

# Issue 7



Drakensberg, by Shannon Muller

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**Editor's Note** By Molly Hill

*September 2017: Issue Seven*

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*“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.” Phillip Pullman*

Dear Readers and Writers,

Welcome to the September issue of Blue Marble Review, and the outstanding creative efforts of our contributors. Our submissions continue to increase which means we have the unpleasant job of turning down great work that we just don't have space for. We remain committed to paying all our contributors, and indebted to ALL of those who submit work. It's a privilege to work our way through the poems, stories and essays that reflect young writing voices from many parts of the world.

We think creative expression is pretty important. And that the introspection of the writer \* or artist eventually translates to a story or painting that becomes a way to outwardly connect with others in the world.

One of this issues contributors—Canadian writer/artist Almas Khan shares her definition of a writer:

\*writ·er

/ˈrɪdər/

*noun*

1. Merely a person with a biological tendency to be fascinated by everything and a desire to outlive themselves (for a truly glorious kind of immortality can be conjured with nothing but ink and pen).
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2. Somebody who aches unbearably with the force of every person they will never be, every place they will never visit, every fictional thought, emotion, and imaginable spectrum of sound and aroma and colour that is too beautiful not to exist outside of their mind.
3. An individual who is simultaneously a physicist, philosopher, and street magician; for to be a talented writer you must be *everything*. (Almas Khan)

Thanks Almas, —we think this applies to creators of all kinds. Enjoy Issue Seven!

Molly Hill

Editor

## Poetry

**October** By Anthony DiCarlo

The setting sun beckons all fiery things toward their rest

As autumn leaves fall like embers toward the dark earth.

I walk home across cinders,

And each step replies with crackling sparks.

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Anthony DiCarlo is a first year student at Sacramento City College, pursuing a major in the field of history. In his spare time he enjoys attempting to play the piano, listening to music, being emotionally manipulated by his dog, and writing poetry.

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**sobriety isn't the same thing as falling down a mountain** By J. David

an addict's hands / tremble / like a cave of bats / every thought /  
tastes like relapse / i pull my veins / out of my arm / tie them /  
to a kite / pray they get lost / in the storm

J. David is a spoken word artist from Cleveland, Ohio, and the author of *The Streetlight and The Supernova*. Most days he spends driving, or dreaming of the way a slow train rolls through Georgia pines at midnight under a clear sky. His name feels heavy, so he sits under rain clouds trying to feel clean.

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**An African Symphony** By Chiamaka Okonkwo

The clanking of *efele* in the sink as grandma dutifully does the dishes

Running the soiled plates through the water

The cold wet water that has latched onto her very being drawing her back to her beginning

It sends gentle ripples of an earthly peace to travel the wide, intersecting highways of a child's mind

The quiet thumping of the *aziza* as my industrious mother sweeps away the dirt, evidence of a lively day drawing lazily to a close

It resounds throughout the chambers of my heart bringing with it the indescribable comfort they call "home"

The air is beautified with the low sizzling of the beloved fried plantains that bask in the slippery touch of heavy oil

Whose scent slowly snakes around the entire household, gracing my family with its delicious

aroma

The graceful stomping of my father's feet as he dances around to his adored beats of music notes that reverberate throughout his entire body

He sends merry shockwaves pulsating through the wooden floor

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My brothers and sisters create our own impromptu melody led by the free spirits of a youthful generation as we run about the happy home knocking down books and toys to and fro

As the hissing of the bubbling *egusi* soup rages on in that scented kitchen

And the hushed, whispered nighttime tales of the precious *mbe* and how the foolish turtle cracked his shell

Or the laughable *ewu* too confused to function in the complex animal kingdom of the vast savanna

The sounds ever ringing in my home are ringing throughout the essence of my existence

They draw the thin moving streams of my soul out to dance along with the beats of a divine inheritance

Oh yes, there is an aura in this abode

One of deep, rich, irreplaceable substance that traces us all back to the land where our names began

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Where the bloodline was planted and its seeds watered by the sweat of strong, brave men and women

They call it culture

An invisible string that has sewn our stories together and set them afloat upon the gushing Nile whose mighty cataracts pushes us ever onward

I call it life

Chiamaka Okonkwo is an emerging writer. She is a junior in high school who spends her time composing poetry that takes snapshots of daily life. She can be found running in the park whilst pondering the words of Wordsworth, Longfellow or T.S. Elliot. She has work upcoming in various publications.

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## **New York City** By Megan Loreto

Heels dangling over the edge of the New York City skyline, she climbed 1,576 steps just to see her life and its relationship to the streetcars below. On 31st street the sudden deaths of three people she will never meet cause a traffic delay of fifteen minutes. On 72nd and Broadway a boy walks alone, dragging his shoes across the pavement, considering how easy it will be to step in front of the 5 o'clock subway train. Years later he remembers a woman holding a sack of groceries whose glance kept him from the edge of the platform. On 29th street, an advertisement for chewing gum plays on a television as a man with white hair and shaking hands checks his mailbox to find it empty. He will die in his sleep tonight, but for now the TV blares and the mailbox maintains its vacancy. Some indistinguishable figure 1,576 steps below hails a cab. It's too late, they've

missed their flight and he is four hours dead, but the world is spinning. These seconds, these lives, they blend together into the din: a symphony. Simultaneously, or across the span of centuries. The prelude to silence.

Megan Loreto is an eighteen-year-old writer originally from the San Francisco Bay Area who is currently studying English at Loyola Marymount University. Megan was an editor of Backroads Magazine for the year of 2017. In her spare time, she can be caught leafing through the journals of Sylvia Plath, listening to records from the 1960s, or spending time with her two cats, Janie and Bingley.

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### **How to Die 101** By MayaRose Mason

Be both the Milky Way

And the Andromeda

Spiraling into each other

Until it bursts

Be the artificial supernova

For others to admire

From afar

Safely,

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Behind their sunglasses.

That's how life started,

You know.

II.

Bridges were first built

From wooden planks

Then stone

Then steel

And now they stand

Limitless

Toying with our human abuse and

Gas choking vehicles

They chatter

And whistle

And sometimes even sing to the water

That pushes against their towers.

If I *were* to die

How I would like to be reborn

As a bridge

III.

I have created nine different

Google accounts.

I have to decide who I am

Every time an application

Asks for my email address.

And still,

I am not satisfied.

Still, I find my mouse hovering

Over the

“Create A New Account” button

Telling myself that this time

It'll last.

My dreams

And my ambitions

Sometimes make me wish I were so unhappy that

I could buy the first train ticket to nowhere.

Unfortunately,

I'm quite happy with how I am now.

I find life to be intangible

Summarized in infinite street signs

Scars on legs

Bird poop dripping through hair

I die again

And again and again

Every time I walk around the corner

And notice something new.

I am no longer the same me

I was before.

Against my better judgment

I talk about life

As if it is mine to have.

Maya Mason has been published in her school's literary magazine, Eddas, three times in Creative Communications, and once for Falling for the Story. She loves dogs and the color pink, and takes inspiration from the people around her for her writing. —

MayaRose Mason has been published in her school's literary magazine, Eddas, three times in Creative Communications, and once for Falling for the Story. She loves dogs and the color pink, and takes inspiration from the people around her for her writing.

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### **Swerving Through Route 30 Lines** By Maddie Katarski

Mom was a performer,

belted "Heart" lyrics,

harmonized with Ann,

played the air guitar with Nancy.

Her eyes were fire again,

after years of being told that no one listened

burned her down to the wick.

We always listened as the words grazed

against our ears like satin,

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*"Now wouldn't you, Barracuda?"*

She looked back at us

from the rear view mirror

and told us we could be whatever

we wanted.

It was a lesson worth learning.

Mom stopped

singing

when the tape stopped

playing.

My sister and I became

the music she wanted

to hear.

We carried the tune

on our backs when she couldn't.

My sister chose to be Nancy,

I was Ann. We were together

barracudas.

Maddie Katarski is a junior at the Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts, where she is studying Literary Arts. She hopes to someday pursue a career in writing. She is the editor-in-chief for her school's newspaper. She has been recognized as an Honorable Mention in City Theatre's 2017 Young Playwright's Contest. This will be her first publication.

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**Ship Down** By Akua Owusu

Skin sinking in goosebumps,

I reach out for you:

asylum from the dark blue

lashing out to lap me up.

Pulling my head onto your shoulder,

you whisper to me,

and I bask in the brush

of your breath on my cheeks.

Resting on my raft,

I watch the spirals

traipse away from your legs

as you propel them back and forth.

Praying for a miracle

to sweep us back to land,

you succumb to the tremors —

I don't let go.

Akua Owusu is a junior at Milton Academy who spends most of her time in her dorm room stressing about extracurriculars. In her short life, Akua has moved back and forth

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between Accra, Ghana and New England suburbs. Akua's unique experience of the world is the main motivating factor behind her writing.

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**siren slumber** By Courtney Felle

sirens, eyes closed, on the rocks.

sirens, breath steady, floating

in the water, then looking

like they're about to sink.

sirens, not screaming, not

singing, not ensnaring

men and pulling them down.

this time, when Odysseus'

unnamed ship passed those

rocky crags now silent and

unscathing, no gallery of

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soprano voices lilted down

the cliffside, and the sirens

didn't watch the men

watch them. they were out

as if with lotus, chamomile,

melatonin. as monsters and

as women (which are really

just the same uniform) they

were used to caring too much.

sleep let them care too little,

not at all—*we are not*

*your protectors anymore,*

their eyelids fluttered, sighed.

slicing through the oars, the water's

blue made the men's medals

glisten, with ribbon after ribbon  
stuck on their shirts' pockets.  
the children in the village they'd  
plunder later would never see  
their accolades, nor would they  
ever awaken like the sirens  
the next day, wondering what  
on earth they'd let happen, caused.

Courtney Felle is a daughter, dreamer, writer, watcher, waffle enthusiast, and recent high school alumna. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming at other publications including Jet Fuel Review, Moledro Magazine, and Chautauqua Literary Magazine. She herself is the founder and current editor-in-chief for Body Without Organs Literary Journal, which can be found online at <http://bodywithoutorgans.weebly.com/>.

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**Waiting in Vain** By Claire S. Lee

I'd like to sightsee God

one day, but I don't know

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where to go. My mother  
sees him on the road  
leading up to our home,  
his invisible shadow  
hot over her shoulders,  
his visage reflected in my  
dark-swept pupils. I  
imagine God beckoning  
to my mother, her nodding  
chin hooked by his finger-  
wick. Her eyes, eclipsed. Mine,  
still searching.

Claire S. Lee is a student at Canyon Crest Academy. Her writing has been recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and appears or is forthcoming in *\*82 Review*, *Rising Phoenix Review*, and *Eunoia Review*, among others. She works as an editor for —

COUNTERCLOCK and as an editorial intern for *The Blueshift Journal*. Though she loves poetry and nonfiction, her favorite genre is historical fiction.

