

# Issue 23

## September 2021



The Elysian Field

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**Editor Note** By Molly Hill

September 2021

Issue 23

Dear Readers and Writers,

In case you're new, thought we'd let you know how things work around here. We're an online journal and welcome submissions (ages 13-22) via an email form on our site. We publish poetry, flash fiction, short stories, travel adventures, personal essays, movie reviews, art, and photography. Guidelines are on our website, and our submissions are always open.

Our response time used to be a couple of weeks, but now we run 6-8 (working on it!)—and some of you submitters will attest that it can be longer than that. Our submissions went WAY UP during Covid, and we're pleased that we've had the chance to read so much good work.

In January of this year, we published our FIRST print anthology celebrating 5 years of online publication! There WILL be another print anthology, and this fall we'll begin selecting and soliciting work for that.

Being grant funded means we are always hustling and hoping for donations, and applying for grants, — but also that we are lucky enough to pay our published writers, and student editors. Like many lit mags we have a set budget per issue, and once we max out said budget our issue “fills,” and we move all remaining submissions ahead into the queue to be considered for the next issue.

Every submission gets a response, and a yes or a no— but only if we have a correct email. High school and middle school students may want to use a home or parent email as school servers may block our responses. This doesn't tend to happen with our college submitters.

Since selection of writing for publication is a subjective process, all subs are read by several editors. This may delay our response time a bit, but we feel it's the best way to be the most objective about the work we receive. And you don't have to have a long or even

a short list of publication credits to send us your work. All levels of creative experience are welcome!

We receive more poetry than anything else— by far.

Payment has been steady for a while at \$25 per published piece (we hope to increase this soon), and \$75 for work that's selected for cover art.

We're based in the Minneapolis-St.Paul metro area, but happily read submissions from all over the world.

Hope that gives you all a sense of the scaffolding behind the stage; we're here if you have questions: [editorbluemarblereview@gmail.com](mailto:editorbluemarblereview@gmail.com)

- IUp next————>ISSUE 23!!

Molly Hill

Editor

## Poetry

**Rutile and Quartz** By CA Russegger

Needle-shaped crystals of golden rutile  
    protrude from ocean-coloured quartz.  
Its Technicolor shards tell me that my life  
    means nothing in the face of a mineral  
that has crossed a rushing sea of time  
    to arrive smooth and sharp all at once  
in my small, leathery hands by the foamy water

as I call to you, hoping you'll see  
the shimmering, yet painfully irregular, polygon  
that rests in my hands like a  
Sleeping child. What more could I want than a  
strange thing in my palms  
that reminds me of my woefully insignificant state  
among stars hanging over me  
in the freezing heat? This quartz with a rutile stake  
through its heart tells me you  
won't come. I've called out to the sunless sea  
the void that fills the space between  
the grainy sand and whatever heaven we came from.  
The crystals tell me I'll never be home  
and that I've been playing God by yelling your name  
from the microscopic beige that fills the space  
between my toes. But as I dip my feet into the water  
and accept the stippled sea spray  
and wade through the same clever colour as the shape  
I hold tenderly, I thank it for its advice  
and drop it into the sea. I sit down, float through debris,  
and as my toes are eaten by tiny sharp-toothed fish,  
tell the stars  
I've returned home.

CA Russegger is a Filipino writer whose work doesn't appear anywhere much, but who loves history, literature, and dogs.

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Sitting on the rooftop ledges,  
The golden dawn lighting up the hedges.  
A vantage point, a bird's eye view,  
Woe is over: through and through.

Take a step, with feet on air  
Hover a while, maybe stay there.  
A glance around, endless bliss.  
Everything in order, nothing amiss.

In the wake of rain, comes break of day,  
When the clouds frolic and do ballet,  
Order and chaos intertwined:  
The symmetry of nature, perfectly defined.

A rude awakening, back at school:  
History class is nothing but cruel.  
A fickle world, easily undone.  
Back to the real world: not nearly as fun.

Alex Blickhan is a high school junior, interested in chess, unicycling, anime, and dogs. He is an aspiring decathlete, engineer, and poet.

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**When I Am Eight** By Noreen Ocampo

*after Aimee Nezhukumatathil*

SUWANEE, GEORGIA

My mother harvests yard-long beans, their tails a bracelet on her wrist. I pour plasticky water into the dusty, dusty dirt & make mud pies. I am a cooking show host. I am eight & want to bike around the cul-de-sac with my neighbor-friends, but my knees are still red-cratered from the last time. I am eight, my brother is new, & we puff our faces into full moons for every picture until our mother cries no, no, no. I am eight & I belt “Heartbreak Hotel” to our Thanksgiving casseroles. I’ll be a pop sensation if the cooking show doesn’t work out. I am eight & I squeeze my mother’s pear lotion into the bath mats & scrunch my toes & dance until the silky green disappears. I never see her nose wrinkle. Sometimes I steal into the dark of her purse & find sugared mango ribbons, tough & expired, meaning a squirrel’s desperate paws, meaning a prize saved for winter. A sweet reminder of home, I think—she pokes at the determined puffing of my cheek & says, No, no, can’t you save one for me?

Noreen Ocampo (she/her) is a Filipina American writer and poet based in Atlanta. Her work appears in Taco Bell Quarterly, Hobart, and HAD, among others, and she studies at Emory University. Say hello on Twitter @maybenoreen!

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**Cold Snap** By Issue 23

*“What we have called ‘the new abnormal’ last year...now has become an apparently enduring, disturbing reality which things are not getting better.”*

— Robert Rosner, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*

you tick like  
ball bearings  
in a Rolex  
that doesn't stop.  
there are barely  
minutes to midnight.  
each branch is  
a fortune untold.  
no two nettles  
the same green  
all over.

you  
have looked hard  
enough. *worry on  
your wing, not  
the bare branch.  
each year they  
turn brown for  
the same answer.*  
says the parent  
whose child will die.

*instead of trusting  
your instincts, you  
should have known  
when to make  
new ones, says  
any raving evangel  
of the anti-Earth,*

the future comes  
a little faster  
with every  
lukewarm winter.

Jonce Marshall Palmer (they/them) is a nonbinary poet & organizer recently relocated near Denver, CO. Their first chapbook, *Searching For Smoke Rings*, is available from Ghost City Press. You can connect with Jonce and see more of their work on Twitter @masterofmusix or on their website <https://jmpalmer.carrd.co>

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**To Be Healthy—or Not** By Alessandra Obrist

I break the tangy cocoa.  
It starts to melt under my touch,  
and paints my fingertips a rich dark brown.  
My mouth aches from craving;  
that silky sweet chocolate.  
I drop the small shard  
into my mouth.  
The bite of the cocoa  
coats my tongue,  
as its bitterness  
dissolves on to the roof of my mouth.

I glance over at the gleaming green  
of the other tangy sweet-  
tart apple I probably should have instead.

Then I glance at the other  
chip of bitter dark chocolate  
whispering my name  
and smile,  
already knowing what I will indulge in next.

Alessandra Obrist is fourteen years old, and originally from Guatemala. She's lived in the U.S. since she was two months old. When not in school she enjoys art, music, cooking/creating healthy foods, reading and writing. She also enjoys being active, and doing things like running, yoga, exercise, and volleyball. She writes to understand reality in her own words, and hopes readers can see it through this writing.

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### **Ode to the Sky** By Sayantika Halder

The infinite altruist to mankind  
The majestic and naked azure  
The color changing trickster  
The empyrean that has known the globe for the  
longest  
The homebody of stars  
The portmanteau of solar and lunar light  
The bearer of clouds' raw wrath, rage and  
tantrums  
The pursuer of hope and courage  
The sacred weight on the shoulders of Atlas  
The ultimate beginning and end of existence  
altogether.

Sayantika Halder is a student from Nirmala Convent School Siliguri, West Bengal, India. She likes to read poetry and literature, from the works of Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Charles Bukowski, Franz Kafka, to John Green and Rupi Kaur. In her leisure time, she writes poetry.

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**an alternate timeline where i never appear** By Calvin Verner Jr.

had death afflicted me before I ever lived

you would be a Texan

I could almost picture you

young, beautiful, and stressless

without the stretch marks across your belly

driving around in your two-door

blasting R & B in the Texas heat

had you went to the surgeons to have me removed prematurely

you would have never tried to stay with him

your heart

your pelvis

would have never been scarred

in my removal from you

I was born with a bad omen

with a nuchal cord

I still wonder if you have regrerts

had you unlocked the shackles

of me at seventeen

and left me to the world

would you be happier?

but instead you kept me out of faithful love and I dare to wonder

did you make a mistake?

Kalvin Verner is a high school junior from Kansas City, MO. As a young child up to now, he has always enjoyed reading poetry but never got into writing poetry until early 2020. Verner has previously won a Scholastic Honorable Mention for his poetry, and he plans to continue expressing himself with words.

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**borrowed dreams** By Katherine Mendel

others overestimate my abilities

i am nowhere near as clever, confident or capable as they think i am

my carefully constructed facade has fooled them while the very vulnerability i attempted to hide was only amplified

even when i try and tell them, it is heralded as humility or humor

despite this massive mismatch, somehow their belief blossoms into big, beautiful dreams

but they feel borrowed

my mind screams

STOP

dreams like these don't belong to someone like you

so, i store them away

until

something in that secret, sacred space inside myself whispers... what if?

Katherine Mendel is a computer science and mathematics student at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. Her poetry has previously been published in her college's underground literary magazine, *Surfaced*. She loves reading, laughing and bread.

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**in the consequence of creation** By Grace Anderson

in the consequence of creation,  
it's a tuesday morning in my bed.  
the windows shield cold weather  
slights, curtains hung-tight-and-shut.

in my head,  
this is a consequence of mayhem.  
that the lesser powers crash against  
each other, wielding the sort of chaos

that creates its own pretense.  
in my bed, it's a tuesday morning  
like the tuesday morning before,  
ages quietly passed like the breaching

of waves on a crag-lined shore.  
in the consequence of creation,  
starlight is buried in the dust  
of our bones. like the tired,

creaking bone-dead stardust  
i am a tired, creaking bone-wrenched  
nerve-wracked star, in the consequence  
of its conception.

it's a tuesday morning like the ones  
before. curtains shield the consequence  
of a cold, unfolding youth collapsed inwards  
of its quick, unyielding consciousness.

Grace Anderson is a freshman at University of Minnesota, Morris. They write to conceptualize interpretations of the world and their place in it, and can otherwise be found delving into fiber arts and reading fiction.

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### **Hey, What's That Behind Your Ear?** By Sydney Sackett

I could never figure out  
the cheap trick all magicians know  
where a ball hides under  
one cup (of three), and when he  
lifts it, *bam*, it's disappeared beneath  
the next one over, he reveals.

But the bugs are getting smarter,  
as the spider in my kitchen  
most particularly stowed inside  
the heaviest cup I own

is — presto! — nowhere to be found  
(I guess my house is *his* stage now).

Sydney Sackett is a Maryland-based freelance editor, artist, author, and D&D enthusiast when she's not working on her latest manuscript, combining her passions for fiction and theatre. Her previous poetry publications can be found in literary journal MONO. and Frostburg State University's Bittersweet anthology.

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**Science of Mourning** By Obasiota Ibe

A girl  
walks towards  
the light  
and disappears  
into a cypress—  
do you see  
how this is a metaphor  
for the apocalypse?  
I still highlight  
the word grief  
in every poem I read.

It is something I cannot unsee:  
the colour of a body wrung of joy  
like the blue black colouration  
of a protein test.  
Again, tonight  
I search the sky  
and name the bleakest  
star after me.  
It is what I do  
to keep hope alive:  
call myself a thing capable of light.  
call myself a thing incapable of light.

