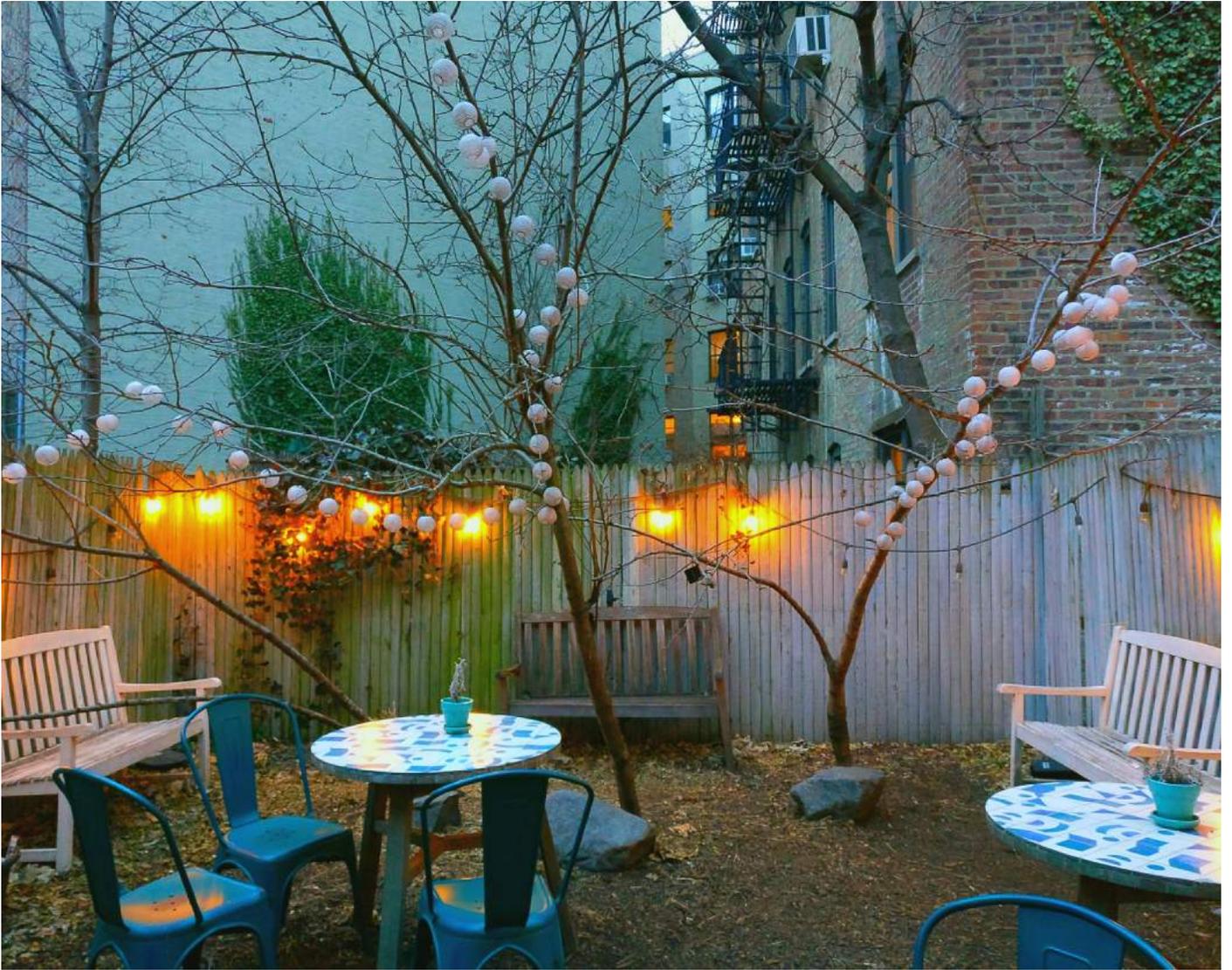


December 2019

Issue Sixteen



Blue Marble Ice Cream, by Lily Ma

Editor/s Note By Molly Hill

December 2019

Our brightest blazes of gladness are commonly kindled by unexpected sparks.

—Samuel Johnson

Dear Readers and Writers:

Just as we were putting the final touches on this issue before it goes live on our site, we received a surprise donation of sufficient funding to cover the costs for our entire December issue, —talk about a bright blaze of gladness. Our deepest heartfelt thanks to our anonymous donor who supports our mission by providing this unexpected financial spark!

And speaking of sparks, if you go to the web site: earthobservatory.nasa.gov you'll find what are called light maps, satellite images of areas of human habitation around the globe. Per NASA, these images of the earth at night are often called “night lights,” glimmers of light in the blue marble night sky.

We see evidence of these light maps in our submission inbox every single day. Young writers are taking pictures, making art, and ready to share poems, stories, and opinions with us. This issue features points of light from Nigeria, Belgium, Singapore, Canada, and Turkey, as well as work from our many writers here in the U.S. Read on to discover unexpected sparks.

Molly Hill

Editor

Poetry

November By Pelumi Sholagbade

Relief is retrograde for the next few.
I dream
of blood now. I don't
Know if it's mine. I don't know if it matters.

The feeling fails to subside. Hours drip by.
School is sharp and draws out like piss like
What lands on your eyeball at

Three in the morning
As cars rush by
In acid rain.

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.

It is November. And I don't want my life to be
This kind of perpetual autumn.

my riot By Esin Nizamoglu

my riot is that there are countries in our world where my smile is
a sexual invite. countries i'm so close to where my bare shoulders render

me a piece of meat.

my riot is that there are far more countries where i can't speak up against men, where i can't scream, where i can't let my voice bang against everyone's ears; my cries a whisper "set me free, set me free..."

my riot is that my fingernails have turned into claws and that pepper spray has glued itself to my hand; a part of my body now.

my riot is that no existence outside of my body exists for me; no existence without the meat i carry.

my riot is my unheard voice, my dreams, my ideas; against a world that has rendered my existence illegal.

my riot is the words i speak, my sentences; slipping out from between my clenched teeth.

my riot is my very existence. and my will. my womanly, female will to continue that existence.

my riot is my will and right to life and freedom; against the chains, against the walls.

Esin Nizamoglu is a Bulgarian-Turkish poet from Istanbul, Turkey. Aged sixteen in a city bridged between cultures, she writes in order to organize the chaos of an uncertain life. She also enjoys composing songs for the piano, traveling to foreign cities and learning above all.

Modern Day America By Niara Davis

Modern day America is such a disgrace

History is repeating itself, we're not winning the race

Innocent people are being killed everyday

Black men are the most common prey

Y'all shouting all lives matter
But what race has their blood in a scatter
Y'all wanna know what's really messed up
You got young kids fighting out here
It's the violence that they fear
They know the reality
Of the Brutality
That messes up the mentality of their people
They are scared to walk outside
Knowing the hate that is applied
Scared a gun might be pointing to their head
Hear a pop and all they see is red
Scared their dads and brothers might be dead
Cause they're not in their beds
This world is cruel
Hatred is its fuel
It's time to stand up and fight and do what is right
We can't stop till justice is won
From there we're still not done
Innocent lives need to stop being taken
The lives that have been forsaken
Until we get equality then all lives may matter
But for now our voices will remain in a chatter
We will speak up and protest
Until there are no more bullet holes in our chest

Niara Davis is seventeen years old and has always loved reading, hearing, and most importantly writing poetry because it gives her a way to express how she feels. Poetry is

like an outlet for her and she loves it.

Sunset Highway By Sarah Zhou

Driving with your knees—
look Ma, no hands!—
as Supergrass screams happily about
youth and destruction and cleaning up
spilled milk after car crashes. Did
you know I'd invent a car
slash
boat hybrid just to sate
your hunger? Just to see you delight
in all the sky's self-harm and
-transformation. Let's go back to where
it all started, our necks sprouting
from stuttering sunroof, hazarding
amputation but more likely
bird shit. Conflagrations smudging
the background, teeth and temples
crowding the fore. Deer always nearly
being hit but never actually
experiencing impact. How lucky to be that
lucky, to escape devastation so
often, and through no effort
of your own. Let's do that,
okay? Meaning, let's traverse the country
all dirt-kicked and lawless—
let's move everywhere
without intention. Without
strategy. Please.

You have no idea
how much I miss Pangaea.

Sarah M. Zhou is a Chinese-American undergraduate at Columbia University. Her work appears in *COUNTERCLOCK Journal*, *Bombus Press*, and *Vagabond City* and has been recognized by the Poetry Society of the U.K., the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, and the National Council of Teachers of English. An avid fan of rock music and films about childhood, she can often be found wiping out while skateboarding or laughing at a dumb joke that “really isn’t that funny.” Catch her on Instagram @sarahmzhou.

6/19/2019 By Alixa Brobbey

The milk’s smudged expiration date
not warning enough to stop me roughly
yanking it from the crystallized shelf.

In the center of Smith’s, white lights
formed a halo around my head.

My tongue was young, almost angelic,
ignorant of lemons and curdled
dreams. Back home, mom moaned

about planting dead seeds, and
embracing clouds in vain. I knew
you would leave in two months,
and yet I kissed you anyway.

Alix Brobbey spent portions of her childhood in both The Netherlands and Ghana before traveling to study English at Brigham Young University. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Canvas, The Blue Marble Review, The Battering Ram, and the Albion Review.

possibly By Gia Bharadwaj

Maybe we are blind butterflies in the breeze.
Maybe the sun flares sharp blue at its edges.
Maybe the beagle has a beautiful voice.
Maybe the dandelions belong in the garden.
Maybe the world is on fire.
maybe we are kindling.
Maybe the best stories should be hushed until they become legends.
Maybe the glass slipper doesn't fit and the Ash girl keeps sweeping.
Maybe stars don't die.
maybe they open up like oysters and spill pearls upon the earth.
Maybe we never find it,
gilded realization that we see mist.
Maybe we never get to unfurl it,
punch away its festooned clouds.
Maybe it doesn't matter.
maybe our eyes are enough.
maybe this is how it should be:
blind butterflies in the breeze,
fluttering to oblivion.

Gia is an eighth grader living in Newton, Massachusetts. She often uses poetry to reflect on her observations about everyday life. In her spare time, Gia enjoys reading, writing, and watching Netflix. She has previously been mentioned twice in Stone Soup Magazine's honor roll.

Nighttime Crickets By Mara Magarahan

There is so much time passing where
I am doing nothing at all.
I sit, ponder, sketch, paint
But is it really leaving me with any life left?
Am I just melting into these books?
My body will not let me sleep
So I pull on my hair to somehow feel things,
Making a pile of the strands in my hand,
I think, *these are mine*.
But I just can't be somebody anymore.

My existence mimics a breeze,
Like I can walk on top of cities and bridges
And nobody will know,
Like I can let my limbs fly away in the wind.
Like my thoughts create clouds in the sky
As the room goes soft,
As my dogs are sleeping on couches
And I am here,
Hidden underneath blankets and
Muffled by the nighttime crickets
Who have so much to say.

-

Mara Magarahan is a high school creative writing student from Chester County Pennsylvania, who can be found writing poetry anywhere at any time, even if that means scribbling on napkins or writing on her hands. She is the author of the poetry collection *I'll Be Okay*, which was published in September of 2018. Recently, her work has been published in Bridge Ink's literary magazine's 3.5 issue. Mara finds inspiration from her life experiences and uses writing as both a coping skill and a way to connect with others. She wants readers to feel like they are experiencing the world through her eyes and mind.

wild child By Hannah Landis

she eats all the bread on the way to grandma's and fills her basket with wildflowers instead. she builds a fort with the mattresses and feather beds, roasts the pea on a bamboo skewer, and tells the prince she isn't interested in marriage at this time. she eats all the porridge and barricades the door with the chairs and the bed frames, barring the bears out of their own house. she wakes up and steals the candlesticks on the way out — no one will know, the whole castle is asleep. she plucks the petals off a flower in a garden

at midnight and the beast falls down dead. she cuts off the princess' long hair to weave into ribbon, and sells them for coinage as gold as the locks. she scrubs the floor and steals her stepmother's brooch and her stepsisters' pearls when they leave for the ball. she sells the golden goose to the king and plays the harp in the town square, singing to hear the sound of her own voice. she drags the prince to the surface and holds him for ransom. she cuts the poison apple into eighths, dips the pieces in caramel, and lays them on each pillow. she feeds her own piece to the deer outside the window and then roasts its heart along with the huntsman's. she sells all the matches to the highest bidder; when no one pays, she sets the town ablaze to keep her warm. she leaves the frog where he is and buys a hundred new balls; she doesn't need him. she doesn't knit the scarves; she uses the string to strangle the witch, leaving her brothers as swans.

