

Issue 31

September 2023



Strung Along

Editor Note By Molly Hill

September 2023

Issue 31

Dear Readers and Writers:

Our Fall 2023 edition is the largest issue we've ever published. When we first started out back in 2015, we published quarterly (March, June, September, December) and then as time passed, added poetry supplements in January, July, and last year in November.

All of this was done in response to our steadily increasing submissions, and our attempt to publish more student writing.

Since we're an online journal we theoretically *could* just keep making our issues larger and larger: but we've got this budget.

From our very first issue, we've paid all our published writers, then added student editors, and paid them a stipend as well. Luckily we've got great grant support, but it's not unlimited,— so each one our online editions usually includes close to 30ish pieces of creative work, chosen from the hundreds (!) of submissions we receive.

This time around there was so much ART that was hard to say no to. A couple of good book reviews. Lots of skillfully written stories, great poems, and on point personal essays. We added as much as we could, but still ended up saying no to all kinds of outstanding publishable work.

We always encourage every student author to submit their work widely, to increase their chances of acceptance, and we let them know that if we turn down a submission, chances are it's because we don't have the room (budget) for it, and not a reflection on the quality of the work itself.

Our submissions have been closed for a couple of months, but they'll reopen September 1-December 1, as we welcome back our student writers and editors for another school year.

Thanks for staying with us for eight years! Keep writing and reading, and enjoy the issue.

Molly Hill

Editor

Poetry

Paying the Debts By Kayla Simon

Hours of therapy, weeks late payment from my parent's coat pockets.
Don't see the nutritionist anymore but she loved to talk about a copay.
I used my gift card to buy a journal & now it sits next to my bed, empty
threat. How do I account for the time between meals? I missed the bus
on purpose, wanted a longer walk. Don't think Mom trusts me anymore
but we both pretend. In the waiting room, I step backward onto the scale,
ask the nurse to give nothing away. Does the doctor remember me bone-light
at 16? After three hours on hold I give up. Buy every book about the body.
When I can't fall asleep anxiety presses the blanket tighter, I count breaths
and resist praying, resist resisting. On the worst mornings, sweatshirts
don't even feel right. In my car, garbage bags of jeans, tank tops, bras
that don't fit & the reason I've kept them so long is embarrassing.
buzzing, the new therapist takes payment over Venmo.
Here's to everything insurance doesn't cover.

Kayla Simon is a May 2023 graduate from the University of Connecticut, where she majored in English with a concentration in creative writing and double minored in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Communication. Her work has previously been published in New Square, Grub Street, Long River Review, and Red Cedar Review. When she isn't writing or reading, you can find her taking photos for her photography business or looking at the stars.

Winter Lemon By Cecilia Januszewski

It's brisk

And smells like the stars are thinking of snow on my way home from ballet class.

I have leather soled shoes that make me sound like a horse on the sidewalk
And am still sweating under my trench coat. I am running late
To bake with my neighbor. We do this every week.

Tonight is lemon meringue pie,
Which comes out runny and yolk yellow, smelling like marshmallow and citrus.
We cut it before it's cool and eat with spoons,
Standing quietly over the kitchen counter.

Outside the sky stretches thin and gray
And the sidewalks flex in anticipation of winter.

Inside, my apartment shimmers lemon yellow
And the warm scent of sugar glows,

Diffuse and golden, against the cold.

Cecilia Januszewski is a senior at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where she studies linguistic anthropology. She is currently editing the manuscript of her first novel and has been previously published in Manuscripts, Quibble, and Quabbin Quills, where she is now an editorial board member.

Five Yards By Sriya Bandyopadhyay

Thread work of gold,
Depicting mythologies of old.
It translates to “a strip of cloth”,
But hides a multitude of secrets.
Bearing south asian uniqueness,
Combatting stereotypes of female weakness.
In a world where women were beautiful figurines,
The sari gave them a role much more obscene.
The 5 yards taught me,
The importance of lucidity.
They showed me,
The power of elegance hidden ever so cryptically.

5 yards of subjectivity,
Embrace 5 eons of historically embedded complexity .
Accordion-like folds tucked in the front,
The silk is ironed so that not a single fold is blunt.
A systematic procedure,
The 5 yards teach us of a rule-lined ether.
One hundred and eight ways,
To wear a fabric worthy of much praise.
The 5 yards taught me
The strength of adaptation and resourcefulness.
They showed me my
Heritage of artfulness.

5 yards of inclusivity,
disregard 5 centuries of selectivity.
A size that fits all,
Unlike the glass slipper Cinderella wore to her ball.
A sign of coming-of-age,
A trust in maturity,
And not running away.
The symbol of a woman,
And an act of feminine insurance.
The cloth that is pleated
And tucked in the front,
Creates the figure of a woman who is completed
And safe from the hunt.
The 5 yards taught me
The revolution that lies in history.
They showed me,

How moving forward in social norms

Could only be done by reassessing ancient mystery.

Sriya (she/ her) is a high school senior living in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. She was born in Kolkata, India, and carries her Bengali heritage with her while traversing into unknown cultures. Her poems have been published with The Weight Journal, Teen Ink, KidSpirit, Elan Magazine, The Rolling Stone, and Footprints on Jupiter. Her poetry is inspired by the small details in her daily life, but speaks to larger ideas of personal growth. As an author, she has progressed from writing solely about external events, to internal revelations.

White Feathers By Almila Dukel

to hear icarus fall would have been to listen to the sea. to
sink into a dream built of tumbling noise, of waves foaming
into each other, the erratic hollow thump of heavy water
heaving itself against bound planks. then forgetting sound
when the world darkens, when a shadow-cast ship with

sails ballooning to catch the brilliant sun brings you into its sea-destined shade.

it passes; only the whistling sea birds extend their pinions to break uncut light into fractured beams, their voices a question on the bewildering limits of where earth meets shining sea.

your life dwindling within reach of that deep, unresting expanse – you begin to recognize a bending of distance, know you no longer listen to the sound of each new wave. their potency fades with the withdrawing of each tide, their fickle voices insisting upon changing with each cry, a boy falling into dark water is just another kind of splashing—no different than the sound some half-forgotten sailors made as bacchus, laughing, changed them into dolphins, then cast them into opening green water.

echoes of that laughter – do you hear it? no... the distance between time stretches far above this trembling prairie of changing blue. only pale feathers drifting up from where two legs disappear suggest an uncertainty.

but you are not wholly blinded; look and see: there stands a languid shepherd leaning upon his twisted staff, back to icarus, sea-gray eyes toward the skies.

perhaps he turned his head upon hearing the grieving keen of a father.

or simply the melancholy wail of a great white bird, flying
away.

Almila Dükel is a writer and poet who currently resides in Türkiye. She has had her creative work recognized in a number of international contests. Her haiku have been published in several journals, with poems appearing in *Modern Haiku*, *Frogpond*, and *The Heron's Nest*, among others.

Petrichor By Ellie Erich

Not a prayer, really, but something like a spell. Enough to slip to the surface of truth.
I step into the yard and the mourning doves firework into the grey.
Soften the sleet-slick bones.

Flood, or cleansing: flip the coin.

After the storm, the air hums. Pools stretch thin enough to hide an inch of depth,
or burrow between the broken ribs of the earth. Superposition, until the splash.
I've given up guessing.

From the window, air blurs into mosaic. I stir my coffee and fragment the cream-heart.
What we need to stay awake: throat, breath, warmth. Hook & eye,
for the world we weave with words. I have left only blue and grey.

Without thunder, the thinnest things seem intact.

Remembrance, piano, overripe pears. So many synonyms for leaving, or lingering too long.

Yeats: *Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

To think: something might still be awakening.

The ache in my wrists. Achromatic afternoons. Achilles, ink-stained heel. Anchor the chaos,

or alchemize it into an orchestra. Cauterize the echo, or it burns through the rain.

The present will poison you more than the past. In time, the fray of thread withers.

Listen closely and imagination stitches together the gaps. Patches in the voices down the street, the face beneath the red umbrella glossed with monochrome. A snatch of meeting, undertone of a phone conversation. Gesture brushing into embrace.

I remember now:

Cyclic connectedness, that is to say Carl Jung's collective unconscious.

Raindrops populating in the troposphere and cumulating on the concrete.

Everything falls (again / in the end).

Eva Skelding is a young writer from the Boston area. An avid poet, she loves exploring quiet and beautiful emotions through imagery and symbolism. She has previously been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers and has attended several creative writing programs, including the Iowa and Kenyon workshops for young writers. When

she's not writing or reading, you can find her practicing calligraphy or curating Spotify playlists.

sermon By Adesiyan Oluwapelumi

I am learning to hold a pen instead of a knife, to peel a metaphor open and find solace. To find salvation in the gospel of poetry. To hold grief like a shadow beneath the torch of imageries and carve words into therapeutic pills. I am learning to write my story in ways that defies fears. To drown in a sea of light every darkness rooted in the body. To diagnose, treat and to cure every ache. I am learning to palpate my tongue in a parenthesis of happiness and tranquility. I am learning to wear language like an hard skin, like a protective layer shielding me from the banes of existence. Here, in the realms of puns, I cull joy cradled in the follicles of consonance and assonance, and like a mother loves a child, I cuddle every confetti of diction. When I write, the bones of the dead quivers, chains splinter and bodies fall like rain into an ocean of cleansing water. With every pain written, the self is reborn, made into a being cured of wounds and scarring memories. When I write, I paint the landscape of my life and it is beautiful.

