you, your present self, who doesn't have to train right now, who has these invaluable minutes to himself, with his eyes open or closed, alternating, leaning against the bookshelf and not meditating, not like they are, not like you should, but meditating, yes, meditating perhaps more than they are and perhaps more than you should.

But here I am, aimless, alone, in empty and mutable space, and happier than I've been for a long time. The clock reports five minutes until dismissal, until I give out the copies of the newspaper and then rush home for homework and rush to sleep until I can rush up to hurry through the sunlight. Laura starts chanting the first line of the Shema, six words, saying each of the words like they are heavy throated "Om" chants, but keeps her eyes closed and everyone else does the same. *Shemaaa*. The room vibrates powerfully. *Yisraael*. The reverberations are in me, whoever that is, and they follow me as I clamp on my hat, the visor reminding me where the successful people keep their gaze. *Adonaaii*. I slide on my coat, which blocks judging eyes and always puts on a professional front. I paused to look out at the class with their eyes closed before viscerally breaking myself from the spell they were still under. *Eloheiiinuu*.

Silently, I put on my glasses and strode out the door before they finished the prayer, dashing down the hallway to greet the regulars and give them copies before they rushed off too.

Benjamin Samuels enjoys history and using the past as a lens and divining stick for the future. He is also a vehement opponent of the encroaching advancements of big tech. He lives in an undisclosed location.

My Fault By Jared Pacheco

Cold. My nimble feet crusaded around the worn-down cement stairs that could cut my flesh in an instant. I trekked past the overgrown ant hill on the cracked flooring. Finally, I was greeted by the dewed cushion of grass that welcomed me so. My mind was a cloud as I twirled in what seemed like an eternity, and I ecstatically blinked back into my seven-thousand three-hundred-five square foot world.

All I'd known was a decomposing wooden fence, three-feet taller than my three-foot self, and the world. The world was a backyard, but it was more than my family gave it credit for. It was about the size of two houses and their yards combined. It was my playground, my house, my circus, my city, my solace. The neglected trees served as my landmarks. Between the two pecans was my basketball court, with my Crayola chalk strewn and a rusty hoop snagged from a construction site as the basketball hoop. The basketballs I had were half deflated, but still bounced even with my languid throws. The young oak was a skyscraper in the ocean. At the base, I would pour loads of water to make a beach, where my dog Oreo would play. The fig tree was the fountain of my city, a crumbling birdbath atop a pole sitting at the heart of the tree as branches curled around it. A large fishing net was draped over the trees and tied down to the fence all around the yard. It was a closed environment of sorts. The honeysuckles that curved along the fence didn't mind that and would instead find their way along the cracks to get through to me. My small hands picked about ten at a time, and I'd run to the stairs. My dirty nails would pinch the bottom tip of the bloom, pulling the stem out along with the sugar-filled drop. They were the food of my life and were one of the few kind things in this world of profound solitude.

Then there was the shed house. It was far removed from the house and sat at the very edge of our property. Compared to the salmon pink our house was painted, it was a chilly blue, and holes from my sister's archery practice scarred the surface. Looking back at it now, I always hated that shed house, but oddly enough I was always inside it. It was packed to the brim with boxes: old clothes, old toys, seasonal decorations, books, and just about whatever my mother deemed outdated and useless.

The shed house was my treasure trove. I would trade with the worn-down stuffed animals in there. Monday through Thursday was normal. Friday I would have rotating items that would be at a higher value. Saturday was the best day to trade! Trading was the worst on Sundays because I had to go to church in the morning. I would sometimes take naps in there too. I would pitch the tent we had inside and spend the hardest nights

inside it. When my mom would come yelling, or my sisters berated me, or my brother locked me in the bathroom with the lights off so I would stop bothering him while he played video games. All this subjugation led me to believe the outside world merciless and it was “my fault”. I didn’t know what that meant until the day I saw a white jeep pull up in the driveway.

A bald man who wore a cowboy hat and aviators. His belt was that of a dead snake, a cobra from what I read in picture books. He wore a Harley Davidson leather jacket and reeked of cologne. His pointy cowboy boots didn’t make him seem friendlier either. This was my father, and after years, he’d returned. Unsurprisingly, my mother wasn’t all too happy with him, because that night they got into a huge argument, leading me and my sister to seek shelter in the bathroom until it was over. When we came out my mother rolled her eyes.

“Se va quedar afuera en el cobertizo.”

Though my father was a kind man, his living habits weren’t. He moved his luggage into the shed, and quickly it began to fill the already dusty air with the scent of unwashed t-shirts and alcohol. After he stayed there, I was no longer allowed to play in the shed house. My toys, my friends, my economy were all locked inside as my father slept his summer days away. The times he did come out it was either for food or to go out, and he’d look bedraggled. It was then that I made my quick entrance into my old treasure trove. I found it filled to the brim with junk. A TV was haphazardly placed atop the box of Christmas ornaments, and his bed was shoved to the corner, where a wall of boxes loomed over it. *One day it would fall, and he’ll leave were the words I told myself. One day everything would go back to normal.*

On a good day, he’d take me and my haughty sister to a flea market we called La Tierrosa due to how sandy, and gravelly it was. It was a little portion of Mexico, and my dad seemed to love it there. From vendor to vendor, there was so much to see, so much to

discover, and from the corner of my eye, I could feel the weight of the world looming over. In these moments, I wanted to understand him, I wanted to know why he left, and why he resented me so. I could see it in his eyes as he stared back to mine. Untouched, innocence in my hazel eyes contrasting to the scathed hardwood tint of his unwavering stare. That stare was laced with malice, something I wanted to ignore for a long time, but at that moment it hit me. I'd read it in a book somewhere, and the scariest words popped into my head: *My fault*.

My fault. I'd scribble it down everywhere in the cement of my basketball court. In pink, in blue. In green. *My fault*. I know those words meant something bad, but I knew I hadn't done such a thing! So why was it my fault? Was I the driving force to his departure? What did I do?

Clutching my spotted rabbit, I sat under the fig tree. It was putridly tangy, and the wasps that never stung me shifted past in the lukewarm air of an August day after the rain. Delicate fingers reaching out for something, anything, to help me. A red wasp fluttered down to my index finger, its feet sticky as it trailed down my arm, and at that moment I felt a pang in my heart.