Hannah Landis is an award-winning poet and author. She all too often is distracted in class by her story and poetry ideas. In her room, you'll find overflowing bookshelves and too much stationery (though she doesn't believe "too much stationery" is a real phrase.) When she's not writing, she loves hammocking and dancing to Ed Sheeran, but she's currently working on multiple creative projects, such as multiple short stories and her overflowing ideas for poetry.

[poet? or just making nonsense?] By Lee Gaines

yeah i'm a poet
except my poetry is prosaic
in nature,
naturally my words do not
alliterate or
obfuscate,
as many others do,

but the poem does not want to confuse,
it wants to be heard.

if you want,
i'll make images leap off my fingertips, bloom,
catch you in a cattywampus cache of consonants,
snap crackle pop those ono mato poe ias onto a page.
i'll enjamb
my words to
make you
read faster,
or lengthen these lovely lines until you stop at a perfect pausing point.
Punctuate.
or not i'll ramble a lot;

feels a bit unnatural, but things
grow on me, in time.
and isn't the point wanting to be heard,
as the poem does ?

Lee Gaines is a junior in high school from Alabama. They have a penchant for prosaic poetry and fiction, but will write anything except screenplay. They love birds, space, and shiny things. They hope you're having good day.

Free Fall By Patrick Wang

Today I drove my car down a hill. No brakes. No seatbelts.
Just gravity and I, taken aback by how much we had in

common. We liked the clouds, white bodies with no arms,
daring us to do something about them. Found satisfaction

in the queering of nature's course, the curvature of light
through prisms, like chromatic filaments shattering from a single strand.

Rejoiced in the irony of it all, that in order to move forward,
we had to first let ourselves fall. Not names though, never

names because names were linear courses. Because gravity's name
chained it to become a law. Because my name chained me to

an uncertain manhood. And we were both contradictions, parabolas
among life's lines, high on things untouchable*. The odometer hits free

fall, and gravity has already left me, severed itself from the world. I reach
out the window and carve the rusted air between my fingertips, whittling myself

down and raising a new sculpture in the name of life. Here I am, breathless and
falling, no set course, reanimated like a newborn star hurtling into the night.

* inspired by the novel *Untouchable Things* by Tara Guha.

Patrick Wang is a senior at Northview High School. His writing has been recognized and published by the New York Times, American High School Poets, and Eunoia Review. When he isn't writing, he is busy editing Curieux Academic Journal and working on his art, which recently served as the cover art for the Daphne Review. He is a proud defender of minority voices, his favorite television shows, and the Oxford comma.

Hey Black Girl By Ugonna-Ora Owoh

They say you are no black girl for any sort of hair except black hair.

They say you should go kink, wear your natural.

They say you should never go braid for braid has no philosophy for black girl magic.

They say you should have no weave and wigs cause wigs shows the generation of your slave mothers.

You are a threat carrying all their legacies, carrying all the womanhood, carrying all their slave ships in your bushy hair, carrying all this history in the root of your scalp.

Your hair black girl is a magic, just this voodoo will keep you a black skinned girl.

Ugonna-Ora Owoh is a Nigerian poet and model. He is a recipient of a 2018 Young Romantics/Keats- Shelley Prize and a 2019 Erbacce Prize. He is a winner of a 2019 Stephen A. Dibiase International Poetry Prize and a 2018 Fowey Short Story Prize. His recent poems are on The Journal of Compressed Art, The Malahat Review, The Matador Review, The Puritan, Frontier poetry, Crab Fat Magazine or elsewhere.

To the Man By Lea Gonzalez

To the first boy who was my friend
I thank you

To the first boy who I had a crush on
I hope you're doing well

To the first boy who called me fat
I hope you stopped hurt others with your words

To the first boy who physically attacked me
I hope you learned to release your anger in other ways

To the first boy who had a crush on me
I hope you know I was too scared

To the first boy who I spoke to
I hope you know I just wasn't ready

To the first boy who wanted to date me
I hope you know it wasn't your fault

To the first boy I developed strong feelings for
I hope you know I understand the rejection

To the first boy I kissed
I hope you know that I had never been kissed like that in 18 years

To the first boy I let in
I hope you know that I've never shared so much with anyone

To the first boy I loved
I hope you know you meant the world to me

To the first boy I slept with
I hope you know I never thought I would be able to

To the first boy who broke my heart
I hope you know you killed me in ways I never thought possible

To the first boy who used me
I hope you are able to find your happiness in life

To the first boy who I used
I hope you know that I was searching to feel wanted again

To the first boy who came back
I hope you know I appreciate our friendship more than ever
To the boys who remain in my life
I love you all as brothers
To the man who took my innocence
I hope you know you broke me before they ever had the chance

Lea Gonzalez is a college student at UC Davis where she studies Biopsychology. She developed her love for writing in the first grade where she started off writing short stories and songs in Spanish. Aside from writing, she is into various different types of music and reading.

Fiction

Mara Primavera By Lauren Rooney

In the shady bloom of evening, when work is nearly done and the growling automobile which brought back the Primavesis has long since crawled back to its cave, I slip out to meet Mäda in the garden. I like to imagine that she lives there—that she guards and governs it, that it is for her that the frogs croak and the creek murmurs and the flowers stretch up towards the sun. From the edge of the orchard, I watch her run to meet me, her new white silk dress streaming out behind her, cloth flowers rustling at her waist and in her hair.

Mäda's real name is Eugenia. That is the name her beady-eyed governess calls from the terrace when she sees us talking. When I first met her two years ago on my way to water the flowers, she told me never to call her by her mother's name.

Breathless, Mäda reaches the gate and pulls it, creaking, open. Then she hugs me tightly. I smile as she talks, and when she finishes, I ask about Vienna.

She shrugs, nudging me along our favorite path, the one that leads down to the edge of the stream. “I missed it here. More space, less grown-up talking. But the streets were beautiful at night—too bad we weren’t allowed to go out by ourselves. You know, my father had an artist paint my portrait in Vienna. I have my name in his autograph book now.”

Last spring, I drew a picture of Mäda, but my mother wouldn’t let me give it to her for her birthday. Her parents get embarrassed when they see us playing. My parents just tell me to stay out of her way.

At the end of the path, we crouch down on hands and knees. We stick our faces in the lavender until we can’t smell anything. She fills her dress with flowers like a great white sail, then opens it and spins until they rain from her, all folded, their scents mixed with hers. Mäda says the painter dreams about her every night and that it takes a long time to live forever. Ravenously, we uproot the hyacinths, hands sunken deep in the soil. The stream licks the dirt from our fingers. With a splash, Mäda plunges a hyacinth down, then pulls it up, glistening. I splash her. She splashes back and threatens to baptize me. Barefoot, I run.

Where the stream empties into a tranquil pond, I throw a leg around the worn limb of a tree and hoist myself among its budding branches. Mäda stands bare-ankled in the lavender. She squints against the setting sun, and her white dress ripples. Mäda likes to read myths and tell lies. She says last night she dreamed she was trapped in the painting. Her lips sealed shut, she burned at the eyelids as the painter drew his feathered brush across her surface like a sorcerer.

“Do you think that’s where you’ll go when you die?” I ask. She is always talking about immortality. Once she told me that eating rose petals could help you live forever, and I haven’t yet proven her wrong.

She considers gravely, then shakes her head. “No. That’s where the painter will go.”

She calls a truce, and I climb down from the tree. Now we walk holding hands, giving the flowers ugly names and laughing.

“This one’s called mudface,” says Mäda, clutching a zinnia.

I tear a rosebud from a thorn bush and hold it up for her. “This one’s called Mäda.”

Mäda snatches the rose, throws it down, and stomps on it. Pausing, she kneels down and looks at it, crushed. She scoops up a handful of soil.

“This is called Anna.”

She turns to me, squinting. I can’t tell if she is sorry. She unfurls her wet, pink tongue and licks the dirt from her palm. She swallows, wincing fiercely, and wipes her dirty hand on her new dress. Maybe I should have told her not to.

“Is this the latest way to live forever?” I ask. She doesn’t answer. “When they ask what’s on your dress, will you say Anna?”

We both laugh. We name the worm after her governess and the flies after her brothers. We spot a garter snake and call it Echidna. The sun drains from the garden like the mud in our hands as we gather it from the leaf-strewn bottom of the pond. Mäda’s pointed toes draw circles in the dust. I ask if I will ever see the painting.

“They’re bringing it to the house out here. My father says they’ll put it in a golden frame and hang it in the hall, and no one will be allowed to touch it. Even I will not be allowed.”

“One day it won’t look like you anymore.”

Mäda smirks, poking eyes in her circles. “It doesn’t look like me.”

The caresses of blue shadows give her hundreds of faces. She pulls the cloth flowers out of her hair and does a tap dance in the dust. I lift her discarded hyacinth, dripping, from Anna.

Maybe nothing ever looks like anyone.

Inspired by the painting *Mäda Primavesi* (1912-1913) by Gustav Klimt, currently on view in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Lauren Rooney is seventeen years old. She lives in New York City and attends school at Convent of the Sacred Heart, where she is a co-editor of the school literary magazine. Lauren's work aims to engage with ideas of myth and symbol, often inspired by the parks and museums which have nurtured her imagination since childhood, and is informed by her interests in philosophy and theology. The Met is one of her favorite places in the world.





Eidolon By Ashley Bao

The graveyard is empty. Well, there are the dead bodies underneath Abigail's feet, of course, but they don't creep into her mind. If anything, knowing Nana is beneath her feet wipes her mind squeaky clean, just like how Nana used to wipe down the store windows until they sparkled in the sunlight. But the important part to Abigail is that no other person sits across from her. No one is yelling at her to get off the headstones; no one shaking their head at her basket full of pastries, all with enough butter to put even Madame LaCombe's cakes to shame. Abigail can let her feet dangle, lean into the fresh summer winds. A crisp breeze in summer is the only thing that keeps her going, if she's being honest.

She runs her fingertips across the scars beneath her fishnet tights. They are her chainmail.

Abigail wonders, not for the first time, why her parents moved from the biggest city in the state just to run a general store in a town of fifty people. She can hear her mother, Caroline, jabbering on and on about the "atmosphere" and the "peace", but she can also hear Doctor Harvey's panicked phone calls when the power went out and Nana's wheezing got triggered by a thunderstorm rolling in. The pitter-patter of the rain echoed through town as Nana waited four hours for an ambulance. She passed within three.

Abigail was fourteen years old. She stopped going to school after that,— not like this town had a high school. It was more that Caroline couldn't teach her anymore and didn't want to teach her anymore. Twenty-year-old Abigail, who sits on top of her grandmother's gravestone, lights a cigarette. She rolls it in her fingers. The little ball of orange at the end reminds her of a hamster she used to have as a kid. It died the same year Nana did. She looks down at her ratty 80's band shirt, her ripped dark-wash jean

shorts, black boots that go up to her knees, and wonders if there was any chance she was going to turn up normal. Everyone said being depressed and emo was typical for a fourteen year old, but here Abigail is now: nineteen years old with no idea what the hell she's going to do with her life except maybe teaching herself the bass chords to every Sleeping with Sirens song. She should go to college, find a job, not sulk in her room, she knows. She likes to ignore the advice, wallowing in ever deepening depression that her parents don't notice.

She takes in a big gulp of smoke. She coughs.

"Nana, what do you think?" Abigail asks, putting out her cigarette. She doesn't plan to live long enough to get lung cancer, but it burns too much right now. "Am I a worthless failure?"

Silence.

Abigail gets off of the headstone. She is opening the graveyard fence when she feels a hard chill pass through her body. She snaps her head back to see her Nana, frizzy hair, floral dress, and the smell of homegrown Chinese chives exuding from her.

"Nana?"

The old woman smiles. She walks up to Abigail, and Abigail thinks she might burst out into sobs if she weren't in shock.

This Nana takes a lock of Abigail's purple hair, frayed and rough from the bleach, and tucks it behind Abigail's ear. Her fingers are soft, like Nana's old silk scarf that is stuffed in some cardboard box in the attic. Her face is paler than the moonlight, wrinkles running like river channels down the sides. Her crows feet make Abigail want to smile like she is six, canoeing in the lake up by Ms. Robin's house with her best friends. All

those best friends went away to college or moved before then. Abigail is the youngest person in town by at least fifteen years.

This Nana, like her real one, always seems to know when Abigail is sad. She presses a kiss onto Abigail's forehead and whispers, "*Bu yao shang xin*. Don't be sad."

Her lips are crisp, like the summer breeze.

She disappears like it too.

And it is just Abigail Li, alone in the graveyard. Sometimes she wants to kill herself.

Tonight, she doesn't.

Ashley Bao is a high school sophomore and a Chinese-Canadian-American writer. She has a poem forthcoming in *Liminality*.

The Girl That Got Away By Micaiah Saldana

Remember all the girls...