Ibe Obasiota Maryhilda Ben is a Nigerian. She has won the Bloomsday Poetry Prize 2020 and The African Writers' Trust Prize 2018. Her works have appeared on Brittle Paper, Kreative Diadem, Poetry Column and elsewhere. She writes from Calabar, Nigeria. Follow her on twitter @obasiotaibe.

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### **I Speak of Hospitals, Binaries, and Alice Walker** By Kylan Tatum

*"Since last September, contractors have been painstakingly demolishing the old Princeton Hospital to make room for a 280-unit development of rental apartments"*

– Anne Levin

Picture sex as life and death  
sentence. A dance where the self  
is unclear. An eye for something  
else. Here, Men are born of ink  
and anatomy. Bodies pass  
into hands looking for something  
to hold on to. I call this place home  
before. Maybe, if I can return  
to a liminal space between birth  
and memory, there is still some peace  
to be made with something beautiful,  
whole, and free, but not quite me.

Someday, this deadname revealed  
as both prison and investment,  
I will come to understand why  
you speak for me before  
I have voice: to provide something  
to outgrow and remember outgrowing.  
Like all mothers, fathers, and doctors,  
you must teach me to live and to die.

Kylan Tatum is a writer from Plainsboro, NJ. He is a first-year college student at Harvard University. His work is forthcoming in Polyphony Lit and has been recognized by the Center for Fiction's National Criminal and Social Justice Contest, and the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.

# Fiction

## **Cicadas** By Lyra Kois

Cicadas don't scream like they used to.

Evan clings to this thought as he walks, numb with rot, down to the bone. He's nothing but the texture of the rope slipping against clumsy fingers, the burning against his palm. The cicadas are quiet, even as the sun swells in the sky, a concentrated fist of wobbling heat. Evan hears himself breathing. Hears *Ruby* breathing, short, quick, desperate breaths, like she's drowning, even as she continues to walk. She stumbles. Evan doesn't catch her – his arms are full, after all.

Don't look down. Don't look down. Don't look down.

Something soft rubs against Evan's calves, and for a moment he pretends that it's nothing but lamplight-eyes Mew slinking around his legs, or the tendrils of his newest fern tipped sideways, spilling soil. The cicadas are so very quiet. Why are they so quiet?

When Evan reaches the tree, it rings like a victory, and that thought curdles in his gut like sour milk. His chest heaves for air. His teeth clatter against each other like marimbas. Ruby's stomach growls, and the sound feels almost sacrilegious. There's something patently wrong about the human nature of the bodies they inhabit – Evan's never felt less like a real boy.

It's  
easier if they're two mindlessly shuffling dolls with painted lips and glass eyes. It's so  
much easier.

There is an open bottle of wine on the kitchen table.

There is an open bottle of wine on the kitchen table, and it is cherry red and steaming  
violet,  
crushed grapes fermenting, carmine and rose, and Evan clings to it like a lifeline. He  
closes his  
eyes and imagines it in the scrunched-up, bled-dry corner of his mind. The individual  
dust  
motes, suspended in the air, like snippets of dry skin cut out of a ghost. Filtered spindles  
of light.

The heady, heavy scent of berries. Evan turns it over and over in his brain, a rotating  
wheel, and  
the sour smell of it, creeping under his nails and nostrils, is almost real. Almost.

In his addled state, his head spirited away, Evan trips.

He hits the grass softly, like a whisper, mud nuzzling up against the incline of his cheek.  
Rosie  
does not.

Ruby shrieks as Rosie falls, an entirely involuntary sound, and Evan winces at the way it  
leaves  
his ears echoing with thinly-spread pain. Her body thuds awkwardly against the earth,  
and  
something cracks – ribs, maybe, or the already-fragile line of her collar. Evan scrambles  
to his

feet, leaves and undergrowth flaking under him as he moves. There's no mistaking the motion of the action, of the way Ruby stops herself from sobbing, cuts herself off in the deep part of her throat, desperate and ragged, down to the root. Smooth, black hair spreads out across the undergrowth like spilled ink, a dark patch, and Evan is not thinking about the open bottle of wine at his house or the dark, plum-colored half-moons beneath his eyes, like someone had taken a scraper to his bare cheeks. There is only the body. There is only ever the body.

Somehow, Evan stands up.

They will bury this body even if it kills them.

Lyra Kois is a junior at Yorktown High School, in Arlington, Virginia. She enjoys writing, music, and art, and is deeply passionate about social issues. She mainly works with Signature Theater, especially SigWorks in the schools. She hopes to one day own a dog.

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### **Winter Tangerine** By Mira Jiang

Baba ushered us to the yard and ordered us both to keep quiet. You giggled as the chickens fussed around you, but I handed you a tangerine from my pocket and held a

finger to my lips. You began peeling the fruit, tossing orange scraps among the dirty straw. In the right light, they could have passed for blood.

The men walked through the door, and Mama kicked your shoes behind the curtains. Whatever story she gave didn't seem to satisfy them. They started toward the backdoor, silver guns flashing beneath their coats.

Baba raised a fist, but the shorter one backhanded him. He collapsed against the kitchen table, bloody rosettes staining the wood beneath his head. In the right light, they could have passed for orange peels. Mama screamed.

When they came for us, I could hardly breathe. I fought them tooth and claw—you must believe me, I did. But they had the weapons and the strength and all I had were pebble-stuck orange peels. They knocked your tangerine to the dirt when they grabbed you, and that was the moment you realized it was not a game.

“Jiejie!” you cried. “Jiejie! Jiejie!”

But our family cannot afford the fine. The men take you away to a new family far from our little town and do not tell us where.

Some days I imagine you're in the north, among the snow-capped peaks we saw in Baba's dog-eared atlas. Other days I think you end up south, walking the streets of Shanghai and Nanjing with tanghulu shells melting on your tongue.

But all I know is the empty place at the table, half-finished drawings scrawled across the walls, and the basket we leave behind when we harvest tangerines in the winter.

*Come home, meimei. We miss you so much.*

Mira Jiang is a high school senior from Coppel, Texas. Her work has been published by or is forthcoming in Flash Fiction Online, Paper Lanterns, Hobart, and the Rising Phoenix Review, and recognized in contests from the Poetry Matters Project and the Geek Partnership Society.

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## **Bottle Baby** By Matt Hsu

They presented Mom with a barrage of bottles, swollen like milk jugs, corked with burnt cardboard. The nurse wore a paper hat, creased inward, with a clipboard in one hand and a clementine in the other. She had an hour, they told her, to scan the reports, bring the bottles to her eyes, sing to the babies dormant behind glass. She left the hospital half an hour after she entered, bottle baby in her elbow crook, receipt in her skirt's back pocket.

The pricing system is rote, yet somehow still speculative. Babies are awarded a value based on their longevity, their looks, their predicted personality, anything that appears on the atomic-level scanner. Blonde babies are the most expensive. Blue eyes add a two-thousand-dollar surplus. Gene patterns that indicate obedience shoot the price upwards, while any neurodiversity causes it to plummet to nearly zero. The cost used to be fixed, but supply and demand tossed the bottle baby economy into economic entropy. We're not too wealthy, so our new baby – who we've decided to call Lucas – is small, angry, and Chinese.

The nurse handed Mom a pamphlet, which she taped crookedly to the refrigerator door. In his early days, Lucas is treated much like a hunk of raw poultry. He soaks in warm water for several weeks, as his limbs unfurl, his face takes shape, his umbilical cord floats away like bread in tomato soup. We season the water with nutrient packs, bought in bulk from the nearby supermarket. A lightbulb hangs over his tub; casting light over his scrunched fingers for twelve hours per day.

Mom pulls Lucas from the bath at 7:00 a.m. on September 16, which I suppose is now his birthday. The moment his head emerges from the water, he begins to wail. Not a gentle coo, not a miracle cry, a full-out, five alarm, pineapple cake, donkey-on-the-mountain type wail. It shakes the shutters off our windows, turns our pecans into pie, grabs Dad by the collar and dumps him in the backyard. Mom tries everything, rocking and bouncing and steamed milk, but he just won't shut up. I create a small barricade in my room, made of pillows and stuffed penguins, but Lucas' cries drive right through it.

Five o'clock the next morning and he's still going. Lucas has not gotten louder, but he's definitely shriller, frillier than the night before. Mom and Dad have turned a muddy yellow from the stress. Their fingernails bend away from the noise and the hairs on their head have begun to commit suicide. All three of us have crusts contouring our cheekbones, black smudges beneath our eyes. My oatmeal tastes like tears.

Mom's on the phone when I get back from school, caressing the receiver with her lips. Across the house, Lucas continues to wail, screeching as if silence would cause the world to stop spinning on its axis. Several moments later Mom taps the handset back into the dial pad. She tells me we need to take Lucas to the hospital. Dad tucks Lucas' old bottle into a cloth bag, along with a turkey sandwich and a stack of manila folders, before ushering us into the car. Lucas continues to cry.

The doctors say no refunds. Lucas can be returned, but his valuation has dropped significantly. They apologize, say that these malfunctions don't usually happen, but jab at the waivers Mom signed when she protests. Dad and Mom and the doctors disappear into the room next door, shouting over Lucas, who they've left with me. I take him in my arms, lifting his chin beside mine.

Soon Mom and Dad finish their conversation with the doctors. They disappear for a while, then reemerge in the hallway, a handheld cradle hanging below their hips. There's a baby inside. They wink at it, cover their eyes, bobble their tongues, shower its head

with caterpillar fingers. I try to make eye contact with them through the door's glass pane, but they keep their heads fixated on the exit as they walk away. The baby's name is Luther.

My name is Theresa.

The doctors come back into the room. They stuff a purple rag into Lucas' mouth, and he stops crying at last.

Matt Hsu is a junior at San Francisco University High School in San Francisco, California. He works as a poetry/prose editor at Cathartic Youth Literary Magazine and The Formula. Currently he's working on a new adult novel about a lonely assassin. In his spare time, he enjoys playing tennis and eating dark chocolate.

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**Today** By Chido Munangwa

Twenty-one. I am twenty-one. The thought repeats itself in my head as I hurriedly stumble and skate up the uneven, stoned land, up to the cliff. My Nike sneakers slide surely against the ground yet I can barely remember stepping forward. I feel like I am holding my breath, although I am breathing normally, my chest moving up and down in the normal rhythm.

Energy builds up inside my muscles and bones knocking in my lungs like gas particles in a jar. I imagine Brownian motion, small fast particles violently colliding with large slow ones at random. I want to leave a mark in the world, I tell myself, yet at twenty-one I barely know my place. I hate to admit it, but I am confused.

I arrive suddenly, as if I stepped on some brakes. Before sunrise, at exactly four o'clock, I stand erectly at the edge of the steep cliff. My favorite place. I am ready to meet the sun. Tenuously, I study the plain below me. In the darkness, my straining eyes can barely detect neat rows and columns of the slanted wooden shades. Between the shades are narrow strips of worn out dust roads. Dust roads with indent-like roads in my neighborhood.

For five minutes the air is motionless while the coldness teases the skin exposed by my vest and shorts. All my thoughts disappear, as the sun peeps at the landscape a small upper part oozing upward. No movement can be detected in the squatter camp below as the sun slowly lights it up piece by piece like a fire burning down a string. This, I realize, marks the beginning of another day. The sun rises in exactly the same way yet it's different.

*I thought I would find you here.*

I don't turn to the sweet voice. My mother approaches until she stands beside me. Her eyes study the side of my face, searching, studying and listening. She is the headmistress of a prestigious Catholic girls' school. The first Headmistress who is not a nun or sister. Mom has found her place with her girls. Ladies, she calls them. I envy her.

Finally, she softly speaks, *Happy Birthday, dear.*

My mouth twitches. I have no words just as I have nothing to show for being twenty-one, a graduate and employed. The years are merely passing by. It angers me so I remain silent gazing at the sun in no rush to replace the darkness. My skin responds to its warming up. Sounds, although muffled, of people scurrying out of ragged blanket or card boxes reach my ears.