## Fiction

### **The Paths that Cross** By Willow DeLyon

Corn-maze dust does the Devil's jig around two pairs of feet. Meena's toes are brown and slim, probing the earth like curious pitchfork tines. Salome's feet are pale and sturdy, thumping the ground with her solid heel. Corn pokes the sky. Way up above their heads, there could be astronauts watching the waving stalks from the outermost edges of space. Salome wants to reach up so high that they see her too. She'll wave to the astronaut lady with the very red hair: her ginger astronaut looks like a superhero and has a laugh like galaxies of light.

Meena would make a fair explorer, Salome knows. High fashion is her game, even in overalls with crusty knees and denim hiding her scraped-up shins. Questions are all the rage these days. So is art. Meena has bushels of both. She has no distain for Salome's soiled polka-dot dress with the high collar.

"Salome, let's run away! We could *thrive* here!" the sprinter shouts and spins in dizzy face-up spirals. Words like 'thrive' come out so spontaneous that nobody gives her lip. "You're so clever, Salome," she continues, after flopping on the ground. "Make us a cornhusk fire. I'll roast corn on the coals. We can catch crows and tame them! Can you imagine having your own battalion of crows? And then we could stay here, and sleep with the stars all watching!"

"What about the smoke? They'll find us. We'd get sick of corn after a few days. And then it'll frost. This whole field will be bleached and creepy. All the stalks will turn into zombie fingers." But fearless Meena is up and away, flirting with straw men. If there were

zombies, she would make friends with them and lobby for equal rights regardless of race, gender, age, social status, or speed of pulse. It's all about the content of character, and Meena is contented.

All these years later, she uses her long dark braid to swat flies away down by the swimming pool. Nobody has ever seen a lifeguard so likely to drown a man with just a look. Once a month or so, she thinks of her childhood friend who burned easily in the sun. She wonders where that girl is now.

Salome is not as far away as Meena thinks. The girl repented. Devil dust got her young, so she went to Christ to beg forgiveness. The sins were yet to come, but sins there might be.

Behind convent hedges, she wears white and brown. Black is for women fully fledged.

Salome bends over her evening soup but doesn't eat. Eating is an earthly pleasure. Pleasure is weakness, and she wants God to see her strong. Strangely, though, this doesn't make her strong. Bones push up against her skin, becoming a collar around her neck and bars across her chest. Visions come, of fire and of blood. Salome kneels to these sweaty illusions.

Today is a Thursday afternoon in snow. Down at the swimming pool, Meena is a sleek red seal. Between her breasts she has a white plus sign where Salome carries a dead man on a chain. The water is so electric blue that it looks like summer sky over a cornfield. Someone is screaming, and it isn't in pleasure. A man cradles a dripping infant with pink eyelids and drenched eyelashes. He's shouting for help.

"Does anyone here know CPR?" yells a woman. All eyes turn to Meena and her glistening brown thighs. She's already halfway there.

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Salome kneels in her husky skin. All her sisters are baking bread this afternoon. She told Ms. Superior that she couldn't partake, which isn't a lie, really, is it? Now she worries that a lie by the omission of truth might be a sin. *Forgive me, father. Forgive your Salome.* She got a bottle of bleach from the cleaning cabinet yesterday. Is that stealing? Tears run down her cheeks. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

Cradling the wet duck-fuzz head, Meena uses two fingers to compress that little chest. *One, two, three,* she counts quickly to thirty and then seals her lips over the little mouth and nose. Two breaths, just enough to move that tiny chest. The father of the child is sobbing uncontrollably. Meena ignores him.

The bleach is Mr. Clean. Salome takes a swallow to scrub out her guts. She drinks Mr. Clean without a moment to appreciate irony. It burns her like the visions do. She chokes and splutters.

When butterfly lungs flutter, eighty-five birthday cakes practically bake themselves. The little body convulses, and Meena flips it over to drain away milky sputum. Plum lipstick is smeary on puff-pastry cheeks. Those baby-blue eyes are the color of the sky over a corn maze. A wail starts up as the baby squirms, and Meena reunites father and child. She feels like she's just run a marathon. And won.

Pain curdles Salome's stomach. She pukes white nothingness on the floor and cleans it up with the rest of the bleach. Nothing truly colorful is allowed in the convent, but the bleach bottle is blue. Salome remembers a wild brown heathen that flew on curious feet. She wonders where that girl is now, and pities her- not one of God's chosen. There was a day in a maze on the death rattles of summer. That girl was running so sure, and she had

followed. Meena must have had a map in her head. When the parents were just on the cusp of calling the cops, the girls emerged victorious. Meena's father scooped up his little girl, swung her around and held her tight. Salome's mother didn't say a word until she was safe in the car.

"We were worried sick," she said, "You ought to be ashamed. What do you have to say?" Salome looked out the window, then down at her hands.

"I'm sorry," she said. And meant it.

Willow DeLyon has loved telling stories, as long as she can remember. She grew up in the hills of Massachusetts telling stories to whoever would listen. At seventeen, she left home to travel, and met many people who shared their own stories, and in doing so, helped her along the bumpy road towards adulthood. One thing she learned was the importance of listening to strangers and learning from their joys and sorrows, good choices and regrets. Although she's not been collecting stories for very long, she hopes to share the right stories with the right people at the right times.

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## **The Way Her Skin Seemed Like Paper** By Carolyn Chung

She called you and said she was tired, that she couldn't sleep the night before because of *con ma*, a ghost. You weren't listening; you didn't ask. But she answered anyway. He'd come for her at the Devil's hour, dressed in all white. His smile a crescent moon at dawn, he'd knelt at the foot of her bed, eyes like two black bubbles. She'd laid awake, frozen.

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Come morning, she'd looked and saw that her husband had gone, as if he'd fizzled out into nothing but dust and slow, amber-tinted light.

You didn't believe her.

Lifting your glasses, you rubbed the side of your nose with two fingers. The voice of your grandmother, your *bà ngoạ*i, was small, soft. Swiveling between the textbook and the solutions manual, you scowled in frustration. You breathed in: black coffee and cheap erasers. And you breathed out, swearing under your breath that next semester, you'd start studying sooner, much sooner. You turned off speakerphone, clamping the iPhone between your shoulder and ear. You were busy, and you said so—twice. Loudly and firmly, as if she was a slow-learning dog. She spoke in broken, faltering English.

She said, "My grandson is a hard worker."

She said, "I'm proud of you."

She said, "I love you."

You hung up. In that moment, you had no way of knowing what your face looked like (blank, with eyes like iced-over rocks). You had no way of knowing that the following night, while you wrote your organic chemistry midterm, grandma would take grandpa's hand, the two of them disintegrating into nothing but dust and moonlight.

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In the summers between grades four, five, and six, your grandmother cooked you lunch every day. When you saw her at the door in the morning, snug in a dotted cardigan, you struggled not to smile. A white plastic bag, stuffed with sweet buns and coloured sticky rice, always hung from one wrist.

The day before grade four started, she'd held your hand and the both of you ran—giggling—through a thunderstorm, from No Frills to your house across the street, white plastic bags stretched over the tops of your heads. The world was a dark and soggy place, an anonymous jungle of dripping power lines and shiny rooftops. A world without any framework or handholds. But as long as bà ngoại held your hand, you thought, you would know where to run.

The summer between grades five and six, you grew almost a foot taller. You were eating *bánh xèo* on a quiet August afternoon when you heard them outside your front door—those boys from school who would kick the back of your chair and flick elastic bands at your bare arms and legs. Boys who would yank the skin around their blue and green eyes, spitting the word *chink* in your face.

Your fingers sticky with fish sauce, you scrambled out the door to see them wheeling away your bike. Before you could take off running with clenched fists, bà ngoại yanked you back by the elbow. Tottering onto your front lawn, she screamed at the boys in Vietnamese, her little, wrinkled face turning red. Furious, she flapped a dirty rag at them until they dropped the bike on the sidewalk and sprinted away, wide-eyed.

The next summer, you told your mom you were old enough to stay home alone, that you could eat whatever was in the fridge. You were embarrassed by bà ngoại—by her broken English and blackened teeth. By then, you were more than two heads taller than her. Having stumbled upon new friendships and new, mesmerizing ambitions, the world had unfolded into someplace effervescent and white—someplace comfortable, where you no longer needed to hold anybody's hand.

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In front of the apartment building were huge, old willow trees, their leaves drooping, almost touching the ground, as if they were people lost in thought.

Inside the apartment, the smell was nothing you could've imagined: a sickly sweet, like cantaloupe rotting under the afternoon sun. Even with her body gone, the smell still sank into your hair, your clothes. Your throat was plugged. Outside, though the chintz curtains, you saw a flock of pigeons nosedive behind the willows. The engine of a motorcycle in the parking lot out front filled the small apartment with the moaning of a torture machine. Behind you, your mom was folding the one, tattered winter jacket your grandma had ever owned, the jacket she bought at a Sears outlet mall when she'd first immigrated to Canada.

You stacked her books into a cardboard box. Thumbing through the pages of a notebook, you saw that she'd written the days of the week in English, over and over again, in stiff, slanted letters. She'd penned the names of furniture, of animals and countries. You ran your fingers over the popped-out curlicues on the backs of the lined pages. You bit your lip until you tasted pennies, squeezing your eyes shut.

In another, slimmer notebook, you skimmed through the phone numbers and addresses of her family doctor, dentist, hairstylist, and a few names you didn't recognize. An unopened pack of gel pens, with Dollarama's green and yellow sticker still on it, was hidden beneath a thick Vietnamese-to-English dictionary.

Next to the phone on the kitchen table was a spiral-bound notepad with a holographic kitten on the cover. You took it and sat down on a chair she'd lined with a sheet of plastic. Each page in the notebook had a tiny paw in the upper right corner, with a page number in its center.

Bà ngoại had written on the front page, "My name is Linh. How are you? I am well."

Your mom was taking silverware out of the kitchen drawers. The clink of forks and knives sounded like faraway, heavenly bells. You flipped to the last page with words on it.

She'd written, "My grandson is a hard worker."

She'd written, "I'm proud of him."

She'd written, "I love him."

Carolyn Chung is a nineteen-year-old living in Toronto. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *FreeFall* and *tenderness*, yea.

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### **Shock Value** By Henry Wahlenmayer

Madison, standing arms folded by the linoleum counter, watched Kyle eat another grubby fistful of Cheetos and lick the dust off his palm. His round face, splattered with grease, peered up at the TV. Some sort of marathon was on- *Power Rangers*- and Kyle's beady eyes hadn't left the screen for hours. It seemed inconceivable that her son cared more about fictional superheroes than he did about the melodrama unfolding outside. Kyle loved *Lassie*, right? The dog, not the movie. Kyle hated that movie. Not enough explosions.