...Forget to call Casey, the cheerleader you're going out with now; wonder where last month's Lisa moved; don't think about the brunette you could've loved; throw away the pictures of you and Amanda, the ones that her cousin took on the Fourth of July when she told you that she loved you; ignore the memory of Amanda's face when you told her you were breaking up with her; hate yourself for the fact that it was the cousin who took the polaroids that you woke up next to a week later; try not to feel like a jerk, even though all of the girls probably think that your name is the definition of that word; wonder why the new ones don't seem to think that; for the love of all things decent,

forget the girl you think you loved; rub the scar that Kelly's boyfriend etched on your jaw when he caught you kissing her in the hallway; call Casey and ask her if she wants to go out; let yourself smile when she responds yes with a squeal; frown when it seems that she's too eager, too excited and clingy; plan to break up with her this weekend—it's her birthday tomorrow, you're not *that* heartless; remind yourself to buy something for that birthday, flowers maybe; shower away the sweat of today's workout and the scent of Casey's perfume; brush your teeth and spit out the taste of her cherry Chapstick; try to throw away the thought that the girl you might've loved never let you kiss her; try not to wonder what kissing her would've been like; pull on a shirt that Lillian said would match your grey eyes; muss your hair; spray on cologne; grab your wallet, full of money from working overtime at the auto center—taking girls out is an expensive business; pick up Casey, whose clothes are so tight and skimpy that you wonder why she didn't just wear a bathing suit; kiss her when she leans over the console; drive to the '50s themed diner, the place you took the girl you possibly loved on your first date, the first of many in six months; sit at the same booth where that girl blushed when you told her that her ocean eyes were beautiful, blushed and then sipped her pink milkshake; bite your lip when Casey pulls out her phone and takes *another* selfie; let your hamburger and fries captivate you when she starts yammering about cheerleading and how good you were at last week's game; wince when she shoves the arm that a tumble with a wide receiver nearly dislocated; accidentally squirt ketchup on her white denim shorts; apologize profusely when she squeals and hurries to the bathroom to assess and contain the damage; stare across the room at the jukebox the girl you likely loved slipped quarters into to listen to Frank Sinatra croon songs you wish you could've crooned to her; force a smile when Casey gets back; don't run away when Sinatra starts crooning and you have to pay the bill; kiss Casey in the parking lot, and again in the movie, and again when you drop her off at home; look forward to the weekend when you can kiss her goodbye; lie awake until midnight staring at the ceiling thinking about the girl you almost certainly loved; lie awake until four thinking about her ocean eyes and brown waves of hair; lie awake until five thinking about how you should've treated her better and why you shouldn't have broken up with her; lie awake until six thinking about all the girls you

didn't love, the girls that fill your camera roll and follower list and memories, the girls that drain your heart and your bank account and your sanity; at seven, text three words that make you shake and sweat and nearly get sick; worry about those words until eight; drift off around nine thinking about the girl you most definitely loved...

Sent from DYLAN at 7:03 A.M.

I love you.

Sent from SKY at 8:30 A.M.

It's too late.

...Wake up and wonder why on God's green earth you let the girl with ocean eyes, the only girl you've ever loved, the only girl you think you can ever love, the girl you should've never let go, the girl you shouldn't have abandoned when she needed you most, the girl you should've fought for and protected...

be the one girl that got away....

Micaiah Saldaña is an avid reader and writer of stories of all kinds. When she isn't lost in the stories she writes, you can find her reading books that make her cry, daydreaming about typewriters, going on one of her many adventures, or drinking salted caramel hot chocolate. Find her rambling about stories, adventures, and her faith on Instagram @micaiahsaldana or on her blog at www.notebooksandnovels.com

The Pearly Gates By Megan Meyerson

The Pearly Gates looked less...well...pearly than I had imagined. Sure, Saint Peter stood before them, there was a distant echo of angels singing, and a faint scent of flowers floated on a warm, gentle breeze. But sitting atop the brilliant gold of the Gates twisted a menacing spiral of barbed wire.

I stepped up to the pedestal as Saint Peter called out my name.

He seemed to sense my confusion. “This is the back entrance. It’s for people who...might not make it in.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I felt like I had been pretty virtuous in my life and earned a spot in eternal paradise. Or maybe I just really didn’t want to take a spot in eternal damnation. “So basically, I’m still on the line?”

“Oh, no – your place is secured. I merely need to ask you a question, and we don’t like causing traffic through the main entrance.” Saint Peter reached into his robes and withdrew a golden scroll. He unraveled it and began to read. “On the 24th of August, in the Year of our Lord 2019, Joseph Stephens departed his mortal life by means of an elevator malfunction.”

I was a little annoyed at being reminded of the circumstances of my death, which were both less glorious and earlier than I had wished in life, but I kept my mouth shut.

Saint Peter continued, “It has come to our Lord’s attention that this was the result of a mishap on the part of Joseph Stephens’ Guardian Angel, who was meant, but failed, to protect his charge from the accident.” Saint Peter looked up from his scroll into my somewhat baffled eyes. “Before you enter the Kingdom of Heaven, you must decide your Guardian Angel’s fate.”

I stared at Saint Peter. “You’re joking.”

He looked surprised. "I assure you, I am not."

I thought it unlikely that a saint in charge of admission to Heaven would lie, so I didn't question him further.

"What are my options?" I asked.

"Whatever you wish. You can banish him to a mortal life, take away his status as a Guardian Angel, or force him into eternal poop-scooping service in Hell." Saint Peter paused, thinking. "You may also forgive him and grant him total exoneration of his sins. It *has* happened occasionally, that someone has chosen that path. Please, take your time."

He dismissed me with a wave of his (I suppose) holy hand. An old woman stood behind me, so I stepped out of her way to let Saint Peter deal with her admittance.

I sat down on a puff of cloud to consider my choices. I had very little experience in making decisions, but what little I did have told me to make a pros and cons list.

On the one hand, the angel had hurt my family greatly in not saving me. I could only shudder, thinking of the grief they must be suffering even now; I imagined my dad's wretched tears, my mom's shattered smile that would crumble at the news of my death, my wife's life as she would try, and perhaps succeed, perhaps fail, to adjust to a life without me.

And because of this angel, I would never know the joys of fatherhood, the quiet happiness of growing old with the woman I loved, or the simple moments in between that count for just as much. I would miss every Christmas morning of pancakes and carols played too enthusiastically, but still adorably, by my child on the piano. I would miss every Mother's Day and Father's Day, miss Easter picnics, miss...

But on the other hand, I did not know for what reason he had missed the moment of my death; perhaps he had been saving another, destined to be more important than me, or perhaps preventing some cataclysmic war that would have killed millions. Who was I to judge? The greatest responsibility with which I had ever been entrusted was my dad's twenty-five-year-old station wagon when I was, myself, twenty-five. I could not imagine holding the fate of a human—thousands of humans for all I knew—in my hands.

I glanced at Saint Peter, but he was busy shuffling papers and sorting out the business of admission to heaven for the old woman.

I rose from my puff of cloud and approached him. It seemed the woman had gained entry, for she thanked Saint Peter heartily and practically skipped through the gates in a manner that seemed to defy the frailness of her frame.

Saint Peter looked up from his papers as I approached. "What did you decide?"

"Can I talk to him?"

Saint Peter sighed. "It would require much paperwork, and it is rather busy today, so you'll forgive me if I say no."

I glanced around. Now that the old woman had passed through the gates, there was no one to be seen.

"Really?" I asked, trying hard to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

"He is unavailable." I raised my eyebrows. Saint Peter sighed and continued in a more genuine tone, "It isn't allowed; I'm sorry. You have to make this decision entirely on your own."

A memory crept suddenly into my mind, of my grandfather telling me to forgive a second-grade bully. I remembered him wiping my tears and saying, “You can only judge a man after you’ve seen him lose to the turtle and beat the hare. If that went for guardian angels as well, I had no business passing judgment on mine if I knew so little about him.

I put my hands in my pockets and tried to look as casual as possible. “I think I’m going to forgive him. You know, no punishment, just a warning...a ‘don’t let it happen again,’ that sort of thing?”

Saint Peter shook his head absentmindedly as he continued to sort through his papers. “Off to Hell, I’m afraid.”

My stomach dropped. Too many words of outrage tried to force themselves from my mouth at once that I stood mutely, staring in utter shock at the saint. *Off to Hell?*

A half-growl, half-choke finally escaped my throat and Saint Peter looked up. His brow furrowed. “Wait. You decided on forgiveness?”

I nodded.

“Then you must forgive me, as well; it has been a long few centuries—I’m far overdue for a vacation. I must have misheard you. If you have chosen forgiveness, then it is with great pleasure that I can open the gates and welcome you into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

My heart leapt as the barbed wire dissipated into mist and the gates swung open. The scent of flowers floated more pungently on the breeze and the angel choir sounded a little clearer.

I turned, bemused, back to Saint Peter. “And if I hadn’t chosen forgiveness?”

He winced. “You would have gone the other direction, at least for now...but you would have gotten whatever revenge on your guardian angel you desired. From my view, you made the right choice, though; he’s really a lovely chap, your angel.”

I bowed awkwardly (I was never taught the proper etiquette to use when speaking to a deceased saint) and walked through the gates. My granddad stood just inside, his arms outstretched. As I ran towards him, he winked, and I knew suddenly who had been my guardian angel all along.

Megan Meyerson is a senior in high school and has been published in *Surge* (“A Flower’s Dream”), *NEATE’s The Leaflet* (“The PB&J Showdown”), and *Daedalus* (“A Look Beyond”, “The Devil’s Appointment”, and “Vader Takes a Taxi”). She was also a finalist for Bluefire’s \$1,000 for 1,000 Words Contest, has been awarded an honorable mention from the Connecticut Student Writers Contest, and has won 1 National and 20 Regional awards from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. She is most inspired by J.K. Rowling, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brönte, and Gail Carson Levine. She enjoys writing, playing squash, baking, and roughhousing with her two dogs.

In Transit By Phoebe Houser

Fire streaked through the dusky horizons, swirling reds and golds amid wisps of spectral smoke. The sky was a collision— a clash of vibrancy and terror and ruin. It spoke of longing, the sort which holds no object, yet does not loosen its grip for want of one. It was a brutal, unforgiving sky, and yet, gazing at it from the aegis of a window, its viewers found it muted— docile, even. Two of the youngest found their eyes drooping as they sat huddled closely together in the backseat.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” murmured the woman behind the driver’s wheel.

The girl sitting next to her nodded, tapping her fingers against the glass. Outside, she could see her own reflection in the rearview mirror. She saw the way her hair drooped, clinging to her head at all the wrong angles. She saw the way her skin bickered quietly with the outside world, rising and stinging as though its bitter quarrel was with its own form. She saw herself, her own, expressionless eyes peering back at her. And she could not look away.

The woman glanced over. “It really is a stunning one,” she tried again. Her tone was enthused, although, admittedly, her actual impressions of the heavenly display were substantially more subdued.

“Yeah,” the girl said, her tone more of dismissal than agreement.

Fingers drummed against the steering wheel. From the backseat, a muffled grumble emerged from the younger of the two children when the older shifted in her seat. The engine made all the sounds that are eventually forgotten on a long trip, intricate hums and heartbeats which eventually fade into obscurity.

“Allison,” the woman in the front seat said softly. The girl, Allison, who had begun to reach for the radio, left her hand suspended in the air as she shifted her eyes towards her mother. There was something about her voice— something gentle, painfully intimate, which pulled her back into reality. Or, at least, whatever sort of reality could exist there, in this dreamscape of a moment, with fiery skies and dozing siblings and a world that sped past their windows like a memory sooner forgotten than it was conjured.

Allison glanced back at her sleeping sisters. “Sorry,” she muttered, withdrawing her hand. “I forgot.”

Her mother shook her head. She had not meant to extract an apology. What she wanted was her daughter's voice. She wanted to know how her day had been. She wanted to know what she was thinking when she sat there and stared out the window like that. She wanted Allison to know that she loved her, and that she had her father's eyes. Eyes that she had once thought she would never see again.

She knew the look of sadness in those eyes. And it terrified her.

"Allison," her mother said again.

"Yeah?"

Mother looked to daughter. Then back to the road. "Sit up straight, okay?"

Allison nodded. And slowly, slowly, her eyes drifted back towards the window. Back towards the deep brown of her eyes which her mother so cherished. Against the canvas of towering gray buildings and skyscraping lights, she watched the ghost of her reflection fade, and fade, and fade into obscurity.

From another set of eyes, the same vision, of cityscapes and lights and phantasmic reflections, sat planted decidedly ahead of the dark and winding road. Another car, of similar size and similar speed, raced in the opposite direction. The backseat was empty—that is, empty of life, rather than of empty of substance. Old toys, broken car seats, and more fast food packaging that could have been from just one, or even a week's worth of meals, littered every inch of the vehicle. The man in the front seat seemed to care very little, however. If the smell of old food and unwashed cloth bothered him, there would be no telling from his expression.