Adesiyan Oluwapelumi, TPC XI, is a poet/essayist from Nigeria. He was the winner of the Cheshire White Ribbon Day Creative Contest (2022) and the 1st runner up in the Fidelis Okoro Prize for Poetry (2023). His works are published in Poet Lore, Tab Journal, Poetry Wales, IHRAF, Brittle Paper and elsewhere. A 2023 Adroit Journal Summer Mentee and a 2023 Fellow of The SprinNG Writers Fellowship, he reads poetry for the

Kitchen Table Quarterly and is the Assistant Editor of Lean and Loafe Poetry Journal. He is the author of Ethos (Ukiyoto Publishing). He tweets @ademindpoems.

Calf at Sunset By Emma Berver

The calf's jaw feels gold-heavy.
When I cup her chin,
it glows slick with hunger.
An eagerness to savor
sits in the upwards slant
of her wide eyes.

Her bull's breath
heats my palm, condenses,
leaves a single drip of water
sliding against my wrist.
Within it, I can see
the small circle of the sun
reflected back at me,
as it slowly sets.

Two small dimples sit
where she was dehorned, hours after birth.
Dark feminine eyelashes, hot manly exhales,
I see in her a duality, so young she is still
part heifer, part bull, not yet re-signified.

I feel it in myself, too, as I
midwife a milking cow with
my gruff, calloused hands.

When her nose touches mine,
rife with presence,
it fills with an earthy sharpness
keen to begin a lifetime grazing,
head bowed, humbly.

To wean her from suckling,
she wears a spiked nose ring,
round and protruding,
that startles away the other cows
when it presses against
their soft bellies.

Her yearning, so instinctual,
was not built for bottle-feeding.
She juts her head forward,
lips curled and ready for attention,
towards me, instead.

My hands outstretched, I hold her head,
bearing her weight while she drinks.
I can feel her heartbeat through her neck
as I keep it tilted, unstrained,
pointed safely toward the sun as it sets,
the sky softening into flecks of gold against the dusk.

Emma Berver is a current student at Smith College pursuing a double major in English and Spanish along with the Poetry Concentration. She recently completed an internship at The Word Works, a poetry publication. Her work is forthcoming in *The McNeese Review*.

The Golden We By Kamilah Valentin Diaz

after Gwendolyn Brooks after Terrance Hayes

I think about what it means to be a 'we'
it requires a closeness tested and real

to feel time passing and the fire still blazing uncool-
ed and unbent a partnership unspent 'we'

survives and doesn't go out with a hit of the lights left
to their own devices ready to school

the 'I's in a trust that resists rust we
stay together, ride together, in each other we live and lurk

forever we lie within each other late-
nt in a love so blatant we

savor the taste of each other strike
'n out together- we are tethered on this unstraight-

end path all rickety and smattered with cracks we
fill them in together as we sing

songs outta tune lathered in sin
we croon, *ella lo que quiere es salsa**, we

feel our grins spreading, all our thin-
king needs to stop lets get our drinking on- hide the gin

it's for breakups and we
are not there yet because we are jazz

not built to last but meant to be had like a summer fling in late June
on a never ending loop and over in the blink of an eye we

are made up of a you and I even if one of us is to die
'we' remains a truth of a love gone too soon.

Kamilah Mercedes Valentín Diaz is a chronic over thinker and the author of *Moriviví: To Have Died yet Lived*, her debut poetry collection with Alegría Publishing. Originally from Puerto Rico, Kamilah has tons of experience with change, but during the pandemic she was forced to sit still. With so much time to spare and her mental health circling the drain Kamilah found refuge in writing. Her family, sheer stubbornness, therapy, and writing journey helped her come back to life. As a college senior attending Purdue University, Kamilah is studying Political Science with plans to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing after graduation.

(*from *ella lo que quiere es salsa*, by Victor Manuelle)

(expensive thoughts) By Benson Wang (Ben)

spinning, the world and I, I and the

world

boughs and cobble, earth, me, and life,

impossibly warm; cold or, perhaps, real.

I want more,

but the price is too much,

life, the world, and I,

the world

a wisteria that cannot

no. a grandeur I –

exhale.

perhaps in the next life, the world and I,

I and the world,

may be

Benson Wang (Ben) is an incoming first-year freshman at UNC. Recently turning eighteen and diving into the depths of adulthood, Ben is the founder of Phenom! Education and an avid fanfic author & reader.

Saltwater Taffy By Christian Paulisch

From the pier, we watch two gulls wander
overhead, the day oddly warm.

The sun has waxed the city
into speechlessness. Suspicious

of the island across the Bay,
you ask if prisoners really swam from there.

The reason, we'll learn, is obvious:
the best bars are in the city.

We sit and stare for a while, and you,
not nervous for once, take my hand.

We walk around the aquarium
where you pay just to watch me

giggle at the otters curled
like pieces of saltwater taffy.

We eat steak, drink Malbec, and at night,
at the bar, we become as we are meant:

two gulls, wandering, from the pier.

Christian Paulisich received his B.A. from the Johns Hopkins University and is a Master's candidate at Towson University. He lives in Baltimore, Maryland, but is originally from the Bay Area, California. In 2023, he received the Julie Sophia Paegle Memorial Poetry Prize from The Concrete Desert Review. His work has been published or is forthcoming from Blue Marble Review, New York Quarterly, Pangyrus, Rust + Moth, The Ocotillo Review, I-70 Review, Black Fox Literary Magazine, Invisible City, and others. He is a poetry reader for The Hopkins Review.

Mentally I Am Above Twenty Years Because My Mother Calls me Her Husband By

Hassan Usman

the rescuer

is what my siblings

think of me now

it doesn't matter

what my body

communicates

or how I have

designed my life

I am without a father

twenty-nothing

jobless

self-schooling

but I know that

whenever

mother calls me

okomi

which means

the family is starving

I must

go out by the butchery

buy meat

and then pepper

and two kongos of garri

even if

I must starve

or steal

or snatch from a

lifeless thing

I want to ask
is this how it also happens
in every home
without a head—
the first son
coming of age
watching himself run over
hurdles 10 inches
taller than him?

Hassan A. Usman, *NGP II*, is a Black Poet and a lover of cats. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Folksway Press*, *World Voices Magazine*, *Isele Magazine*, *Riverstone*, *Blue Route Journal*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Welter Journal*, *Invisible Lit*, *The Madrigal Press*, *Paper Lanterns*, *Trampset*, *Icefloe Press*, *Olumo Review*, *Lunaris Review*, *Afrocritik*, *Poetrycolumn-NND*, and elsewhere. He's an alumnus of the *SprinNG Writing Fellowship 2022*. Hassan enjoys cooking, listening to Nigerian street music, and juggles writing with modelling. Say hi to him on Twitter or Instagram @Billio_Speaks

Fiction

Things to Do in the Dark By Anna Steig

If all the day were turned to night, first I would light my cigarette and ask you to go stargazing. If no stars shone, we would raise up our lighters together and remember the sun; now that we have moonlight forever, we have learned to embrace brightness when it comes. Your smile is like light. A hazy glow emanates from your body whenever you draw near; like a fire, I feel your warmth before we even touch. I am never surprised to find you.

If all the day were turned to night and Earth had fallen still, we would drink until the sun came up – ha! Like a pair of thieves, we would tiptoe around the white picket fence neighborhoods and play games of cops and robbers with the women in their hair curlers and bathrobes – we would never get caught. Under cover of the spell of invisibility, like in the backyard fantasies of childhood, we could kiss and never talk about it; we could do our makeup without having to ever scrub it off. If the sky were dark and clouds were like cloaks, I might strut the streets in high heels, sweatpants, a floral blouse. I like those things. And you would wear nothing.

If all the day were turned to night and not a speck of light came through from heaven, we would never have to walk apart. No other jaded human soul would be able to see our faces or our chests – our heads would have already been shaved – and for the first time in our lives, I think we would blend in. In the dark, I think we could be like shadow people – we could be unseen.

Anna Louise Steig is a young writer from Hagerstown, Maryland, who will be pursuing an English degree at Shepherd University in fall 2023.

Future Astronauts By Lila Analfi

Mr. Kebler moved in during the hottest summer of our lives, when the flies got stuck in the space between the drapes and the window and died there. It was the summer when Charlie and I ran the AC full blast at one end of the apartment and fanned it with our

hands to carry the cool. We could afford to keep the AC running because Charlie worked nights at the pharmacy and because I worked as a part-time vampire hunter, part-time rabbit exterminator.