It made sense. He'd left not long after my birth— on and off from what I was told. When I was two, he disappeared. For a child to blame himself for such things, invokes fear in me now. No one ever told me those mean things said to me were lies. If anything, their actions supported my theory. My mother never told me of my infancy, and yet she'd boast about my siblings. *What was I?*

I dreaded opening my eyes. The safety of my isolated world had been attacked by the real one, and the realization of my life left its permanent scar in my mind. Was there any truth to it? My guilt, and my effort to make everyone around me happy,— and I was the root of my issues.

The wasp was getting closer now, slowly inching towards my cheeks. I could feel my body heat growing ever higher, and the wasp's wings vibrate as it readied itself.

A heartbeat and a buzz.

A second between the two.

I swung my rabbit plush towards my shoulder, and the dying shell of the wasp pathetically dropped to the grass. It struggled in its final moments, asking for help where no one would respond. They were all hungry, and eager, for the fig tree was ripe with fruit, no unnecessary nuisance was about to stop them.

Sundays were bad but praying was supposed to combat that. My sweaty palms met, shaking from the adrenaline of facing a small wasp. Its foot twitched, and I saw myself in its final moments.

A pest.

Jared Pacheco is an aspiring writer from Texas. He's deeply interested in fantastical artwork and literature. On his free days, he likes to garden and bake with his cat by his side.

I Watched the Death of Titans By Sophia H.

i. Seven

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? My loathing or his animosity?

He is a wolf, a creature carved from the bowels of the darkness that whispers my name when I'm dreaming. His head is cocked to the right as he leers at me from the stairway. I

can see the beads of sweat which have formed from trying to chase me on his forehead, fall slowly onto his arm, and then onto the floor. Silence.

All of a sudden he springs at me and has my arms pinned against the yellow wall. Don't give up your wings, I remember thinking. Fight! I try to kick him, but he yanks my hair so hard that the colors in the world blur together like fingerpaints. He pulls me towards him and rips my shirt clean through the middle, and then slaps my face. I fall to the ground, and he stands over me, grinning. I'm crying as I yell to my mom. "Stop it!" I beg. "Stop it please, Daddy!"

ii. Ten

We stand on the orange linoleum floor, our gaze upwards, watching her dip the cauliflower into the flour, egg, and breadcrumbs. Her hands move with practiced urgency as she lays each piece on a sheet of tinfoil and places the tray into the oven. From the room next door, we can hear the familiar sound of love. The shattering of glass, the smashing of china. The parallel voices of my grandfather and father going up, up, up as they shout bitter words with the strength of years of resentment. I clamp my hands over my ears and begin to cry as if some part of my being recognizes the chronic fear that this fiery abyss will summon.

"Babička, what's wrong with the oven?" As the acrid smell of burning food begins to fill the air, my brother asks again. If she hears him, she doesn't answer. Her eyes are closed, and she grips the silver cross hanging from her neck. From the fear of God's judgement, or for reassurance?

I follow my brother as we tiptoe out of the room towards the basement, where we turn on the tv and watch hours of Slovak cartoons. It's always the same. The same wolf running in the same circles to eat the same bunny. We understand nothing, yet we keep it on, for the crackling static of the television set drowns out the noise from upstairs.

Later, I find a dusty tin of sweets. We eat cookies for dinner.

iii. Twelve

The Royal Pine car-freshener is still slowly revolving around its hook by the time the car lurches to a halt at the cemetery. My grandfather's knuckles are white as he lifts himself from the driver's seat and walks through the rain to the tombstone.

My little sister asks, "Do you know that when it rains it's actually God crying?"

"Shut up," I say.

With my face pressed against the window, I can see his hands begin to shake as he places a fresh set of lilies by his own grave. He strikes a match, which goes out. He tries again, but covers it with his hand and quickly places it into the candle holder. Bowing his head, he places the candle on the grave where his family, my history, is buried side by side. He kneels on the earth and begins his prayers in the only way we know how to.

"Forgive me father, for I have sinned."

iv. Fourteen

The day I learn my father is mortal is the day the gods watch him fall as his wings finally melt after years spent trying to cradle the sun. When he hits the Earth, the impact breaks his back and his mind, and he spends days in the white room reciting a chant in a cipher only he can understand. As he breathes through tubes and machines, he transforms into a fragmentary echo of his past being. My mother's shoulders curve inwards and shake.

v. Fifteen

Up here in this place between light and deepest shadow, the heavens seem to be just a fingertip out of reach. As we near the summit, I look down at the base and picture my grandfather there, leaning on his cane as he waits for us to come down. The mountains are my grandfather's mistress; during his youth, they would steal him away for a couple of hours, enticing him with the sacred promise of the wild joy of adventure that only something as divine as the mountains could construct. The summit climb is my family's tradition every time we spend the summer in Slovakia. This year, however, my grandfather said he was too old, so we left him behind to complete our climb.

At the peak, my dad and I stop at a clearing and look at the trees, the mountains, the lakes, the whole expanse of the world beneath our feet. "Look over there! That's Liptovský Mikuláš! Do you think Babička can see us?" I point to a small group of houses off into the distance and wave.

As my dad shakes his head, he grabs my hands as if in need of assurance. "Wow, it's so tiny. Were we always that small?"

I pat them gently and say, "Don't worry, Dad. You were once big to me."

Sophia H. is a sophomore at Phillips Academy aspiring to study political science. Her work has been featured and/or recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, The Apprentice Writer, and various school publications.

Rationalizing My Identity Crisis By Min Ki Kim

I often imagine what life would be if it resembled TV shows like *Friends*. Chandler's self-deprecating jokes, Monica's extreme compulsion to be organized, Joey's simple-mindedness, Phoebe's flakiness, every character existing to serve a specific purpose, and always acting in accordance with their character. Perhaps the prevalence of media's

influence like this and its inability to reflect the complex characteristics of a real person makes me believe that I'm alone for struggling with my identity.

I think it stems from suppressing my feelings down for too long and doing what I think I should do instead of what I want to do. It's been hidden away for so long that it's hard to distinguish between the two. It wouldn't be a problem if the two were consistent with each other, but most times, it's the polar opposite and that's when my sense of identity breaks down, and I'm thrown into an endless cycle of overthinking and overanalyzing.

I just want to have a concrete set of things that identify what I am, and that all the actions stem from. Up until ninth grade, I had that specific identity. I loved to play games and that's who I was. I stayed home hours on end, on a Skype call with online friends, barely even leaving the house or physically interacting with my friends. All my conversations revolved around the game I played, whether it be *DOTA 2* and all the different play styles I can take with a certain character, or *The Binding of Isaac* and the different play throughs I had. Looking back at it, it's pretty depressing, the kind of lifestyle I led. I remember countless times I shouted at my mom saying, "No Mom, I can't pause an online game!" when all she wanted was for me to eat dinner before the food got cold. I also shouted and threw my headphones at my monitor when I lost a game, screamed when the connection went bad, swore and shouted at my teammates for every mistake they made.