*I want to find my place mom. The way you did.*

I don't turn to her as I confess this. Mom keeps her door open for any stray or troubled girls. They flock to her like a moth to flame, attracted by strict and quiet wisdom. When she strides through the quadrangle, greetings and requests follow her steady and quick progress.

The shadow of darkness slowly retreats backwards as the glorious golden sun patiently spreads its rays. At one-point half of the squatter camp is gold and the other black. People smile and greet each other while a delicious egg is shared among all. Small miracles exist here, although mother calls these people unfortunate.

I heavily sigh, tempted to hold my breath and never take another. Sometimes I wish I was a girl, so I could fully lean on her firm at the same time liberating guidance too. Do not misunderstand. As her only biological child, she's the best mom ever. Absently, I kick a stone hearing it drop down the cliff.

*Raymond, said in a you listen to me voice, I am sure you'll find your own place. I'll allow you to go as far as need to find it. And even if you venture to the sun, I'm there.* My mother's mother didn't grant her the same luxury so my mother knows what it's like to be trapped, when you know your place is out there. Grandmother is not even Catholic yet mother loves being Catholic. *But that's not what's bothering you, is it?*

No. I force a smile. My mother doesn't assume the problems she faced are the same ones I will face. *I am leaving childhood mom. It's safety, to enter the unknown.*

A warm smile lights her pretty face matched by a charcoal peplum dress. Blinking slowly, she tells me, *You overthink, Raymond. Remember we part to meet and meet to part. The sun rises to set and sets to rise. In between all the lessons, wisdom and experiences from childhood will be there as a shield or sword. They bought you here.* Lightly, she places a hand on my shoulder. Her familiar touch is comforting. *You will find your place. And if you are worried fortune will be cruel, remember she has also been favorable. You got me.*

Laughter bubbles out of my chest. I have her. She'll make an egg a meal. A drop of water enough. I step forward into her arms which hold me tight. I feel safe. Sure, of myself.

*I am scared.* I breathe the words into her ear. *I must forge my own path. At the same time, I must follow other paths already set.* Fears gripped my heart so it beat weakly. It's similar to the feeling I got when I lost my bus fare and only realized it in the bus. If you place it into an equation, childhood plus adolescent equals everything.

*You should be,* she confirms, *otherwise you in the wrong direction. Fear is your compass. Now stop brooding and let's celebrate. I am also getting older, you know.*

*And wiser.*

Chido Munangwa is a Zimbabwean poet and Indie author currently studying Radiography at the University of Zimbabwe. Her paranormal romance series, *The Color of Trouble*, can be found on Smashwords under the pen name Cora Sacha.

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### **A Checkpoint for Chosen Ones** By Ambriel Hurst

Old woman Agatha Featherwood snaps the curtains that overlooked the vegetable garden shut. The kettle on the wood-fire stove begins to howl. It'll be her second helping for the day, the caffeine isn't good for her heart she knows, now little and frail with age. But after the visitor Agatha had just had, another pot of Earl Grey wouldn't hurt.

Her little cabin sits primly on a hill in the middle of nowhere. For miles in any cardinal direction, there is only the endless expanse of green, the deep indigo cutouts of mountains in the distance that pierce the gray sheet of sky. It is cozy. Quiet. There isn't

much to do but tend to the garden, bake sweets, and drink tea down to the leafy dregs—London fog with extra cream, extra vanilla.

And of course, there are the children.

One comes every few months or so. Sometimes it is two. Rarely is it ever a full party (the cabin is too far into the journey for all of them to have survived.) They're usually filthy, hungry, and haunted from the things they have seen. Agatha is sure to whip up something sweet. She believes that her cooking has a kind of magic that can mend the soul, even if it's only for a little while.

As Agatha pours another cup, there is a knock at the door. She peers up at the cuckoo clock. It isn't even noon yet.

"Another already?" She sighs as she deposits her spoon into the sink. "I hadn't any time to make more finger sandwiches."

She goes to the door. It had started to rain in between her setting the kettle and tidying up after the last visitor. It sounds like stones pounding on the tin roof, but after all this time it has become lulling, melodic.

Standing on the porch, soaked through and looking like a drowned cat, is a boy. He can't be older than twelve or thirteen. He is covered head to toe in dirt. A rucksack is thrown over his shoulder, a longsword sheathed at his hip. In the downpour, Agatha isn't sure if his baby-blue eyes are wet from the rain or tears.

"Hello..." the boy mumbles. There is a cut red and curved like a sickle on his left cheek.

Agatha smooths the front of her apron. "Hello there. Would you like to come in?"

The boy nods. Agatha steps away for him to enter. Too weary to worry about a potential threat, he takes off his boots and socks, dropping his bag and sword by the door. Feet rooted on the worn *Welcome* mat, he looks about the cabin. Shelves are cluttered with spices, tea tins, painted porcelain dishes and carved wooden figurines in the shape of dancing bears. Bundled herbs are suspended from the ceiling to dry. A fire crackles giddily in the hearth.

“Come sit! You must be cold to the bones.”

The boy sits down hesitantly. Within seconds a cup of tea is set before him, and a towel is placed over his shoulders. He wipes at his neck. “Are you a witch?”

Agatha laughs. “Oh heavens, no. I’m just a gardener. It’s hard to get good produce all the way out here, so I decided to grow it myself. Milk and sugar?”

He nods, doesn’t tell the old woman ‘*when*’ until the tea is completely cream-white. A plate of blueberry-cherry scones are set down next. “What’s your name?” Asks Agatha as she finally sits.

“... Nathan.”

“Nathan. That is a good name, a strong name.” She takes a sip, peering at the latter. “My name is Agatha Featherwood. You look like you’ve come a long way.”

“I didn’t think that there would be a house all the way out here.”

She smiles. “If I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard that. Where are you headed?”

Nathan swallows down the last bit of his scone, reaching for another. “To the mountains.”

“Let me guess. A giant? Dragon?”

“Dragon,” murmurs Nathan.

Agatha nods solemnly. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

*Thirteen.* Such a young age for such a quest. “That’s a daunting task for a thirteen-year-old.”

“What does ‘daunting’ mean?”

“It means difficult, intimidating, formidable.”

“Oh,” Nathan picks at his scone. “Then yeah, it is.”

“Well, if you’d like my advice, don’t take anything from the dragon’s horde, that’s a one-way-ticket to losing your head. And bring a shield, you’re gonna need it for all of that firepower.”

“How do you know this stuff?”

“I’ve had a lot of heroes like you come my way, some of them had to slay dragons.”

“These other heroes... were they—”

“Children who have had their fates written on an old slab of rock?” Agatha’s smile grows sad. “Or perhaps an old book? It’s always something with a prophecy they must fulfill.”

Nathan doesn’t say anything for a moment. Finally, when he does speak, it is softer than a whisper.

“Do... do they come back?”

“Some of them do, yes.”

“But not all?”

Agatha grips her teacup. “No, Nathan. I’m afraid not.”

Silence falls over them. This is always the hardest part of these visits. The children that come through are already halfway defeated. Their worries are too big for their too small bodies.

Agatha needs another cup, she fears.

“What is this place?” Nathan asks, as if he isn’t sure what to ask anymore.

That is something Agatha has wondered for a long time. When she bought this tiny cabin in the middle of nowhere all those years ago, never had she thought her little fixer-upper would be right on the vein of a ley line. After some research, Agatha learned that ley lines are formed through a straight highway of energy garnered by the Earth. Between these lines, strange phenomena are known to occur. It is as if Agatha’s little cabin sits in the crossroads between universes. For the forty years she has lived here, Chosen Ones from different places, different eras, different worlds— all of them have ended up right on her doorstep. All of them have shucked their boots and unloaded their weapons on her doorstep and eaten cookies or scones or finger sandwiches. All of them have been young— always too young to be so far away from home. Always too young to die for a prophecy they had no say in.

Agatha has learned not to grow too attached. She had stopped drawing them baths or letting them stay the night. She keeps to baking instead of cooking suppers. It was easier

this way for the children to just pass through. It dulled the hurt when a lot of them didn't return.

"This place," says Agatha. "Is a checkpoint for Chosen Ones."

Nathan, without warning or preamble, drops his head into his hands and begins to sob. The rain continues to beat on the old cabin. Gray-washed light filters through the sheer curtains and spills onto the floors. Agatha hopes it doesn't drown the tomato stalks she just recently planted.

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The rain has finally stopped outside, leaving the smells of earth and storm behind. Nathan stands at the door, much dryer, bandaged up and back in his boots. His sword is sheathed at his hip and rucksack slung along his back. The load is a little heavier with a bundle of blueberry-cherry scones and a thermos of tea.

"Righto, there you are." Agatha straightens the collar of his jacket, stepping back to get a good look at the boy. "Looking like a proper hero."

Nathan says nothing. Agatha places a gentle hand on his messy blonde head.

"I don't want to die," he whispers.

The old woman steps back, crouching down to Nathan's height. She takes his chin in her hand, lifts it so he will look at her. In the daylight, the boy's eyes are an electric blue. Like a deep island lagoon, or a fresh coat of paint on a cottage door.

"No, I don't think many do either," Agatha says. "But one thing I learned about Chosen Ones is that they're a different kind of breed. They've got guts."

“Is that what you tell all the others?” Asks Nathan.

“You caught me.”

To her surprise Nathan smiles a little, albeit it is a little melancholy. He hikes his bag further up his shoulder. “Goodbye, Miss Featherwood.”

“Goodbye Nathan.”

Agatha watches Nathan walk down the dirt, serpentine path that winds up and away from the cabin, all until he is nothing more than a small speck on the horizon where land meets mountain and sky. When he is finally out of sight, she checks on her tomato plants and heads back inside to fill the kettle again. It'll be her third helping of the day, the caffeine isn't good for her heart she knows, now little and frail with age. But after the visitor Agatha had just had, another pot of Earl Grey wouldn't hurt.

Ambriel Hurst is a healthcare worker and English literature student residing in Virginia. Her hobbies include reading, writing, swimming, and spending time with her two dogs. Her favorite things to write are all things strange and mystical. She is currently working on her second novel, and hopes to become a best-selling author one day.

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**A Home in Alaska** By Naomi Marko

I will build us a home in Alaska.

Inside you'll be able to paint flowers anywhere with thick oil colours, the same ones you sketch on your notebook when you cannot focus. They'll be bright and brilliant and their

petals will be strewn across the banisters and countertops, gauzy bodies overlapping like shingles. You can throw them like splatter paint over the walls and carve wispy leaves on window sills. The flowers will be visible and brazenly displayed and not hidden in the corner of your paper.

The outside will be a gentle white. As frozen crystals dive sluggishly from clouds to earth and the land is whipped cream, it will be impossible to see a difference between us and the snow and the expanse of forest beyond. Because we'll be the same: pristine, radiant.

I rest my head against the frigid window beside my desk and admire the sunlight flow through the glass barrier, onto my paper, making my pen marks shimmer. Lifting one hand into the sunbeams, I watch dust motes swirl around my fingertips. I imagine the specks collecting into ribbons that flutter and sail in the air, wrapping themselves around my hands and forearms. With my eyes closed I can see the vast skylight I'll build in our home. We can wake up to daylight's butter yellow glow, it will pour inside like a waterfall of light, and we'll be swimming in sun.

After I have been distracted too long, the teacher walks to the window and tugs a string, dropping the blinds with a whir and a crash.

The tiles covering the floor will be a dark, deep blue, the colour of a 2 AM sky. None of the furniture will match. The curtains will be made of thick canvas so we can paint them on rainy days. Your green retro bike will sit on the front porch. And anything else you could possibly want, I'll get it for you.