She turned and caught a glimpse of her husband through the cracked window of their trailer. He was holding Grandpa Turner's gun, tears streaming down his face. Madison looked away. *That's how you do it*, she thought. She glanced back at her child. There was something distorted about it, the way this scene was unfolding- the crying outside only contrasted the sickly glow of their cluttered living room. And there Kyle was, unmoving. Why wouldn't he move?

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She didn't want him to be sad, she told herself. She just wanted to see him be sad. But what she wanted, the hysteria and the breakdowns and the screaming, that wasn't going to happen. The television was on.

It wasn't their fault. They just didn't have the cash to go to the vet to do it. Blame the economy, blame the president. It was cheaper this way. Still, it made her want to vomit when she looked at their flat screen and saw all the money they could afford to waste on that piece of garbage. Deep in her gut, she had known that Rick's promotion was a temporary respite. Nothing ever went well enough for them. Besides, all they ever watched on it was Family Feud and the goddamn Power Rangers. Her child loved it, and she hated it more.

The boy finished the Cheetos and sucked his plump fingers clean. Kyle's eyes were small and beady and completely unmoving. She felt bile rise in her throat.

A bark came from the outside of the trailer. Rick's muffled cries soaked through the cracked tile.

She just wanted Kyle to care. She wanted to grab that fat face and push it against the window until his snot ran down the glass and tears welled up in its eyes and Kyle could see her husband, its father, blowing the dog's brains out. And she wanted that boy, that parasite, to cry, because that'd at least prove that it was human, and that it cared about anything or anyone. She thought about doing it, she really did. But Madison didn't think she'd be able to forgive herself.

Sounds stopped trickling in from outside the trailer. She could picture her husband taking deep, even breaths, trying to swallow his emotions back into his stomach. Madison turned away. There was a yelp and a gunshot and then nothing but the birds, voices like wind chimes, nature correcting itself through music. With one misshapen finger, Kyle turned up the volume on the television.

Madison felt a tug at the corner of her mouth. Kyle didn't look away from the screen, didn't blink, because Lassie was just a movie and the dog was just a dog.

Henry Wahlenmayer is a Literary Arts student at LPPACS. He likes chickens.

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### **Only the Rain** By Nathalie Mitchell

The world was awash in grey, grey light, and only the rain was watching. It lightly dabbed at the gravelly scree on the wet tar road, shining everything into granite: the occasional buggy creeping by, the fractured sidewalk, and a man's shoes which stood, undecided, beneath the cover of a bus stop. They were black cap-toed derbies, the cheap kind only a lower-middle income like the man's own could afford. The glossed veneer was cracked and his toes were drawn together like shivering children.

Millie had bought them for him. Millie, Millie. Millie with limp, mousy hair and a drooping face. Millie with an apron around her waist and a baby boy in her arms. Millie, his unswerving wife. A woman of middle-age who couldn't understand melancholy or the perverse pleasure that accompanies pain, who spoke in the lilting cadences of the content, and who had married Henry, six years and two frown lines earlier, for his grey, grey eyes.

Standing at an altar with him in a burial shroud-white dress, Millie didn't know then that Henry's heart didn't beat with love, or really anything at all besides the bluish blood that crept along his veins. It was buried deep in a bitter sleep, pumping its liquid breath in and out and in and out until that fateful day when he met She.

She. To Henry, She was love and romance and recognition, a name and a place and a time gone too fast. She was beauty and wine-dark hair. She was like a tern, swaying with the sky and smelling of sea air.

She was sitting on a bench in the local park, a sanctuary of trees, when Henry met her. Her wine-dark locks were dancing with the cypresses. She wasn't doing anything in particular, just sitting. She did that often. Sit. Henry had walked over to her, his feet undecided even then, and sat down, too. She looked up at him with her grey, grey eyes and whispered, "Do you know, I think you are wearing somebody else's shoes. Those are the shoes of a confident man."

And he had looked down at his shoes, brown boots, and saw through them to the young man's hesitant feet inside, the same feet that She had guessed to be there. "I think you're right," he had whispered back. And that was that. That was how it had started, the gilded romance with She.

And then the bus crash. And that was that. That was how it had ended with She.

Now he would never wake up in the morning and see Love looking back at him. Now he would never wake up in the morning and be sure he had ever seen Love looking back at him.

For years after She, Henry had wandered about his small city, charting its margins with his footsteps, but never venturing beyond them. He had often flipped through travel guides at the public library, his eyes devouring Paris, his tongue tasting Rome, his fingers caressing London. He walked out of the library after these trips abroad, as he liked to think them, in an eager daze, hungrily slinking to the drugstore to buy lottery tickets that would pay for his exotic travel whims, someday. Someday. His lucky number was 1117, or November 17<sup>th</sup>, the day he met She.

Soon, Henry found himself on the cusp of middle-age, alone, fourteen pounds heavier with burden, and completely unaware of how he had ended up where he was. He worked as an accountant, hunched over his computer, nameless to his colleagues, and just another paycheck to his boss. The only reason he had survived all the personnel and

budget cuts at his company was that once he had sent his boss's secretary a get-well-soon card when she came down with the flu.

That was about the same time he had met Millie. Millie was also an accountant at the same firm. Their meeting wasn't quite so quaint as when he met She, but comparing these two women would be like putting an ant next to a butterfly: they weren't even the same species. And he happened to be the man these two women loved. Anyhow.

Millie had said hello to him one morning, her brown, brown eyes shy, eight years after November 17<sup>th</sup>, and two years later they were married. Henry never loved Millie like he loved She; in fact, he had never loved her at all. Instead, he loved the idea of Millie. He had loved the comfort and stability marriage had offered. He imagined their life together would be like the nicely made bed they had slept in their first night as husband and wife. Clean and sturdy.

Only when his son came, wailing and screaming like reality, did Henry realize the illusion that was his married life with Millie. He had fooled himself into thinking that his new wife, his newly repainted kitchen, and the doting jealousy his wife's friends wore in his house were happiness. His lottery ticket sprees and travel plans had flickered out with his bachelor days, just as swiftly as youth had passed him by.

Frustrated, Henry wished sometimes that he could jump back on that train, back on to Life, that great thing everyone else sighed about with a film of nostalgia painted over their eyes. Instead, one day he was lost and alone, the next, he was lost, alone, and married. The greyness in his grey, grey eyes was now the grey of a rainy day, no longer the silver fire he used to see reflected in She's brazen smiles.

But life went on, apathetic to Henry's existential crises and indifferent to his pathetic thoughts of wishes unfulfilled. For a while, Henry had tried medications to jolt him from his confused stupor, but the thought that he needed help depressed him even more. So

Henry stopped. And Henry attached blinders to his head so he would never catch a lethal glimpse of the stooping man who mirrored him on glass windows and in clear puddles.

And here he was. At the bus stop. Henry, Henry. With grey, grey eyes in a grey, grey world. It was Monday, a skeleton of a day: all that's leftover from the carnage of the weekend. It was 7 am, like always, and Henry was waiting for Bus 43, headed westward to his grey, grey office. Like unwilling slugs, he shuffled his shoes tiredly. He wanted somebody to stop him. To march right up to him and yell his name, to recognize him, Henry. He wanted somebody to shake some color into his grey, grey world like She had.

But nobody stopped him. Nobody marched up to him and yelled his name and recognized him, Henry, or shook any color at all into his grey, grey world. Instead, the rain fell and the cars slid by and his watch ticked from 7:01 to 7:02 and on and on and on... When would time stop? Henry thought about this for a while, tumbling it around in his washing machine of a mind: insert a thought and watch it spin in circles.

Of course, Henry already knew the answer to this question. He knew the answer to all these types of questions. It was She, even if it didn't make sense. She was like that; the ribbon he could always turn to, to tie things up. But since her grisly desertion of him and all things living, since the day he saw her limbs cracked by Fate's hands, She made him writhe in a suffocating guilt. How like her to haunt him even now.

It was the guilt of knowing he had settled for Millie and resigned the both of them to a dull life of mornings and nights passing unnoticed and insignificant beneath the great, big sky. The shame that Millie loved him, but he loved She. The guilt that he had married Millie anyway. The shame that he wrapped himself in pity and hid behind his guilt like prison bars, trapped, but safe. Safe and hidden in his shame.

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Henry carried this rotten tumble of agony around every day, to the bus stop every morning, just like this morning. He'd always thought that maybe he'd be end up a somebody. But now he was just him. Henry, Henry. A plain man with a grimace plastered permanently across his sagging face.

He wasn't the man people whispered about in malice or adoration. He wasn't the man people whispered about at all. He wasn't bad. He just wasn't good, either. And this nagged at Henry every morning like the rain on his neck as he surveyed the bleak road and the minivans slithering by...

Reminiscing, he counted the red cars. That was She's favorite color. "Scarlet!" She would cry, pointing to a red Volkswagen whizzing past. "Crimson!" at a red pick-up truck. He saw three red cars this morning. And what was this?

A glimmer of wine-dark flame caught his eye. It was a lustrous braid attached to a lithe tern of woman bending over to pick up a grey, grey pebble on the sidewalk. She was only a yard away from him, waiting for the bus, too, he presumed. She stayed squatting, examining the slate pebble with grey, grey eyes, the grey of a silver forest fire.

Henry couldn't help but stare, the woman so resembled She, almost to perfection. He wondered if her voice could also out-sing the birds and if her words could also outshine the lamenting of the sea. Her nimble fingers turned the pebble over and over. Her business attire was tailored perfectly, and Henry pondered briefly if calloused hands corrupted by time like his own had ever run over her fragile body, through her wine-dark hair.

She.

Henry tore his eyes away from this woman, this mirage, thirsty to take in her consuming temptation, her consuming fright, but more tortured that he could forget about Millie at

the sight of a burnished braid. He ripped his head to the side. In a blur, from afar, he watched his bus, Bus 43, pull swiftly up to the stop where he was standing and skid out of control on the slippery road.

He watched the ghost, She, rear back in fright and drop that perfectly grey, grey pebble. He watched her fall into the road. Funny that she should do so, so gracefully.

Amid the confusion, he watched himself fling his worn body onto the road and push the woman, She, whoever's pernicious Fury she was, to the side, hoping to catch the brunt of the bus's force on himself.

This time, he wouldn't let the bus get She.

His body crumpled beneath gravity's weight as he landed in front of the veering bus. He hoped wildly he had pushed She far enough into safety's grasp, but he couldn't be sure. He would never be sure.

He never was sure either if it was the weight of the bus that crushed the life out of him or the weight of the guilt that now his wife and son were alone and he had left them and the world for a phantom of the love he didn't deserve. Was she ever there? Or if it was the crushing melancholy that killed him, the dissatisfaction with the ugly plainness of his life. But either which way, he died.