As something vibrated next to him, he reached over to turn down the radio. Without taking his eyes off the road, he traced the tiny tremors back to their source with one fumbling hand, then brought it to his ears.

“Laura,” he said, not missing a beat. His voice was more prayer than greeting.

He let his eyes rest gently on the horizon as he listened, caressing the city’s outline with his eyes as distant words fell like petals upon his ears. When he spoke again, his smile was just as much a note in his voice as a fixture on his face. “I’m on my way home now. Tell the boys I’m almost home.”

The phone fell gently back to the seat. And then, once again, it was just he and the road. The radio still hummed with a muffled chatter, a song so quiet that its words were nearly impossible to discern. The man did not reach over to restore the volume. In his head, he could only hear the echo of his own voice. *I’m almost home.*

Outside, the passionate hues of the sky had gradually darkened, granting a stage upon which the first eager stars began to burn. A certain serenity glazed over the chaos of the fading day, and yet, the sun still peaked over the bustling earth. The day was not over quite yet.

A man, rather young, but rather more worn in appearance, did not seem to share this view, however. At least, his heavy eyelids most certainly did not. Against his will, he found them slowly shutting, more than once, before he forced them open with a jolt. He had already burned through three cups of coffee. He shouldn’t be tired. He *couldn’t* be tired. It was still an hour longer before he was home. Although he was far too close to warrant stopping, the distance seemed almost unbearable as he shifted in his seat. The car, which had been freezing only minutes ago, was now unbearable hot. Agitated, the man tried to find a more comfortable position, but to no avail.

The world around him was vast, or so the setting sun seemed to suggest. And yet, from a seat that was just a couple centimeters too narrow, a car that was just a few inches too small, and a road that was entirely too full of nameless and faceless people with so many places to be, everything just felt small. Too, too small.

When the cars in front of him stopped, the man slammed on the wheel. Once. Then again, then again. A tear escaped, then another. Everything began to spiral. He would be home later, and his mother would be angry, again, and he would have to listen to a month's worth of scolding, again, and he wouldn't have time to start any of the many tasks that he knew needed to be done by the end of the week. Time was running out, and time was taking away every hope he had of a night, just one night, of respite. And he had no choice but to sit, to sit and watch it flee.

He hated his job. And he hated his home. And he hated that he had to go to either.

He did not make the turn to drive back to his old neighborhood that night. He missed the turn, and he kept going. He kept going and going into the night, until his eyelids closed and he couldn't find the strength to open them.

The sound of horn filled the darkening night, then the sound of a startled engine and a startled voice. Finally, a deafening crash. As the sun ended its journey across the sky, so too did the young man and his companion in the wreckage. Fire flooded the night sky.

Perhaps, the next day, a woman and her daughter would reconcile on a crowded road. Perhaps, a man would kiss his wife in the passenger seat as his kids protested from the back. Perhaps, a tired young man would return home to sleep. Perhaps everyone would go back to their jobs, to their families, and to their lives, unaffected by a distant collision.

No matter what, rest assured, the road would hold something new tomorrow.

Phoebe Houser was born and raised in Pennsylvania, and is currently a senior in high school. She has loved writing since she was in second grade, and doesn't plan on

stopping any time soon.

How Sisters See By Lum Chi

Note: Independent study, Last interview, hardest interview. Interviewees anonymous.

Study: How discrimination affects minority twins.

Interviewer: *I put you and your sister in separate rooms for a reason. I want to interview you both individually so I can hear your own authentic answers. What I'm going to do now is ask you a series of questions. Take them seriously and be as honest as possible. First question: what do you think of the phrase 'let there be light?'*

Sister 1: Honestly, it was a mistake that He left us alone. Light is always supposed to be pure. So, why create light when it would be tainted? I don't understand. I mean if our creator formed another world would he create another human race or hope that we learn? With this world's seemingly new and more demented version of morality, I'm starting to believe that darkness is becoming synonymous with light. Children in cages, refusing to prevent another school shooting, considering miscarriages a crime . . . how could I not believe otherwise? There was already Noah's Ark, who says there won't be another.

Sister 2: I think it's beautiful. He trusts us to achieve the eternal. Not like we need to, though, because already light is eternal. Cruelty has repeatedly found ways to thicken out and swallow a majority of humanity. But specks of morality are always found. Look at history, reflect on your life, go through religious scriptures, and observe the progress we've made. I sound naïve, but really I'm speaking the language of common sense because if that isn't true then why hasn't the world shriveled yet?

Interviewer: *There's a stranger next to you. How would you interact with them?*

Sister 1: Why do I have to interact? I'm not an idiot. In the classroom we're taught to put ourselves first and yet society scorns us if we do. Women are no exception to this rule. Selflessness is important, but so is selfishness. What if I have a sore throat that's so bad that if I speak I lose my voice forever? What if I'm in the middle of sending an extremely important text message? What if I'm having a really bad day? Perform anything but selflessness and you're scorned for it. If that's the case, then scorn me.

Sister 2: Did you ask this question to my sister? I bet she overreacted. We're pretty different did you notice? Selflessness can get overrated sometimes. No, that's not the right word for it . . . overpraised? I'd forget that, though, if I acknowledged said stranger. How different would we be in comparison to each other? Would we have a lot in common? They have a story; at least in that aspect we're similar. They could be a potential friend or lover. You never really know with strangers. So, I guess I'd talk to them.

Interviewer: *The news is on.*

Sister 1: I listen with my eyes and with my ears because that's all I can do—reflect on the twisted evil consuming this world. Bickering over policy making. Grown men controlling bodies through bills. I'm confused but I get it. I scream, — but more at myself. I'm a kid, incapable of understanding. So I can't do anything, right? Change the world? They say we can't; yet they rely on us. I say bullshit. Stop relying on us. Stop pushing the problems you've created onto us. Sometimes silence can be change. Let them, those past generations, suffer with what they started.

Sister 2: I turn it off. Every flicker of the screen depicts corruption, which dims the hope that I *know* is still lingering in this world. I don't bother questioning. Questioning creates frustration and frustration leads to anger. But sometimes I do break. I scream at the news not me. I throw the remote once the screen blinks into blackness. It's just not worth watching. It's never worth watching.

Interviewer: *Why do you view the world the way you do?*

Sister 1: My teachers never liked me in pre-school because my skin was darker than a Hershey's chocolate bar. At least, that's what one of my classmates told me. You remember that? The funny thing is, I still question how to react to that. Sometimes I imagine flipping him off. But other times I imagine thanking him. If not for his harsh comment then I never would've woken up. I walk into an ice cream parlor with Mom and people would stare at us as if they'd never seen a fucking human being before. Back then I thought it was because we had stains on our shirts or something. But since that classmate of mine told me what he thought, I understood that the only stain that we had was not looking like them.

Eventually, I started asking why because I was stupid enough to hope that the explanations would debunk what he'd told me. To some I look like a monkey. Our president says we belong in our shithole countries. But it's not like I can go back to my country because European exploitation drove it into fucking war. Like I fucking want to stay here. I wear my natural hair to work and I risk being fired. I was even unfortunate enough to get a brother. I yell at him when he puts his hood up, snap at him when he plays with a toy gun. Some say I sound harsh but I only do it because I love him. Sorry, I sound like an angry black woman don't I? Look . . . I've tried to view the world otherwise. I've tried to view the world like my sister, beautiful, happy and whatnot. I still wake up trying. But then I step outside my door and the world gives me reasons why I should stop.

Sister 2: My friend once told me that I could push the night sky into retirement. I assume it's because of how dark I am. I was . . . what in elementary school? Because I loved nighttime I took my friend's comment lightly. But my sister didn't. Instead she just stormed off. I thought she was overreacting. She always does. I remember I'd always ask her to play dolls with me but she never did because she thought it was too childish. Yeah, I know. And we were kids. Of course, you already know that. But I look back now and I

understand. I wasn't like her. Whenever my teacher told my class that we could pick partners, I was always alone. I became so desperate at one point that I started asking the guys to be my partner. How do you think that went . . . ?

I'm no different than anybody else. As kids, most of us are naïve and innocent before seeing the world for what it is. It's just a matter of how we react to it. I'm shopping with my friends and I notice that a security guard is watching not us but me. Strangers would pull at my curls. I look at mothers holding their children with this affection in their eyes. Sometimes I see myself through them. I'm a mother holding my own kid. But I'm not just looking at them with affection. I'm scared. They'd be a newborn but already I'd be imagining what I should say if they started wishing that they were white or how I should react if I got a call telling me that they were arrested or killed. I mean . . . I try not to fuss over that, though. The world sucks but it's not going to change if I keep hating the people in it. It just . . . won't.

Interviewer: *How do you view your sister?*

Sister 1: I pity her. I like to think that it's people like her that are too good for this world. But I've noticed how she chooses to stay in the ignorance marinating her. Her head isn't even above water. This world will eventually swallow her and it won't spit out her bones. Her mouth will turn on her, her emotions will betray her. She can care but on judgment day her costs and losses will be extortionate. She's seventeen now. This is no longer childhood innocence. It's not cute anymore. *She's* not cute anymore. God, I just don't understand her. She needs to stop forcing her eyes closed.

Sister 2: Honestly . . . she confuses me. She's always pushing herself to see things she doesn't have to see. Anger literally fleshes out her heart and boils her blood. It's like a cloud that surrounds her. I mean, the water that clumps in her eyes isn't even prompted by sadness anymore. It's all anger. I'm scared for her. She wants change but . . . with her

quick maturity came an inevitable cynicism. She needs to take a break for once or else she'll suffocate herself before the world does.

Interviewer: *Do you have any hope for the world?*

Sister 1: Solutions you mean or punishment? Hope is too infuriatingly overused. It can be good but sometimes it makes people unbearably naïve. What is hope gonna do for us? Is it going to stop global warming? Of course not. Fuck hope.

Sister 2: My sister or the world? It's on and off. But I'd like to say yes. Without it comes a loss of motivation and inspiration and world changers. People would become apathetic and with that "fuck everything" mentality nothing would get solved anymore.

Interviewer: *Is there any additional information you'd like to mention?*

Sister 1: Yes actually. I want you to remember something, *especially* after this interview. Don't ever compare me to her.

Sister 2: Even before this interview I'm sure you already knew this but . . . I'm not and I won't ever be like my sister and I'd appreciate it if you remembered that, Fiona.

Interviewer: *Thank you for your time.*

Interviewer Signature: Fiona Ngu **Interviewer Status:** Older Sister

Lum Chi is a high school senior who's been awarded a Gold Key and American Voices Nomination for her fiction pieces in the Scholastic writing awards. Her work has also

been published by the Minnesota Writing Project and by the K'in literary journal. Currently, she is busy traditionally publishing a three-part young adult novel. When she's not busy writing, she's either locked in her bedroom curled up with a good book or binge-watching anime.

Insatiable By Kathleen Mollinedo

He decided to celebrate. There had been a new addition to the family. It sat at the kitchen table, lapping up spilled milk with a tongue like long, twisted licorice, which shone darkly under the kitchen lights. He had welcomed it into his life only a few short days ago, and already it had eaten dead patches into the air in his home.

Sometimes, he wondered if the dead patches had something to do with Lily. She was the one who had stood in those places, painting her poems onto the walls like protection spells. Now, when he came too close, his lungs collapsed in on themselves. There was no more oxygen left to breathe.

He didn't mind the empty air that much. At least now he wasn't so lonely. The creature was not him, or the friendly neighbor who brought over frozen casseroles, or his worried cousin, or Lily. And yet, it deserved a feast. He shuffled through the chest in what was once their room for something he could give it. It would eat anything, but he wanted it to be full. Soon, dying plants and dog-eared books stacked up on the table, and it wrapped its mouth around them all, gurgling. Sharp book corners pressed against the thin skin of its mouth. The crunch of their spines was deafening, and by the time its jaw could close, he was once again standing in empty air. The ground wobbled beneath him, and there was a short knock at the door. It was too late. The celebration could no longer be stopped. He had piled on letters and bedsheets, paintbrushes and tubes of lipstick, all one final, graceful meal. The knocking was only getting louder. Then, he heard the handle turn.

“Please shut the door,” he called. The beast finished off the last drops of ink, and footsteps creaked through the floor.

“Shut the door,” he called more desperately, barely able to breathe. No one was supposed to be there. “Shut the door!”

No one should have been there but the creature. He set a palm flat on the table, then an arm. There was only one way to finish the feast.

We Used to Wonder By Ricky Martin

We used to wonder if there was something out there, in the night.