In the spring I'll put a chair beneath the trees -aluminum so the rain cannot eat at its metallic frame. Vines will slowly wrap their spindly tendril-hands around its legs; climbing and slithering between the gaps in the seat. Nature will curl through the chair like it's a trellis and then I'll sit. And I'll become part of a mixture of metal, plant, and boy. Not the way a teenager is hidden in a crowded high school hallway, but the way rain joins

the sea. Ferns like shaggy dog tails will sway at the base of trees whose trunks are knotted and gnarled with fortitude, blotchy shadows shivering on the ground. I'll close my eyes, listening to birds whistle. I'll flex my bare toes against the damp earth and feel roots gradually sprout from my feet, twisting down in the dirt. I'll connect to the forest and feel it breathe. Synchronize myself with its pulse. Be part of something bigger.

We'll have a record player in the living room, sitting on an ancient black suitcase. With the needle placed down, I'll close my eyes and let myself sway to the music. It'll soothe me, a river of notes over my burning body. We'll play everything we crave; from Bach to the Rolling Stones. Tom Petty to Britney Spears. Holding you close to me, we'll dance on the navy floor; spinning with our arms above our heads, stamping our feet, rocking softly side to side with our foreheads pressed together.

I put in my headphones and play my music now, dissolving and floating away with the song, rising upwards in a cloud. The feeling is ethereal and effortless. Absolutely uncontainable.

Then it ends. I desubliminate. I slam back into my body with an abrupt jolt similar to the impact of an airplane landing on a runway.

If the music ends at our house, the silence will not sound like emptiness.

I have an inkling that soon, the walls of my hectic mind won't be able to ignore the erosion from nonstop waves of exhausting thoughts that crash against them. I'll collapse dramatically on the stained carpet floor of my bedroom, fracturing and bursting apart, flooding water in the licorice-coloured night. I will be a candle melting to wax across a table, a tree cracking in the wind, being undone, being demolished. But not in our

Alaskan house, the farthest slice of America from here, where the wild hums. If the tears start to spill from my eyes, you will wipe them away tenderly with your thumb. You will whisper my name (you will know my name). You will look at me, recognize me, and I will be held together.

The porch will be screened in with a fine mesh. I can lay blankets on it and fall asleep listening to the commotion of the night.

Naomi Marko is a high school student in Vancouver, BC. Her writing has been recognized in the Alice Munro Short Story Competition and is forthcoming in Aerie International. When not writing, she can be found reading, playing soccer, or hiking with friends.

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### **Peeping Tom** By Alex Blank

Loud music filled the room. Tom's stick-like legs bounced to the rhythms of Patti Smith, Richard Hell, and the Ramones. Like fingers on a keyboard, they hit every note via convulsive inward twitches. Though unable to move, he had danced his homebound days away in his mind, and flared up the walls between himself and his neighbours.

His paralysis subsided upon the sound of silence. Tom straightened and strained each of his legs, as if they were made of crumbling wood. He stood up and floated out the door in a dreamlike state.

As he went outside the trees swayed to his rhythm, encouraging him to take one fresh footprint after another. He hasn't walked in years, and every step felt exotic and transgressive. He felt himself doubling like a tom-tom drum at the climax of an upward-

hill solo. His legs withered under the strain of sensory excess, so he reached for his fellow strollers for support.

The first figure he spotted was a teenage girl. She walked carefully, pliéing her way forward like a ballerina. Her long legs, winding and ashamed, didn't seem to fit the rest of the body or the malevolent expression on her face. She had headphones on; Tom imagined ballet poses smashing an electric guitar seamlessly, its crumbs falling over the girl's dark hair. He tried to mimic her walk, but it was too fast, too used up.

He heard the tap-tapping of the rain as he followed another silhouette across the street. She had a brisk walk and a concentrated style, like a first-rate dance teacher, relinquishing talent for authority. What would happen if she found a partner good enough for her? He wondered. Would she spread her wings and fly above the crowd to the rhythm of a ballroom's starlight chandelier? He tried to keep up with her, but the bustling sound of her footsteps put him in need of a crutch to lean on. He dropped her trail and fell on a bench.

Tom used to slurp on movement like it was mother's milk. He inhaled every rhythm and key change, and moved his body accordingly: he pogoing to punk, gesticulating to hip hop, swaying to jazz—and skinning his partners alive at slow-dancing.

There was one art he had never been able to grasp, and that was walking itself. The way people moved forward, never looking back or up or down – except for those more socially anxious, that is – the path leading them exactly where they needed to go. As natural as he was on the dance floor, he grew hopeless on the street.

Until the paralysis struck him.

He'd been kissed by a siren at the most elemental dance of all. The curves of his partner's flesh suffocated his bones and blew substance out of them. Unlike birds, he did not learn

to fly. He took to bed instead, watching the birds flocking and mocking him outside the window.

He would never love anymore. He could not dare to invite even a possibility of the tiniest tinge of attraction. He had loved once, and the woman broke his legs. They could have remained broken, he didn't care about that anymore, but he would never let anyone break his heart ever again.

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Pumped up by the air in his lungs, Tom situated himself firmly on the bench and watched people walk by. The street began to overflow with couples: tangoing their way out of fights, cha-cha-ing into each other's business, or waltzing into a shared space of their own. One heart might have been a lonely hunter, but two constructed the most elaborate frameworks and patterns imaginable.

Tired of looking outside himself, Tom joined the fingers of his two hands together and took them on circling walks up the air's stairs. He mixed and matched grungy rhythms and twirled until his cheeks turned flamenco red.

When he looked at the world around him, he noticed a woman leaning on the wall on the other side of the street. When she spotted his eyes set on her, she waved at him. He waved back.

Without walking over, the woman began to move her hips. She must have been about Tom's age, with short red hair and a sickly pale complexion. He couldn't see the features of her face from afar, but he saw a smile sifting through her body. He stood up and walked up to the edge of the pavement. He couldn't feel his legs anymore. He began to mimic her, and sway his hips left to right. Without thinking twice, he raised his hand, as if pressing it on an imaginary wall; then he locked the air in an embrace with his other hand. The woman, in turn, reflected him.

Tom remembered the waltz lessons his parents had forced him to take in elementary school. Right foot forward, left foot to the left, right foot follows; left foot backwards, right to the right, left follows; and so it goes. The woman moved correspondingly. Each passerby stared and every other car honked, but no one stopped them. Everyone kept a safe distance, as if the pair was surrounded by an electric field of their own.

Tom felt a teardrop on his cheek. When he looked up, he noticed a bruise-coloured cloud staring at him and sending him cold droplets, one by one, like a cold shoulder. When he looked back down, the woman was gone. The trees turned motionless. People did, too. Their pace was slow and their movements mechanical, blurry, anonymous.

Tom felt the pronounced stickiness of his legs crawling back into the bones. He barely made it back home. As he did, he heard the trees' whispers, their promise branches broken like the wind and swallowed by the rain.

He couldn't tell if the drop on his cheek was a tear, or a bit of sky falling upon him.

Alex has been experimenting with various forms of writing for the past few years. She's a Culture Editor and Writer for Roar News, her work has also appeared in publications such as HuffPost UK, Bad Pony Mag, Breath & Shadow, and Litbreak Magazine. She's a creator of the YouTube channel, Alex Blank, where she explores the illusions and inconsistencies of the human psyche.

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## Time Lapse By Justin Gu

It didn't feel like a vacation.

The entire week we'd been in Cabo, I tried to pretend—swimming in the hotel pool and lounging in the jacuzzi at night. I drank non-alcoholic Piña Coladas all day. At the all-inclusive hotel restaurant, I stuffed myself with squid, fish tacos, clam chowder, and macarons. I spent long mornings in bed and told myself that sleep is the only time machine in the world, though one-directional and oblivious to the past.

“We need to make the most of what we've got left,” my mother had said a month ago. She was pointing at the resorts on her computer: Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Cabo San Lucas, Costa Rica. “It'll come out of my retirement, but it's worth it.”

“Why don't we just stay home?” I recommended. “The doctor is here.”

Ultimately, they had settled on Cabo because Grandpa wanted to “stand at the edge of the world.”

It was almost five o'clock, and the Arch of Cabo San Lucas looked like a dragon bending over to drink from the sea. During the day, the sun perched right above our heads, blasting us with equatorial heat. But now, the wind blew just enough. We reached the beach's edge, and I removed my sandals, taking small steps over the broken shells.

Standing at the tip of the Baja Peninsula, I admired how the water reflected the flame-like clouds. The colors reminded me of when Grandpa and I went bird watching at Shoreline Park. There, the long-billed curlews dug into the sand, and the belted kingfishers sat in the trees. Grandpa had pointed out the geese. “You know Canada geese don't actually migrate to Canada? They were named after John Canada.”

“Who's John Canada?”

“The guy who discovered that these geese were different from other geese.”

“So they don’t go to Canada?”

“Nope, they go somewhere south, I think.”

“To die?”

“Maybe some of them.”

“I wonder what happens to them after they die.”

“I guess their spirit finds a new body.”

The violent waves collapsed on boulders as if they wanted to break the rocks and suck me in. I inched around for a steady place to stand. In the tide pools, starfish lounged, sea slugs crawled, and sea anemone swayed their little fingers. I picked a smaller boulder where a thin tide ran over my feet.

On the beach, Grandpa set up a tripod for his camera. “I’m capturing the sunset time-lapse to condense into two minutes.” He loved time-lapses, often saying how they let us truly witness time passing because people never notice on their own.

“Like a flipbook?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

One morning, several years ago, he took me to Golden Gate Park. As he pointed his camera at the fog rolling over the Golden Gate Bridge, he said, “It comes and goes, and

then it's gone. One second the fog floats over the city, and the next, it engulfs it. It's unpredictable."

"You can't see the bridge," I complained.

"Yes, but you know the bridge is there. You've seen it a hundred times without the fog, so you can imagine it."

Grandpa was like that. He would bring me places and tell me things, and half the time, I wasn't listening. I went along because he had a way of making me feel important. He had an interesting past that he liked to talk about. He'd say, "*Your* grandpa ran a chemical factory. He was the guy everyone looked up to." When I was younger, he was so cool, but as I got older, I didn't always understand why he was constantly teaching me things. It sometimes felt like being in Mr. Kinsley's history class.

On the beach, the sun was still over the arch, and my mom and I waded into the water. We rolled up our shorts to keep them dry, but the waves splashed our clothes.

Grandpa positioned us to stand knee-deep while he maneuvered from rock to rock around us, clicking the shutter button on his phone. With his expertise, his photos looked as if we stood in front of a green screen. He'd already captured so many pictures of our trip as if he'd planned to have so much time to look at them. He even brought a camera when we went ziplining. A small one that dangled from his wrist.

We'd gone the day before in the outskirts of San José del Cabo. He couldn't be talked out of it. As we climbed higher up the stairs to the platform, I started to sway, and every time I looked down, nausea took hold of me. Grandpa marched ahead. I watched as one of the guides connected him to the trolley.

"Remember to brake when you see the other platform," the man said. "Don't worry. My partner will catch you on the other side. Just make sure you don't stop in the middle."

I stood there, under the shade of the platform watching Grandpa. It was frightening to see him dangle on that line, his feet pointed forward as he grasped the handlebar. When he picked up speed, he grew smaller until he blended into the dry hills like a bird in flight.

At times like these, I thought about Jesus. I had recently been learning about him in Sunday School. My parents always believed in God, but only after Grandpa's illness had they started going to church again. Maybe Christianity was right. Or Grandpa was right and we'd all be reincarnated. I guess we'll know when we know.

Then it was my turn. The guide hooked me onto the trolley, repeated the same dialogue, and sent me soaring.