Standing in our doorway, Mr. Kebler said that he was moving into the apartment to our left, and that he worked as a retail agent for homes up in Michigan. I asked whether it snowed up in Michigan. He said it did.

Then Charlie took me by the arm. "This is my wife, May."

I shook Mr. Kebler's hand and said, "Charlie's wife, May."

Mr. Kebler looked me up and down. "Anyone ever told you you're built like an astronaut?"

"No."

"They don't tell you this in school. But there's a certain proportion that they look for in astronauts, and you fit the mold down to the centimeter."

"Is it cold in outer space?" I asked.

"Sure it is. It's very cold."

"Then I think I'd like to be an astronaut."

Charlie asked, "Do you have a wife, Mr. Kebler?"

Mr. Kebler said he did not have a wife. He returned to his apartment to unpack, leaving a bouquet of honey-scented flowers on our welcome mat. A droplet of water still trembled in the vial.

When the petals started to fall, I fought to preserve each purple scrap. Yet inevitably they would end up squished on the windowsill with the bugs, sun-sucked dry. Charlie caught me crying and laughed, as if amazed water still fell from eyes or from the sky or from anyplace, really. “Stop crying and go hunt a vampire,” he said. “That’s your job, isn’t it?”

I had picked up vampire hunting after Mama sent me a postcard of my little brother holding a gun, his hair long and ragged, though she never mentioned what he planned to shoot.

I hunted three vampires prior to night Mr. Kebler returned.

“Hello, May,” he said, stepping through the doorway and taking a seat at the table. Beneath his coated right arm, he clutched a helmet. It was white and plastic, smooth to the touch, with a logo reading NASA on the side. “It’s what astronauts wear.” He handed it over and said, “Try it on.”

It was cool and dark beneath the helmet.

From his bag, Mr. Kebler produced a bottle of wine. I brought over cups, and he poured two glasses like a waiter in the movies.

“Welcome to the Future Astronauts of America,” he said.

America meant a country and Future meant girls huddled in linoleum bathrooms without their mothers, crossing their thin fingers.

“It’s a club,” he explained, when I took off the helmet to stare. “For people like us.”

“For people who would make good astronauts?”

“That’s right.”

Mia had wanted a car. Belinda had wanted to marry a hot vampire. I had wanted to be a judge on TV, slamming down that wooden hammer. Guilty. Innocent. Guilty. Mama would’ve called it playing God, but Mama was dead.

Charlie came home late the next morning, knuckles scraped raw, asking why I had left glasses out on the table.

“I was celebrating,” I said.

“Celebrating what?”

I shrugged. “Life.”

“You don’t need two glasses to celebrate life.”

“I do.”

Guilty.

I lied again when I begged Charlie to buy a fan to fight the heat climbing up my torso like water up a flower’s stem, parching me from the inside out. I told Charlie I was afraid to die, but the Future Astronauts of America did not fear death. Mr. Kebler talked about men who exploded into a million bits as soon as their rocket lifted from the ground, or men who went off-course and drifted through the endless blackness until they starved. But I *was* afraid that the helmet I had hidden in the closet would slowly melt away – drip, drip, dripping into nothing but a sizzling puzzle.

“Which planet is coldest?” I asked Mr. Kebler one night, licking cookie crumbs off the edge of my lip.

“Whichever is farthest from the sun, probably. Probably Neptune.”

I tasted the syllables on my tongue. “I’d like to go to Neptune.”

And then Mr. Kebler kissed me, his lips touching my helmet where my mouth should be.

The next morning, Charlie returned from work and flipped off the fan and piled our belongings into the suitcase in the corner. When he came upon the helmet in the closet, he said, “I thought you were a werewolf ballerina.”

Charlie had many wrong thoughts – that I loved him, for one.

“Not anymore,” I said. “Now I’m an astronaut.”

“Where we’re moving, I think you’d rather be a werewolf ballerina. More space to dance.”

“Where are we moving to?” I asked.

“Not far.”

“Will it be colder there?”

“It isn’t far.”

Lila Anafi is a part-time freelance writer and editor. Her writing has received regional recognition in the Scholastic Writing Awards, and she is set to be published in the Ginosko Literary Journal.

So You Want to Go to Harvard By True Pham

With your grades? And your skin color? Not a chance. Go to an info session or two and humor your parents with the whimsical idea that you might proudly don a Crimson gown at your college graduation, and then accept the reality that the best crimson you'll wear will be in Tuscaloosa (roll tide!).

College admissions are scary, especially for you, anxious and self-loathing teenager. I'm here to help make it a little less scary. It'll save us both the headache if you can understand that it doesn't matter where you go, so it'll be best to choose the place that you can afford in a climate that you can tolerate (it gets frosty in New England).

When other aspirational eighteen-year-olds come to me, soliciting guidance, I have them answer these three questions:

1. Are you poor?
2. Are you particularly talented in anything? Do people other than your mother recognize your talent?
3. Do you want to go to college? Why?

That last one is particularly puzzling to people, and it's my favorite of them all.

Something you will soon realize is that not everyone has to attend college, and that not everyone *should* attend college, and that *you*, the most generic of students, might be one of those 'shoulds.' You remember those D.A.R.E. sessions in middle school? The ones where the cops herd everyone into a classroom to give a 45-minute lecture on the evils of drug use and how to combat peer pressure? Too many kids go to college because it's the next step in a path prescribed to them by their parents, their teachers, their friends, society and whatnot. It's hard, I know, but try and see if you can 'just say no' to college if it's not right for you.

If you are persistent on attending college, then I will help you figure out which schools you can apply to. If the answer to the first question is 'yes, you are poor,' then limit yourself to in-state public options or the most elite of private schools—they'll pay for everything and then some. Disclaimer for these schools is that it becomes incredibly apparent that you are significantly poorer than other students, and I mean *significantly*. You might go camping during Spring Break while they're spearfishing in the Maldives. You might take the bus to your local Walmart once a month and pass by Cory from Chem 133 driving an Alfa Romeo. It is very easy to identify the wealthy students in the winter based on their brand of parka (watch out for Canada Goose). Try to develop your code-switching abilities, master the prep-school dialect, and you may find yourself rubbing shoulders with the sons of CEOs and the daughters of heart surgeons. If code-switching isn't to your liking, you'll find company with the other financial aid kids during vacation periods who also can't afford to fly home more than once a semester (hope you like dining hall food).

Next, determine if there's anything special about you. Are you good at anything? You don't have to be a world-class hockey player or the next chess grandmaster Magnus Carlsen, but are you solidly above-average at any activity, and can you prove it? It doesn't matter if you won an award from your school's Rubik's Cube club for 'Most Improved' or you were invited to teach fourth graders about the woes of nitrates in the water supply —is there some external recognition of your competence? This is your marketability as a candidate: sell it! If you aren't talented at anything (likely), tell them about an interest of yours. It doesn't matter how inconsequential that interest has been on your life, or how niche the interest is. In fact, the nicher

the interest, the more it sets you apart. Convince the admissions office that you will be that one kid that is really into Chinese yo-yos, or that you will start the Kyrgyzstani Culinary Club.

Once you figure out your marketing strategy, it is time to prepare for rejection, and you will be rejected quite profusely. After the first few rejections, you rationalize and reason, you just weren't the right fit or it was a longshot anyway (no one even wants to go to Princeton). After several roll in, then you start to question yourself. Did you forget to include your transcript? Did your teachers write incorrigible recommendations? Are you just stupid? Your mom will comfort you, reassure you that you'll get in to a few. What does she know. Back in her day, if you were literate and mildly law-abiding you could go to Stanford on a full-ride. Now you have to testify in front of the FTC about antitrust policy just to get into Georgetown. Your safeties get back to you, but it's little consolation to settle for UT Dallas when your classmates announce their admission to Rice. You go to school, kids already wearing their future college sweatshirts. Use every impulse of self-control to stop yourself from setting these people on fire along with their sweatshirts. Your college counselor counsels you, tells you that you were a sure thing to get into Georgia Tech, that it's always a toss-up. Thank them for their sympathy, Ms.

Salinas is trying her hardest, and you wander the halls like a lost ghoul, the misery and self-loathing burning in the back of your head like a bonfire. You will remember this feeling.

You need to burn off steam. Text your group chat of best guy friends, the ones that you forget about all of your obligations with and blow off steam chucking melons off of cliffs after midnight, but they don't respond quick enough for you. Ask your parents if they want you to pick up dinner so you have an excuse to drive the Mazda. As you open the garage and watch the amber hue of streetlights trickle onto the concrete slabs below your feet, you see the neighbors across the street have put up a congratulatory poster for their child—MIT. Good for her. You're in too much of a rush to queue music from your phone so settle for the radio. You haven't heard this station since you rode the bus in sixth grade. As you begin to cruise down the highway, fixate on your very proximate and uncertain future. You can't remember the last time you were happy, but then you think that's too dramatic. And it is. But then wonder why this has affected you so deeply? Question why you are so emotionally invested in these decisions. Blame your classmates, your teachers, your school, your generation. Then remember your parents, the immigrants that worked night shifts to pay for your SAT tutoring, the ones that never went to college. Remember your mother, the one who told everyone how you were going to be the first person in your family to go to college, how you were going to make everyone so proud when you inevitably got into Harvard. Twitch at the thought.