I've changed significantly since then. I got inspired by a Youtube persona I follow, developing a new interest in pumping iron. With that, everything started to change. I felt more confident, I went out more on social gatherings, and I made new friends that I now share precious memories with. Memories that are both good and bad, but nonetheless, memories that exist outside the virtual realm. Throughout this transformation, I eventually phased out gaming altogether, leaving behind everything related. You can say that I jumped from one extreme end of the spectrum to the other end. Although I may seem better off, I really am not.

I appreciate everything that happened. I really feel like I'm a better person than I was before. This transformation, I believe, has really turned my life around, but that's the catch. The turnaround was so drastic that I'm not sure what I am. When I'm in the house for a while I'll get lonely and sad, but when I'm outside with my friends I'll get exhausted and sad. I feel comfort in having things in order, but I seek spontaneous activities outside of my control. I'm unable to boast about my achievements but I'm a narcissist, a loudmouth, and an egomaniac. On every situation, I'm two things polar opposite.

Inside my head, two demons constantly battle for dominance. I've found my way of dealing with it, by jamming the brake and taking the controls away from my emotions. All the decisions now come from my head. I still feel the polarizing personalities, they just no longer get to make decisions on what I do. Emotions now sit on the passenger seat of the ride that is my life. I've been hurt numerous times in the past, and on every occasion, my response was, What now? How does this affect my future? What is the next logical move? When my best friend betrayed me, all I could think was— it'll suck to find someone else to hang out despite the fact that for the past year and a half, we'd shared our closest secrets and had supported each other. Sometimes at night, I'll find myself thinking over those important moments of my life. I'll begin to feel sad until a single tear forms from my eye and goes away and then I'm left feeling nothing once again.

I've written this essay thousands of times. Not on paper like this one, but in my mind as I overthink and overanalyze. It's just what I do, no matter how hard I try to not think, to just enjoy the moment. I've gotten used to being this way. I doubt it's something I'll ever figure out. Despite all this, I'll never stop wishing for a revelation amidst all the thinking. One that would make all the other pieces click, and rid me of this curse. I just hope it'll be soon.

Min Ki Kim is a Korean student attending high school in Indonesia. After taking a long hiatus from writing since middle school, he is revisiting it with the push from his English teacher.

The St. Augustine Heist By Sebastian Lopez

I had worked for GameStop for about two years, and the only thing I remembered from the first orientation was their absurd return policy. This I hated more than anything at the store, and it stated “Official GameStop policy requires every purchased item to be reduced by 50% or more if the customer chooses to sell it back to the original vendor.” This denigrated every valuable piece of gamer history there was to play, sit on, or admire from afar. As you can tell, I am a bit of a gamer myself and had been a GameStop regular before I started working there. Generally, I only remember the regulars that come in for their monthly newsletter, or the gamers who are first in line when the new *Call of Duty* comes out. However, there is one specific and, hmmm.... I feel like unique is an understatement to describe him, so I will just start with the infamous Tuesday morning that set the chain reaction in which the end was a federal crime.

I opened the store on what seemed like a regular day, and the first person to come in was a rather distinct fella. It was clear from his bedraggled appearance that he had just woken up and came with whatever he slept in. With a beard dirtier than the back counter, a short stature, and a fedora-trench coat outfit that looked like it was from the 40s, the man entered and grabbed miscellaneous items from every shelf. The items he placed on the counter were a red *Gears of War* Xbox Controller, a USB drive, small Bose speakers, a *Fortnite* wallet, a gamer table, and lastly, the GameStop monthly newsletter. “Will that be all sir?” I asked in my monotonous customer service voice. Trust me, if you have worked in customer service, you’ll know what I’m talking about. I could smell the Doritos and Mountain Dew from his grotesque beard. “That is all my good man, the people of Ilios thank you,” he responded in a strangely deep and low-key frightening voice. He tipped his fedora, bent down to the *Overwatch* poster as if he was venerating Genji Shimada, and walked out.

The “Fedora Man,” as I rightfully nicknamed him, was the only customer for hours, so my mind drifted to what could have been his intrinsic motivation towards the items he purchased. He probably bought the red controller because he broke his other one rage-quitting or from getting mad at his mom for not bringing him his pizza rolls. I own the same pair of Bose speakers and they are the only quality individual electronics at the store, so he probably needs them to enhance his gameplay. The table was small, he was built like an offensive lineman for the Miami Dolphins, so it was more than likely a decorative table.

The newsletter was always outdated and uninformative, so I had no clue why he spent six bucks on it. The USB was more than likely used to store more of his role playing fantasy games. And the *Fortnite* wallet? Why would a man his age get such a childish thing? I mean I understand everyone can game no matter the age, but in all honesty, *Fortnite* was meant for 8-13 year-olds, not 45 year-olds who buy strange merch.

I know no matter how low or high a person may be in status, they would never want to “covet thy neighbor’s goods.” Ever. *Well, I guess I’ll never know*, I told myself. More time passed, and I was scrolling through Facebook, when I saw the funniest headline. “Florida Man arrested for breaking into military base with gaming accessories.” These stories keep getting weirder and weirder. Then, I saw something that filled me with dread. The mug shot was none other than Fedora man! What did this man get himself into?

“Carl Frazier, age 43, used gaming devices to sneak into the Florida Army National guard base in St Augustine, FL for confidential archives. Read further to see how he did it.” So, I read further, because I just had to know! I’m glad it wasn’t one of those click bait articles, because I had actually seen the man himself. “An accomplice, Bryan Lindsey, age 28, was also identified to be a part of the scheme. This plot was written as such by Frazier in a small black notebook.

Frazier dressed as a postal worker, and would deliver a newsletter to a non-existent subscriber inside. Lindsey was set up on a small wooden table about half a mile away. Lindsey used an Xbox controller to control a drone with loud, distracting speakers to divert the guard's attention. After that, Frazier would sneak through the metal detector with a USB drive in a small wallet, based off the popular video game *Fortnite*, that had a metal cloaking device to trick the detector. He was ultimately captured when the metal detector beeped loudly and several guards surrounded him and his partner. In an interview with the federal officers, Frazier stated that he was 'making homage to Grand Theft Auto V' and wanted to commit a 'heist mission with his friend.' Both will be charged soon, and more details will be available when they arise."