The wind blew and I started to twist. I kept anticipating the platform, but the line stretched longer. Instinctively, I applied pressure to the rope. I scrambled to turn the other way, but I only braked more. I thought for sure I'd get stuck in the middle. If I did, who would save me? But then, the other platform came into view, and I saw my Grandpa waiting, snapping pictures of me. His mouth was slightly open, his hair was gray and long, and his camera hid his crow's feet.

The sun dropped behind the arch, peeking out from the hole. Darkness descended on the stone structure. As I admired the glow of the day's end, Grandpa snapped a silhouette of me, the sound of his camera's click crisp over the rushing waves. "Silhouettes are a type of disguise," he once said. "You never know what the person has on their face: joy, fear, or loneliness—the blacked-out face hides them all."

When we walked back to the red rental car, Grandpa strode in front while my mother and I trailed behind him. The distance between us grew with every step he took. I yelled, "Grandpa, wait! There's no rush!"

But he didn't hear me. The wind had caught my voice and lifted it away.

Justin Gu is a junior at Palo Alto High School. He has been writing for three years, and he finds his inspiration from family experiences. He was recognized by Scholastic Art and Writing for various pieces.

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## **Twelve Summers** By Lili Namazi

Eliza tucked paint-stained hands behind her back and took a step closer to me. Her faded summer camp T-shirt was knotted at the waist, daylily-gold skirt brushing the tops of her sandals. Standing in the blunt fluorescent of the airport terminal, her contour was more defined, shadows seeping through her neck. Graduation had weighted her to the ground like I thought nothing ever could.

We used to draw all over our geometry notes, faces and flowers and flowy dresses. They all ran into each other in the margins, collarbones intertwining with hibiscus stems, tangles of tie-dye arteries twisting through wide-rule lines to the sun. Once we realized how to put summer onto paper, we could never focus on math again.

We were always afraid of the dark. On those wide-eyed August days, we would spend the whole afternoon sprawled in tall field grass, tracing clouds with our fingertips. We stretched our arms to the sky and let hazy pinks and yellows fog our vision. But when the sky flooded periwinkle, and mosquitoes swarmed around our heads, we would run all the way to her house, set candles on the windowsills, switch on all the lamps and flashlights we owned, sit cross-legged on the floor, and wait for dawn.

And that was how it was. Every summer, from when we first learned how to stretch our arms wide like the sky, to the moment we realized we could never win against the world.

The day after graduation, she didn't paint flowers on her jeans or run cursive paths through the open field overlooking the lake. She sat in my backyard and scuffed patches

of dirt with her big toe and picked at an orange peel. And made small talk. And then a mosquito landed on her arm and she said she had to pack and she drove herself home.

That night, I fell asleep with the sunset.

She went to college in California. “Where winter doesn’t exist,” she said, burying her nose in my neck as she hugged me goodbye. She pressed a small, square canvas into my palm — a painting of a sunflower, flush against the bluest sky.

Her hazel eyes burned gold with tears as I looked up. She said, “I’m going to miss you so much.”

Half an hour till her midnight flight. Five and a half hours more, and she’d be landing to an L.A sunrise. I said, “Me too.”

I left for Chicago the next day. Full scholarship.

I can’t remember exactly when we stopped talking. We FaceTimed every day at first, and then one afternoon she had too much to do, and so it became every other day. And then once a week. And then just texting. And then silence.

I let it hurt.

Chicago doesn’t see the sun, but I wouldn’t know the difference. I have watery suns awaiting me at all hours of the day now, nestled in sagging ceilings that are either off-white or dirty. Sometimes, during lectures, I stare up at them just to feel the spots in my eyes again, but it’s not the same.

We still follow each other’s Instagrams; her posts always show up at the top of my feed. The algorithm is taking a while to catch up. She’s smiling her genuine smile in every picture, made only truer by crystalline California light, not the heavy Jersey heat we

tolerated out of necessity. I wonder if her new friends — glimmering, molten, like her, like I could never be — take her to the ocean at sunrise on the warmest days of the year. I hope they do.

Once, the summer we were eight or nine, we were lying on a beach towel in her backyard, benevolently competing to name all the birdcalls we heard. As I said, “Indigo bunting,” Eliza asked, “Do you think the sun and the sky and the clouds can see us like we see them?”

Intellectually, I knew the answer. But I said, “I think they can see you.”

Her brow furrowed as she contemplated. “Why not you?”

“Cause I’m just me, and you’re a lot more than just you,” I said, and this, I know, is true.

I was born lonely, and then I spent twelve summers with Eliza, and now all I do is look for her.

Lili Namazi is a fourteen-year-old rising junior with a passion for all things literary and musical. When they are not writing, composing, or playing an instrument, you will probably find them drinking iced coffee, listening to music, and daydreaming. They plan to continue their artistic pursuits in college and as their career.

## Nonfiction

### **A Place of Worship** By Zinnia Hansen

The cathedral was big, absurdly big. It towered over the cobblestone streets of Chartres’ medieval center, imposing its harsh Gothic symmetry on a place that otherwise seemed to exist in a state of perpetual pastel charm. I stared at it, biting into a

baguette. The cathedral was impressive. But being a twelve-year-old atheist, I had chosen to stop at the bakery before starting my sightseeing, even if it meant sacrificing the opportunity to experience mass. I found the baguette and the gentle June sun a far more sacred form of communion. I finished my bread, then, holding my parents' hands, entered the cathedral. I was curious to see a building with such a fascinating and ancient history, but I was ambivalent to the faith that drove the miracle of its construction.

The air was cooler inside the cathedral. It smelled like old stone. What struck me first was the singing: passionate tremulous notes that seemed as old as the walls off which they echoed. Despite my bakery detour, mass had found me. I looked up. The arches rose to pointed pinnacles with a solid grace. The cathedral was composed of curves accented and grounded with the geometry of angles. It was dark, yet in that darkness was so much color. With an almost ascetic sensibility, precious sunlight filtered through windows stained with stories, touching the gaudy marble of the partially refurbished walls.

Juxtaposition brought out my reluctant spiritual side. The cathedral was a place of contradictions. It was there I first saw a detailed depiction of the crucifixion: the grotesque, yet passionate image of self-sacrifice was bathed in the soft glow of candle light. I stared at it, horrified, while a glorious aria played. Beauty emerges from contrast: from a dark church illuminated sparingly with the warm incandescence of the faithful's newly lit candles and the colorful light of ancient stories.

The grace of this place astounded me. A small melancholy ache rose in my chest, like I was missing or maybe longing for something. I could feel the careful geometry with which the architects had sought to please God. I could feel the many hands that had dedicated their lives to the cathedral's construction in poignant faith. I realized that I didn't have to be Catholic for this place to be holy. Its story made it sacred.

In that cathedral I found pieces of myself that didn't fit, yet I felt whole. For a moment, I let myself become part of an established and complex rhythm. I let myself dance with

history. I realized that this experience was incompatible with my atheism. In the years since, I have become an agnostic. I believe patterns are sacred: the ones we follow, the ones we seek to understand, and the ones we create. *Notre Dame de Chartres* was full of patterns of religion, architecture and art. These patterns created a throbbing amalgam of humanity and math, of logic and faith. As a writer and aspiring linguist, it is my dearest ambition to translate this amalgam into something I can understand.

One of the defining characteristics of humankind is our ability to create stories, our ability to believe in things we cannot necessarily see. Sometimes the things we are not able to fully understand can be the most beautiful. And the process with which we attempt to make sense of these mysteries can be even more exquisite than the enigmas themselves.

After leaving the cathedral, we returned to the bakery to buy another baguette. Meandering through Chartres, we took turns tearing off chunks of the long loaf. As we walked and ate, my mind lingered in the cathedral. Despite the early summer flowers, I could still smell the musty stone.

Zinnia Hansen is a seventeen-year-old essayist and poet from Port Townsend, Washington. She has a tendency towards abstraction, but a deep love of the idiosyncrasies that make us human. Her work has been published in several magazines. She was a participant in the 2020-2021 Hugo Young Writers Cohort. And she is the 2021-2022 Seattle Youth Poet Laureate.

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The average length of a woman's hand is 6.8 inches from wrist to fingertip. The length of mine is well under six—I have childish hands disconcertingly attached to an otherwise average person. In spite of this anomaly, and beneath the grueling mockery of those who claim to know at least a legion of fifth-graders with hands bigger than mine, my hands have served me just fine. To their credit, their mobility and appropriate proportions have allowed me to live a perfectly ordinary life.

But if I'm allowed to lament just a little, when taken together with the rest of my body, I look like I wasn't quite *assembled* correctly. As if somewhere during my conception, the poor gene that would grow my two palms and ten fingers was struck by a malady so sudden and crippling that it became too disoriented to carry out its instructions properly. But whatever it is, my hands just stopped growing, and I'm stuck with them now.

I wonder if there was a precise moment when I became frustrated with this peculiarity. Maybe it was when my cheeks flushed red after the football toppled out of my hand for what seemed like the millionth time in middle-school PE. I squeezed my fingers extra tightly and stared at my target with ferocious ambition, but every time I hoped to see any semblance of that glorious spiraling arc, I only saw the football slip and fall to the ground a mere few feet away from me.

Or maybe it was when my piano teacher suggested a beautiful Andalusian melody to add to my repertoire one year, only to rescind it when we realized I had no hope of reaching the intervals it demanded. I still listen to it and wonder what it would sound like on my piano.

I soon recognized that my dwarfish appendages were proving to be a real shortcoming, and I naturally blamed them for the problems they caused. At a piano evaluation one year, I was required to demonstrate a technique that I hadn't had to in previous years. That one was especially daunting because my fingers could barely reach the correct

notes half of the time. I tried to do it just about every day, but I could never play it just right. Anyway, at that moment, sure, my heart was probably pounding and my palms inopportunately sweating, but what I remember most is staring at the keyboard and its row of black-and-white teeth flashing back at me in a wide, sinister grin.

Performed well, the notes should have been glimmering raindrops, dancing one by one in clean concision. They should have sprung a wistful tear to the eye, coaxed a warm nod of approval from the evaluator. Unfortunately, by now, one can hypothesize how the music did sound. Perhaps its only saving grace was that it could make the soundtrack of a Tom and Jerry chase (imagine Tom stamping across the keyboard in hot pursuit), with no shortage of discordant clangs and pummeled strings. Disgraced, I rushed through the rest of the music that I had prepared for eight painstaking months.

In any case, the results for that performance were subpar, which wasn't necessarily a surprise. But seeing the marks with my own eyes made me wonder if I was just not cut out for the piano. Being incapable of perfection, I wondered if there was even a point in continuing.

Alas, all I have is small hands. So what? My goal is not to complain. Maybe I'll never be the next Liszt, but do I even want to be?

As for middle-school PE, I'm pretty sure I had never aspired to become a professional football player in the first place. Surprising as it may seem to me in the eighth grade, the horrors of fumbled passes and missed tosses would not torment me deep into the future. Some things can just be moved on from.

To my surprise, I suspect that I've been able to cultivate my skills in other areas precisely because of these setbacks. In my music, I discovered that I can make the music uniquely my own in shaping the voice it takes on beneath my fingers, and this is a goal I can cultivate to fruition regardless of my hands. Indeed, more than the range of notes my

favorite performers can hit, I realize that I admire their tone, touch, and phrasing. In the end, what is the harm in a truncated chord if the return is exceptional lyricism? So although it seems that pianistic virtuosity and expansive intervals can impress an audience (or earn a superb technical score), one's ability to give the instrument life is what captivates it.

Through endless trials and tribulations, my miniature hands have proven to be limited in their means to conquer the instrument. But maybe my key to musicality is not to conquer but to befriend. My inability to subdue the piano has taught me to understand, to negotiate, and to amuse. Though I sit before the same beast every day in all of its enormity, I don't remember seeing its teeth glimmer maliciously in quite some time. Rather, I've learned to love the instrument and my idiosyncratic relationship with it, a far cry from my exasperation at the universe's injustices years ago at that evaluation.