Eventually arrive at your spot, the overlook on the west side of town where you sneaked smooches before curfew with the captain of the swimming team, where you learned that there is such a thing as too much tongue. Sit along the brick guardrails and survey the sumptuous suburbs that have encroached on your home. It is here where you meditate, but not really, because you are nowhere near calm enough to consider it meditation. Fume, pout, stew. And amidst the beauty of city lights, bury your head into your knees. A salty drop floats off your chin and floats down the cliff, drifting into the airy foliage of oak leaves beneath. Your solitude is disturbed by a vibration in your pocket—an email

notification. It's a decision letter. Immediately unlock your phone and click the link to your admissions portal. The reception is bad so get in the car and drive down the mountain. When it finally loads, pull over on the side of the road.

I am writing to inform you that the Committee on Admissions and Financial Aid cannot at the time make a final decision on your application for a place in next year's entering class. However, because of your outstanding achievements and promise, the Committee has voted to place your name on a waiting list of men and women for whom we hope places may become available.

Re-read the message six times. Stop halfway through the seventh when you get a text from your mom. *Waitlisted! It's not perfect but it's a start. Good things are coming your way <3.* You weren't sure how to feel, but after reading the text, a grin creeps in. Remember that, in the end, it doesn't matter where you go, and that you'll pave your own path. Remember that college doesn't create successful people—you determine your worth. Remember that the to-go order your mom placed is ready, and put the Mazda into Drive.

True Pham studied creative writing and Political Economy at Williams College. He is the recipient of the Benjamin B. Wainwright Award for Best Fiction (2021). He is an avid soccer player, film lover, and he will be working in Vietnam next year as a Fulbright Fellow.

The Tick Tock Man By Liza McGilpin

The ticking grew louder and he was struck with a familiar longing for disbelief. The knowledge was his chaotic lover and he shied away from her bruising touch. His body was a mosaic of her kisses, scars, each larger than life.

He wondered how it would happen this time. Fire, skin sliding off his coworker's protruding frame like rib meat does a bone? Sleep, the consumption of an eternal dream? The way it happened was the only thing left to chance. His mind was at the mercy of this indecisive Nature.

His coworker had begun to tick six days ago in the conference room. They had been the only two inside, both plagued with morbid punctuality. She had been writing something, black hair falling in her eyes. The room was silent, save for the sound of the pencil violating her notepaper.

The man's head started to ache. A sour bile penetrated his taste. And then it began, quiet as first, as it always was. The clock. The *tick tick* that made him crave death, crave the blessed ending to the noise.

He called in sick the next three days, the separation dulling the chimes, though the sound never truly stopped.

But it was Monday now. He was back in the office and the ticking began to swell. Death was near. He could always sense it.

With the coworker it was an unbearable tragedy. She was pregnant, the ticking twice as loud. The man felt terrible for her husband. He had met the soft-spoken man at the baby shower, and he had seemed like a decent fellow. The two had been so happy that day, and in the last six months, despite the pain, the aches, there had always been a smile on his coworker's face.

She would die before morning.

He had first discovered his talent in third grade. Before then, he thought everybody heard the clock. Whenever he complained about the ticking to his mother, she would shrug it off, chalking it up to childhood imagination.

The ticks were fluctuating storms, thundering and lulling. He had never assigned them any meaning until the day of his classmate's death.

They had been schoolmates, circumstantial friends that never saw each other outside the elementary walls. Usually they played together at lunch, in the sandbox, or by the woods. However, in those last days, the boy hadn't liked playing with his classmate. The ticking had begun to hurt; it was so loud that he had cried for his mother, fearful that he was going deaf.

Four days after the ticking began, his classmate died in the cafeteria. He had choked on a slice of pizza, and that had been that.

The ticking had gone quiet.

As he grew, the boy learned to manage the ticks. He avoided clocks, as they became synonymous with precognition. A young man now, he followed a strict set of rules that gave his life the illusion of normalcy. Avoid crowds at all costs. Don't tell anyone that they are going to die. Don't treat them any differently. Feign surprise when your pregnant co-

worker falls off a ladder and splits her head in two. Don't tell anybody about your gift. Don't get attached to people. And under no circumstances may you ever fall in love. Love is nothing more than the quantification of chaos.

He broke that last rule on the day he met the woman.

Time skipped after the death of his coworker, the days feeling empty like a slice of Swiss cheese. Their department had been given a week off. The man now wandered in the rain, staring up at the morose sky. His hair began to dampen with the water, and he grew worried that his face would soon follow. He stopped in front of a crowded coffee shop, chilled to his bones and shivering like a mad man. He opened the door tentatively, wincing as the ticking began to puncture his bruised mind. Voices swelled, pregnant with jubilant laughter and contented life.

As he closed the door behind him, his overcoat was caught and the man stumbled to the floor. He heard laughter, and looked up from the coffee-stained carpet.

There was a woman there, on her way out of the shop. Her hair had been in long red braids then, when she still had hair to style. Her eyes were gray and full of mischief, and the man couldn't help but smile, despite the rugburn that scarred his palms.

She helped him up, extending a long hand, thin and pale as a crescent moon. There was a book under her arm, one he had read many times over.

"That's a good book," he said, regaining his footing. He pulled his coat out from the door, dismayed by the slight snag in the black fabric.

"It's rather boring so far," the woman said, her voice like cream. "I'm partial to something with a little more action."

“You should try his other book then. The pacing is better.”

“The one about the spy?”

“Which other would it be?”

She laughed again and that had been the start. They exchanged numbers and names, promising to do a book swap in the following week. And miraculously, they did.

The first book she gave him had been terrible, the second wonderful. Sometimes they would meet up at the coffee shop, other times the park. She would always drink coffee, he a chai.

He resisted it at first, the feeling in his chest like buzzing bugs zipping about. The butterflies bursting through his heart. The warm, fuzzy feelings like the fur of a caterpillar. But the worm of love ate into his skull and there was nothing he could do. He hated himself for it, for breaking the rule. But he loved her more.

The ticking had become quieter as he spent more time with the woman, and for this, with a regard for their mutual attraction, their interactions began to increase exponentially. After their sixth meeting he asked her on a proper date, and she said yes. Three months later, they moved in together.

They had seven good months before things started to go wrong. Seven months of watching films, going on bike rides through the town. Seven months of literature and laughter. Seven months of dancing in the rain. Seven months of intimate whispers. Seven months of happiness. Seven months going on eternity.

Then the ticking began.

It started slow, quiet. He first thought it was another coworker, the sound so faint it could have been wind. But as the days passed, and later months, he knew what the ticking foreshadowed. It was louder at home, as it had been when his mother passed. A different tale with the same ending.

Then she began to cough.

The cancer had been slow. It took her as a sloth grabs a leaf.

He wanted to be with her when it finally happened. He tried to walk through the hospital doors. But in that place, the place of death, the collective noise had been louder than bombs.

A week later he was alone in their bedroom. The walls had grown barren, stained only by the torn-off tape of her photos and pictures. As he sat on their bed the ticking started again, this time louder than anything he had ever heard before. His teeth ached in their sockets and his marrow seemed to bubble. Tears sprung to his eyes with reflex, and he groaned and screamed into their useless sheets.

The pounding never stopped. The ticking never ceased, it never had. His bones felt like they were twisting, gnarled branches of a dying tree. Somehow he stood up, stumbled to the bathroom.

On the top shelf of the cabinet there was a bottle of pills. He had long since forgotten what they did, what they cured. It no longer mattered. He took the jar and unscrewed the child's cap, placed there for the child they never had.

And finally, the ticking stopped.

Liza is a sixteen-year-old student from California who loves reading horror novels and writing existential stories in her spare time. *The Tick Tock Man* follows a tortured man and his struggles with a unique ability, the burden of hearing how close someone is to death.

The Thief By Rehan Sheikh

I remember this incident very vividly. We were living in Delhi near Humayun's Tomb in a small wayside cottage. Usman had just come to work at our house as a replacement for our old servant, who had been incapacitated by tuberculosis to run errands. Owing to his expertise in household chores, he soon became indispensable to us. He would sleep at night in our compound, where a rug had been allotted to him.

It was September and the equinoctial winds had set in. Father had to leave for Simla, and Mother had to go to Calcutta to grandmother's house. I was left alone with Usman. All was well until night. The summer gale howled and shrieked, raging through the city like an untamed beast which had escaped from its cage. The window beside me trembled and thunderstorms crashed in the pitch-black sky.

I could not sleep. The strange noises of the violent storm scared me out of my wits. I kept looking outside the window to assure myself that no one was there, far and near. But I could not stand it any longer, and opened the window from which one could see the compound. I called out to Usman, and asked him to sleep with me for the night. He agreed immediately.