Wow. My jaw dropped. He really came into my store to do a GTA heist. Small world isn't it. I felt bad but at the same time, it was cool that I got to be a part of a heist too. I guess you could say I was an accomplice at heart. ;)

Sebastian Lopez is an eighteen-year-old student from Dallas, TX. He will attend the University of North Texas in Denton in the fall of 2019. He loves playing classic video games and enjoys jamming on his guitar. He also loves writing short stories. His piece is about a bored worker at a game store whose life is changed by a person he criticized greatly in the beginning. Like the Transformers, the customer the worker assisted was "more than meets the eye." This short story was inspired by his love for video games like the classic *Super Mario World*, and *Mario Party*, along with newer shooter games like *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*. He thanks you for taking the time to read his story, and hopes you enjoy it :) This is his first time publishing.

The Required Writing Supplement Section By Caleb Pan

—The Required Writing Supplement Section—

Every student has a unique life experience and a set of circumstances by which they are shaped and influenced. Your background may have been shaped by family history, cultural traditions, race, ethnicity, religion, politics, income, ideology, gender identity or sexual orientation.

Reflect on a time when you had to relate to someone whose life experience was very different from your own. How did you approach the difference? If put in a similar situation again today, would you respond differently? If so, how? (650 words limit)

When I was in third-grade, I was picked as part of a team to represent my school at a brain bowl. My team only placed second, which is why I did not include it on my application.

I befriended a participant from another school, who I will call Throckmorton to preserve racial and ethnic ambiguity. Throckmorton was a Muslim, indicated by a pinback button he wore that read "I am a Muslim." At the time, I wore a handmade LEGO cross necklace (with a rare barbed-wire ring accessory as an attached piece to represent the crown of thorns which I was very proud of). He was certainly different, but he liked LEGOs too, so he was a cool kid.

The host school provided pre-made lunches with no exchangeable options.

Unfortunately for Throckmorton, the main course was a ham sandwich. He felt bad for wasting food by throwing out the ham, but I intervened to absolve his conscience. In my theological opinion, a nice perk of Christianity over the other Abrahamic faiths is that we're allowed to eat whatever we want. So to emulate the self-sacrifice and love of Christ, I offered to eat it for him.

"Wait! God lets me eat ham!"

Throckmorton perked up and exclaimed, "You're a good friend!"

After the brain bowl, Throckmorton introduced me to his parents. Before I could

introduce him to my parents, he had to go and I never saw him again.

If I were in a similar scenario today, I would also eat someone's food in the Lord's Name. Amen.

Please briefly explain and elaborate on an extracurricular activity or work experience that you were unable to include in your application. (200 word limit)

One of my most beloved memories is of waking one spring morning, fully refreshed and to the chirping of birds. It has been a while since either has happened.

I have noticed a cultural and byzantine leaderboard for sleep deprivation. I hypothesize contestants use hours of lost sleep to approximate their fortitude. The most prestigious claim I have heard came from a classmate who allegedly stayed awake for seventy-two consecutive hours by instilling his bloodstream with caffeine and Xanax. He eventually dropped the class – he's probably dead.

For my entire life, I have been an activist opposing this disillusioned award system. I boast an average contribution of 8 hours/day, 7 days/week, 52 weeks/year for over fifteen years. Admittedly, it has been difficult in recent years with other lesser commitments conflicting with my participation, but I plan to continue my passionate work into higher education.

I am dedicated to sleep because it embodies the inevitability of imperfection. I accept the necessities of resting and revitalizing are quintessential to true satisfaction. To sleep is to take care of yourself and not to run a race to nowhere.

I wrote this at 2 A.M.

Describe a specific situation or activity in which you made a meaningful difference and contribution in the lives of others through your effectiveness as a leader in

which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution. (500 word limit)

In third-grade, I was educated in the Montessori model: a classroom designed to cultivate curiosity and open discovery, an organic approach to education.

The greatest mystery of our time was simple: where do babies come from?

The most common theory was that babies were spontaneously grown in mothers' stomachs. I, however, was not satisfied. There was a large visual encyclopedia in the classroom; big books with lots of words were the ultimate and credible sources of truth. I consulted the tome, hoping it might elucidate the origins of life. I studied the anatomy section until I came across the reproductive system.

It took ten minutes of critical thinking and deducing to differentiate and understand the functionality of the organs depicted by artistic diagrams. I also educated myself in the concept of puberty, recognizing some key components in human conception were unavailable at my age. Finally, the description of copulation was bizarre, but I was able to cognitively assemble the act.

Eureka! The speculations and conjectures were over – knowledge such as this was power. I was the natural leader in the class (by default because I was abnormally large) and saw it as my duty to enlighten my classmates. Some were in shock, most likely traumatized; others nodded with interest, quick to accept the big book as evidence. The enigma was no more.

However, the encyclopedia described intercourse simply as an insertion followed by a deposit. We assumed an accurate analogy was like filling a car with gas. This left us with further questions. *What was the duration of the deposit? Does it start upon insertion? How does the body know when to cease deposit? Or does the female have a responsive capacity limit?* After many discussions with car analogy-based theories, we finally came to the

teacher and asked if she could provide any insight. She responded by banning all discussion on the subject and removed the encyclopedia from the classroom. *The suppression of knowledge! How tyrannical!* I led a protest to bring back the encyclopedia, explaining our aims and progress.

Our teacher reconsidered, then relented on the condition we remain quiet on the newfound topic. Keeping our word, with the promise we'd eventually get our answers, the encyclopedia was returned with me as its gatekeeper.

With that, I launched an era of scientific fascination, our teacher happily facilitating and catering to the interests we found in the encyclopedia. The renaissance eventually deteriorated when I lost interest and started writing, the class losing its pioneer. I don't know where my classmates are right now, but I can say with proud certainty that I left a lifelong impact on every single one of them.

Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs? (500 word limit)

Once, I was procrastinating by stumbling through an endless chain of linked Wikipedia articles. I started with the Indian caste system and eventually came across the International Flat Earth Conference. This event piqued my interest. I shared the event's website with several peers for their valued opinions. My so-called friends, the intolerant rabble, mocked the astrophysics minority. I was heartbroken at how frivolously they rejected an opposing view.

Although I dismissed notions of a flat Earth in the past, I put my "globehead" principles aside to immerse myself in their society. Throughout my education, I was surrounded by globe representations and readily accepted them as the shape of the earth. Perhaps I did let myself be indoctrinated by mainstream media and NASA. It was uncomfortable to let a belief I held without question be challenged.