Currently, I'm studying a piece affectionately nicknamed "Wrong Note." My teacher affectionately calls it "inhumane." Structured upon implausible jumps at a dancelike speed, it demands a precision and elegance that I probably have not yet attained, but I have faith that I can. As long as I avoid attributing my hardships to unalterable disadvantages such as the length of my fingers, I will have the perspective that encourages me to keep at it.

The piece derives its beauty from discordant notes. Leave it to a physics student to explain why, but notes that are too close to each other are less satisfying to the ear. When such incongruous notes are heard in a performance, one often assumes that the performer has accidentally struck a wrong note. However, through the melodies which delight the heart in the way that a toddler's first steps or a baby goat's teetering trot might, and through the rhythm's endearing hesitance, the composer reminds us that there is beauty in dissonance and triumph in being *almost*.

I imagine that I will play many wrong notes, some of them on purpose, and some of them grievous mistakes. My fingers will stumble, hobble, and ache. I will experience frustration that'll convince me once again that the world is about to end. Still, I am eager to hear these wrong notes—within them, unimaginable revelations await discovery.

Olivia is a student writer from California and enjoys a multiplicity of other art forms as well.

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### **A Letter About Everything and Nothing** By Roseline Anya Okorie

Writing to you feels sketchy, like I am trying to paint a picture of a kind of formlessness I cannot grasp. Maybe I am not used to writing everything into something. Maybe it is the wave of guile breathing free around me – freedom is a whimsical thing. My palms are tracing patterns of untold stories and I want to tell you that the leaves in my compound dared flying too close to the sun and free fell abashed. I am marvelled by the burnt brownness of the yellow bushes, the lengthy intrusion of the masquerade trees – is there even such thing as privacy, when the clouds stare bleu into my nakedness as I peel lingerie from my skin? I woke up this morning like a log and my bones stretched like stone, water does not quench anything except the combustion of suppressed sentences submerged in my throat.

I want you to read this knowing that I paused punching my keyboard midway because of a notification on Instagram – it was CNA, wearing an artsy T-shirt that affirmed her ancestry & I wonder if we ever get the chance to be the original of ourselves, if reality is true or if the world is founded on a lie we chose to believe in – if there is an afterlife.

Maybe the earth is a stage and all of us are just drama queens! Life and death are similar forms of undoing.

Now, I am trying to make my body elastic, this routine requires me to imagine a bicycle and paddle my legs in the air to the utter disembogement of the fat walls in my belly, that shit burns! I have taken to walking & I find that there are loud silences with every forwarding of my limbs. I like that the wind knows me and has the fortitude to shrink my afro into a bulb, but I want to ask you what else you achieved from walking between Dandora to Bangla besides your destination. I ask because I want to find home for my nothingness, I want it to swim in a room full of meaning.

You said I could write to you about the moon, about the currents in the ocean, I imagine one as a bowl of dim light and the other a liquid blanket over the earth, both of them swallow light, both of them conceal, both of them form stillness in the gut of the night.

I want to explore the complexity of memory, how contorted and distorted lived experiences can prove, how heavy it can flex on the brain. There are some I have carried for long days – like the memory of my uncle unfastening his belt at the mercy of a con woman, I passed like a shadow & was present like a storm when he told his wife he had gone to pray. I carry both the genesis and the revelation of this betrayal. Do you ever feel hunted by the memory of the madman you saw at Kilifi whenever his image flashes through your senses?

These days, I am unearthing myself, coming undone with loss as brittle as rose petals; I am looking at the complexities that have made me simple, gearing at the drowsiness in charge of my insomnia. Sometimes I am begging for rest & other times I am wanting to be riled up. I want to coil into the arms of anything ready to give me a tooth of attention & lest I forget, my cabbage turned purple this evening.

Roseline Mgbodichinma is a Fiction Contributing Editor for Barren magazine, a Poetry Mentor & Alumna at SprinNG, an NF2W scholar in poetry. Her works have appeared or are forthcoming in Native skin, Isele, The African writer, Hellebore, West Trestle Review, JFA human rights mag, Indianapolis Review, Artmosterrific, Kalahari review, Blue Marble Review & elsewhere. She blogs at [www.mgbodichi.com](http://www.mgbodichi.com)

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## Good vs Evil's Implications for Literature and Society By Tanay Subramanian

It has often been said that opposite forces are complementary. Be it through light and dark, loving relationships, the attraction of magnets, or even the ancient Chinese philosophical symbol Yin and Yang, seemingly antithetical parts create the concept of dualism. This is especially evident in literature, where the theme of “Good versus Evil” is ubiquitous, juxtaposing morally righteous characters with someone antithetical who is ethically flawed, usually after undergoing a turning point in their life. From the perspective of a reader, a story isn't entertaining if merely one force dominates the entire time, whether good or evil. Instead, literature reflects the combination of these two platforms, through the complements of protagonists and antagonists, rising action and falling action, and the figure of speech of oxymoron. William Golding's literary work, *Lord of the Flies*, is the epitome of the theme of “Good versus Evil”: Golding elucidates through Jack how a once innocent character is transformed into evil because of his surroundings.

Golding's *Lord of the Flies* reveals Jack's transition from morally correct to incorrect (or good to evil), due to his environment. This selection illustrates the survival of a group of boys who are stranded on an island with no adult supervision. In chapter one of the book, Ralph, Jack, and Simon venture into the depths of the island to learn more about their location. As they are about to head back, they hear an animal squeaking – an innocent piglet. Having a large appetite, the boys try to capture and kill the animal. “He raised his arm in the air. There came a pause, a hiatus, the pig continued to scream and the creepers to jerk, and the blade continued to flash... Then the piglet tore loose... Jack's face was white under the freckles,” (Golding 31).

The only thing preventing Jack from slaughtering the pig is his attachment to civilization but more importantly, the sliver of morality that he retains. Just as Jack is about to strike, he realizes that he is a civilized boy from England. Killing the pig would mean that he has lost his decency, turning him into a savage. Jack's behavior here illustrates the nurturing aspect that humans possess and how it can contain our savage instincts. His actions reflect that humans are equipped with a capacity to understand morality, as well as the knowledge to distinguish between righteousness and grim actions. Jack and the other boys are all hungry, and Jack is in the perfect position to make the kill, but his nurturing disposition is what prevents him from following through. This supports the idea that, at first, Jack is able to differentiate between good (not killing the harmless piglet) and evil (slaughtering the pig). However, his ability to recognize these two parallels of justice diminishes as the novel progresses, resulting in the emergence of his wickedness.

Jack's evil persona is shown after he and Roger, another violent boy, brutally slaughter a pig, and Jack's group of boys imitate this hunt while joining his eerie chant: *"Then Maurice pretended to be the pig and ran squealing into the center, and the hunters, circling still, pretended to be the pig and ran squealing into the center, and the hunters, circling still, pretended to beat him. As they danced, they sang. 'Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in,'" (Golding 75).*

Not only has Jack lost his innocence and transformed into a savage, but he has also influenced his peers to follow similarly, showing that the boys have lost all their decency and no longer retain their civilized manners. The primary reason for Jack's change is most likely to prove to the other boys that he can kill the pig, as he was taunted for not killing the pig the first time. In addition, being in a stressful environment may have affected Jack and his nurturing instincts have now been clouded by his survival affinities, turning him into a savage. These savage inclinations have most likely grown due to his desire to be accepted by others, supporting that the physical and social environment play a role in one's ethics.

Golding continues to develop Jack – the antagonist and opposing power of Ralph – into a brute to portray that humans, despite being born with a civilized instinct, may resort to violence solely because of their desire to survive. Jack and his band excitingly reveal their killing to the rest of the group: “*We spread round. I crept, on hands and knees. The spears fell out because they hadn’t barbs on. The pig ran away and made an awful noise...It turned back and ran into the circle, bleeding*” (Golding 105).

Jack’s conspicuous transformation into viciousness shows his desire to survive which is accomplished by obtaining an unconventional food source – a pig. The fear of death impels the boys to find any food, no matter how disgusting it may seem, showing that the boys have lost all their decency and no longer retain their civility. Being in a stressful environment where one is forced to survive affects Jack, and his survival instincts prevail over his civilized impulses. He has turned into a savage that is willing to do anything – even brutally stab a pig – to escape starvation and essentially, death. Consequently, the basis of evil may sometimes be a motive to survive.

Jack and his band symbolize evil, whereas Ralph and his squad represent good. This separation is conspicuous because of the savagery and irrationality that distinguishes the two. Most evidently, the driving factor behind Jack’s transition into ignobility is that his life is on the line due to him being stranded on a wild island, with no aspects of civility present. After all, the boys now hunt for food, build their own shelter, and relieve themselves on a beach, instead of having access to the luxuries which are available at home. The perspective of the “Good vs. Evil” theme in this story is that by stripping away all remnants of society, Golding demonstrates through Jack’s group, how humans can quickly transform from innocent to savage (good to evil).

Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* illuminates how the lack of amenities can result in evil through Jack which supports the theme of “Good versus Evil.” Even in today’s society, humanity tends to forget that the world cannot exist without either “good” or “evil” people. Simply having just one or another is impossible since the spectrum of being

morally righteous is subjective. The same can be compared to the concept of light and darkness. Without light, darkness cannot exist. Yet without darkness, light cannot exist. This situation exists solely because the two qualities are mediums of comparison and subjectivity, not definitive measures. Thus, “Good versus Evil” in a literary sense serves as a didactic for mankind to scrutinize not only their potential wrongdoings, but more importantly, how they can be ameliorated.

Tanay Subramanian is a senior at Dougherty Valley High School, where he competes in Varsity Extemporaneous Speaking and Varsity Congressional Debate with a nationally-ranked team. He is an avid jazz saxophonist and teaches dozens of students across the nation as part of Tanay’s Music Foundation ([tanaysmusicfoundation.org](http://tanaysmusicfoundation.org)), donating the proceeds to charitable organizations. In his past time, he enjoys performing jazz at public events, in addition to conducting medical and social justice research. When he is not volunteering at John Muir Hospital or shadowing a cardiologist, he can be seen leading his Boy Scout troop as an Eagle Scout.

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## To Measure the Intangible By Alyssa Sherry

The motel was dingy and run-down and highway-side, but I didn't mind because my life was about to change, and such dramatic instances don't require five-star hotels. This motel even, had no vacancies, along with all others in the area. On August 21, 2017, the city of Idaho Falls, Idaho, typically dredged in sleep and quilted between vast stitches of nothing, burst at the seams.

Around noon, the "Great American Eclipse" was to occur—America's first total solar eclipse since 1979—and Idaho Falls was directly in the path of totality. My father had awaited this event *since* 1979, and I, ceaselessly captivated by space, accompanied him to Idaho.

That morning, I noticed how the motel was abnormally *alive*, jolted into sentience by a shock of intrigue, awakened from primordial slumber to watch the galaxy shift. When we entered its "backyard" (an equally dingy lot of dying grass), we found clusters of people setting up telescopes and cameras. The air buzzed with eager conversation as we wandered to the middle of the lot and put on our eclipse glasses—we could only look at the sun safely during totality.

Soon, the eclipse and the waiting began, moon eating away at sun, rock suffocating plasma. The sky slowly dimmed even though it was only around eleven a.m., and street lamps flickered on. I tried to place my own mortal insignificance in the scope of it all; struggled; failed.

"Where are you from?" a man asked us, wielding a complicated camera. We learned that he was from California. A woman nearby was from Australia. She wore a flowy beige dress.

The Californian smiled. "It's amazing, people coming from all over the world for this."