Usman came upstairs and laid his rug on the floor. He quietly slept on it. After a long moment of silence, he said in a comforting tone, "*Babusahib*, go to sleep. I am here. Do not worry- The rain will die down soon."

But nothing could stop the wind. Neither could I fall asleep, nor did the wind give any hint of relent. Usman was still fast asleep, or so I thought. I was still uneasy in bed, waiting for Father to knock at the door anytime soon. I kept my eyes closed, trying to get some sleep, but in vain. It was around 3.30 am. Usman suddenly woke up with a shudder, and raised himself to my bed. He glanced at me, checking whether I was deep asleep or not. I did not move.

Then I saw Usman suddenly standing up. I still lay as a dead man. He walked upto the study, pulled the bedroom drawer, very quietly, and started rummaging through the papers. They were mostly Father's official papers, which he had kept securely in that drawer. I suddenly felt that they were not any more 'secure'. Usman kept scouring through these papers.

I started getting worried. What was he in search of? Was he trying to steal something of value? I had never, in the past, seen Usman in such a state of desperation. Suddenly, he took his hands out from the heap of papers and I saw a golden ring glinting in his hands. I instantly recognised that it was the watch which my my aunt had sent for me from America. On having found the ring, he leapt with joy and whispered something to himself. He glanced at me once again to ensure that I was not disturbed. I still lay quietly on the bed.

Usman moved around the room to check if any other item of value was there. His eyes fell upon the small, golden case which was placed on my study table. He took it in his hands and examined it with curious eyes. It was my treasured silver pen that I had received as a gift from my father.

Usman put his previous possession into a plastic packet, which he acquired from the dustbin by my table. Before putting his next success into the packet, he once again looked at it. The case itself glimmered brightly in the dim light of the dawn. What a fool I was to have kept that case there!

The clock struck six. The sun had now begun to stage itself in the sky. As soon as Usman put the case in his packet and tried to leave the room, the *azaan* rang out. Having lived beside a mosque since my boyhood days, I had long accustomed myself to this morning prayer's call by the muezzin. Suddenly, the packet dropped from Usman's hands. It seemed as if he was in a trance; he stood still without any movement.

The raw sunlight of the morning entered through the lattice filigree and melted on him like butter as the *azaan* rang out. Tears rolled down from his eyes. He fell to the floor, indifferent to the world around him. I moaned, but Usman stood, absolutely still like a stone image cut of granite. Only the tears ran down his cheeks. With cupped hands, he cried out "Ya Allah!"

Usman had been about to commit the sin of stealing, but the *morning prayer* stopped him dead in his tracks. He came to his senses and immediately repented. I don't think he ever stole anything again in his life.

Azaan- a prayer practice by Muslims.

Babusahib- a form of addressing young children from rich families.

Rehan Sheikh writes short stories, memoirs and articles. His work, *The Roaring Himalayas* won him the Elan Middle School Writing Contest 2020. Since then his works have appeared in various leading magazines and newspapers. His work has also been recognised by HarperCollins India.

“I’m afraid we’re snowed in.”

Miss Roseborn’s words made a loud echo in the schoolhouse. Ten students stared at their teacher blankly. Surely she was wrong.

These children were the oldest in school—all ranging from ages fourteen to sixteen. They were studying for a final exam today, so they were at school earlier than usual. All the other children of Maple Creek were at home.

“Will we be here until evening?” Jayne asked finally.

Miss Roseborn nodded. “You might be able to get home this evening. But definitely not at eleven in the morning, like we had planned.”

Everyone looked worried.

“Well, what will we do at eleven, when we’re done studying?” Kate wondered.

There was a general commotion as everyone volunteered their ideas. Miss Roseborn watched them. She wondered how on earth she’d manage to live a day alone with ten teenagers in this room. But she knew she was the only adult present, and she ought to bring some order.

“Silence, please,” she said loudly. The commotion slowly stopped.

“We must think practically first,” she said. “Do all of you have your lunches?” Ten nods. “Alright. So we’ll have enough food for the day, since you’ll probably be able to get home by six or so and eat dinner.” She looked at the corner of the room where the fireplace was. “The fire is kindled. Do you all have water?” Ten more nods. “Well, I’d advise you to not drink very much today, because there’s three feet of snow outside and I don’t know

how you'll go to the outhouse in THAT." She sighed. "Well, you're all too hyper to work. So it seems that we'll have to amuse ourselves a bit before we study. Does anyone have suggestions on what to do?"

Lily suggested that they just talk, a skill that she was very good at. Reluctantly, Miss Roseborn agreed. "But only for a half hour."

Everyone dispersed into groups, but each group eventually merged together and sat on the floor. Somehow, the wailing storm outside had forced the teens closer together. Some of them expressed worry about the storm. Others were less worried. Maple Creek was a snowy town, and this storm didn't seem particularly severe.

"I have an idea," Miss Roseborn said after the half hour had passed. "Since you all seem to have a need to talk, we're going to tell stories."

"Stories?" Simon said. "We're not five."

Miss Roseborn gave him a look that made him shrink back into his seat. "Not stories like that. I want each of you to tell the class a *true* story about something interesting that happened to you. It should be appropriate, and not too..." She paused. "Well, I was going to tell you not to make it too long. But seeing as we're stuck here all day....make it as long as you want."

"Can it be really short?" Peter asked.

"No. Who wants to go first?"

Everyone except Simon and Peter raised their hands. So, with the help of a few students, Miss Roseborn wrote everyone's name on strips of paper and placed the paper into a box. She closed her eyes, mixed the strips around, and pulled one out.

“Jayne Marble.”

“Goodies!” Jayne said. “I already know what I’m going to talk about.”

Simon and Peter shut their eyes and prepared for a good nap. Ignoring them, Jayne continued.

“It was a dark, cold, chilly night,” she said dramatically. “The moon hung over the Marble family’s home in Maple Creek. A lantern sat in their window, and an eager face was next to it.”

Peter sat up a bit straighter in his chair now, with his eyes open. Simon was still sleeping.

“Do you have to talk about yourself in third person?” Rebecca asked.

“I never said she couldn’t,” Miss Roseborn said.

“It’s more fun that way,” Jayne said. “Anyways. Theresa Marble was at the train station, clutching the hand of her daughter next to her. They were very excited, for they were about to receive the most special surprise of their lives.”

“She’s talking about when her family adopted Teddy,” Lily whispered loudly.

“Class!” Miss Roseborn said. “There will be no more interruptions or I won’t let *anyone* tell a story.”

Everything was quiet after that.

“Before arriving at the train station,” Jayne continued, “Mom had told me that we would be adopting a baby. I had always wanted a younger sister. I told Mom everything that I wanted in my new sister—how I wanted her to have curly brown hair like mine, and

black eyes, and be playful and kind and easy to boss around. Mom, of course, told me that I shouldn't be looking at the outside, but at the inside.

"The orphanage had sent Mom a letter in the mail with little boxes on it. The boxes listed traits, like 'curly-haired' or 'green-eyed', you know. Mom ripped the letter up and threw it away.

She mailed her own letter back to the orphanage and said she would take whatever baby needed a home the most, no matter what it looked like.

"I didn't fully understand why she did that. I still wanted a brown-haired, black-eyed baby just like how I looked when I was born. And I just couldn't bring myself to accept anything else.

In the weeks before the baby came, we prepared a nursery in the house. Mom and Dad were so excited. It was almost like Mom was having a real baby.

"Like I said, the night that we received the baby was very dark and cold. Mom and I went to the train station while Dad stayed back home. Dad kept looking out the window every five minutes, he was so excited.

"As we waited at the station, the train screeched to a halt in front of us. About a dozen people got out, including a woman carrying a baby. Since it was pretty dark, we couldn't see the baby very well, but I knew immediately that she—or should I say *he*—was nothing like what I had wanted.

"I bit my lip and held everything in, all the way home, until I exploded in the dining room. I wept and wailed with all of my seven-year-old might. I told Mom how much I had wanted a girl not a boy. How everything with this boy was completely wrong. My mom was

disgusted with me, but I kept wailing. Mrs. Thompson actually came running over because she thought we'd been robbed."

Jayne took a deep breath. "I wouldn't even talk to the baby at first, because I was so upset. It's not that I thought he was ugly. He was a beautiful little baby. It was just that he was the absolute opposite of what I had pictured him to be." She sighed. "It wasn't easy for any of us in the house during those first few weeks. But eventually, I adapted to the situation, like all humans would. My little brother warmed up to me, and I warmed up to him. I realized how ugly my attitude had been. I learned a lot about what I thought was cliché—looking at the inside of people instead of the outside. And..." She smiled sheepishly. "That baby became Teddy Marble."

The room was silent for a few seconds. Everyone knew how much Jayne loved and protected her little brother. They had their arguments, but they got along much better than most siblings did. It was beyond surprising to know that Jayne hadn't wanted Teddy when she first saw him.

"Wow," David said, breaking the silence.

Miss Roseborn was eager to extract a moral out of this story. "Have any of you ever wanted someone you were meeting to look a certain way? Or maybe you've judged people on how they look?"