As I delved into the flat Earth community, I encountered a syndicate of conspiracy theorists, literalist zealots, and internet scum. It became apparent that comprehending this intellectual conglomerate, including their numerous ideological schisms, was near impossible.

My revelation? We are all people, people who have no idea what they're doing with their lives: I squandered my time gaining trivial knowledge from Wikipedia; they filled the void in their lives with nonsensical paranoia. I was unable to accept their beliefs, but it was a valuable lesson of how we are more alike than we are unlike.

That, and there are enough dumbasses for tickets at \$249 per person to sell out.

Why do you want to attend [school name], and how do you think [school name] will prepare you to pursue opportunities in that field after graduation? (250 word limit)

I should say I want to sate my thirst for knowledge at *the caliber* you offer, to hone my unique talent and natural leadership under your *renowned programs*, and to enrich myself in your *vibrant community of creative and critical thinkers*. Listen, I don't want to do another four years. It's not just you – I mean I don't want to with anyone. I almost registered with the Peace Corps to avoid all the confrontation. You somehow found my email and address. I don't know who sold me out, but the way you cluttered my inbox and mailbox was unappreciated. Just because my parents like you, doesn't mean I do. You were the one insisting that I take my time and make "the right choice for me." I'm not naïve, okay? I know you drip the exact same honeyed words to all us go-getter types: we're talented, we're unique, we're what you're looking for.

Am I that special? What am I really to you? You've said you want to know my interests, life stories, and plans to change the world. Be honest though – the first thing you see are my numbers, right? I'm not mad, I know you can't help it, but you should know that I know.

I'm sorry. I'm still young and inexperienced. I'm really trying to figure out what's best for me. I don't know if this is meant to be, but I'm willing to give us a chance. I await your response.

You may upload one optional supplemental resume for further consideration:

Uploaded: **AcceptanceLetterFromRivalSchool.pdf**

Thank you for your application!

Caleb Pan is a stressed out teenager who enjoys hash browns and crying over his lost 4.0 GPA from his first B in Calculus II. He's an avid reader, writer, coder, and martial artist in his free time.

This essay originally appeared on the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards website, and is part of the author's 2019 Gold Medal Portfolio Recalled to Life.

Art

Stained Glass Wing By Eline Almo



Stained Glass Wing

Eline has always had a passion for photography and loves spending time outside, looking for new places where she can take pictures. She is from Norway, and most of her pictures are from the winter, but when she came down to Florida to live for a year, she quickly noticed all of the beautiful places there. She took this picture at a butterfly garden in Gainesville.

All That Jazz/Midnight Blur By Francesca Grazioli

These two pictures were taken in a restaurant in New York during Mardi Gras. A jazz band came in—and I'm a huge jazz fan—so I couldn't help but take pictures. While I was trying to find a better view of the musicians, I found myself looking at the girl in the other picture— and there was something about her that was almost magical. I really like Midnight Blur because it represents the exhausted buzz of being up late, and reality becomes fuzzy, and anything could happen.



All That Jazz



Midnight Blur

Francesca has bouncy red hair, a cat named Raspberry, and never matches her socks. She likes to notice things that other people don't see. Sometimes she cannot control it, like noticing someone across the room biting their nails and not being able to stop, or hearing the slight clicking sound of their teeth for an hour. Other times, she picks up worms from the pavement after it rains so they don't get stepped on. And yet other times, she finds wonderful and beautiful things to capture in photography.

School's Out By Maeve Florence-Smith



School's Out

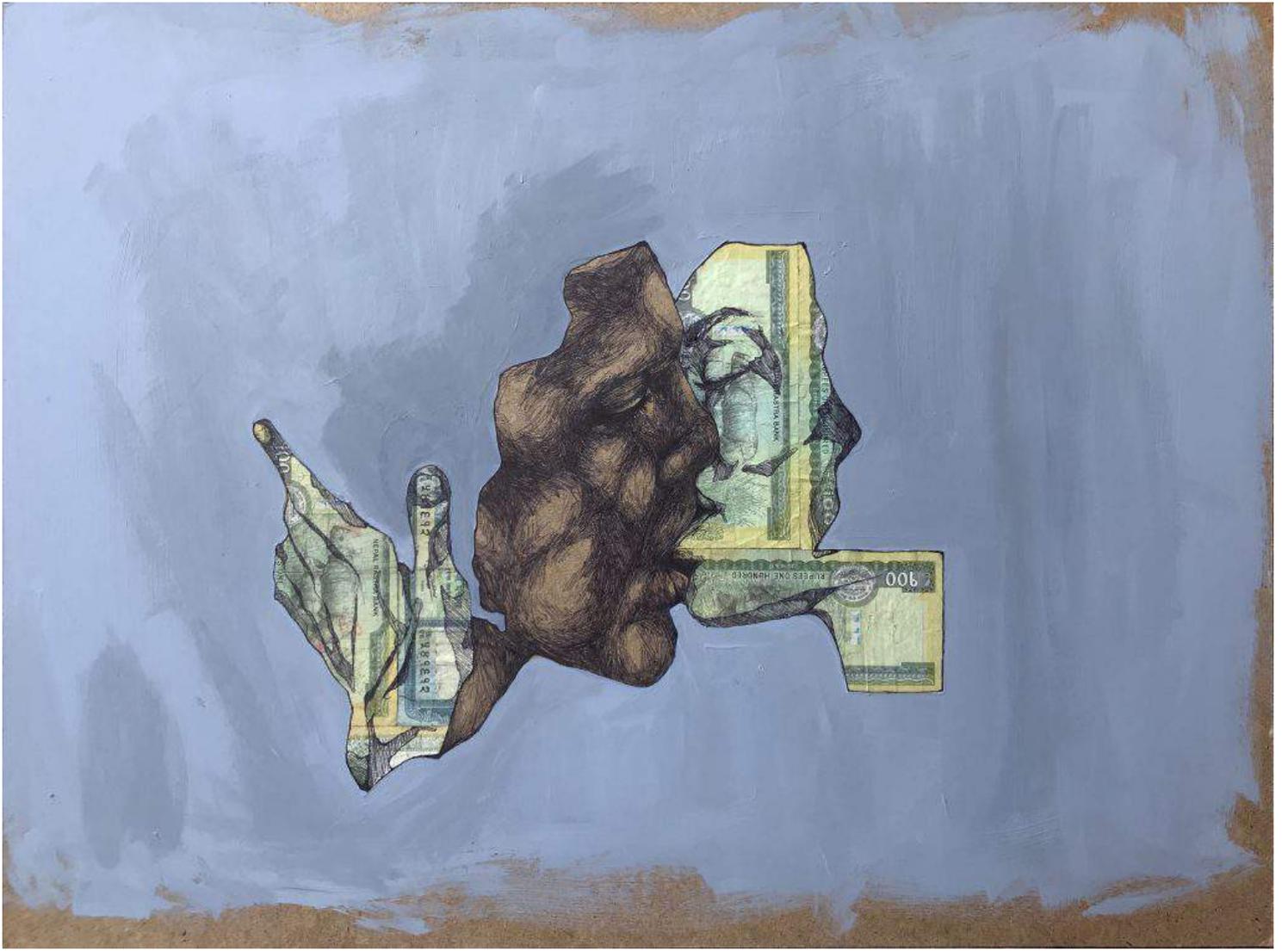
—My brother and I walked to the playground at his elementary school, and they were tearing down the building. We didn't even know that they were going to do it so soon! We ended up watching the destruction of the building, and I took some pictures. It was exciting to watch the school get torn down but it was also sad. I think that they should have taken down the art first because a lot of little kids watched from the playground as the school building went down.