“Yeah,” I echoed, almost to myself, gazing at throngs of strangers staring up at the same sky, marveling at humanity’s instinctual yearning for the stars, “it’s amazing.”

Small talk dwindled as our hazy anticipation suspended reality. Watching the sun vanish, I understood why we once believed that solar eclipses heralded the end of the world. I felt it too.

And suddenly the street lamps brightened and the sky darkened to the deep color of wine and everyone held their breath, eyes fixed in rapture, and someone exclaimed, “It’s totality!” and I took off my glasses and I *saw*. The solar corona shone around the moon like a halo wrought with silver, and I remember thinking that the moon seemed so tangible; it wasn’t just a constant fixture in the sky but something *real*, something I could reach out to and touch.

Moon moved between sun and earth, the cosmos realigned, and this random world, this world of accident and chance, this world where we are small and everything is out of our control, created order out of disorder. It was entropy—the universe’s descent into chaos—in reverse.

I wasted it: 101 seconds of totality, and I spent most while taking poor-quality pictures.

Even as I took those pictures, I thought about the human desire to photograph, to preserve intangible things beyond memory. I took photographs to remember, because even a mere three years later my memory is fuzzy at the edges like a Polaroid vignette, but maybe I would remember better if I didn’t spend so much time photographing. Memory: my personal paradox.

After totality ended, everyone stood in silence, transfixed. Meanwhile, slivers of sun crept out from behind the moon, disorder created from order, entropy-in-reverse-in-reverse.

Eventually people packed up cameras, shuffling, spellbound, speaking in low murmurs. Without fanfare, we, strangers of all nationalities, filtered together back into that motel. Extraordinary into ordinary, disorder into order. Again, entropy spun on its head. I felt like I was dreaming; I didn't realize how, picture or no picture, there are some moments we can never quite shake.

Alyssa is a high school senior from New Jersey. Along with her passion for creative writing, she loves literature, psychology, and neuroscience. Alyssa has previously been published in The Writers Circle Journal, and she is a prose editor at the Body Without Organs literary journal.

## Art

**The Elysian Field** By Luke Nelson



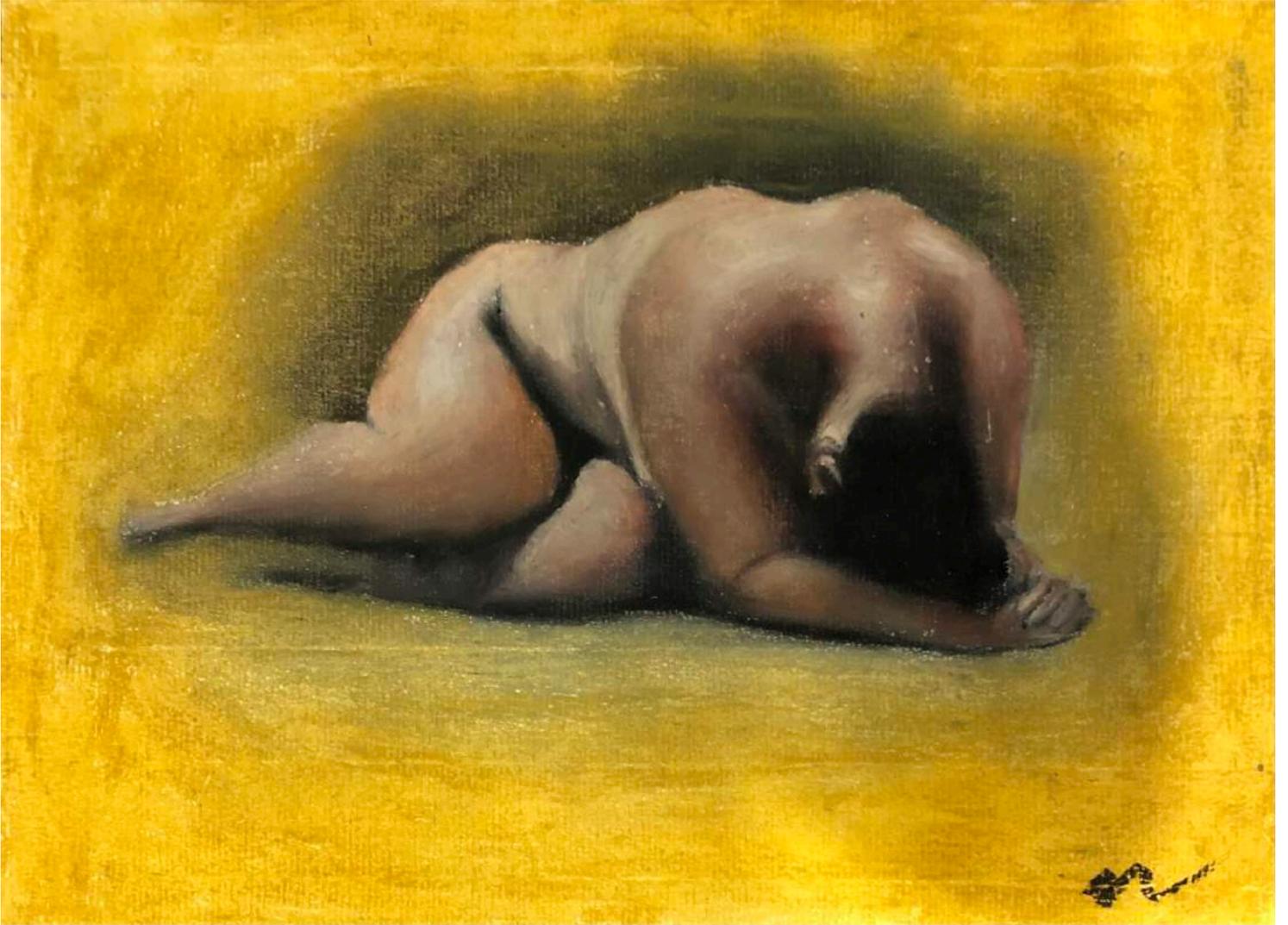
**The Elysian Field**

*This photo was taken in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming with a Nikon D5100. My family and I drove out to the Mormon Row barns in search of bison to snap photos of but did not find any. Instead I happened upon this lone tree in the middle of the meadows and captured some photos of my brother standing underneath.*

Luke Nelson is a sixteen-year old junior at Polytechnic High School in Pasadena, California. He was born and raised in Pasadena and has been doing photography for about three years.

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## Body By Lola Wang



*The subject is an overweight woman crouching down and not looking at the viewer. I wanted to show that there are different body types, and one shouldn't feel embarrassed for not fitting into the standards. The woman is a physical representation of people who don't fit into society's standard.*

Lola Wang is a junior in high school at the Taipei American School in Taiwan. Her interests include art history, writing poetry, golf, and creating art.

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## Drop Your Guns By Charlotte Rosario



### Drop Your Guns

*If you were given the opportunity—paint can in hand and all—to graffiti anything you please, what would you paint? If you had the power in your hands to cover a public, highly visible fence with inappropriate imagery and hateful slurs, would you pounce on the opportunity? Are you a person who would rather spread hate than spread love?*

*This fence I stumbled upon in the outskirts of San Francisco, California was not vandalism nor graffiti but uplifting street art. This was done by a person who couldn't bear sleeping another night imagining another person falling victim to gun violence. This was a person who might've lost a close friend or family member to the ongoing violence in our nation and finally had enough. But most importantly, this person wanted to spread love rather than hate.*

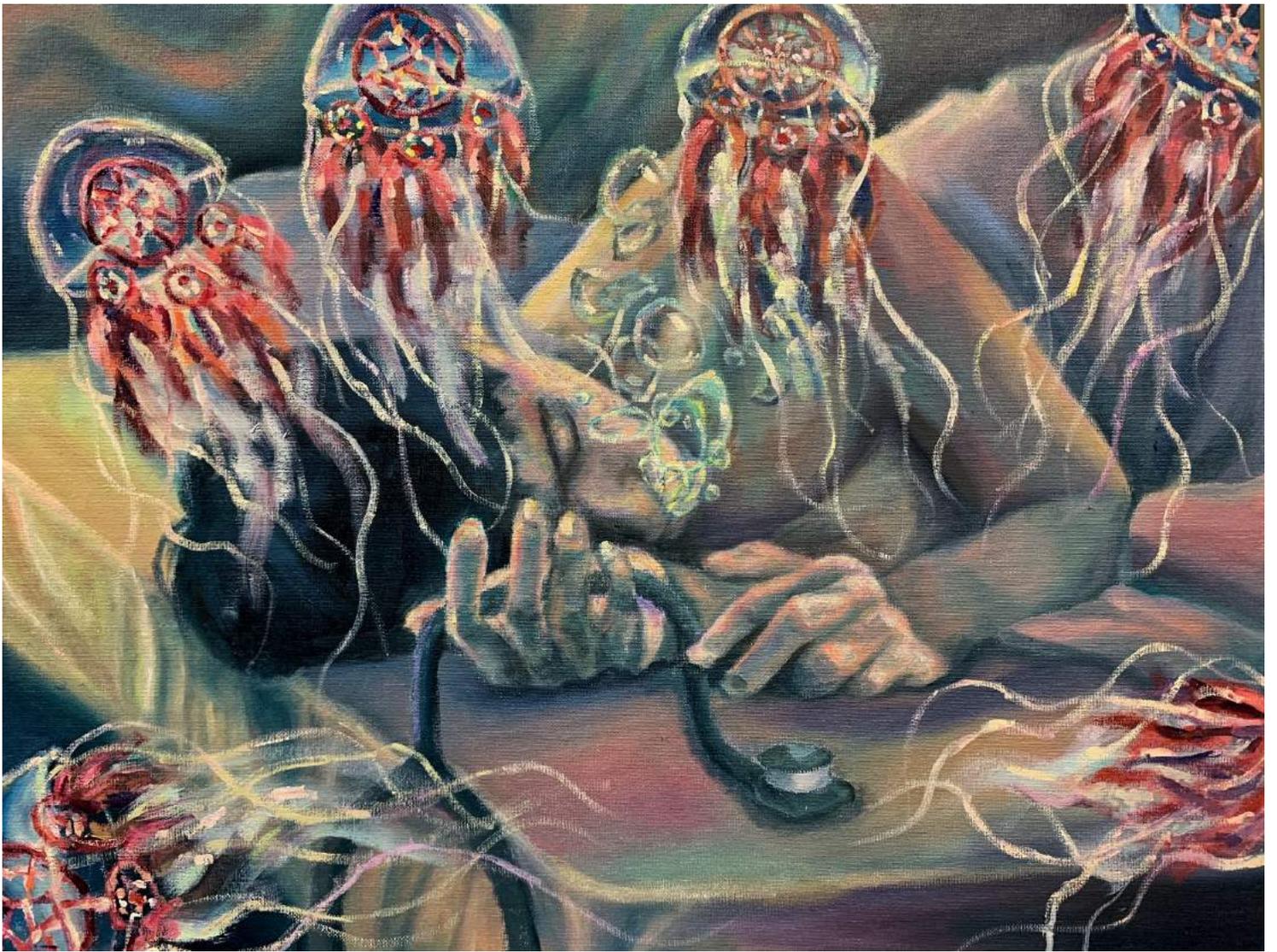
*America faces an epidemic. It is an epidemic of gun violence. With gun laws varying from state to state, the ambiguity of the matter makes it ever so dangerous in our world today. It has gotten to the point where mass shootings on the news are no longer shocking—they've become normal. No elementary school should already be practicing lockdown drills multiple times a year. No human being should have to constantly fear for their life wherever they go. We must end the violence immediately. We must spread love rather than hate.*

*Drop your guns. Drop your mace. Join the rest of the human race.*

Charlotte loves using photography to get involved in social justice issues, building applications with computer science, innovating ways to save the environment, and helping her community. She runs a Bay Area Initiative called the Community Photobooth that combines family photoshoots with philanthropy, and hosts an annual Photoshoot-Fundraiser every summer to rally even more support for local nonprofits. She also created and regularly contributes to the Focus Photo-Journal, an online photo-blog that aims to spread awareness on important issues through photojournalism. She loves to express her creativity and unleash her curiosity whenever she can—whether that's behind her Nikon camera, through coding, or getting on her hands and knees to plant more trees around her community.