The world was awash with grey, grey light when Henry left it, and only the rain was watching.

Nathalie M is a ninth grader from Seattle and dark chocolate enthusiast. She loves to read, watch old movies, and play with her dogs.

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## **Ghost Boy** By Rachel Feinberg

As I'm getting ready for bed, my phone vibrates with a text from my cousin.

**Malinda: YOUR GHOST BOY IS IN MY ROOM. GET HIM OUT BEFORE I KILL HIM A SECOND TIME.**

It's midnight and I have school tomorrow, but the dead don't care. They'll pop up anywhere from midnight to the bleak hours of the early morning. The planet can only handle one world at a time; the dead wake when the living sleep, and sleep when the living wake. Yin and yang.

I grab the sweater draped over my wooden desk chair, then shove my feet into socks and boots. I snatch my keys from the corner of the bulletin board hanging above my desk, then quietly make my way out the house. Mom and Dad are already sleeping, and they didn't appreciate me leaving in the middle of the night to do ghost business on my own. They prefer to tag along, like chaperones on a field trip. I'm sixteen. I know how to free ghosts, and I'm better than the fakers on TV.

This is the third time this week I've walked down the street at midnight. I whistle as I walk down the middle of the road. Nobody drives in this small town this late on weeknights. My neighbors are already buried in their blanket cocoons, asleep and oblivious that a teen ghost is haunting the corner house on my street, where Malinda lives with my two aunts.

Her front door is unlocked; as it was the other times I came here this week. I enter without knocking, assuming her moms are also asleep. I leave my boots at the porch and quietly close the door. There's no need to lock up. This should be a short visit.

Malinda is in her bedroom, furiously brushing knots out of her thick hair in front of her mahogany dressing table. She glares into her oval mirror, her plucked eyebrows

scrunched together. If she could convert the fury in her eyes to holy rays, she could burn away the ghost who has been drawn to her room for the past few nights.

The ghost, a sixteen-year-old boy known as Hiroshi Ochi in his past life, sleeps on Malinda's bed. Malinda's puffy body pillow is tucked between his long arms and legs. Every time he comes, he gravitates to Malinda's bed and pillow. The previous nights, I got him out by suggesting he tour the town. His unfinished business might not be in this house. But now that he's here a third time, on Malinda's bed third time, I'm starting to think his business is related to something in her room.

The dead usually sleep during the day, vanishing into thin air as if they never existed. Hiroshi has recently transitioned from the living to the dead. His soul still clings to the routine of the living. In time, if he isn't freed, he will spend the nights wandering the planet until his business is complete.

I touch Hiroshi's arm. A healthy chill crawls up my arm.

"Hiroshi," I say softly. "Can you wake up for me?"

Hiroshi murmurs and turns his sleeping face into the pillow.

"He better not be drooling all over it," Malinda says.

"It'll go away in a few minutes," I say. Spectral fluids don't remain for long.

Hiroshi rolls to his other side, his face still buried in the pillow. He wears the same clothes he wore when he died: a pressed, white elbow-length shirt; blue-black slacks; and a thin, black leather belt. I've never seen him in shoes or socks before.

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I tickle the undersides of his chilly bare feet, startling him awake. I pull the long pillow from his lax grip and toss it at the headboard. Hiroshi looks up at me with droopy eyes, too tired to be angry, then flops onto the bed and grabs the pillow.

“I’m certain now,” he says. “My business is connected to this pillow.”

“Your business is to leave me alone,” Malinda says.

“Give me the pillow and I’ll be gone sooner.”

“It’s *my* pillow.”

“I can bring it back tomorrow,” I say. “It shouldn’t take long.”

Malinda opens her mouth to argue.

“Don’t you want to help him rest?” I say.

She clicks her teeth together. She looks at Hiroshi, whose eyes are turned down to his lap. He looks like a kicked puppy.

Malinda pushes the pillow into my chest until I clutch it with both hands. “Just hurry up,” she says.

“Thank you,” Hiroshi says. “Can I have the honor of opening it?”

“Go ahead.” Malinda twists her wrist in the air. “But rip along the seams. I still want the case.”

I give Hiroshi the pillow. Malinda gives him a pair of scissors. He carefully cuts the pillow open and reaches inside, his lip caught between his teeth. He pulls clumps of stuffing out

for Malinda and me to sift. Halfway through destuffing the pillow, he pauses with his hand inside. His eyes widen and he slowly pulls a rusty locket out.

Malinda recognizes it and holds out a hand. "Can I see that? I'll give it back."

Hiroshi pools the necklace in her palm.

"I was wondering where this went." She opens the locket and shows me the two faces staring out. "I used it for an ancestry presentation in my Spanish class. It must've fallen in when I was stuffing. Weird." She chuckles. "These are my great-grandparents."

"It's my family!" Hiroshi shoves his face in front of mine to get a look. "Those are my great-grandparents too!"

Malinda looks at him. "You're related to them? You don't look it."

"Malinda," I warn.

"Yes!" Hiroshi says. "That is why I was drawn here. You have a picture of them."

"That's your unfinished business? Finding pictures of your great-grandparents?" Malinda narrows her eyes at him.

"My family. Finding my family. *You're* my family." His eyes water. "I lost my parents and grandparents in an accident. You're all I have left."

Hiroshi grabs the locket and holds it to his chest. His black eyes fog over and his breaths become shallow. His body becomes transparent. He drops the pillow and wraps his arms around Malinda and me, then kisses our heads. His touch becomes soft, like a pillow I can sink my hands in.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” He takes Malinda’s hand and pushes the necklace into it. He curls her fingers around it. His body fades until it’s barely there.

“Hiroshi!” I grab his wrist. It feels like thick vapor. “Do you see anything?”

“Huh?” he says.

I speak fast with the fear he will vanish before he can answer. “Ghosts see different things before they go. What do you see? I want to know.”

“Everything’s fading into white and I see a woman. She...looks like me.” The first tear slips down his cheek and then he’s gone.

I close my fist on air.

Malinda gets her laptop while I collect my thoughts. “What’s his last name?” she asks.

“Ochi.”

I hate the aftermath of a ghost’s departure. I always develop a bond with them, and though we rarely get to know each other, it always hurts to watch them fade. Hiroshi, unlike the other young ghosts, never told me how he died.

“Tomoko, you should see this,” Malinda says.

I scoot next to her and glance over the month-old news article. Hiroshi Ochi was a sophomore student at a private high school in New York. He had died on his way home from school after a drunk driver jumped the curb.

That explains his bare feet; sometimes people lose their shoes when they get hit.

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“I don’t get his unfinished business,” Malinda says. “Finding a locket of his great-grandparents seems a bit...boring.”

“He was looking for relatives,” I say. “For us.”

Malinda picks up the fallen pillow. She puts it on her dressing table. Her mouth stretches into a long yawn. I expect her to tell me to leave so she can sleep. Instead, she says, “I hope he’s in a better place.”

“They all are,” I say.

I don’t know what awaits all the ghosts I’ve helped free, but I have a feeling it’s beautiful. Hiroshi seemed to think so, smiling at the woman he saw right before he faded.

Rachel lives and writes in California. Her debut novel, *The Bridge*, was published with Harmony Ink Press under the penname Rachel Lou, and her short stories, creative nonfiction, and fan writing have appeared in student literary magazines and fandom zines. She was an author panelist at SLJ Teen Live 2016, where she discussed cross-genre writing. When she’s not writing, she’s scrolling through her Tumblr dash, playing video games, training at her kung fu school, or working toward her bachelor’s degree in Business Administration.

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### **When We Drive, I Feel Dizzy** By Megan Hunt

When we drive, I feel dizzy.

He’s turning corners at breakneck speed, rushing past stop signs and traffic lights until suburbia melts into the rural area outside our town. We cruise past endless stretches of abandoned farmer’s land, all beige wheat and liquor bottles left over from bush parties.

His hand hangs out lazily from the window of his father's car, moving along to the beat from the radio. Sometimes we listen to my music, but you can only tolerate shitty pop for so long, so he's playing his mixed CD with the word 'indie' smeared across it in black Sharpie.

He's a focused driver for the most part, but sometimes he sneaks a glance over at me and laughs as though something's funny. The noise he makes is the giggle of a schoolboy, dreamy and dizzying. The radio is on full blast, this track he'd sent me a million times.

Sometimes I wish I could turn it down.

"Let's drive to the city," he says, and I nod.

He stares through the rear-view and I stare through the side mirror. Everything behind me is dry, even the wind pushing my hair in every direction can't hide the hundred-degree heat.

He reaches for his plastic water bottle, spilling some down his chin and onto his Buddy Holly shirt. When the clouds open up across our stretch of highway I can see the constellation of freckles across his cheekbones, I remember looking forward to them every summer.

Our speed is disorienting, he insists after one-twenty it all feels the same.

Forty minutes past the large green sign with our town and population written across it he asks me what I'm thinking. I don't tell him about the two of us staring up to the tops of skyscrapers or unpacking coffee mugs in studio apartments or getting lost together or that rush of air in the subway station as a train departs.

"I'm just glad we got out today."

He rubs his hand against my arm; his skin is cool against the rural heat.

To our amazing luck, we pass city limits right as the last song on his mixtape ends.

The flat and favourless landscape of wheat fields has been replaced by a horizon line of skyscrapers and power lines. We're in no-man's-land, not yet the city but ripe with the promise of it.

He finally slows as he prepares to take the next exit, but I'd adjusted to his speeding ages ago, the dizziness is gone.

We arrive downtown in good time, everything is steely and tinted blue. We're wedged between a couple grainy yellow cabs for a bit- interestingly, there's something unnerving about the stillness.

He finds cheap parking and I have to help him figure out the metre. He giggles in a kind of effeminate embarrassment. There's a breeze by the lakeshore, the pavement is wet as though it's just rained.

We walk around aimlessly, sifting through shops that are too expensive for our budgets and checking the menus of diners too dodgy for our taste.

We find ourselves waiting in line for something- a concert or a gallery of some sort. Whatever it is, the line is long and packed with kids with interesting piercings and purple in their hair so we assume it's cool. We sit on the curb, staring up at skyscrapers. Their height feels disorienting, dizzying, like they feel ready to tip at any time. The buildings

themselves are dull and grey, the sunlight bouncing off all the many windows makes my eyes hurt.

We decide the line isn't worth waiting for.

We find an entrance to the subway station, and as we head down the stairs he tells me we're gonna buy day passes and ride the trains along every route, stopping and exploring the first and last stop of each.

It sounds like a wonderfully calculated adventure to me.