It was at Cornerstone Elementary School in Wooster, OH. We live a couple blocks away, and the dust settled onto our lawn. The building had to come down because there aren't as many kids in town anymore, and also the town has less money now.—

Maeve Florence-Smith attends Wooster High School in Wooster, OH, where she is a reporter and editor for the school newspaper. She has won Scholastic Arts & Writing Awards and an NAACP essay contest and placed third in the It's All Write, Ann Arbor Writing Contest. She volunteers at the local nature center and tries to spread awareness about the environment and foster a love of reading and writing at Alice Noble, the nonprofit summer camp at which she works. She is currently working on a horror novel about bees and climate change.

Untitled By Devika Sharma

I have always been entranced by the interactions between human beings and the different forms of intimacy they can share. I strived to capture these interactions using mainly pen and collaging, while incorporating items that can tarnish the authenticity of a relationship, such as money. Kissing, in my eyes, is one of the simplest yet most effective ways to show affection for a loved one, and I hoped to depict different couples kissing one another. Using hatching with a fine tipped pen, I capture realness while also putting a twist to the reference picture, either thematically or with a varied background.



Untitled



Untitled

Devika Sharma is a seventeen-year-old artist from Singapore. She loves drawing portraits and has always had a fascination for drawing people. She can't paint at all and primarily draws inspiration from artists like Egon Schiele.

Looking for Signal By Annie Ma



Looking for Signal

This photo was taken on an exceptionally foggy day in San Francisco. I was originally focused on photographing the bay to the left of the photo, but once I noticed my dad walking away into the fog to get some signal, I thought it would make for an interesting shot.

Annie Ma is a senior at The Harker School in San Jose, where she is a co-editor-in-chief of the school's literary magazine, HELM. Her poetry, prose, and photography have won several Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. She is the founder and president of The Book Bank

(www.bookbank.org), a nonprofit organization that serves underprivileged communities by collecting and distributing free books to K-8 school children. Her favorite poet is Mary Oliver.

Book Review

Middlesex in Review By Anonymous

The book had been sitting on my mother's bookshelf for as long as I can remember. When I was very young, I recall sliding it from its position and staring at its title with the kind of sly fascination that only "grown-up" words can elicit. *Middlesex*.

I was probably fourteen the first time my mother suggested I read it, noting, "It might be a little inappropriate for you," but "the writing is amazing." At the time, even my growing adolescent preoccupation with things inappropriate could not overcome my desire to ignore my mother, which in my early teens was in full swing. Also, my mother had mentioned the term "hermaphrodite" in relation to the story, and because I had no education on the subject, the word made me vaguely uncomfortable. So the book remained on the shelf, gathering dust.

In sophomore year, I was often too distracted to read because I was spending more and more time in doctors' offices. At age sixteen, I had not yet menstruated; after several months of prodding, x-rays and beeping MRI machines I was diagnosed with MRKH, a rare condition where a girl's reproductive system does not develop in utero. I would not be able to engage in intercourse without extensive physical therapy, and I would never give birth to a baby.

My reading habits fell by the wayside. Keeping up with mandatory work was difficult enough. For several months, I could barely stand to go to school. Although it wasn't logical, I found myself uncomfortable around people who were "normal", and I couldn't seem to talk myself out of it. I wouldn't call it jealousy; I'd never particularly wanted to

give birth to my own children and after the initial shock, I realized that this was not as upsetting to me as it might have been to many others. However, I was scared of judgment. I had lost the genetic lottery, and with it my sense of belonging.

It was nearly a year after my diagnosis that I gave in to my mother's suggestions, which had dialed up a notch in the past months for obvious reasons. I finally slid *Middlesex* from the bookshelf with the intention to read it.

Middlesex won a Pulitzer Prize, so I was prepared for a good read, something with sparkling writing and a well-developed plot. I was not prepared for this book to hit me as hard as it did. The story follows the life of Cal (formerly Calliope) a Greek-American male-identifying intersex man (intersex is defined as any deviation from standard genitalia). Cal is assumed female at birth, but starts developing as a boy at puberty. The account of his life is astonishingly detailed, stretching from his grandparents' courtship to his own adult relationships. Even if I had no personal draw to the story, I would have thought the plot compelling. But because I am also intersex I found this book moving, relatable and somehow healing.

I had read one book that revolved around MRKH prior to this; I ordered it off Amazon in the hope of finding an anecdote that would make me feel less alone in my experience. The book was written by someone who did not have MRKH, and it completely missed the mark. Besides being riddled with typos, it was painfully clear that the author was merely using the condition to drive the plot. The character with MRKH had no depth beyond her inability to have children. I came away from the book feeling a little less than human, validated in my fear that people would be unable to see me as anything more than my condition.

Middlesex was the polar opposite of this book. Although my condition is quite different from that of the protagonist, we had many similarities and I could see myself in his actions and internal processes. One thing that resonated with me was when the

character discussed his shame regarding his condition, something I immediately recognized in myself. The book reads “My shame. I don’t condone it”, and this simple phrase captured something I’ve been struggling with for the last year. In Cal’s case, he is embarrassed by his atypical genitalia in his dating life. I frequently feel this same shame about my biological uniqueness. I do not want to be ashamed. Intellectually, I know that there is no reason I should be ashamed. But some days, the voice in the back of my head whispers that my inability to reach the milestones that women in our society are expected to reach makes me less worthy than the rest.