Everyone looked uncomfortable.

"I'd really like it if a few of you could share," she prodded. "Of course, you don't have to. But you know what? I'll share, to make everyone comfortable. I have *always* judged people based on looks."

Ten shocked faces exchanged glances.

“I know,” Miss Roseborn said. “I’m trying to stop, though. I’ve met too many wonderful people who aren’t beautiful to believe that only beautiful people are smart, or friendly, or talented. There are beautiful people who have those qualities, and there are beautiful people who don’t.”

The classroom was silent for a moment more, reflecting on the story. It had touched each student in the room. Whether they wanted to admit it or not, each of them had judged someone else based on their looks, clothing, or weight. Jayne’s bravery, though, encouraged everyone in the room to share their own stories. James Muller, in particular, wanted to share a story that was similar to Jayne’s. He held his breath as he watched Miss Roseborn pick a name out of the hat. She read it out loud.

“James Muller.”

It was time for another story.

Deborah loves reading, art, and baking. She’s adored writing since she was little. As a child, she filled up journals with recollections of everyday events and stories about girls her age (who happened to like reading, art, and baking). “Snow Stories” is her first published work.

The Coffee Shop By Fadilah Ali

I am at the coffee shop three months after my father’s death, when I develop a strong thirst for an extra foamy cappuccino.

I decide to make it myself, directly on the stove, like he used to. In the brief moment before I head from the front door to the kitchen at the back, I lean against a wall and watch the scene, my head resting on a frame of purple interlocking triangles. Inside our coffee shop, it is nice and warm, the air redolent with oven-hot scones, croissants, buns, cakes, doughnuts, cookies, pies, and coffees of every brew and flavour. I move around for a while, returning a pleasant nod from one customer and offering my compliments to another. It is heads, shoulders and moving hands hovering over the mahogany table tops. I maneuver the spaces around the tables, careful not to knock my fragile knees into a chair, or worse, bump into a barista carrying a customer's order.

Most of the customers around are elders; friends and associates of my father. I try not to catch them staring at me. I see the sympathetic expressions on their faces, the noiseless sighs they heave before taking another sip of coffee. When I catch their eyes, I manage a smile as bright as it is fake. Old Roger, with his characteristic solemn expression, sees me and raises both eyebrows in acknowledgement. My lips curve into a small smile. Like always, he is alone at his table, eating a large doughnut with his pumpkin spice latte. His spindly fingers hold on tight to the day's paper.

I stop by the espresso machine on the back counter and retrieve the transparent pot of roasted arabica beans before strolling into the warm kitchen. There are three workers—my father's employees—moving tirelessly, each in separate stages of pastry making. I exchange a few greetings with each of them; Harold, a bushy-haired man with a perpetual about-to-sneeze look on his face, Wale, a younger man whose woolen mittens dangle from his yellow apron, and good Sylvia, a lifelong friend of my father. I put a small pot of milk to the boil. Then, I fetch a handful of rough coffee beans from the handy little pot and set them on a tiny mortar, ready to pestle them to an airy smoothness.

Five minutes later, I tuck my hair behind an ear and put down the pestle, satisfied with the results despite the burn I feel across my upper arm. Tiny coffee particles float in the air and tickle my nostrils. Harold sneezes ever-so-softly in the distance. I cart the fine

powder into the espresso machine, and return to the now bubbling milk, suddenly at a loss for what to do next.

Soon, the milk spills over. I know it is not supposed to spill over. But my mind goes blank. There is someone else standing with *my* feet, watching the boiling milk dance energetically with *my* eyes, hearing the sharp hiss of the fire below as it protests contact with liquid using *my* ears, and sniffing the aroma of baking dough and boiling milk with *my* nose.

My father would know what to do next.

This is the strange thing about sudden death; the way it matures those left behind. You don't know how to deal with this foreign emotion that arrives as a visitor, but stubbornly overstays its welcome. You don't realize how coping with the loss has impressed on you the urgent need to be serious, to smile no longer, and to shut yourself from the world. The pain sears your insides, and attacks your throat with the bitter, constricting sensation that always comes before the tears. But you cannot cry anymore, because it is a luxury that the expectations of well-wishers have gently snatched. You master the art of feeling many things at once, thinking many thoughts at the same time. How you need to appear before people as the right amount of sad, how the last time you drank coffee was at dinner, three months ago with your dad, how it spilled copiously on your white t-shirt and scorched your chest, how hard he laughed when you complained that coffee only ever spilled when you had white shirts on, how you will never again hear that warmhearted, rasping laughter, how hard it is to accept he just went to bed and never woke up. You will hold on to every memory for the longest, every frown and whisper, every goodbye hug, and every eyelash. And you will wish you didn't have to mature this way.

I take a deep gasp and a few steps back. No one seems to notice my almost breakdown so I grope for a cane chair nearby. The heat of the kitchen, burning milk, baking food and all, strikes at my face and neck. I motion to Sylvia to seek her help, seeing as she's loaded the last tray of doughnuts into the oven. She nods, dusts her flour-coated hands on her green tartan apron before approaching me.

I like Sylvia. She is the most relatable despite being nearly thrice my age. She stands before me in an instant. She has bright blue eyes, a small, friendly stature and a perfect spray of freckles.

"Holy sassafras!" Sylvia exclaims. It is hard to believe that she'd not noticed the milk on fire till then. "First of all, turn it off." She takes two steps to the large burner, and puts off the stove with a flourish. She does the same with the whirring espresso maker. "How have you forgotten that, kiddo?"

I laugh nervously, and she joins in, clapping me on the shoulder. "I don't know... I was thinking of him." My nostrils flare as I gasp again, ending with a semi-conscious shrug.

"Your father?"

I nod. Who else?

She takes my hand and squeezes it. Her touch is dry and intimate, and when she lets go, there are specks of flour on my wrist. She draws out a cane chair for herself. There is a certain sweetness to her persona, one that reminds you of your favourite ice cream flavour

"Listen, D. Your father was a most kind and loving man. He lived an extraordinarily kind and peaceful life. And he passed away the way he'd lived. He'd want you to move on."

At her words, a bitter constricting sensation attacks my throat. My grief is fresh like newly-ploughed earth. There is a picture frame of my father right on the opposite wall. In the picture, I see the vibrant smile my father always had. The warm tenderness of his sunken black eyes. The shadow of his widow's peak covered with a black beanie. The space between his eyebrows that perfectly accommodated my lips in my forehead kisses. He liked it when I jumped on him, even as I grew older and bigger. When I close my eyes, I see him attempt to make foam art of my face in a latte cup. The way his eyes dart to and from my face. The vestiges of youthful strength in his movements. His excellent hand-eye coordination. His vibrant smile as he tells me to put the stove back on, and make my extra foamy cappuccino.

I draw closer to Sylvia. She gathers me in her arms and strokes my hair as the stream of tears swallow my voice, as I cry my heart out for the first time since my father died.

Fadilah Ali is a Nigerian writer living in Edo State. A Best of the Net nominee, her work has appeared in Alternate Route, Isele Magazine, and Overtly Lit among others. Find her on Twitter @/bythealmondtree.

Zipperman By Julian Riccobon

Sometimes the Zipperman likes to think that his job is sacred; so predictable in its routine, that it has become a solemn ritual. Every day like clockwork, he climbs into the driver's cabin of his tram and sets the machinery in motion while San Diego still sleeps. And then, at a speed of 3.8 miles per hour, he rumbles his way along the arched spine of the Coronado Bridge, soaking up the world in slow-motion.

Every morning, it is the same story, como siempre. He knows the route better than anyone; five lanes of traffic, two eastbound and two westbound, with one center lane that changes direction twice a day. His job is simple: unzip the center lane in the

morning. Zip it up again in the evening. Sleep, and then repeat. Muy fácil, his boss told him, because the lane-changer machine runs on autopilot.

Even still, the Zipperman knows that his job is important; vital even, to the circulation of traffic. He is the one who changes the meridian between the opposing lanes, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, to indicate the shift in direction. He is the man who moves concrete dividers from one side of the lane to the other, to accommodate rush hour traffic.

Sometimes, he likes to think of himself as the keeper of some ravenous beast. A snapping turtle, maybe, or a Gila Monster. He is the one who rides this hungry reptile. *¡Tranquilo!* *¡Tranquilo!* He is the guiding hand that steers it safely from Barrio Logan to Tidelands Park.

Along the way, the monster devours everything in its path. The concrete dividers disappear into the mouth of the tram, and underneath him the machine thrums and rumbles, digesting... Behind him, the dividers reemerge from the back of the tram, this time on the opposite side of the lane.

The pace is slow, the asphalt rugged and sunworn, but the Zipperman prefers his work this way. Every so often, he descends from the tram and clears the road with his litter picker, skewering styrofoam like shish kebabs. Clearing roadkill that threatens to obstruct his progress.

Across the bay, trains rumble their way through the railyard, and the metal cranes dip their beaks towards the water. They are always thirsty, he thinks. Never sated. Beasts of perpetual motion.