When we get up to the window, he realizes he has no change on him, the guy at the window says he doesn't accept debit. With a distraught look on his face he says he's going to look for an ATM, I tell him not to bother. The day's disappeared before our eyes; I say that my mom had just texted a minute ago to tell me I needed to be home for dinner. He doesn't question how I got cell service underground.

He suggests we at least take a subway back to the parking lot, I tell him there's no point, we've already gotten ourselves lost. I can tell by the look in his eyes that he's taken this to mean something else entirely.

He kisses me then, in the subway station, where we're lost together but not lost together. His lips taste exactly like the charcoal they made me drink that night I'd ended up in the ER because I'd taken too many pills: nothing at all.

I can hear the rush of air from a train leaving the station; I'm just a few feet too far to feel it.

I don't think he even knows who Buddy Holly is.

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We ask an old man how to get to the street where we'd parked, he glared at us through suspicious, steely blue eyes and gave us delightfully detailed instructions. It turned out in all our wandering we'd made it just minutes from our starting point.

When we're back in the car I ask if we can listen to my radio station and he crinkles his nose and giggles annoyingly. You can only listen to that stuff for so long, he tells me, and we play his mixtape from the top.

We approach city limits, the grey scale horizon behind us and the towering power lines in front of us. We don't talk and his hand swings carelessly from the window of his borrowed car, gesturing to his music. Once he hits one-twenty it all feels the same. I avoid catching the city's reflection from the side mirror, and instead stare outwards until I see the stretch of golden wheat fields, stop signs, home.

Megan Hunt is a Canadian writer, editor and undergraduate student at Concordia University in Montreal. Her non-fiction work has been published in a number of small publications, including Affinity Magazine, where she has served as a contributing editor since the summer of 2016. When she isn't writing somewhere in downtown Montreal, she spends her summers in her hometown outside Toronto, working in the non-profit sector and hanging out with Alfie, the greatest dog in the world.

## Nonfiction

### **Masking Authenticity** By Tamarah Wallace

Usually when someone who knows me well asks me "do you remember this or that?" I respond with a very sarcastic- "I don't even remember which class this is, much less what the homework assignment was?" or "who are you again?" I do this because even though I

might have remembered then, I do not always. In fact, my forgetful nature presents itself so often that I have decided to act upon my several months of AP Psych and diagnose myself with a very rare, chronic condition called “remembritus.” Therefore, since “remembritus” sweeps my memory clean every few seconds, it’s funny that I could even remember this recurringly random and cringe worthy memory.

It is an image of a paint-splattered, grinning little gremlin, of which I can only deduce is myself, and a decrepit looking paper mache mess with two eyes and a mouth hole cutout. I hold my creation up to my face, laughing hysterically as glue falls onto my no longer white shirt and proceed to make the most awful of sounds, which, could only have come from the deepest, darkest monster imaginable.

When I got home that Halloween, my heart swelled with pride for my little recycle bin masterpiece and I excitedly showed it to everyone I could steal attention from, but that night while I was alone in my darkened room, I had to call my parents to flip the mask on it’s back so that I could sleep.

A weird, unseemly memory of childhood exuberance. However, as I think of it now, in the social climate we all reside in, I fear that it is a memory we would not at all think random or weird. Because today, children are not the only ones who wear masks... and the scariest monsters will always be the ones we create- our social media profiles being no exception.

As we primp and preen, twist and tweak, we metaphorically rip our costumes out from underneath our beds and instead of wearing them for a night, we wear them for years at a time. While using social media we are able to create a perfect image of ourselves by filtering and editing all aspects of our lives until it’s this inauthentic variation. As a result, we compare ourselves to the inflated versions of others and aren’t able to express our true personalities, quietly facilitating negative psychological impacts.

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So today, let's fix that: let's first aim to understand why we wear our Insta filters like it's never ending Halloween, then determine the chilling effects of these personas, and finally muster up enough courage to open the closet door and take on our solutions.

"Somebody get the cam, looking so good we should be on Instagram." That was part of a rap and no I'm not a rapper. I actually stole that line from a song aptly entitled Instagram by popular rapper, Destorm and probably botched the way in which he would have swaggered through that sentence. However, the idea behind including this line was not to launch my diggity dope rapping career but show something even more terrifying- that society is so deeply rooted in the ideology that we have to portray only what we think is the best form of ourselves online.

Dr. Kay Green of the Huffington Post coins the term "ideal self" which is defined as who we feel we should be and is usually driven by competition, achievement, and status. She goes on to explain that this ideal image is what most of us portray online rather than our actual attributes, characteristics, and personalities- all elements of ourselves that can't be hidden in real life. And I mean hey, it is completely normal to filter, edit, or even tell a little white lie on our profiles because on social media, there are a lot of people out there who have never met you and have no conscience when it comes to judging you anonymously. So it's a natural defense to slap on the filters, pixelate your face to the point of no return or pretend to be constantly in a good mood.

But we never think about how these defenses affect us personally. The unrealistic perfection portrayed is only maintained by consistently concealing your flaws. Clinical psychologist Craig Malkin concludes that these masks affect our relationships with ourselves and others deeply, because part of the way we develop a strong sense of self and identity is by being appreciated by others, including our flaws. The whole idea is that we need to feel positive emotion directed towards us with our flaws because without that, they aren't really liking us, just the mask we've created. Malkin goes on to say that

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when we have negative reviews on our exaggerated profiles, we can't help but to take them personally because it is still our account.

Additionally, posts on social media often present an idealized version of what is happening, what something looks like, or how things are going for someone. This can lead users to compare themselves to others and think less of their own lives. Recently, a team of government researchers in the UK surveyed social media users and 51% of those asked said that they felt a decline in confidence due to unfair comparisons to others online. Another study conducted by the University of Michigan- Ann Arbor reiterates the same sentiment by noting that avid users of Facebook were overall more discontented with their lives. This goes to show that when we compare our lives to those that seem of a higher magnitude, we second-guess our own, which can then lead to devastating effects such as depression and suicide as documented by a 2015 Pew Research Center report.

However, the thing is that when we combine these two social media issues, the need to inflate ourselves and act like Dr. Frankenstein and the need to compare ourselves to others, a distinct problem occurs. We base our lives off of other people who do the same as us- mask themselves.

As a teenager in this day and age, I can attest to the incessant pressure to post online. So much so that when I experienced the worst years of my life, my mother's battle with cancer and resulting death, I could only share with my peers a plastic, filtered smile. And I am not simply sharing this information for pity points. I know what it felt like to feel completely alone, to scroll through my Instagram and see picture after post of my friends looking like they were having the time of their lives and wondering "Has anyone ever felt as sad as I do now?"

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But what I've come to realize is that online photos are exaggerated and I have also come to notice that I love my life and everyone in this country should too. We all have food, shelter, and a chance to speak about the issues that we believe in- not everyone in the world has those comforts.

Now, I know what you're thinking- this is a problem but don't you dare advocate against my ability to post fire tweets. I know I sound like a seventeen-year-old grandmother/caveman hybrid who is under the impression that the magic picture box, or as they say "computer", is inherently evil and has people trapped inside of it. I know that trying to discredit and destroy social media is a cheesy, cliché, and quite frankly, impossible endeavor that you have probably heard a million times before. It is obvious that technology, particularly social media, is an entity that has simply become an integral part of most of our daily lives. However, with that said, the negative psychological effects cannot simply be ignored.

So I propose a solution- the mitigation of our masks. In authenticating the way we use social media, we can ultimately lessen its negative impact.

And this all begins with a second's decision by us. Instead of opening our front facing cameras and immediately turning on the image perfecter, we need to be pleased with who we see staring back at us- unadulterated. Trying to use less of the filters and adornments that hide who we are from the world and embracing your true self is actually much easier than you think, now knowing that you will not only be improving your life but that of others as well. In the words of critically acclaimed author, J.K. Rowling, "The mistake ninety-nine percent of humanity made, as far as facts could see, was being ashamed of what they were; lying about it, trying to be somebody else." She and I agree in that we need to be able to love ourselves for who we are when we feel like the most hideous monsters in the world, because that is the only way we will have enough courage to take off our masks and live with authenticity.

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Tamarah Wallace is a senior at Cooper City High School, where she presides over a plethora of clubs and organizations such as the National Honor Society and Model United Nations. In her free time, Tamarah enjoys editing for two critically-acclaimed publications- her school's newspaper, The Lariat, and the Polyphony H.S., an international literary magazine. Furthermore, she has also accepted multiple state-wide, regional, and district awards for her literature as well as has written for the prestigious Miami Montage program.

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### **The Grand Piano** By Almas Khan

I suppose the strong desire many parents have for their children to become doctors and engineers is somewhat justifiable. What is wrong with wanting your son or daughter to follow in your footsteps and be financially independent? Absolutely nothing (or so it seems). Your chosen field of study and your happiness are directly proportional. My parents will tell you this is how the world has always been structured. People in STEM will always be considered more successful than people in the arts, and the sun will always rise as Earth completes an axial rotation. My parents will also tell you how tragic it is to have a daughter who could read and do simple math by the age of three, has an IQ above 140, yet chooses to apply so much of her mind to "trivial" things (i.e. reading and painting for pleasure, watching a popular anime, learning phrases in Ancient Greek and Latin). Yet there remains a moment in my memory where I felt truly understood by them, and by extension felt the most powerful. It is secluded from the others, as if encased in glass.

The months that lead to this moment were unforgiving. Ramadan happened to coincide with my 4 final exams. I would quickly eat something with negligible nutritional value and have a strong cup of espresso at Iftar, then return to my bedroom to study until the early hours of the morning. It was a common occurrence for me to doze off at my desk, face touching a textbook that was undoubtedly a breeding ground for bacteria, the pen that i

had been using lying somewhere on the floor. I was a creature made of sleep deprivation and anxiety. My parents noticed this, but weren't concerned. I have always been prone to these kinds of fits, and they are both neurosurgeons – of course they'd be aware of any changes in their daughter's health and address them if they were serious enough.

Exams inched closer. I began to daydream of summer. Two months between one school year and the next seemed vast in my mind. How much could I accomplish? I decided that I wanted to learn to play an instrument. Preferably the piano, as it had the widest range in pitch and involved both treble and bass clef notation. After I had written my last exam, I strode out of school with my calculator and pencil case in hand. My mother had parked nearby; I sat in the passenger seat of our black Chevrolet Camaro and braced myself to be interrogated. Predictably, I answered a set of questions about the length, difficulty, and composition of the exam. A few minutes into the drive home, the subject of our conversation became my Eid gift. I seized the opportunity and declared that I wanted piano lessons as my gift. My mother's expression became thoughtful, and this incited excitement somewhere deep within my core. But she merely informed me that it would be a huge commitment and take away valuable time I should be using to study if I planned on getting a scholarship to university followed by an acceptance to medical school. Besides, she wanted to consult my father on the matter and get his opinion before making a decision. I'll translate that: it meant "no". I was distraught.