Middlesex is written by a non-intersex man who clearly engaged in a huge amount of research to write something that rings so true. The book has been praised by many in the intersex community for being accurate both scientifically and emotionally. Some scenes were so specific that they could have been taken right out of my head. In the sequence of Calliope’s birth, the author describes how the doctor was distracted before he could thoroughly inspect the baby’s genitals. This is something I have often wondered about in my own situation. What could have been so interesting in that room that the doctor overlooked my physical difference? Another thing I have wondered about is what exact genes caused my condition, which strands of DNA did not mutate quite far enough, and what caused this anomaly.

This topic is dealt with extensively in *Middlesex*, going back several generations, and as the book is told from an intersex perspective, the curiosity and the depth of the delving into family history feels legitimate, something I could imagine myself doing in the future. The passage I found most poignant described Calliope, fourteen years old, noticing that every one of her classmates had gotten their period except her. Since sixth grade, when I was first asked by a classmate if I had a spare tampon, I have had the nagging worry that something was might not be quite right, but I attributed it to being a “late bloomer”. This subconscious reassurance and denial of the thought that something might be wrong was powerfully depicted in *Middlesex*.

But to me, the most important thing about the book was that it wasn't only about being intersex. It was about love and family and children and sex and all these things that I had started to think were out of my reach. It was about a character who had every normal human experience without being what most people would call normal. It was about a person's life, a person who happened to be intersex, but a person no less valid or worthy than anyone else.

I am a logical person, and question things like fate or higher powers. For most of my life, I have preferred to take the evolutionary perspective. Naturally, this did not serve me well in dealing with my diagnosis. In fact, the purely evolutionary perspective told me something along the lines of "There's no real, biological reason for your existence." This unfortunate conclusion is something I've been attempting to shake off for over a year. *Middlesex* brought me a long way towards transforming my viewpoint. I took a long look at my own life, as a good book will make you do. And I noticed how healthy my friendships are, how delighted my art makes me, how my boyfriend is happy dating me without any sort of "in spite of."

Middlesex made me realize that I would still be able to have just about all the experiences I have been looking forward to my whole life. In fact, it made me realize that I am already having them. When you learn something about yourself that changes your expectations of the future, it's hard to live in the present. But this book took a little bit of the weight off. It gave me back a little bit of confidence in my future. Even more, it made me feel less alone in my present. That's the highest praise I can give any book. I think it's for the best that I didn't read this story when I was fourteen. It wouldn't have meant nearly as much to me. But ultimately, I've never been more glad I listened to my mother.

Anonymous is an American high school student.

Travel

On Top of the World By Danielle Amir-Lobel

"I know that I must do what's right As sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti" ~ Africa by Toto

Towering over the diverse ecosystem that is the Serengeti – the “endless plains” which are home to the remarkable annual wildebeest migration – looms Mount Kilimanjaro. She is the highest mountain in Africa and the world’s tallest free-standing mountain. Her tallest point, Uhuru Peak, reaches 5,895 meters above sea level (19,341 feet). This past summer, I was able to stand atop this natural wonder, above the clouds, and gaze across the beautiful horizons of Tanzania, for a moment forgetting my complete exhaustion from the six-day climb.

Our odyssey began in a lush rainforest, complete with an expansive variety of greenery which confirmed that it was, in fact, a rainforest. Our bus of twenty-one wayfarers included me and my father, my father’s colleague and his wife, and seventeen local guides and porters. These guides and porters were extremely experienced and accustomed to the terrain as they sped past us with large loads on their heads while we trudged up slowly with only our day packs. Some of these locals called Kilimanjaro “the grandfather of Africa” because of the snow on the peak which always looked like a beard. We arrived at the *Lemosho Gate*, the threshold of the modified Lemosho trail we would be taking. Our first hike was the shortest and easiest of the journey; it was only going uphill from there – literally. Full of excitement, I set out on the two hour walk at a nice, slow pace between the trees on a trail with some ups some downs and a large net elevation gain. After completing this walk and acquiring only the slightest bit of false confidence from the first day’s, easy trail, we arrived at our first campsite – *Mti Mkubwa Camp*.

The next morning, day two, after sipping our daily hot tea and chocolate, we set out again through the rainforest. An hour into this hike, we emerged into a new climate zone: the heather and moorland. Mount Kilimanjaro boasts five different climate zones:

the farmland, which the bus took us through, the rainforest, in which we began our trek, the heather and moorland, a sunny, dry, swamp area with wild grasses and heathers, the alpine desert, a barren land much like other deserts except with glaciers in sight, and the arctic zone, covered in snow at the time and home to the summit. When we trudged up to the campsite, we were immediately greeted with songs and dances by the local porters, instantly enlivening our day. The magnitude of joyful spirit in the mountains that day proved to me that happiness is harnessed from within and requires no material possessions— but simply a gathering of friends celebrating life itself.

Their song went something like this:

Jambo, jambo Bwana (Hello, hello Sir)

Habari gani (How are you?)

Mzuri sana (Very well)

Wageni, mwakaribishwa (Foreigners, you are welcome)

Kilimanjaro, hakuna matata (Kilimanjaro, no trouble)

Tembea pole pole, hakuna matata (Walk slowly, slowly, no trouble)

Utafika salama, hakuna matata (You'll get there safe, no trouble)

Kunywa maji mengi, hakuna matata (Drink plenty of water, no trouble)

After a steep climb, we arrived at the *Shira 1* camp around 1:00 pm and were given the rest of the day to repose and acclimate. I felt a slight headache from the altitude at this camp, 3,610 meters, but it subsided after lunch. We saw some pretty flowers which were a friendly reminder that beauty and life bloom everywhere, rested, ate dinner, were briefed for the next day, and rested some more before going to sleep around 8:30 pm.

On day three, we woke up at 6:00 am with some hot water to wash ourselves and drink. When we stepped outside of the tent in search for breakfast, the ground and all of the plants were covered in frost – it was quite literally freezing. It felt surreal that flowers and frost covered the same landscape, and I thought I was still in a dream, as ice crushed

beneath my feet. On a ten-kilometer trek, we crossed into the alpine desert. Walking became difficult and exhausting, an effect of the altitude, but we could now see the snowy slopes of the volcanic crater, and each step brought us closer to them: a glimpse of our final destination brought a sense of hope and purpose to get us through the long journey.