We were all fairly certain of the existence of something beyond the walls of our crashed ship, but past that small confirmation, agreements were scarce. The instruments installed never seemed to pick up on the enigma’s traces during their staunch overnight vigil, but the sound of claws against the bulkhead and body dragging past the walls are all the scientific proof we need. Mandy’s the only one who claims to have seen it, but even her description of the alleged monster left much to the imagination. We can’t blame her, a tiny porthole only lends so much to the eye, especially on nights as dark as the ones we’re forced to endure here. For months, it was the fear of the unknown that kept us from pursuing this figment of the Martian night, and perhaps that was better than foolishly seeking the answers we thought we wanted.

First, it was caffeine and curiosity fueled all-nighters. We had to sit in the dark; ever so carefully preserving the power reserves of our downed ship whilst we awaited aid from the blue marble some fifty million miles away. We pressed our eyes to the portholes, each determined to be the first to lay eyes on whatever life lay beyond, but our hubris was no match for the sly shape of shadow. Every night as we watched, we heard its nails, sharp as daggers, scraping against the thick hull, seemingly always just out of eyeshot.

We heard its body, sliding across the pale red sand like a massive snake, perhaps driven by curiosity or hunger towards our craft. We prayed for the former.

Our tactics grew sharper as the weeks wore on. None of us were foolish enough to risk venturing out, keen to remain within our thick spacefaring armor. 'Foolish is the snail that sometimes crawling atop it, rarely even striking at the parts it seemed to think were soft. Did it think us prey? The presence of such stimulation kept us all sane, I like to think. Veronica filled a book with sketches of what she imagined the nocturnal visitor looked like, from its talons to its tail. Some were long like snakes, others stocky like bears. Some had beaks, some had fangs, some had no face at all. The details made for topics of many a scholarly (and many more an un-scholarly) debate between the five of us, and the constant through-line was that it was larger than an elephant and would make us all famous when we returned to Earth.

Eventually, we were sleeping through the day and sitting awake all night, just to document the daily passing of the monster. Sometimes, we'd catch a fleeting glimpse of a tail (or tentacle, some protested) as it passed by a window, more fuel for our theories that quickly grew more and more wild by the day. Was it the same animal coming to visit us each night? Was there more than one of whatever stalked the surface of Mars?

As diligently as we strived to uncover the truth behind all these questions, the answers cared not for our resolve. The answers elected to arrive when and where they chose.

Mandy was the first to get those answers, just as the sun was rising over the red horizon and the lot of us were preparing to go to sleep. No monster had come that night; no claws rattled our craft and no body dragged across the sand. We were all left disappointed, figuring that perhaps whatever spectre of the night was visiting us had simply grown bored of our silent, unmoving shell. Mandy was sole among us in choosing to stay awake just an hour more and finish a report, her excuse to hold out for the arrival of the mystery beast. As the sun rose over the rocky desert, though, she was met with the reality that our visitor had been just outside the window the whole time.

abandons his shell', Yuri loved to remind us. We had grown a certain affection towards whatever creature came to visit us. Each night it came, like clockwork, sometimes pacing around our craft, sometimes crawling atop it, rarely even striking at the parts it seemed to think were soft. Did it think us prey? The presence of such stimulation kept us all sane, I like to think. Veronica filled a book with sketches of what she imagined the nocturnal visitor looked like, from its talons to its tail. Some were long like snakes, others stocky like bears. Some had beaks, some had fangs, and some had no face at all. The details made for topics of many a scholarly (and many more an un-scholarly) debate between the five of us, and the constant through-line was that it was larger than an elephant and would make us all famous when we returned to Earth.

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We were, naturally, ecstatic at first. We saw its rock-red body laying not even a ball field's length away, long legs rested against the sand and head partially obscured by the awkward position it had taken up. It was only as the sun continued to rise that we

realized we were looking at a corpse rather than a living specimen. It was the length of a bus, and easily the height, unchallengeable by even the greatest of Earth's fauna. Its claws were long and sharp, body powerful, tail thick, and yet it lay in the sand, neck snapped and flesh feasted upon by something much larger.

We used to wonder if there was something out there. We don't wonder anymore.

Ricky Martin is a senior with a side passion for creative writing, especially flash stories and poetry. Fascinated by fantasy and science fiction alike, he does his best to find inspiration in every aspect of life, and aims to one day go on to be a professional author.

Non-Fiction

Walk By Hannah Ling

The wind breathes cold on my face. Green-tinted transparent waves leach away the tideline, taking everything except the pitch-black strands and broken shells forming a jagged ink-line of unwanted debris across crusty salt sand. There is a chill in the air, stealing uninvited through my jacket and whispering across my hair. Tumbled rocks lean into the beach, forming mounds of solid granite, immovable stone faces turned to the sky. Above me a world is falling away, sinking down in fire below the visible realm. The deepest hollow imaginable cups it as it dies, a hollow swathed in dusky blue and murmuring indigo. Streaks of burning color shoot warm pink fingers across it all, clutching on, afraid to let go, but all in vain; their grasp slips, falters, fades. Then, like a heartbeat gone cold, little frigid points of sharpened silver thrust through woven fabric to dance, luring me higher.

A pale, deadly glow lightens the horizon. Rising like an invincible destroyer, the great pitted face of Chang'e arises, glowing, cutting the soft sky with pitiless lances. The

night's full beauty descends upon us, and we stand struck dumb. There is nothing to say; all the words are gone, flown away to heaven, and we cannot call them back just yet. Soon we will be ourselves again, talking, defiling nature's purity with our relentless worldliness. By then the spell will have dissipated and left us with nothing more than the echo I write from: memory. But right now the world turns day into night and the metamorphosis merits utter silence. It is the only fitting tribute.

Turning, we walk away. The idea of leaving feels strangely alien to my star-numbed mind; there is no other existence than that of a mute spectator party to the greatest costume changes unknown to mankind. Yet I walk. Shoes dig into the sand, eradicate thousands of burrowed homes. Nobody notices. When we reach the road, tarmac welcomes us. Not many humans pass this way nowadays, only the little earth-dwellers we hunt to extinction. Yet we walk. The road holds no ghosts of inherited wrongs, not for us. For the hands that felled the noble brethren of the trees now watching us, maybe. For the feet that stood here and declared it worthy for destruction, without a doubt. But we know nothing of this, nothing of the senseless cruelty except for what we are told. Who is to blame? The question follows us, eyes pleading, longing to be answered. And still we walk.

Hannah Ling is a Malaysian homeschooler with a penchant for pointless debates and interesting accents. She enjoys theatre, photography, writing, daydreaming, and the minutes just before a thunderstorm.

They Could See Themselves By Arden Yum

The watercolor sky of each seemingly endless June day bled into the next. The sun turned the other girls red and left their skin bruised and tender. They slathered on aloe vera and emptied cans of spray-on sunscreen, but flakes of flesh still ended up on the front porch and in the bathroom sink. I did the same; smeared on layers of protection

against the angry sun, anxiously waiting for my skin to get burned too. I felt the suffocating weight of warm air on my face and a stream of water droplets rushed from the roots of my hair to the back of my neck, but the pain did not come. Instead, I glittered in the sunlight and could see my pale skin darken into the sweet honey of summer. The sunscreen I had used to guard myself dripped away until my body shifted into shadow.

Two girls posed for a picture on the front steps of the bunk. I drifted into a corner and pretended to reorganize the pairs of sneakers lined up by the door. My head swiveled around periodically, waited for a half-second to be invited into the exclusive photoshoot, then went back to occupying myself with more arbitrary tasks. The girls held clenched, closed mouth smiles. They stuck their elbows out and threw their shoulders back. Their arms were wrapped around each other, but one girl's fingers barely grazed the other's back. They stood perfectly still while drops of sweat collected into shallow puddles on the ground. After a single click of the shutter, their shoulders slumped back down. They started to fake laugh for a second pose and soon their forced giggles grew into uncontrollable laughter. Another click. One girl rushed around to the back of the camera to see what she looked like.

She let out a high pitched cry for help. Her voice was burdened by the agony of summer heat and the insecurities she tried so hard to suppress. She hated the way that her eyes narrowed into dark slits whenever her smile was genuine. She complained to her friend that it made her look *Asian*. She said *Asian* like she was spitting out rotten food. The disgust in her voice sent an earthquake through my spine. Could she see me? Did it matter? I stood speechless on the porch. Her words took refuge inside of my mind. My tan skin blended into the wooden walls and I hoped that if I closed my eyes she wouldn't be there when I opened them. I stopped adjusting the shoes and kicking the dirt into piles. I walked into the corner of wet towels and bathing suits and tried to take up as little space as possible. Thick teardrops rolled down my cheeks but I couldn't lift my hand high enough to wipe them away.

The sun dried my tears and left thin lines of salt on my face. I positioned my head towards the shade so my eyes wouldn't squint. Every muscle moved with calculated caution. I stared at my arms. Now they looked like they had been muddied and no matter how hard I scrubbed, the layers of contaminated skin refused to fall off. I ran my fingers across my eyelids and failed to find the same deep-set eye creases and long lashes that the other girls had. I silently cursed the sun for making me different. They were beautiful in a way that I could never be. Yes, they burned. But they burned together.

As the day faded into night I sat on the front porch and watched streams of girls walk by and gossip and giggle. One girl's face blurred into another whenever I took a second to blink. They didn't need to look at their arms or trace their eyelashes. They could see themselves by watching each other. There was a security in their sameness but they paid no attention to it. Some girls sat down next to me to see the stars, and I half smiled at them. Their eyes were pointed in every direction but somehow avoided contact with mine. I retreated into the darkness. In the midst of our closeness, I was still inevitably alone. The sun rose the next morning and my fingers trembled because they were scared to touch the light.

Arden Yum is a junior at Trinity School in New York City. Her favorite subjects are Latin, English, and Math. She enjoys photography, teaching, and oatmeal. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing awards.

Becoming Nancy By Yuwei Dou

At age thirteen, I lived on the fifth floor of Ya Qing Court, a grey apartment building with many windows that overlooked the street. There, we called the smog over the city the yellow dragon because it made the sky perpetually yellow, and people often wore masks outside. A few Yang trees sat across the Beijing street in a courtyard. On the ground floors of apartment buildings were shops where vendors from the country sold candied

fruit called tanghulu and guokui pork pancake. Multi-colored awnings always flapped in the wind, and old men sat in their rickshaws waiting to carry passengers to their destinations. Down the street, my school was a complex of sterile white buildings that resembled a jail. Whenever I left the streets and entered the gates of No. 241 middle school, I felt as if I were leaving freedom and entering a courthouse where a strict jury would judge me.

In that school, our teachers were our guides, judges, prosecutors, and executioners. They wielded immense power. One winter, I made Ms. Liu's face turn red when I privately corrected her use of future tense in English. She sent me outside without a coat, and I stood there for twelve hours shivering in the snow. Often children stood with me who were also sent outside to stand in the snow. Sometimes I could see a hundred children, standing in a line outside, shivering, contemplating their mistakes.

In school, I knew a girl named Nancy. She was the kind of girl who would not eat her hot pot and dumplings outside like the other women while the men ate inside, as was common in Chinese culture. She insisted on eating at the table with the men. She loved hip-hop dancing and ping-pong. While the rest of us left our hair black, Nancy died her hair golden. Her legs were pale and long. Nancy always smelled like laundry detergent, as if her clothes were cleaner than ours. Unlike most of us, she was an Opera God: kind and good and gave everyone luck. Each day, she would encourage her friends: Keep working hard! Have a good day! We lived in a bamboo-steamer-like environment, where every kind word was a cure for death.

Naturally, she didn't belong in this place. Nancy was like the tiger locked in the zoo. While the rest of us understood our cages, Nancy seemed to quietly pace crazily. We all should have noticed when she began to change.

One day, she stopped smiling. When the teacher called on her, she stood up and said nothing. I thought she was having her period, but then I was too worried about my own

problems to help.

On a Wednesday when we arrived at the school, news that Nancy was missing spread quickly on campus. That day, the rain and clouds converged to form a grey dragon in the sky. The whole day, teachers didn't seem to notice her absence. Even our counselor ate her sandwich in her office and watched television operas. But we students secretly thought Nancy had run away to another city, like Holden in *Catcher in the Rye*, and would be back. But Nancy's tall, lean figure remained noticeably absent.

Two days later, I read about her in the city newspaper. They didn't mention Nancy's name to protect her identity, but we all knew.

Rumors spread that Nancy was staying in a shabby motel. I knew the place. From traffic and pollution, the outside wall of the motel long ago turned from white to dirty yellow and was covered with patches of small ads. From her boyfriend, I found out that Nancy was smoking marijuana, playing games on her phone, and eating the 3-for-\$1 mysterious-meat pancakes sold on the street.