I didn't mention the piano lessons again. I spent the first days of summer break volunteering at the hospital and sitting at the library, flipping through novel after novel. Eid approached, and my group of friends decided to host a party. I was horrified, yet I decided to put my introversion aside and attend. After the event, I planned to return to my bedroom, sip french vanilla coffee (my caffeine intake knows no bounds) and not see another human face for at least a week. Intent on making this vision a reality, I was striding purposefully up my house's marble staircase when I caught a glimpse of something in our guest bedroom. My pulse began to bound. I flung the door completely

open, gawked at the sight before me, and barely contained the urge to shriek. There was no longer any furniture or embellishments in the room. Except for the piano.

It was a stunning concoction of polished oak and gleaming keys that seemed to draw each ray of light in the room, begging me to press them. A collection of sheet music lay across the top. *Beethoven's 5th. Allegro Appassionato in B minor. Tchaikovsky's Works.* And a smaller slip of paper with a phone number and a name written in my father's flowing, elegant handwriting: Alexandria Aguiard, piano instructor. My first coherent thought was "Is this a lucid dream?". Then a sense of wild triumph ensued. I was victorious, my parents were beginning to listen to me and understand me as a person. They had finally embraced my interests, ambitions and desires. I grinned as I realized how much planning it must have involved. Purchasing the piano, deciding which classical pieces I'd enjoy playing the most, and finding an instructor offering lessons nearby. Not to mention arranging for me to be away from home as they cleared the guest bedroom and lugged it up the stairs. I was still surveying my surroundings in utter shock and awe when my parents traipsed into the room. Their smiles were so broad and bright that for an instant I was convinced I would be blinded.

Although it feels like ages have passed, this moment is engraved in my memory. And I believe it will remain so for my entire life, as my parents and I coming to a mutual understanding made me feel capable, teeming with untapped potential that no force could stop or overcome. I can attest to the fact that sometimes it is a thing as simple as acceptance that makes us feel the most powerful.

Almas Khan is a sixteen-year-old artist, aspiring author, and avid consumer of dark chocolates. She lives in a small Canadian city where she spends most of her time with

her nose in a book, longs for a kitten, and does schoolwork.

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## **Masada** By Becca Moszka

The drive was long and tiring; the early morning sun cast shadows on the mountain peaks as we navigated the sandy path. The bus windows were closed, and the air conditioner was on full blast as Alan, our tour guide, regaled us with the history of the Negev.

“The Negev is a desert region in southern Israel best known for its excruciating heat, large craters and canyons, and beautiful mountains,” he began, sounding as if he had swallowed an Israeli History Textbook. “This region takes up about half of Israel and is mostly uninhabited. The land was, at one point, home to our forefather Abraham himself.”

We all nodded along as Alan spoke, his Australian accent poking through his speech at different intervals. Mom appeared fascinated, her mouth ajar in a slight “o,” eyes wide and sparkling. My brother, Joel, was the only one to appear disinterested, head cast down at his phone, thumbs moving quickly over the keys as his head bobbed along to the music spilling out of his headphones.

As Alan spoke, I covered my mouth in a yawn, and mom leaned over to me and whispered, “You do know why we had to leave so early, right?”

Eyes watering, I shook my head.

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“It’s because it’s so freaking *hot* on top of Masada. If we were going to climb it, we’d have had to leave even earlier, like, 4am, because that’s when it’s still kind of cool out. But we’re taking a cable car up to the top, so it’s okay to leave later. It’s still gonna be hot as hell, though.”

“Even at six in the morning?” I mumbled through another yawn.

“Even at six in the morning,” mom parroted. She grinned at me then, and I felt a surge of excitement waft through me upon seeing her eager smile.

“...And up there, you can see the homes of the Bedouins, who are less nomadic than they were in ancient times. Most live up there permanently now.” Alan pointed to a mountaintop, and sure enough, nestled deep in the rock, were several tents. I glanced over at Alan. His hat was tilted slightly to the left, and he looked as thrilled as mom appeared, despite probably having shown hundreds of tourists this exact sight before.

Mom turned to me again. “Aren’t you excited?” she asked, nudging me slightly. I nodded. I was, but somehow I couldn’t imagine the top of a mountain in Israel being anything but disgustingly hot and filled with crumbling rocks.

Mom had begun her planning of our trip to Israel years ago, researching the best tour guides and the best hotels and the must-sees of the country. My brother and I had watched as she grew giddier as the weeks flew by and the day of our trip grew near. “You’re going to love it,” she’d tell us, “you’ll be immersed in Jewish culture all day long. It’ll be wonderful.”

Joel and I had groaned in unison upon hearing that.

“...And, oh, there is so much history that comes just from this mountain alone! I mean, all of Israel has a rich history, but this place tells some great stories too.”

“Uh-huh,” I mumbled, “isn’t it just a bunch of rocks?”

Mom started. “Of course not! Back in ancient times, there were bathhouses, living quarters, King Herod’s throne room-”

“Was there an ancient ice cream parlor too?”

Mom glared at me. She never was one for jokes, especially where Israel and Judaism were concerned. “You know what? You can just sit on this bus while everyone else goes to the top. They can appreciate the history and the scenery, and you can play on your phone.”

I rolled my eyes, looking down and fidgeting with the fringe on my shorts. “It was a joke.”

“Well, it wasn’t funny. You just can’t take your religion seriously, can you?”

*Not really*, I thought, thinking of all the times I had begged mom to let me stay home from Sunday school. What I said, however, was not as blunt. “I just don’t care about it as much as you; that’s all.”

I cringed, watching mom’s face turn red to match her manicured nails. Her eyes hardened, and I knew she was considering throwing me out the bus window.

“Sorry,” I muttered, quickly, to call off the rapidly approaching fury practically oozing from her stare. Mom grumbled in response, and I crossed my arms, determined not to speak to her for the remainder of the bus ride.

An hour later, Alan ushered us off the bus and onto the scorching pavement. My curls grew slick with sweat as I stood in the glaring sunlight.

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As we walked towards the cable car, I glanced at mom: her gaze was softer, and the angry red lines etched in her forehead had begun to diminish. Sensing it was safe to speak to her now, I began, "So, you've climbed Masada before?"

Mom looked at me curiously-probably confused as to why I was suddenly speaking to her again-before answering. "Yes," she responded carefully, "and it was absolutely beautiful." She paused, and then, surprisingly, grinned. "Not as beautiful as the Golan Heights, of course, but still beautiful. The view was...hypnotic."

I forced myself to hold back a snort. On the plane to Israel, mom had told me about this "revelation" she had when she went to Israel the first time. She'd always been passionate about her Jewish heritage, but had been skeptical about G-d and didn't foster complete dedication to the Jewish homeland. Upon reaching the Golan Heights and seeing the vast, unprotected fields not immune to enemy fire even thousands of years after the Israelites had been led to the region, her mind had begun to stir, and suddenly she felt it: a strong tether to the area, a sense of devotion to the land of her ancestors.

"I felt as if G-d was with me at that moment," she recalled, taking in the gently rolling plains, the olive trees in full bloom, and the Israeli farmers at the base of the hill. "I knew then that Israel would always be my home, a safe haven for me, and that it was my duty to protect the country at all costs."

I had furrowed my brow as she said that, trying to conjure up the image of my mom, thirty years younger, standing on top of a large hill, curls blowing in the breeze as her revelation passed through her. It wasn't an easy image to summon to mind, however-how could someone so young and so uncertain have such a profound awakening simply by standing on a hill? I ended up dismissing her words as mere over-dramatization. I wasn't sure if I believed in G-d, let alone if I even *wanted* to be Jewish for the remainder of my life.

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I wanted to tell mom that I didn't believe revelations could occur, and that even if they could, they wouldn't happen to me. I wasn't very religious; I attended temple, but only to please mom. I enjoyed the Jewish holidays, Friday night services were sometimes bearable, and I loved Israel, but I was not completely and utterly devoted to my religion, like mom was. Revelations don't happen to people who don't really believe what their religion tells them, I thought.

We reached the top of the mountain a few minutes later, exiting the wonderfully cold cable car and setting our feet on the scorching mountaintop. The sun glared down on us, hot and bright, as we followed Alan across the rocky landscape. As he spoke, we found ourselves growing restless, downing our water bottles and frantically trying to keep ourselves cool. I slipped on my sunglasses and tied my hair up, groaning in fervent desperation as the last drop of water slipped out of my bottle and onto my tongue. "No more cold water up here," Alan informed us, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye, "you'll have to wait till we get back down to the bottom."

Alan led us to several stone benches, baking steadily in the late-July sunshine, and we gratefully took our seats, thankful, at the very least, that we no longer had to stand. Alan launched into a story of the history of Masada then, and I tried, with great difficulty, to listen as he spoke.

"...And *my gosh*, it was absolutely incredible. King Herod's fortress had become a refuge for the Jews against the Romans. They had lost their Holy Temple, and Jerusalem was on fire, but for now, they were safe up here on Masada." Alan gestured around us, and I thought, *here? The Jews had been standing where I was now sitting?*

"They were not safe for long, however. The Romans laid siege to Masada, and tried to catapult rocks up and destroy the fortress. But the Jews up here were strong and smart, and fought back with every ounce of energy they had, until, finally, the Romans broke through the fortress."

I bit my lip, feeling as if I were listening more to an ancient legend than to a factual story. Was it just mere folklore? The way Alan spoke—eyes sparkling, hands waving wildly in the air—made me think it had to be the truth.

“And you know what the Jews did then?” We shook our heads. “They refused to be beaten by the Romans. They refused to be made slaves as they once were in the land of Egypt. So you know what they did? They destroyed the fortress, and then they killed themselves. Every last one of them—men, women, and children—dead. And when the Romans rushed up the mountainside and through the ruined fortress, all they found were the bodies of the Jews. Now, they could not be taken. They died bravely, preserving the freedom of the Jewish people.”

Alan let out a deep breath and lowered his hands to his sides as he finished speaking, all the finesse of a master storyteller. Everyone was silent, casting glances downward at the benches. I, however, turned to the side, wiping sweat off the bridge of my nose and sweeping my gaze over the top of the mountain. I stood up and walked to the edge of a precipice. Digging my feet into the gravel, I looked out at the desert that stretched on for miles, the sheer cliffs carved into mountainsides, the arid, barren nothingness that once held an entire community of people. It was pretty, I thought, despite seeming so empty, so endless. Miles below me, the ancient Romans had once stood, plotting exactly how to seize the fortress. And, up where I was now, the Jews had worked and hoped and prayed for salvation, sacrificing themselves when no other sort of strategy revealed itself. What was it like for the last person who killed himself? He had been forced to watch the Romans storm up Masada, and being the last one alive, made that incredible sacrifice completely and utterly alone, in the middle of a seemingly infinite desert. I shuddered slightly, shifting my feet against the gravel. Those people no longer had the freedom to attend temple; there’s had been burned down. They could not celebrate the Sabbath, nor indulge in the delectable foods served on Passover. Instead, they were forced to condemn themselves to death, allowing future generations to experience the freedom they so desperately desired.