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**Jellyfish Dreams, The Cultural Commute** By Edward Zhang



**Jellyfish Dreams**

*Jellyfish Dreams (2021)*

*Medium: Oil Paint on Canvas (18" x 24")*

*An Asian boy sleeping or drowning? Regardless, each of his dreams slowly drift away.*



**The Cultural Commute**

*The Cultural Commute (2020)*

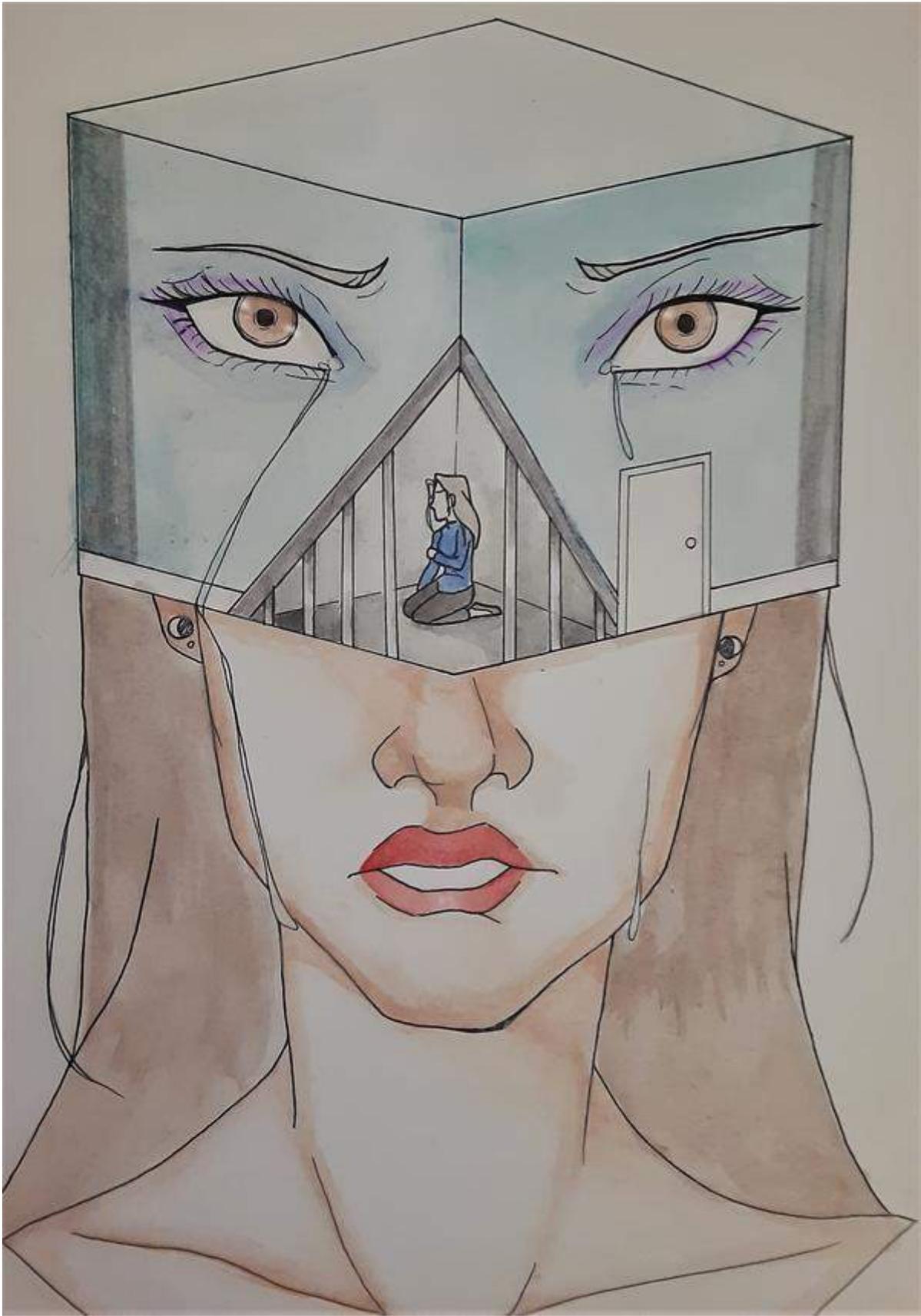
*Medium: Oil on Canvas (48" x 60")*

*An Asian Girl on a train is sandwiched between an elderly Asian man and a middle-aged Caucasian man. This piece was inspired by one of my friends. She felt as if she did not fit in with her Chinese culture because of her inability to speak and write in Chinese, which often left her feeling ostracized when she lived in China with her grandpa.*

Edward Zhang is currently a junior at Palo Alto High School in California. He has won two Scholastic Art & Awards and earned a Certificate of special recognition in his district's Congressional Art Competition. Edward enjoys using acrylics to depict portraits and human figures. Additionally, he writes articles about foreign policy for his school's Agora magazine. In his free time, he walks his dog Snowy.

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**Eyes are the Window, Self-Portrait, The Working Machine** By Olivia Pinney



**Eyes are the Window**

*"Eyes Are the Window"*

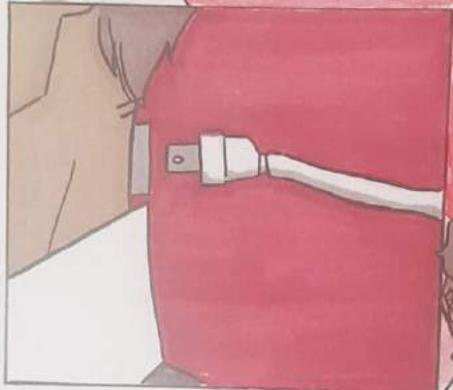
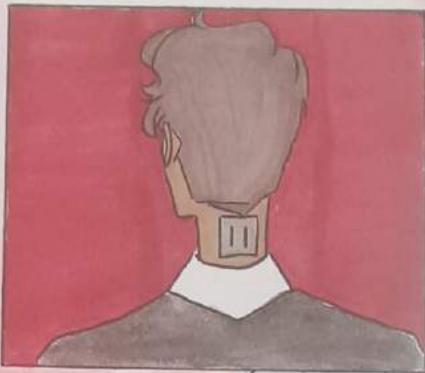
*This was meant to emulate the feeling of being trapped in your own mind and hiding yourself from the outside. People tend to lock themselves away when faced with adversity, but by doing that, are you escaping the world or being imprisoned by another? The character is turned away from a door that could easily be opened but doesn't want to.*



Self-Portrait

*“Self-Portrait”*

*This piece is a portrait with the purpose of using looser-than-usual lines and materials I don't usually work with. It was a bit out of my comfort zone considering it's much bigger than the art I normally create, along with the use of charcoal, a material I'm not too familiar with.*





## The Working Machine

*“The Working Machine”*

*This was made to encapsulate the feeling of work overload. I added the plug element as a way of showing how people (students, workers, etc.) are expected to work like how electronics are plugged in, and how unnatural and artificial that feels.*

Olivia is a sixteen-year-old soon-to-be senior with a love for traditional and illustrative art and writing.

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**Transcendent Hues of Music** By Mihikaa Singh



**Transcendent Hues of Music**

*This piece depicts the convergence of the hues of my paintings and euphonious melodies. How both of them have the ability to invoke powerful emotions- entrancement, anxiety, hope, craving. How the power that creative expression holds, is almost transcendent.*

Mihika Singh is thirteen years old, and in the ninth grade. She is profoundly passionate about art, writing, piano, music, and reading. Moreover, she is also a published author and a certified pianist from the Trinity College of London. Most of her canvases feature vibrant subjects, made from acrylic. She writes on the blog- <https://mihikaasingh.wordpress.com/>

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From the Dog's Eye, Among the Wildflowers By Kiley Brockway





### From the Dog's Eye

*This photo was taken on one of my walks through my suburb. I love to play with perspectives on ordinary subjects because it forces us to approach the object in a new way. I'm fascinated by the overlooked ordinary, so I try to capture that in striking ways with my photos.*





**Among the Wildflowers**

*Just after the last frost in March is when the first April wildflowers start to pop up. I placed the camera at level with the flowers because I wanted to create an effect that not only focuses on a subject in the flowerbed but also places the onlooker in the flowerbed. The girl in the flowers adds a new depth to the photo, as she takes it from an image to a story.*

*I love black and white photography because I find it adds a layer of elegance and sophistication to the photo. It plays with light and shadows, creating an experience vastly different from colored photos.*

Kiley Brockway is a high school senior in the Chicago suburbs. She has been previously recognized for both writing and photography in “Halfway Down the Stairs” and “Briefly

Write” literary magazines, and participated in the young writers workshop through the University of Iowa. You can find more of her work @kiley\_a\_brockway on Instagram.

## Book Review

**Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie** By Julissa Mendoza Robles

*Drums, Girls + Dangerous Pie* by Jordan Sonnenblick centers around Steven, an eighth-grade drummer, whose younger brother has cancer. Inspired by a past student of his, Sonnenblick set out to write a cancer story that would accurately portray the lives of families with family members who have cancer, particularly the relationship between siblings in that situation. After reading the book, I would say he was successful in writing a story about cancer that not only let me glimpse into the lives these families may have, but also made me laugh despite the heavy subject matter, and further developed my knowledge on the importance of mental health.

Throughout the story, readers can see how Steven deals with middle school, drumming, mental health, and his brother’s cancer treatment, as well as how the people around him help him. The aspect of Steven I loved the most was his humor. He was very sarcastic and the majority of the humor of the book came from his light sarcasm. Despite the tough situation, he was able to bring some light to it for his family, especially for Jeffrey, who definitely needed something to laugh about as he was only five years old. Steven even used his sarcastic humor around his friends before he told them about his family’s new situation.

Besides Steven’s humor, I loved seeing his journey with mental health. While at first he kept his feelings about his brother’s cancer diagnosis bottled up, it was nice to see him eventually trust people with his feelings about the difficulties of being a sibling of a cancer patient. I personally felt that it was very realistic for Sonnenblick to not have Steven trust people right away, since I can also be reluctant to tell people when I’m having a hard time. I liked that everyone was willing to support Steven once they realized he was struggling.

His relationship with the school counselor was one of my favorites to see develop. At first he was hesitant to tell the counselor anything, but he soon trusted the counselor with anything that was troubling him. With that gain of trust he was able to receive the help he needed. His counselor definitely gave Steven wonderful advice on how to cope with a difficult situation that anyone could use. My favorite advice that his counselor gave him was that while he can't control everything, such as the fact that his brother has cancer, he should focus on what he can control. That piece of advice definitely helped Steven stress out less about what he couldn't control and I feel that anyone could benefit from focusing on what they can control, to stress out less.

Of course, the main relationship that the story focused on was that of Steven and Jeffrey. While they did have an eight-year age difference (something that bothered Steven in the beginning of the story), they still managed to have a strong, loving relationship. When people were being sad or concerned around Jeffrey, Steven would make sure to keep Jeffrey's spirits up so other people's negative energy wouldn't bring the five-year-old down. Not only that but Steven made sure Jeffrey didn't feel like an outcast because of his condition. The work Steven put into making sure Jeffrey was happy and could have a happy childhood was admirable.

Overall, I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to read a story with a heavy subject matter that isn't as sad as other options. People will definitely learn something about the obstacles that families have, and how they persevere when a relative has cancer —while also having some good laughs.

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