While riding the bus one day to the library, I passed the motel and saw Nancy wearing our school's uniform, but it was oil stained. Her pants looked wet as if she'd washed them but didn't have a dryer. Without shoes on, she was standing at the door of her motel room. She gazed straight ahead, and her normally happy eyes looked as if they held a secret. Her long hair looked like that of a homeless woman. For weeks, she stayed there in that terrible motel, skipping school, smoking marijuana, and setting a bad example for all of us. She was my hero. When our teachers weren't around, some of us said quietly to each other, "I want to be Nancy, even for one day. One hour. So I can stop studying for just a little while." When we said those words, our faces looked like those of mischievous, scared children. Secretly, we spoke about the joy of playing soccer on a field under the pleasant sunshine or riding the Cinderella's Secret Palace at Disneyland in Shanghai.

But our words changed when teachers' pets interjected: "Nancy was such a bad girl. Ms. Lee cannot get the extra prize this month for being a good teacher. We will never be like Nancy!" But secretly, we were all Nancy. We all felt that hidden desire to throw away our futures to go lie in some dingy motel, where life was devoid of pressure, where mysterious meat pancakes were better than egg tarts from Crazy Bakery and unending school. To us, that terrible, frightening life was better than the one we lived every day.

The situation changed when the principal cornered Nancy's boyfriend and threatened to beat him if he didn't tell her where Nancy was hiding out. Pretty soon, the police were dragging Nancy into the principal's office. I remember watching the armed officers escort her across the blacktop to the office. Like a criminal, she looked at her feet the whole time. Her face looked sick, weak, dirty, and wild. I could see a tear in her shirt and her pants, as if she'd run through trees to escape judgment, as if she had been willing to risk harm rather than return.

Later I heard that the principal beat Nancy with her bare hands, screaming, "You've hurt our reputation! Now the education government is punishing us by taking money from our school!" When Nancy arrived home, her dad beat her so angrily that he injured her leg. Beatings were normal in China. Parents and teachers beat their children as a way of teaching them life experience. Later that week, at her apartment, Nancy stood on the ledge of the window, but her parents stopped her. She tried to grab a knife, but her parents took her to the hospital, where she lived in a small, dark, windowless room for seven days, like an animal in a cage.

I never saw Nancy again and she never returned to school, but we still talk about her. She lives on in my mind, and I'm sure she lives on in the minds of other students who want freedom. Sometimes when I study biology for 20 hours straight and I feel evil in my brain, I throw my book across the room. I turn on my music, and for ten minutes I become Nancy. I become her.

As a senior at Amador Valley High School, Yuwei is a creative writer, student journalist, and page editor of the Amador Valley journalism class. She is actively involved in school and enjoys being part of the community. Yuwei is a professional Chinese Zither player, —a 21-string traditional Chinese Instrument almost 2000 years old— which she has done since the age of four and passed Level 10 at 11 years old. She enjoys doing competitions and won first place in the National Chinese Zither Competition from 2009 to 2016. She also writes her own zither pieces included: Summer; That year, that river; Childhood; Homeland grassland, Homeland river, etc. As a member of High School Music Collaborative and the leader of PLAY Chinese Ensemble, Yuwei enjoys using music to share the joy and happiness to other people in the community. Although English is her second language and she just came to America three years ago, she has already won the Scholastic Writing Contest, Bay Area Book Festival Writing Competition, and the Tri-Valley High School Writing Competition as the only double winner. She always tries her best to make the school and the Pleasanton Unified School District better as a leader in LINK, an active member in Pleasanton SIAC and a student representative in LCAC and DCLC. In her free time, she enjoys listening to music, reading books and cycling.

Dear Bo By Yingtong Guo

Remember when Aiona and I thought you were dying? The big kids kept breaking up, so they tattooed your body with the names of their lost loves. Viscous sap seeped from your freshest scars, and we stored grass and mud in a first-aid kit in case you needed surgery. We named you *Bo* because it was etched into the most exposed and vulnerable part of your roots.

A few years later, Aiona and I drifted apart – she liked singing, but I liked reading. Liking turned to loving when I discovered *Harry Potter* during lunch break on a warm Monday, slouched against your trunk. I can still smell the mildewy scent of your soil-clad twigs, mingled with the cool fragrance of magnolia flowers in elusive wafts of summer freshness. I shopped with Harry and Hagrid for school supplies on Diagon Alley, peaking through the store façade of Flourish & Blotts, where leather-brown tomes like giant chocolates were stacked to the ceiling in rickety spirals. Under the invisibility cloak, I snuck into the Restricted Section of Hogwarts Library to unravel the purpose of the Philosopher's Stone. When the school bell shook me back into the muggle world, I picked up one of your fallen twigs before running off to my afternoon class. I had a magical wand now – *English Oak, 10"*, *unicorn hair, unyielding flexibility*, I imagined – and was expecting my Hogwarts acceptance. Although I never received that Hogwarts Express train ticket, I returned every day to read and dream in your protective shade – my Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ to the universe of magic.

After I had finished the entire series in my native Dutch, I learnt that Hogwarts' headmaster *Perkamentus*, meaning *parchment*, was named *Dumbledore*, meaning *bumblebee*, in the original English. I was angry with the translators – a humming old wizard with twinkling eyes and a jolly laugh should not be called a shriveled piece of goatskin! English works needed to be read in English, and as my vocabulary expanded, I gained access to a wealth of English literature, diaries and memoirs, and popular science.

Over the years, I forged bonds with the downtrodden and forgotten characters I read about not because I understood them, but because I was stunned by the profound

humanity in their isolation, their resilience, and their complicity in their tragic downfall. There was 13-year-old Theodore Decker, who drifted through cities full of nastiness and apathy in search of a home, weighed down by his nagging guilt for an unspeakable theft. There was 11-year-old Pecola Breedlove, who descended into a madness that delivered her from the endless sneers of more beautiful and more eloquent people, and from her burning desire for the bluest eyes. But there was also 36-year-old Humbert Humbert, a vile man with a ruinous, excuseless, but sickeningly passionate heart that coaxed him into child rape, barely possible to like yet uncomfortably hard to judge. *If you were an orphan, a lunatic, or a deviant, these characters asked me in unison, would you do better?*

In moments like these, I could neither invent an answer nor turn the page. So, I would take a nap under your awning of leaves until your shadow blackened the sunlit insides of my drowsy eyelids. I would roll over to the left and roll over to the right, but you turned and turned as time passed by, chasing me around like a tireless clock-hand, blocking the light and absorbing the warmth from my furry mattress of matted grass.

Sit up and keep reading, you commanded. But this time, a different author, a different subject, and a different genre. So, I read the works of activists who had suffered much but complained little and of scientists who had discovered much but shared everything. Malala Yousafzai, for example, lost the left side of her face during a Taliban shooting in her school bus, while Nelson Mandela sacrificed 27 years of his freedom to a 56-square-foot cell on Robben Island. Their narratives were authentic, generous, and filled with hope, and they showed me that we choose the interpretation of our past that lays out the blueprint for our future.

Carl Sagan, Michio Kaku, and Stephen Hawking took me on an exciting journey through black holes, parallel universes, space clouds, and, finally, back to the pale blue dot that is planet Earth – our *mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam* – as captured by the imaging system of Voyager 1. Their tales of pink skies, cannibalistic pulsars, and planets made

out of solid diamond filled me with wondrous questions. Some inspired a quick web search. Others introduced the very next chapter.

Despite astronomers' warnings against anything-centrism, many of my fascinations and obsessions had less to do with deep space and more to do with human history. From the 2 million animal species on planet Earth, how did we end up at the top of the food chain? Why did we give up the carefree romanticism of hunting and gathering for a sedentary life in destitute villages? These questions had their answers hidden in the fields of biology, psychology, and anthropology, and I looked for them in the writings of Richard Dawkins and Noah Harari.

For 10 years, Bo, you have shielded me from sunshine and drizzle so that I could live inside the pages of my newest conquests from the school library. Thank you for allowing me to meet Harry, experience joys and sorrows with Malala and Mandela, explore space-time, reflect on the heritage of our tribal ancestors, and be an inveterate reader. I wish you lots of sunlight, water, and nutrients in 2019!

Green kisses,
Yingtong

Yingtong Guo is an emerging writer and undergraduate student pursuing a double major in biology and PPE (philosophy, politics, and economics) at the University of Pennsylvania. Her work has been published in Deerfield Magazine and Pacific Ties Magazine. She lives in Leuven, Belgium.

Wildflowers By Sydney Craig

This creaky, old porch is the same one that I have spent almost every afternoon on for the last fifteen years. The screen gapes open in some places, the brilliantly teal paint is chipped. My best friend's parents are too busy with their carousel of jobs and their habits and their special needs son to pay attention to home repairs. Or her, most of the time, which is why when the sun starts descending into the horizon line we go next door to my grandparents' house for a home-cooked meal. She calls them Nana and Pa the same way I do, and they call her squirt or honey or little shit the same way they do me. They always slide bowls of dessert in front of us when we say we're stuffed because they know we're never too full for sweets. We're both lanky and tall and freckled and mean, our bones always ache at this time of day from playing rigorously outside and we are starving. Nana tells us to wash the dishes or she'll get a switch and being teenagers does nothing to dampen the impending fear that motivates us to the big, full sink.

After supper, we trek back over to her second-story porch to smoke Marlboros and wait on the neighborhood boys to come slinking around the corner of the house. We laugh and sprawl out on comfortable recliners her dad plucked from yard sales or the side of the road. The breeze picks up and we both do a little shiver. I stare at her and I love her so much that it doesn't surprise me anymore how much alike we have grown up to look. Exhaling smoke, I gaze over the rotted banister and at the green, stinking pool. I stretch, and her voice interrupts my daydream of the wildlife beneath that murky surface out there.

"Where you'd get that scar on your hip? It looks like a burn, a perfect circle and I don't remember it."

This is the first time I have ever tried to summon my father back from the grave. I want his soul to take place of mine for a moment, just long enough to lie convincingly. If he could do anything well in the whole world, it was to modify the world into whatever he

made up. But I am not him and so all I can come up with is, "It's nothing, it's from early childhood."

I yank my shirt back down without moving my eyes from the bug-ridden pool in the yard. But she notices that I don't even look at where she's pointing and she knows me better than my own mother does. Her silence is an aggressive accusation. Her words prove my theory correct, "Stop lying to me, I've been around since you were two, I'd know. What the hell is that?" It makes me want to smack her the way she does me when I tell her somebody could drive a semi between the gap in those teeth of hers, but I won't argue with her because she's right and we both know that I'm hiding something. Part of me wants to tell her that I understand just as much as she does. My ignorance to the truth of my own story, in more ways than the chapter that she's trying to read right now, pushes me to anger that cannot be silenced, "Dammit, look I really don't know and I stopped caring. It's just bullshit. You really want to see?"

Some wicked, misplaced giggle escapes my throat like a bubble blown in my stomach that floated out. It was gravity – nothing is actually funny. I sit the cigarette in between my lips and pull my shirt up to expose myself. I've got a constellation of perfect-circle scar burns across my ribs. She winces and turns away, mouth quivering, as if she hasn't seen them 200 million times before but never known to look or ever noticed how much foundation I go through. I paint my face pretty and my torso plain with that liquid magic so that nobody asks me who or where or why.

She looks like she might pass out because we've been with each other forever and my memories are more worm than thought when they crawl through her brain. She's not strong. She's barely able to use her legs properly as she totters to the side of the porch and violently vomits into the weeds below it. Her mind conjures up what it must have felt like as all those cigarettes were extinguished on the thick cover of my rattling bones. I tell her it's funny she's noticing in fall, when it's too late, because he only ever grows hungry when it's sweltering out. I won't tell her his name. After she empties her stomach

of every bit of its contents, she wipes her mouth and closes her eyes. “I can’t see how you can still smoke.”

My mother comes into the bathroom to get the hair dryer while I am drying off from a bath. She says, “What is that on your hip?” I smirk, “You should know.” My voice is hardly above a whisper but she gets the point, she looks at me with eyes that are my own. Her lips curl in on themselves and she steals a continuous look that travel across my ribs, down to the top of my thigh. She shivers. “You know this is the only thing that has ever made me feel as murderous as my mother. Can I hug you over your towel?” She can sense my apology but I only say, “It’s been years. It’s not like you haven’t seen them before.” She leaves because she knows that touches are electric blue flames lapping my skin up, messy and grotesque, like a parched dog finding a puddle in the heat.

There is this boy I meet after the trauma that swept me into isolation. At seventeen, I am hostile and blunt and very into my education and liquor. He tiptoes into my world out of nowhere and immediately annoys me because he can barely speak my language. Yet, he clings like a gnat. He’s asking too many questions in his broken, deformed English that he knows I won’t answer and telling me jokes that I do not understand. He shows up at sunset on my mother’s doorstep searching for me on the first day I ever crack a grin at him. Somehow, my family falls more in love with him that evening on the deck than I ever will think about being and for that reason alone, he is allowed into my life. He cooks dinner with my soft-spirited mother and wraps Christmas presents with my spiny-hearted Nana. He never complains when I want to sleep through the day, he just sits beside me as I dream. I wake up to cut fruit and cigarettes beside my bed, and his fingers slowly moving across the surface of my skin.