We arrived at *Moir Hut* camp, elevation 4150 meters, around 12:30 pm, experiencing a bit of altitude sickness. After lunch we were told that we must now go on an acclimatization hike. While we were skeptical of the efficacy of a walk that did not bring us closer to the summit, we felt better after this short trek and even managed to catch a bit of intermittent cellular service, if standing on a specific rock and holding the phone at the precise angle. Speaking with family brought a sort of home to the isolated cliff. When we returned to the camp, we washed our hands and faces, ate a hot dinner of soup, rice, and beef, received a quick briefing for the next day, and went to sleep around 8:00 pm.

We woke up around 6:00 am the following morning, in the frosty alpine desert. After bundling up in our warm clothes, we ate porridge, egg, fruit, and hotdogs for breakfast. At 7:45 am, we departed for a 17-kilometer trek. At first, I was freezing, but, once we passed the ridge, the sun warmed me up. Fooled by the promise of only slight elevation gain, we did not realize that the excursion consisted of a series of long ups and downs. The venture proved very strenuous and we endured headaches. After walking for ten kilometers and five hours, we arrived at a midway campsite called *Pofu Camp* where we ate lunch at an elevation of 4000 meters. We then proceeded, feeling better than before, for another seven kilometers and two and a half hours to reach the *3rd Cave* campsite. The site was very pretty as it stretched out above the clouds, the sun warming the horizon, and the final peak loomed above us – not too far away. We were closer to the peak than ever before, but I also realized then that happiness and fulfillment come from the journey itself, regardless of if I reached the summit (even though I was still confident I would make it). We stretched our muscles, washed our hands and faces, ate dinner at 5:45pm, and slept at 8:00pm.

On the fifth day of our adventure, we embarked on a relatively short but demanding three hour walk with an elevation gain of 1,000 meters. The hike was an entirely uphill climb that was extremely tiring, but we proceeded slowly to account for the high elevation. After one of the most difficult treks, we arrived at the *School Hut* basecamp. Since our team took a less-traveled-by path, the camp was secluded and peaceful. My dad and I were able to call my sisters and welcomed the good wishes for the next day. We attempted to wash our hands as usual but were impeded in part by a mischievous raven who hijacked our soap, probably assuming from the smell that it was a tasty treat. We ate our lunch and then rested until dinner to build up our energy reserves. At dinner, much to my discontent, the cook put ginger in everything, including the hot water, because it supposedly helps with altitude sickness. Between the hours of 7:00 pm and 12:00 am, we did our best to catch some sleep, as we lay awake apprehensive about the journey to come yet excited to finally arrive.

At midnight, we got ready and ate toast and a peculiar porridge (probably full of ginger). Before departing for the summit, our guide brought us together in a huddle and gave us ritualistic encouragement in Swahili for the voyage ahead. At 1:00 am we began the final trek towards the summit. This final stretch was the most arduous challenge of the entire week, but it would be extremely rewarding. My many layers to fight the bitter cold made me partially immobile and I struggled to eat or drink, as I felt like a seven-layered marshmallow. I could merely trudge along the steep, slippery, and rocky trail as the full moon made the snow glow on the mountaintop. The rough, sandy, zig zag trail sometimes led me to slide down half a step for every step I took. We had to hike most of the trail with headlamps, and the cold, strong wind and gravity worked their hardest to push me back down the mountain.

After drinking a Red Bull to regain energy and hours of walking in the darkness, illuminated only by our headlamps, we arrived at *Gilman's Point*. Seeing the wooden sign at an elevation of 5,685 meters which read "congratulations" made us think that we were near the summit, but there was still an hour-and-a-half-long journey left to travel.

Never in my life had I hoped for the sun to rise and bathe us in warmth and light as much as on that morning on the rim of the dormant volcano. We found *Stella Point* at 5,756 meters elevation atop the snow-covered mountain. The wind had finally died down here, and the full moon made the snow glow marvelously. The trek between *Stella Point* and the summit was frosted over with snow, but the guide had told us we wouldn't need crampons, so I slipped a few times but continued forward nevertheless.

As the sun ascended upon the horizon, after seven straight hours of steep climbing, we finally arrived at Uhuru Peak, the tallest point on the mountain rising at 5,895 meters (19,341 feet) above sea level. The summit was stunningly beautiful, as snow plated the ground beneath the yellow-lettered wooden "congratulations" sign and the glacier shone nearby. I glowed with pride and accomplishment – the youngest person on the summit at that time. We felt fortunate to see the glacier atop Kilimanjaro – the closest glacier to the equator on earth – as it has been increasingly receding due to climate change. Staying at the summit for too long is unhealthy because of the altitude, so we embraced, took pictures with the sign, tried out playing the harmonica in the thin air, and then began our descent thirty minutes after arriving.

While climbing to the peak of Kilimanjaro took us five and a half days, descending it only took one and a half days. There are many different trails which people follow to ascend the mountain, however there is only a single one-way trail that brings travelers to the exit. We began our descent right away, but it was very rocky and slippery from the ice, and I stumbled a few times. Eventually our group made it to *Millenium Camp* where we ate lunch which was an interesting soup that contained bananas and an assortment of vegetables as well as cheese pancakes and watermelon. There, we had a choice to make: we could either stay at *Millenium Camp* and then have to travel more the next day which would entail waking up at 5:00 am, or we could progress and sleep at a camp closer to the gate. We decided on the latter and hiked two more hours downhill to the *Lower Mweka Hut* campground. When we finally arrived at the camp, after a very long and strenuous day, we ate dinner and soon went to sleep.

On our seventh and final day on the mountain we woke up at 6:00 am, had breakfast, packed up, and set out at 7:30 am. Before us was a three-hour hike through a rainy and muddy rainforest. It was an 11-kilometer trek, but we walked slowly in order to avoid slipping in the mud, using our poles for necessary stabilization. We made it to the *Mweka Gate* around 10:30 am and completed our grand adventure. Though there were many literal and figurative ups and downs, and the expedition challenged us greatly, the triumph was extremely gratifying, and I am very proud of my accomplishment. I would definitely recommend that any adventure-seeking explorers out there embark on this unforgettable journey.

Danielle Amir-Lobel is a senior at La Jolla Country Day School. She loves traveling and exploring the world around her and wishes to experience as many diverse cultures as possible throughout her lifetime. She has a passion for community service and has led many service events in her community and abroad to advance various causes and bring people together. She enjoys swimming, singing, playing the violin, and conducting research in various fields. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *The Palette*, La Jolla Country Day School's newspaper, and *Pegasus*, a student publication for writing and art. She has won 16 Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and her work can be found in multiple publications including The New York Times and the American High School Poets My World anthology.