Ahead of him, the highway yawns onward.

He has lost his name, over the years, in the faded white lines. In the rolling gray asphalt. It seems like a souvenir from another lifetime, *no vale la pena recordar*. On the hottest days the asphalt trembles, and this, combined with the stench of gasoline, is enough to make his eyes water. In a way, it reminds him of home; the way his abuela used to fry jalapeños over the stovetop till the air was *picante*, strong enough to peel the skin from one's face. The way his abuelo came stomping in through the door, shaking mud from his work boots. Leather hands, like gloves, from construction work. *The road will play tricks on your eyes, chico*. That's what his abuelo always told him. *Espejismos y espejos*.

Sometimes, it hurts to look at the concrete, so the Zipperman watches the people instead.

Inbound: drivers smack their fingers on the steering wheels. People smoke their Camels out the windows, flipping their cigarette butts over the bird spikes, watching the smoke spiral down towards the ocean below. They beep at him sometimes, but he stares straight ahead, *¿entiende?* Focused on his work.

Outbound: the gringo tourists scream by, headed for Coronado Beach. Who goes swimming, six o'clock in the evening? That is what he wants to know. Who wants to hit that freezing water so late in the day? Gringos, apparently.

He sees them hanging out the window sometimes, the kids with their pasty sunscreen noses, the parents with their *Lucha Libre* t-shirts, and he waves to them sometimes. They never notice him, because their eyes are on the road, but he likes to think that they would wave back, if they could.

The Zipperman has come across a lot of strange things in his time. Like the little girl who tried to ride her bike along the shoulder of the bridge. Like the woman who flashed him through the car window (it was the closest anyone came to waving). Like that roadkill armadillo that was stinking up the road. *Ay guacala*. He buried that armadillo in a Taco

Bell takeout bag, because that was the only proper burial shroud he could find amongst the litter on the bridge. He tucked the armadillo safely away in that leftover tortilla shell, and he crossed la bendición over his chest, then he said a word of prayer and dropped el pobrecito over the side.

Descansa en paz, hermanito.

Sometimes, the Zipperman sees a sight that will change his life forever – like the woman smoking by the side of the bridge.

He was zippering up the lane for the evening when he spotted her; just a lone silhouette against the sky. She had lined up a whole caravan of Camels on the railing and she was smoking them, one by one, taking one huff after another as she studied the inbound clouds, breathing out as she tossed the butts over the edge...

Her car was parked slantways over the fifth lane, the engine purring, but she didn't seem inclined to climb back inside. Instead, she ran her fingers over the bird spikes and gazed out at the road sign – *San Diego City Limit. Population: 1,130,000* – as if she was imagining how they would need to update the sign tomorrow. *Population: 1, 129,999.*

The woman looked like a waitress; the apron tied tight around her stomach was a dead giveaway, the strings cutting deep into her belly fat. She looked like the sort of woman who would stand behind the register all day, taking orders; *Chile lime sauce or chipotle? You want extra cheese, what kind?*

She looked like the sort of woman who would clean the tables with a washrag, and push her janitor cart like the stroller she'd always wanted but never got, cause she never had kids or got married even. She looked like the sort of woman who sprays the plate glass with Windex and wipes it clean, the sort of woman who breathes fog on the window just

to draw pictures in the condensation, who watches people pass on the sidewalk, waiting for someone to stop and notice her; the mannequin in the window.

The Zipperman waved as he passed, but he didn't stop the zipper machine, and the woman waved back, but she didn't stop smoking. Instead, the Zipperman kept on rumbling down the road, lifting each divider and setting it down again. And the woman kept on picking up her cigarettes and flicking them over the side, and though he longed to look back, the Zipperman kept staring straight ahead, even as he trundled his way down the bridge towards the 8, because he couldn't bear to see what would happen when the woman reached the end of her chain.

Julian Riccobon (he/him) is a writer, editor, and artist of Italian/Panamanian descent, and the Managing Director of Polyphony Lit, an international literary magazine for teen writers and editors. His work has been published in The Acentos Review, Flash Fiction Online, Huizache: The Magazine of a New America, and Rumble Fish Quarterly, among other places, and his favorite genres to write are contemporary fiction, magical realism, and historical fiction. He is currently drafting a magical realism novel about a bunch of loco neighbors who live together in a rowhouse in San Diego.

Nonfiction

Infinite Power By Raiya Shaw

“You guys! The volleyball!” I shriek, racing towards the lake.

It's too late. It rolls into the water with a disappointing silence, like a yo-yo slipping down its string. It drifts slowly but surely to the middle of the lake, where it then stops in the dead of night.

My friends crowd around me and debate possible options to reel it back. Someone suggests stealing the life preserver from the pool, but that doesn't sound very responsible at all. Another tries to wade through the lake, but it is surprisingly deep. Someone else walks back home for a spool of twine. They try to knot a circle to lasso the volleyball, but we are hardly Westerners.

"When's your birthday?" the culprit asks with a nervous smile.

"May," I grumble.

"Okay, bet. Expect a new volleyball in May," he says, flashing me a grin and a thumbs-up. I know his answer is genuine and this predicament isn't entirely his fault, but I still glare in response.

It is 2020, and the pandemic isn't slowing down any time. Playing volleyball and badminton at our local park has been our only source of social interaction for the past month. This volleyball is the only one we have, and in our adolescent minds, holds infinite power for joy.

I wander to the other side of the lake and hope it will float in my direction. Plopping down in the grass, I take off my mask and gaze at the still water. The volleyball looks like a bead of color in the monochrome night, a dot of white in a black abyss. From where I sit, it almost resembles the reflection of the full moon, wafting along the water and surrounded by specks of twinkling stars. I half expect a fish to surface and spike the ball into the atmosphere, causing it to never be seen again. Maybe it'll knock a star out of place. Maybe it'll form a new constellation. Maybe the planets will align, beckon a new fortuitous age, and then someone will find a cure for us all. Maybe the tides will go wild with the appearance of this new moon. I shudder and rub my icy hands together, my imagination running wild with the current.

When it drifts to the other side of the lake, I touch the moon and frown. Its craters are all wrong, too shallow and straight. The texture is too soft. I am not holding greatness or infinite power in my hands. My hope dissolves into the water.

It is just a wet cold ball, stolen from the sky.

Raiya Shaw is an undergraduate student at the University of Central Florida majoring in English: Creative Writing and Sociology. She works as a writer for Her Campus magazine and has been recognized nationally by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and the NCTE.

Wontons By Tanya Sun

Zhang was one of those hundreds of quiet, plodding men who kept Chinatown alive. He had come to America as an exchange student decades ago, dreaming of becoming a civil engineer back home, designing apartments for the developing Sichuan. When he consumed alcohol for the first time at a college party, he'd forgotten those goals forever. The drink consumed him right back—leaving him to pick up the pieces of his life for the first time when it was nearly half over. Yet he had in the end; he'd learned a few phrases like “here’s your bill” and “don’t cheat,” enough to bargain at the market. Broke and broken, unable to return to China, he created for himself a little slice of home where he was.

He ran a little restaurant tucked in a back alley. In truth, it was an exaggeration to call it a restaurant. It was really a stall, with its rickety bamboo doors that were kept open by a broken brick to prevent them from getting stuck; the faded red spring-festival paper, peeling off with the wind; the dusty bulbs casting a dampened lighting that felt almost

atmospheric. Yet he never bothered to change things, as he knew these were the reasons his customers came to visit, even more than the authentic Sichuan dishes: noodles in hot chili oil, stinky tofu, chicken claws boiled in a sour-and-spicy soup. His customers were college students from the nearby University of San Francisco—young men and women with pock-marks over their faces, plastic foreign bills still in their pockets, their accents apparent despite all their efforts. They came because the splintering walls reminded them of their childhood homes, the dustiness of the lighting of the rusting oil lamps which lit their summer nights. They did not mind the dinginess; they had grown up amongst it, had grown to love it, to see it as home.

It was a sweltering summer afternoon when Zhang received his first new customers in ages; a young couple. It was immediately apparent that they were without the intimacy which came from a lengthy relationship. The man bore no resemblance to the majority of his other customers; he was tanned, and despite his Chinese appearance, he looked up quizzically when Zhang greeted him in Mandarin. He stepped in cautiously and tentatively, as though he was a traveler just arriving in a foreign land. The woman was rather tacky-looking, with a worn pink purse and a matching dress ripped at the seams; she hailed Zhang enthusiastically. They sat at the counter and each ordered a bowl of beef wontons. The woman took the pair of chopsticks in hand; the man asked for a spoon.

Even Zhang could tell he wasn't impressed with her. The man watched her mouth insistently: her lips painted more brightly red than the American style; the way they curved upward too much, as though they were used to creating different sounds; the gap between her two front teeth which would have been corrected by an orthodontist, had she been born here. She slurped at the wontons with an intensity that betrayed her hunger for home, only stopping to cast around a nostalgic glance at the decor around them. When they were finished, she clung to the counter, examining it intently as though she could be taken back to her parents' dinner table by her pure imagination. The man was anxious to leave, to be free of the smog, of the language others spoke and he could

not decipher, of the strange foods they were consuming. He pulled on her arm until she let go of the table, letting herself be dragged out.