When he sees the scars it's because we are camping and before that, I hadn't been in the woods with a boy for six years, but there is safety in his foreignness and his coming departure. When he saw my bare hip, his mouth formed a perfect O and he sadly stares. *You could make beautiful out of ugly memory. Tattoo over. My sister did.* I like that he doesn't call them scars, he doesn't mention that they are perfect circles and he doesn't ask who did them. But he does scratch furiously at his own rib cage as he slips from the zipper door and I know he is burning up, though he doesn't know why. A moment passes and he pokes his head back in, says he's feeling sick, he'll go for a walk and be back.

Wildflowers are clutched in his fist when he returns. He looks at me softer than any creature like me should be looked at and whispers that I should get these flowers drawn on my ribs to represent the beauty of uncertainty.

I still don't know if he said what he was trying to, but I like to think he did.

Sydney Craig is a double major who really just wants to explore the world. She adores spontaneous road trips, antique hunting, photography that makes you feel something, and laughter of all calibers.

Pill Bottles By Sophie Lipset

To say the least, my grandfather is old fashioned. Constant monologues about New York City in the forties, changes in technology, and how amazing the economy is has left me well versed in the mind of an eighty-five-year-old man. But the most striking of his stale views are those of women.

“Most women her age have hit the wall,” he was explaining one day. “Hit the wall” meant, in paraphrased words, that a woman had “peaked” and lost the sex appeal that gave her value. “But Audrey,” he continued, “is far from it.”

Audrey is his partner. Amicable, devout, at times frivolous. She kept my grandfather company after his wife passed. But in no way was this heavily lipsticked woman comparable to my grandmother.

The range of possibilities in my life have been created by my grandmother. Inspiration overflows from the white stock paper of her resumé. Successful business owner, seasoned globetrotter, cultured trendsetter, loving sister, mother, and grandmother. Rather than acquiescing in an early marriage, she secured a college degree. Once her business was thriving, she resolved to buy an exquisite New York apartment a block from Lincoln Center. With cash. Trips to the jewelry store grew in frequency until she became best friends with the owner. Precious metals and gemstones flooded her drawers. Ruth was utterly powerful.

She never followed the trail of tradition. In a jungle of misogyny, she slashed a path through thick, cunning vines. Ruth shared little with my mother’s mother: her style was extravagant rather than plain and she displayed only grace and class. And I’ve seen her cook only once.

I was small, probably four or five years old. Pigtails bounced next to my shoulders as I sat at the table. The tall, expansive surface enveloped my body and nearly covered my head. Gawking, as I did during every visit, I studied the stark whites of the kitchen, the simple oak cabinets, and the industrial refrigerator that I could have fit in six times over. A miniature Kermit the Frog found a seat upon the cubed steel clock that hung from the ceiling. Between pictures of my cousins and I stuck on by magnets, late afternoon light glinted off metallic gray.

The memory itself is faint but imprinted in my mind. Screeching, the microwave begged for my grandmother to collect her food, but she sauntered over with leisure. The usual smell of her house, a confusing mix of mothballs and incense, meshed with the odor of burnt plastic.

“I’m hungry!” I complained. It would only be a few minutes longer, she replied, proceeding to cook the dish despite the microwave’s plea.

After ten more minutes, a black heap steamed on my plate. Long, bony fingers delivered me a fork. My grandmother stood back and crossed her arms, proud, while I contemplated what I was supposed to do with that fork and a burnt brick of frozen food.

I thought of my other grandmother: full, soft around the edges. Her visits were always accompanied by cookies and presents and hugs.

“What should I make for dinner?” Beth would ask.

But my father’s mother was different, eclectic almost. The scorched meal had been microwaveable Stouffer’s macaroni and cheese. And Ruth had forgone the simple instructions, white type against red cardboard, attempting to unleash her own culinary approach.

When I hadn’t sampled the dish for two minutes, she shot me an insisting look. “Just try it.”

The dark crust resisted my fork at first, then slid right in. Beneath the charred layer was a golden cheesy river, steam rising from its stream. To my young eyes, it appeared edible.

I ate the mac and cheese. It was ambrosia.

I've never seen my grandmother cook besides that. And I'm not sure if you can call over-microwaving mac and cheese a method of cooking. But she wasn't bad at it. She just chose to focus on other tasks.

—When I discovered she had cancer, I cried for two weeks.

Ten years old. Mostly innocent. I wasn't completely sure what that word meant. Cancer sounded like a black mold, steadily creeping toward her soul. It sounded like a parasite, arresting, petrifying.

"Her doctors are great," my dad repeated before each time we saw her. But I couldn't connect how the doctors were helping, as she grew sicker. After awhile, those recurrent words rung empty.

We started visiting more often. The smell I remembered from an earlier childhood, incense and mothballs, warred with medicinal agony. Tragic orange prescription bottles littered cold granite countertops. Any natural light left—there often wasn't any; the sky was always gray—filtered through, casting long, orange shadows.

Visits were sandwiched by hugs. "Hi Grandma," I recited as I embraced her. She had always been tall, lean, thin, but, soon, her ribs jutted against translucent tissue-paper skin. "How are you feeling?" I would ask, but I could never remember her answers. Everything was rehearsed.

The woman I was seeing was no one I knew. She was a shadow of the pill bottles, weak and watery at times, but mostly absent.

There was a last good day. The whole family was there, crammed inside her expansive city apartment. Windows sheltered the party from unfriendly autumn air while welcoming sunlight that emerged for the first time in a week and a half. All the pill bottles were hidden in the cabinets.

We ordered food from the Chinese restaurant down the block. Ruth was an auctioneer, delegating chicken lo mein and crisped halves of egg rolls to distant cousins. A tub of duck sauce splashed on the counter as she unloaded flimsy plastic bags from the sturdier paper bags. She organized a conveyor belt of a meal, designating the beginning, middle, and end of the line, commanding which side of the family to go first, micromanaging which plates were used with which food, —and keeping the pork set aside to maintain something close to kosher for Uncle Earl.

The apartment swarmed with energy. Nostrils flaring, my brother challenged my cousin to see who could eat the most hot peppers without crying. Teenage cousins stood bored in the corner, texting on pearled slide phones as I begged them to braid my wild hair.

Ruth rescued me from wandering window to window, munching on a vegetable dumpling. “Come with me,” she urged. “I have something to show you.”

I followed her confident steps past the closed doors of her bedroom. A lamp blinked on and revealed costume jewelry carpeting a bureau, imposter gems flashing across the room. Something that looked like an emerald reflected in her eyes.

I wasn't sure what to do. There was a fortune of jewelry mere inches from my fingers. Tense, uncertain, I watched idly as Ruth began to hold up technicolor necklaces, earrings, and brooches

against my eyes. She unfolded my hand, which had frozen into a nervous fist, and began laying pieces in my palm. Her touch was cold yet assertive.

“This one.” She seemed to be chatting to herself, murmuring aside although I was in the room as well. A lapis lazuli charm, encrusted with gold leaf and hanging from a shimmering chain, collapsed into a small mountain. I studied the wondrous pendant while Ruth continued perusing.

“Hmm, and this one.” On a cream-colored pin, black ink drew a scrimshaw ship traversing the ocean. From the water, a whale’s tail waved a solemn hello. The brooch rocked in my palm, ship on rough sea.

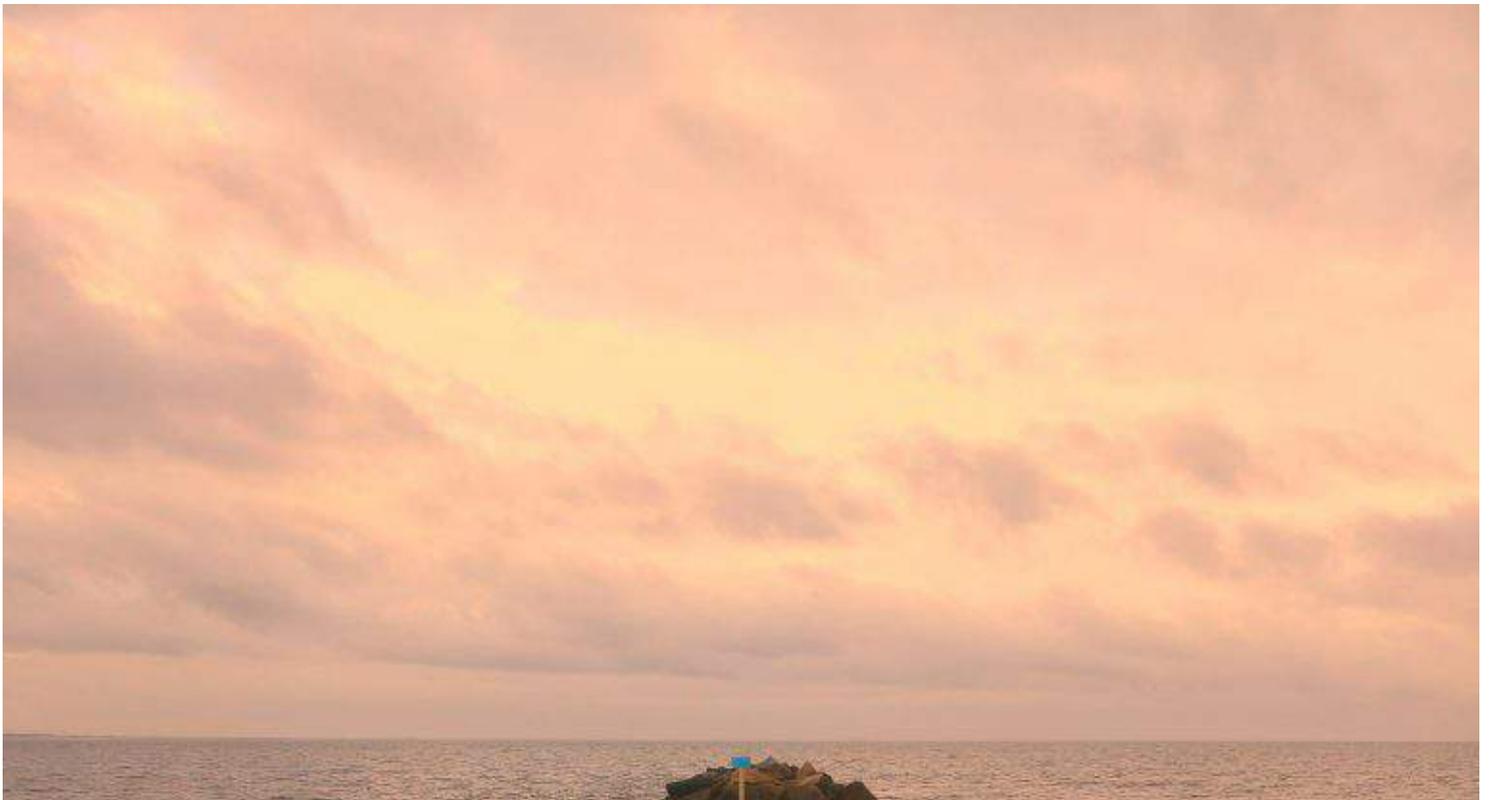
Ruth spoke again. “These are perfect.” She dropped a pair of glinting garnet earrings onto my new collection. My birthstone. Beautiful, encased in a gilded frame.