*Not fair, I thought. Not fair. Those people deserve justice for their sacrifices.*

It wasn't a revelation that occurred next, but more of a spark, igniting my insides, filling me up and keeping my body turned towards the open desert. I didn't feel as if G-d was with me, like mom had said, but I did feel a powerful and irrevocable pull towards the Negev, as if I belonged there: a safe haven, as mom had called it.

I twisted the fringe of my shorts, finding myself oddly excited at the prospect of returning home and going to temple. It didn't matter that I didn't necessarily believe every aspect of the Jewish faith; what mattered was that I protected the rights of others to believe and practice that faith. I thought of Joel, who had been bored out of his skull during the story of Masada. When I turned to look at him, he appeared unfazed, as if the beauty of the desert paled in comparison to the delights of his video games. It was remarkable how he could be so unaffected by something so magnificent.

Even as I heard Alan telling everyone else to get up, that it was time to head back down the mountain and towards the Dead Sea, I stood unmoving, transfixed on the massive desert before me. It was, as mom had said, hypnotic; I couldn't seem to tear my gaze from the sight before me.

"Come on, Rebecca, we're leaving," I heard mom call, but there was a pleasant lilt to her voice as she said it, as if she was smiling. As if she *knew*.

Someone came up behind me and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. Somehow I knew it was Alan.

"Mesmerizing, huh?" he murmured, and, noting his word choice, I gave a small smile, but I don't think he could see it.

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“Nearly one thousand Jews died up here. Had they not done that, we might not be here today, you know?”

I nodded. I knew.

Becca is a freshman at Boston University. She has been writing short stories since she was eight years old, and spends the better part of her time reading anything she can get her hands on. Besides reading and writing, she enjoys watching Netflix, walking her dogs, and traveling.

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## **The Friend You Never Asked For** By Angelica Williams

Anxiety is like a toxic friend you actively try to avoid. Yet, somehow it always finds you, always at the most inopportune of times. When you are out for a walk and someone absentmindedly stares at you, Anxiety whispers softly in your ear, “She must be judging you.” However, that person is completely unaware of your existence. While you are paying for groceries but fumble while counting the change, Anxiety shouts, “You’re holding everyone up! Can’t you see they are getting impatient? You look ridiculous!” In reality though, everyone makes this same little mistake at some time or another. So, nobody hears this abusive voice but you.

The weekend is here and it’s time to go out. You are all dressed up, finally pleased with your appearance. A smile graces your lips. Then along comes Anxiety to stand beside you in the mirror and remark, “Those clothes are a little too tight, aren’t they? Do you really want to wear your hair that way? What if you stand out?” Although you look wonderful, the smile quickly vanishes.

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Even a conversation of two is third-wheeled by the presence of your unwelcome friend, Anxiety. “Why is he not smiling as much as yesterday? Are you asking enough questions? Talking too much about yourself? He thinks your company is such a bore.” Before a social interaction is even over, you’re already internally exhausted. Your mind defeated by the lies Anxiety has told.

It sometimes gets to the point when the only option seems to be withdrawing from any contact at all. Hoping that without the company of others, Anxiety will quiet its unceasing voice. But of course, this is not true, for Anxiety always searches for an opportunity to ruin your peace. So even upon leaving calls unanswered and declining invitation after invitation, Anxiety begins its dance again. “They will all think that you are a terrible friend, you know? Why are you being so selfish? Can’t you think of anyone else but yourself?” In honesty, they aren’t angry with you, only growing concerned.

Even in the solitude of your very own home, Anxiety keeps calling your name. “Aren’t you being a little lazy? You need to get out more. You are just wasting your life inside these four walls.” You needn’t worry about this though. A day of rest isn’t an eternity wasted, don’t let your mind be fooled.

However, at some point, enough is enough so you cry out, “Why won’t your voice cease? Does everyone else hear and perceive the things you whisper to me? Or is this murmur in my head alone?”

Anxiety now takes a step back with a grimace on its face, its task completed once more. Your mind gets overwhelmed and things grow confusing until all of a sudden, everything becomes hazy. Anxiety’s friends have now come to play. Good old Fear seizes the recesses of your mind. The “What ifs?” call your name. Panic grips your heart in its strong fist. “You won’t escape this time!” they all jeer in unison.

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Finally, a surrendering scream exits your lungs. Your whole world goes black with a collapse and a fall.

After Anxiety and its accomplices have devastated your mind and body, they leave you for just a little while. As you recover, you swear to yourself that this time will be the last. Anxiety will have no place in your life anymore. It will never claim victory over you again. But is that really true? After you are recuperated and refreshed, the opening for Anxiety to slip back in is renewed. “Will it be as bad as last time?” you worry, while slipping back into the familiar, old pattern. Anxiety has begun to take its course once more.

Angelica Williams is a sixteen-year-old homeschool student in Maryland. When she’s not studying, her days are spent writing and making frequent trips to second hand bookstores to feed her reading addiction. She also enjoys baking and spending time with her many pets.

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**Hero or Zero** By YunBin Cho

*My grandfather, my hero.*

My cousins dive effortlessly into the water and burst onto the surface with loud shrieks of joy. Even the youngest one leaps into the pool without a second thought as I sit at the edge sweating like melting ice cream underneath a fiery sun. One toe gingerly pokes at the water to see what the temperature is like. My entire leg retracts in an instant. It is freezing cold. Dripping from head to toe, my cousins attempt to persuade me to join them and jump into the water, but I just shrug. I notice secret messages being sent amongst my cousins via eye contact. As they attempt to drag me into the pool, I cling on for dear life, scratching away at the sides of the pool. My mischievous cousins tickle me in an attempt to loosen my grip. I am already in waist deep and my knuckles are turning

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white. I think about just giving in and letting go. But all I imagine is sinking helplessly to the bottom of that cold, cold pool.

“That’s enough!” A deep voice in Korean booms from above.

It is my grandfather to the rescue. My cousins let go in unison and I scurry out of the pool and into a warm towel.

The next day, grandfather wakes me up at 5 AM. We are going to SeaWorld. I see Shamu for the first time, absolutely stunned by the show in which the trainer swims to the bottom of the pool and is gracefully lifted by Shamu. At the end of the show the killer whale waves with its tail gently, splashing the water and I got wet with the rest of the crowd, and we roar with excitement. I chant with the crowd “Shamu! Shamu!” My heart synchronizes with the chanting and clapping that is growing louder and faster. I beg my grandfather the next day to go see the show again. We end up going back the next three days.

“Why do you like the show so much,” he asks.

“I want to swim with Shamu one day,” I respond.

When we come back from our third consecutive show together, grandfather leads me to the pool. I feel hesitant, but it’s grandfather, so what can I do but follow?

“For today, you can just take three steps down.”

I think he will pull me into the water once I go three steps down so I hold on tight to the metal handles of the ladder, but he really just allows me to hang out on the third step. He does not pressure me to go further. The next day, I find myself actually in the pool with him and a floaty. I sit on grandfather’s back as he slowly breaststrokes back and forth

across the pool. I embrace water for the first time in my life. My dream of swimming with a killer whale one day remains intact and even achievable.

*My grandfather, my zero.*

I am no longer grandfather's little granddaughter since I am a sophomore in high school now, but grandfather remains the dream-giving, confidence-building, grand wizard he has always been. Just a little older. But today that is all about to come crashing down. An almost comedic, satirical and fantasy-like news story is about to grip the small nation of South Korea for weeks to come. Koreans are about to find out that President Park has been taking advice from and sharing top secret information with a shadowy figure. This shadowy figure happens to be the daughter of a famous shamanistic cult leader. And it so happens that the President is convinced that her dead mother is speaking through this individual named Choi. It is shocking. It is incredulous. It is downright embarrassing. Choi, through her control of President Park, has in turn created a sludge fund to gain financial profit through donations from the biggest corporations in South Korea due to her relationship with the President.

All of this is now about to be discussed at the dinner table. It just so happens to be grandfather's birthday. Everyone in the family is emotional, ashamed or furious. They cannot believe that the Korean presidency has hit new lows. Then my grandfather suddenly tells everyone to quiet down. He tells us that we should not lose our trust and support of the President. That we should not be fooled by the socialists. That this is a big conspiracy to tear down everything South Korea has built up until now.

"We must remain united and protect our country from the North."

He goes on to emphasize that under President Park's father, Korea grew leaps and bounds economically and that South Korea would not be what it is today if not for the Park family. He looks at my grandmother with intense eyes.

“Have you forgotten the day President Park’s mother was shot? Have you forgotten how much you cried that day?”

Grandfather says that his life without his parents had been hard. He understands what President Park must have gone through. That she needed someone to rely on. That she had been taken advantage of. I sit there numb. Dumbfounded really. How can my hero be so blind to the facts right before him? I try to convince him.

“You are too innocent. Do not believe everything you see on the media.”

At that moment, I simply want to rewind time. I want to go back to an hour before when grandfather remained my perfect hero, the man who could never be wrong. I want to pretend as if this never happened.

Hero or Zero?

I now understand that this is a foolish question. I see that it is I who have changed. I am no longer a little girl. I am on the brink of adulthood. And I see the flaws of those around me all too clearly. Grandfather is no hero, but he is no zero either. He is both all at the same time. I guess on that fateful day, I along with the nation grew up. We finally understood what could happen if we did not take responsibility for our country.

And I now realize that my grandfather has always simply been my grandfather.

YunBin Cho is a year 11 student at NLCS Jeju in Korea. She is an aspiring game theorist and political scientist, who writes on current events and edits for school magazine and newspaper. YunBin enjoys reading Dan Brown and George R.R. Martin and watching Netflix. Her favorite series is the House of Cards.

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## **The Laughing Spirit** By Faith Esene

The kinks were becoming more rebellious. They no longer obeyed when I slathered them with gel and tried to lay them flat with an old toothbrush. My strands had absorbed as much sun as they could handle. I called Auntie Theresa. She would know exactly what to do.

Because of my strong-willed coils, I found myself parked on the side of the road, heart in throat. I had been listening to my favorite song, thinking about how smooth my mornings would be, now that I wouldn't need to worry about my hair. The blaring of the siren startled me. The red, white, and blue streaks cast their shadow over my car. I pulled over, parked, and waited. The officer tapped on the glass. I rolled down the window, and greeted him with a cleverly woven calm.

“Ma’am, can I see your license and registration?”

This needed to be done as quickly, and as painlessly as possible. If done well, my chest would still be rising and falling when this was over. I suppose I should not have judged this police officer. Yet, given the time continuum of deaths at the hands of uniformed men, the faces plastered all over the headlines, and “Black Lives Matter” dyeing the fabric of reality, I couldn't resist the urge to use my defense mechanisms. Fear could be buried for a moment, but if probed enough, it would eventually come oozing out. I knew that much. It was best to avoid putting your hand in your pocket, so that you did not evoke suspicion. Suspicion pulled back the curtain. Fear would sneak out of hiding, even if the officers weren't aware it had been hiding in the first place. Fear would pull the trigger.

“Ma’am, can I please see your license and registration?”

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I took a deep breath.

“Sir, you can retrieve it.”

I aimed at the glove compartment with my lips and held my hands up. As a child, I had learned the art of lip-pointing. If my parents ever wanted you to place something on the table, or retrieve an item, you would simply follow the direction of their protruding lips. Not everything needed to be spoken, and you never argued with authority. They taught us well. The tension melted, as the officer’s smirk said “don’t get smart with me.” He knew exactly what I was getting at.

“Ma’am, that’s okay. Open the glove compartment, and get the documents I requested.”

“Okay sir.”

I needed to reassure him that this girl with dark melanin, wearing an even darker headscarf and black t-shirt, was not a threat. He had to know exactly what I was doing, at every moment.

“Sir, I am lowering my hands; I am opening the glove compartment, and retrieving my wallet. I am pulling out my license and registration.” I handed him the documents and he nodded in approval.

“Thank you ma’am. I just wanted to let you know, that your tag sticker is upside down. It is best that you replace it as soon as possible if you aren’t able to peel it off, and turn it the correct way.”

“Okay, I will make sure I get that done.”

“Alright ma’am, have a good one.”

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As the police officer disappeared behind my rear-view mirror, the purring of my car engine broke the awkward silence of trying to collect my thoughts. Now, I was late for my appointment. I drove a few miles before I turned up the music again. That afternoon, Auntie Theresa braided my hair so stiffly. I held each braid individually, so that my roots were not being pulled too much. I opted out of having a receding hairline by the end of the ordeal. I told Auntie Theresa what happened with the officer, and she laughed.

“Haha. Smart move girl.”

She laughed because it was just her way of dealing with these kinds of things. She knew that it had boiled down to life or death. She knew the police officers had a soiled history. Too much black blood slithered on the cold concrete, while their blue uniforms stayed blue. When she touched my shoulder, I felt a spark. I felt it move into me—the laughing spirit. I started laughing too. My braids were too tight, but the laughter rolled out of my mouth, until I began choking on the air bubbles that had sneakily slid into my throat. My head throbbed, but I was glad my hair would be protected for the next couple of months.

That night, as I rubbed my scalp, I wondered who would protect our brothers and cousins and friends. There was no way to know what lurked behind the red, white, and blue shadows. They would have to use their silent weapon. They would have to lip-point.

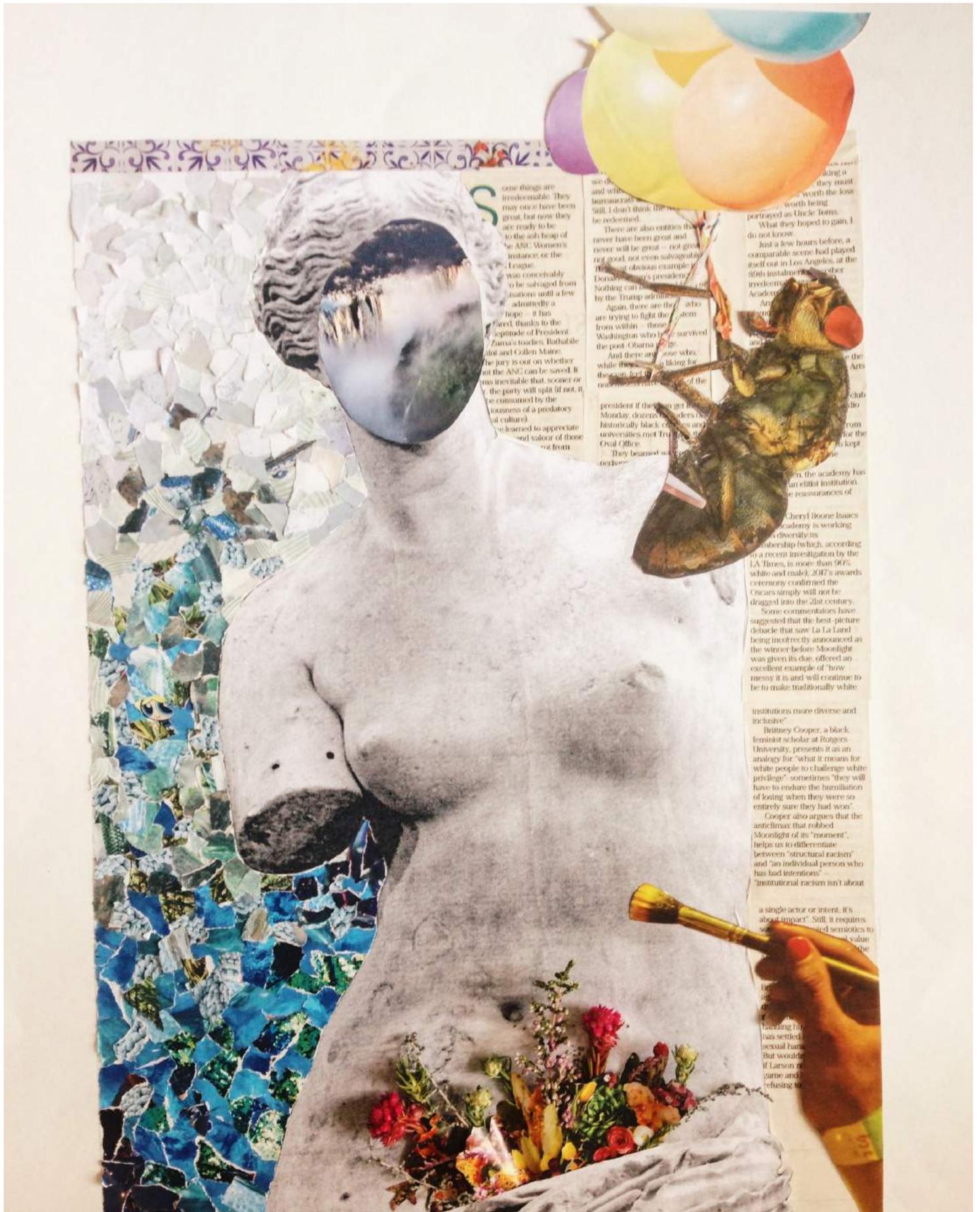
Faith Esene is a Nigerian-American undergraduate writer whose work often focuses on cultural duality. She values the ancient tradition of oral storytelling and views it as a nexus between the young and the old. When not writing she can be found reading, engaging in critical conversations, or embarking on culinary adventures. Her previous work has been featured in *Sterling Notes*, and *Love Letters to Our Daughters*.

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# Art

**Media Made** By Shannon Muller





Media Made

*My passion is painting, I have been painting since I was five years old (I'm now 20). I've recently found out my love for painting landscapes, the peacefulness it resonates in me is addictive! But I also love illustrating, I would always create fantasy characters before I learnt how to draw properly. I think what helps me in my journey and process of art is nature. Nature for me is art and art to me is spirit and exposure of the soul.*

*The acrylic mountains is a piece I did of a Drakensberg scenery, simply titled "Drakensberg" and the collage one is a recent piece I did titled "Media made", focusing on the style surrealism with the theme of stereotypes and social media. Women are constantly being brushed to conform to societies appeal for "perfection" and roles a women should be actively participating in. In means of bodily perfection. I used magazine bits and the newspaper to identify the media, they have a role in how people act. Her face is unidentifiable since it's not speaking to one person but rather a community of women being suppressed and undermined of our abilities. The flowers in her clothes are real dried flowers and represent our femininity.*

Shannon Muller is from Durban South Africa, currently studying a bachelor of Fine Art and taking psychology as a subject at Rhodes University in Grahamstown Eastern Cape. She loves to read, paint landscapes in her free time and sit in coffee shops. She aspires to be an illustrator and is currently working on selling hand painted cards in local coffee shops. In the time she's not studying she enjoys spending quality time with her family and her fiancé, this includes running and exploring her beautiful country.



**Overpass, West Valley Freeway**

*Every day over the summer, I walked across an overpass to the bus stop for my summer classes. During the last week of the class, I was walking back towards my house and I just thought the view was aesthetically pleasing, so I stopped to take a picture. Honestly, it doesn't hold any deeper meaning other than the fact that it's beautiful. The title itself is just the slightly altered name of an overpass sharing the same street name as the one pictured. Maybe you wanted a more poetic meaning behind the image, but that's all there is to it. I like taking pretty pictures.*

Elijah Laker is a freshman in high school. He enjoys baking, drawing, and working on multimedia projects. This is his first published work.

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## Potkop

*The photo was taken in an abandoned hidden military dock. It is now in ruins, but it once served the purpose of hiding – a shelter for boats and the people. The local name for it is “potkop”, a Montenegrin word that does not have an exact synonym in English, but could mean “something in the ground”. The tunnels are eerie and dark, intertwined and they sometimes seem infinite, but you always end up in the area where the ships were stored. There, the sun reflects on the tips of waves, and shadows fall on the walls wounded by graffiti. In the past twenty years, it has become a junkyard, with empty cans and broken glass, plastic bags and shattered rocks everywhere. Once again it is at war, not for the people, but with them. I’ve explored potkop since I was a toddler, and because of it, I fell in love with ruins; history and beauty hidden in the cracks.*

ana m. finzgar is a teenager from the mediterranean. she loves music, movies and exploring.

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**Sound of Music** By Kathy Li



*Music is typically conceived and consumed as an auditory experience, but it can also manifest in many other forms. On a quantitative level, music can be represented by notes, chord progressions, and sound waves. I wanted to capture the range of meaning that music takes on for different people, depending on each person's interpretation. Those with synesthesia, for example, may perceive music as an overlapping of sensory stimuli. Sound of Music is a reflection of the infinite ways of appreciating music, represented as a conglomeration of colors, motifs, and abstractions.*

Kathy Li is a sophomore at New York University studying media and communications. She hails from Rockville, Maryland and is passionate about fashion, art, film, and social justice. She has been making art since the age of seven, but her perfectionism more often hinders than helps the creative process. She is a firm believer in trusting one's instincts, but is slowly learning that making mistakes can be an eye-opening experience.

On a Friday night, you can usually find her jamming out to a Taylor Swift song or curled up with a good book.

## Book Review

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