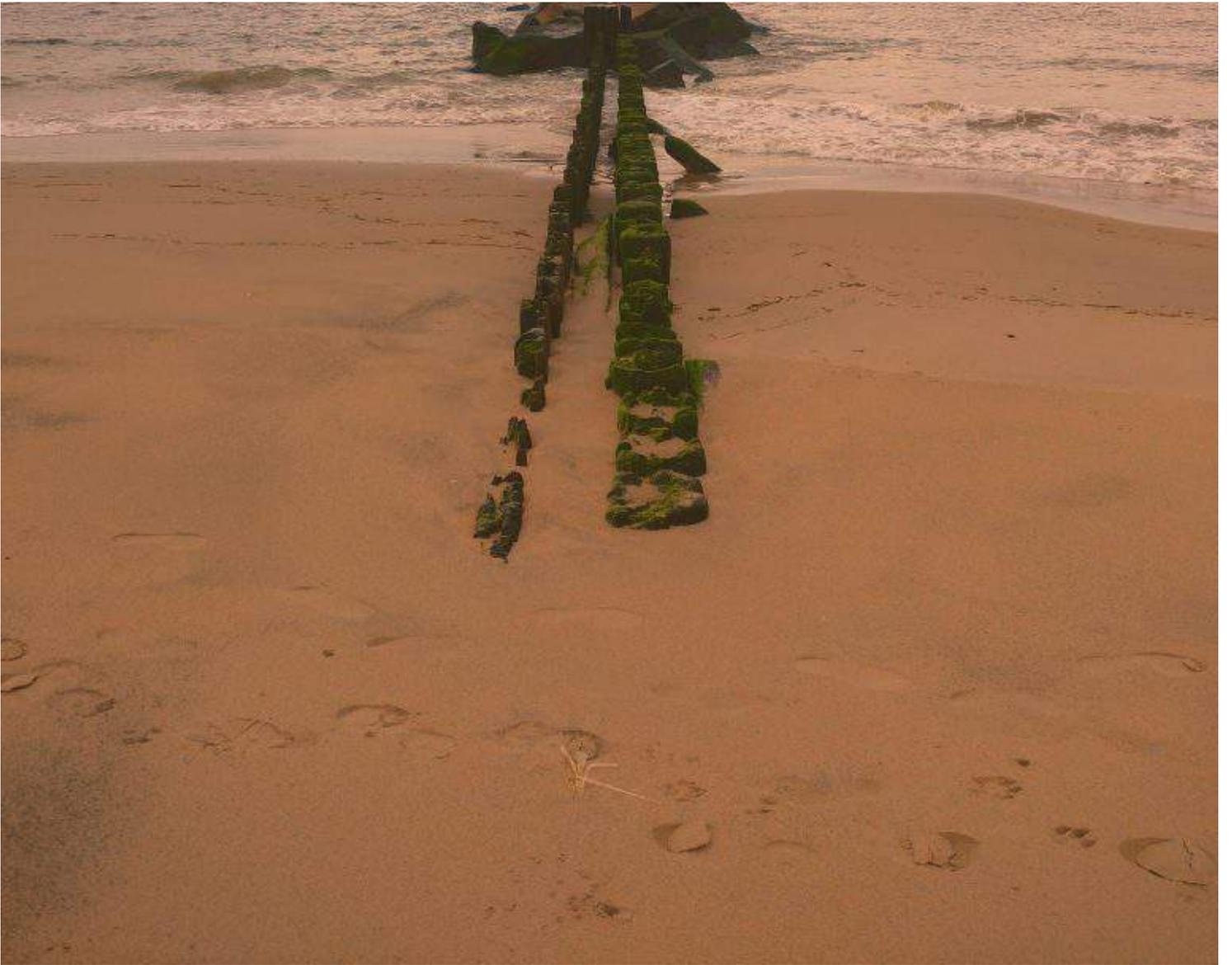
Then, she folded my hand back into a fist, her touch still cold yet assertive, and left the room.

Sophie Lipset is a high school senior with a passion for creative writing. She began writing seriously at sixteen and attended the New England Young Writers’ Conference at the Middlebury Bread Loaf School of English. She focuses on creative non-fiction.

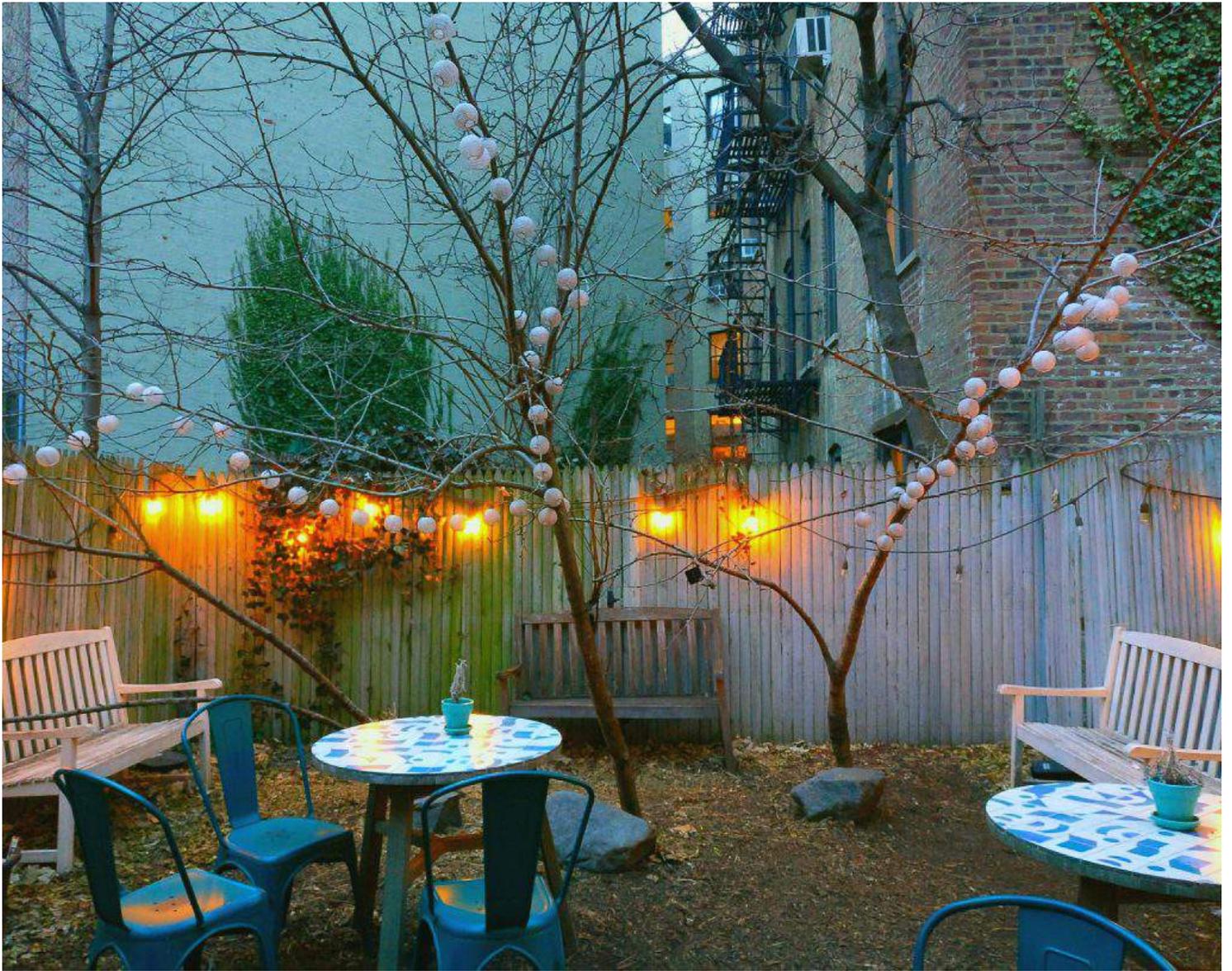
Art

Last Stop, Blue Marble By Lily Ma





Last Stop



Blue Marble

Last Stop was taken during a spontaneous evening visit to Brighton Beach. And *Blue Marble* happened to be taken in the backyard of a cafe by the same name.

Lily Ma is a firm believer that everything happens for a reason and finds herself inspired by just about everything around her. She wants to inspire others—to live her life knowing that she had an impact—and encourage others to do so too.

Chicago 1 and 3 By Emily Lu



These photos of downtown Chicago were shot last spring on 120 film with a medium format Holga camera. Despite the growing appeal of attaining quick, edited perfection through digital photography—especially in this increasingly technological age—I’ve always had a preference for film. I find that analog photography fosters a sense of authenticity that is easily lost when working digitally. Every photo shot on film, characterized by its own light leaks, vignette, and natural grain, is entirely inimitable.

Emily Lu is currently a junior at New Trier High School. Her work has previously appeared in BALLOONS Literary Journal, Paper Swans Press, and Rare Byrd Review, among others.

Away By Francesca Lewis



Away

“Away,” (which can also be thought of as “A way”) is a view over an Amsterdam canal. Though based on a real trip, it feels like a dreamy memory to me. I was inspired by the places we associate with love and happiness, and also how we tend to idealize them. I think about time a lot, so by preserving a moment like this one in Amsterdam, I feel at peace.

Francesca Lewis is a high school senior from New Haven, Connecticut. She has also spent much of her life in Frankfurt, Germany. She is interested in the humanities,

anthropology, writing, visual art, and music. Her goals are to find balance between her two homes, blend her interests with her creativity, and help the people around her.

Flower Study, White Peony By Shannon Horton



Flower Study



White Peony

My creative process has a lot to do with how I'm feeling. I love to get excited about painting. This happens when I listen to a song that makes me feel inspired (at the moment it's Roslyn by St. Vincent and Bon Iver) or when I watch an inspiring movie/ or just had a good day. I then look at pictures of nature – usually flowers and mainly peonies. I sketch out my picture, and with this particular painting I started with the background, then the leaves and flower. Then I outline everything with fine liner.

Shannon is a freckled, blue eyed South African about to move to Saudi Arabia. Art has been in her life since she was a small girl; it's a part of her. There is no other way to describe the feeling of creating something on paper with just a paintbrush and paints.

Book Review

Anne of Green Gables By Tara Awate

Anne of Green Gables is a classic written and set in the early 1900's. Although it's a children's classic, anyone of any age can enjoy it. It's set in the idyllic and rural Prince Edward Island of Canada.

It's about an orphan girl named Anne who comes to live with foster parents in the town of Avonlea. The story is about her adventures in this town. It is heartwarming to see how Anne, who has never had a place to call home, charms the hearts of many and becomes a dynamic resident of this town that is adorned by nature. The book is simply full of breathtakingly beautiful nature descriptions. Anne is a unique character whose fiery temper, and wild imagination get her into all sorts of scrapes all the time. Her love and appreciation of all things beautiful is really endearing. Her vigour and enthusiasm give you a fresh and renewed sense of life. By appreciating all the little joys that life has to offer, she makes you fall in love with being alive all over again. She rekindles your childish curiosity about everything, from attending concerts to performing in concerts, baking a cake, meeting new friends, and chasing your dreams.

But this book is not at all about a person who is always happy and cheerful. That would be preachy. Anne is a flawed and imperfect human being you can't help but sympathise with and relate to. Being very sensitive and high-strung, she has a strong emotional reaction to everything that life throws at her. The author manages to capture these instances and emotions with verisimilitude. Anne's wild imagination gets her into many difficult situations, which is very interesting to read about.

Given that the book is set in the early 1900's, Anne is very ambitious for a girl of that time when girls were only expected to be good housewives. It is a book worth reading and rereading many times.

Tara Awate loves to read and listen to classical music. She loves nature and is an environmentalist at heart. In her spare time, she works on her speculative fiction novel while balancing school and homework.

As Brave as You By Elena (of Elena Reads)

In *As Brave As You*, brothers Genie and Ernie don't expect to have such an exciting summer after their parents tell them they'll be spending it in the South with grandparents they barely know. But even though there are stricter rules and no Wi-Fi, this vacation is probably the best one of their lives.

This award-winning book is about family, love, and courage. It's also about accepting differences and adapting to change.

Genie and Ernie have to experience farm life when they pick peas to sell at a market instead of just buying them at the store. But not only do they experience southern life, they make friends and survive the trip with some surprises along the way.

When I was reading the book, I felt like I was in Virginia with the characters. For example, when Ernie's teeth got knocked out, I could imagine the teeth floating in the jar of milk and him groaning on the couch.

The author conveyed many feelings in the story, like sadness and excitement. There were times when I felt like yelling at the book, or times when I wanted to jump for joy. Also, I really loved the character of Genie. He loves asking questions, like me.

Genie loves questions. In fact, he has hundreds of them in his notebook. So, when he realizes his Grandpop is blind, and learns more about his grandfather's past, Genie finds an unexpected connection. They have fun together, eating entire apples (including the

core!!) and sneaking outside in the dark. But after Grandpop confesses his deepest secrets, he thinks of some questions not even Google can answer, like why his dad won't speak to Grandpop, and why Grandpop carries a gun in his pocket. Genie digs deeper to find the answer to these questions, but more importantly, finds the true meaning of bravery.

Genie sees Grandpop do everyday things with confidence even though he is blind. Genie also thinks Ernie is brave because he's older and is the first one to do things.

I would recommend *As Brave As You* to readers ages 10 and up. Some readers may not like that it slow moving, but I liked it because it had very good messages and a lot of interesting and funny passages. This book has some concepts that younger kids may not understand, like death and self-defense. It's also good for book clubs!

I like author Jason's Reynolds other books too. Here's my review of [Patina](#), another awesome story he wrote.

As Brave as You was really great! I rate it four out of four roses!

Elena is a middle school student who reviews diverse children's books on her blog, Elena Reads. She would like to be an author one day. She usually has her nose in a book, but she has many other interests. She runs cross country, is currently rehearsing for her role as Peter Pan in the upcoming school musical, and plays piano and violin.