They came every Friday, always ordering the same dishes. Zhang took to preparing these bowls ahead of time, watching the same patterns play out. The woman would chatter about nothing in particular in her nasally accent. The man would sit, uncomfortably and silently, rocking back and forth, as though to will the groaning creaks of his chair to drown her out. The man was one of those who were not mean-natured, but he did have a selfishness, a natural need for reassurance which came from his youth. He did not mean to lead one on, but could not help his revelation which came from her—that he could be loved, admired. He may have found her quite disgusting, but kept her around because he enjoyed the reassurance that one might be dedicated to him, and the pleasant sensation of having a woman interested in him. He sat, determined to trade his comfort for the adoring words she spoke, determined to ignore the foreign-ness of the mouth which pronounced them and her differences which drove them apart. He tried to ignore the clattering of mahjong pieces, and wrinkled his nose when the young lady asked him to buy anything else, like spring rolls with oxtails.

One day in spring, the woman came alone and waited, sitting with the two steaming bowls of wontons in hand. She checked her phone once, twice, three times. She tapped her foot, then tapped her chopsticks against the noodle bowl. She sat and watched a group of elderly folks gossip for about an hour before she gave up and headed out. She had not eaten any of the food.

From then on, this became a pattern; she came each Friday to sit at the counter with her two bowls of wonton soup, which always remained untouched. Holding onto them for warmth, she listened to orders being taken and shouted to the kitchen, the cheers of old men as they bet on mahjong, and the whispers of grandmothers worrying about their children. She examined every detail of the restaurant; the crackled paint of the roof, causing steam to float through the top; the oil smeared on the countertop, running to

the floor; and the ink tapestries hung haphazardly on the walls, their images softened by age. She was as silent as those women in those paintings, silent with want and waiting.

One afternoon in summer, nearly exactly a year after they had first come, Zhang made only one bowl of wontons. It sat steaming in the spot where the young woman usually was. She came and sat in her usual spot. She hesitated, seeming to notice the absence of the second bowl; yet she was unwilling to acknowledge this difference. Eventually she reached out tentatively and cradled her hands around the single bowl, moving it with a swaying motion, as though she were rocking a baby. She stared straight ahead, straight at Zhang, in a way that seemed expectant—as though he were supposed to do something, as though he had made her a promise.

Suddenly, without knowing what he meant to do, Zhang reached over and seized one of her hands in both of his own. He gripped it tightly and said, “Us *lao shang* (老乡, those sharing a common home,) we have to watch out for each other, all right? This one is on the house, all right?”

The woman nods and looks down silently. She slurps down the wontons, letting her tears fall free to flavor the soup.

Tanya is a written and spoken word artist residing in the California coast. They write about their experiences in the cultural melting pot of San Francisco, and about their unique cross-cultural perspective as a Chinese American.

My Mainstay By Emma Ogden

The Hood and Removing it By Deeksha Aralelimath

I wear the hood So I can let the world fade away and float back into my own head,

I wear it so I don't have to listen to people's voices. So, I can sit by myself and explore my own mind for thoughts that have never occurred before

I wear the hood to let myself fade away from the nasty looks that Earth gives me once in a while, especially when I miss-step in what I desire

I try my best every day,

even if on that day I did nothing but binge-watch movies and tv shows. Even if all I do is sleep I still try my hardest to be okay.

The world can be a cruel place where, if you're not loud enough your words will fade away, you will fade away. And that may be so unfair but as much as I want to be seen, a part of me wishes to stay hidden.

I wear the hood so I'm unrecognizable to people I don't know, people who I don't want knowing who I am. I wear the hood as it protects me from the stabs of the people that betray.

But when I wear it, I'm also restrained from the warm embrace of the people who actually stay.

The hood is the wall I built around my broken heart. The hood is my mind as it locks my heart in a prison when all it needed was home.

So, I'm working on it, to remove the hood and to let the world see me for who I am, to not be bothered by what people say because the ones who matter just encourage.

I'm working on removing the hood slowly... but surely because I don't want to be restricted from the pleasures I might encounter because of the people who couldn't treat a given heart right.

It's okay, I'm not poking blame on anyone because it's not *one*... but more like a *little from everyone*. Unknowingly and unintentionally.

I do get that part, mistakes do Happen.

mistakes will always happen.

Let's leave the past in the past and see what happens when you carry just the lessons taught a little more optimistically, let's just see what happens,

and if we don't like the ending, we can come all the way back and find a new path ahead.

The time we have, it feels like forever... So, we have all the time we need to mend, to run, to fall, to fly, and to fall all over again.

what we can accomplish by *just being* is unlimited.

Feeling everything is so beautiful in ways that can only be recognized only when we are there, present in the moment that cannot be cheated into. I had forgotten that.

The hood guises itself as protection when in truth it is just the thing that destroys us silently, slowly, from the inside.

I'm going to remove the hood now because I have a world to welcome into me and a lot of time to recover from everything I might feel.

“If death is the destination, why not risk it all?”

Deeksha is a teen writer, poet, and an aspiring author. She recently published her new poetry book: *The Vacated Heart*. If she's not on her computer frantically writing dark fiction then she's probably reading another good book. Some of her other hobbies include cycling, coding, and art. You can find her personal blog at: Wizardee.in

Quick! Destiny! It's closing in! By D'Antonio Ballesteros

I know I can't afford it right now but damnit, here in the quiet of Italy, under the infinite possibilities of my future paths, having grown paranoid and ever-ponderant of these paths after a renewed reading of the Borges—Oh how deeply I feel this liberating instability and desire to live from a car, an SUV (that beautiful, mythic beast whose secrets are known to all suburban mothers), or dare I say Max Tennyson's Rus Bucket,

which one day I could use to drive my many nieces and nephews around the world, speaking all the languages, eating all the food, playing all the games—Oh how magnificent that seems to me even now, still a teenager trying to decide where I'll be living come two months' time and yearning for home but yearning for *life*, for the world, for the stories I'll tell my descendants when I no longer have the strength left to live them; how I yearn, how I yearn—so young! so old! so much time! not a minute! (time to get the shit together up and together before I grow up enough to realize it'll never be together)—Oh how confusing it is to sense the world's size from the tiny town of Mondovì, and how deep the desire to own bookshelves!

D'Antonio Ballesteros (@danteantonio) is a musician, writer, and actor based in Brooklyn, NY. He writes plays and poetry, fiction and non-, and is spending quite a bit of time these days researching for a novel. He's also exploring the worlds of microtonal and electronic music. You can find his work in Progenitor Art and Literary Journal, Blue Marble Review, and New Note Poetry, among others.

Pizza Night By Anna Straka

It is a late fall afternoon. The kind where one can feel winter's shoulder butting in.

Disrupting the beautifully sunny scene with its crisp winds and tiny flurries of snow. I sit by the fireplace and the covered bowl of dough: simultaneously warming my feet and eagerly watching the dough rise, waiting for it to balloon up enough so that I can punch it down and see as it deflates back into the confinements of its glass bowl. But a watched pot never boils so I give up on the dough to busy myself elsewhere.

Beep! Beep! Beep! Fire! Fire! An automated voice warns us. I jumped up. But not because of the potential danger. No. I know that this alarm does not mark a tragedy but rather: a meal. As suddenly as the alarm did, *it* hit me. All the tell tale signs of an active kitchen. I stand at the top of the stairs where I have found all the scents carry to the best. The smell of warm dough and basil trace the air. The soft sound of distant voices and clattering utensils. The sight of all of it as I make my way down the stairs.

My dad bustles around the kitchen sporting a fleece and beaten down Birkenstocks from his college years with the corner of a tea towel stuck in the side of his pants acting as his only form of an apron. He sees me enter the room and smiles. Never mind that we drove home in silence earlier that day because I had a bad race. Or that he most likely had to listen to my oldest brother curse him out and storm off just an hour prior, and will probably again tomorrow. “Hey Annie-Belle,” his nickname for me that I still don’t quite understand. “Here, grab a towel and start pinching the crust.” I don’t need to respond. I searched the towel drawer for the most aesthetically pleasing one and tucked the corner of it into my pants, just as he did: letting it hang on my side down to my knee. We pinch the crust of the pizza dough which rests on a wooden pizza board propped up over the sink. With the newly formed wall we just made around the edges he swirls the olive oil onto the dough and allows me to spread it out. With a perfectly imperfect ratio of sauce and cheese and peppers and a much too large pinch of parsley: we declare it a masterpiece. A masterpiece which is ready for the oven. We start the next pizza. Tossing flour generously onto the bare counter to roll out the pizza dough just enough to allow us to throw it in the air a few times to finish the job.

An array of pizzas build up on the counters around the oven, waiting for all of them to be finished so the family can eat together, which is a rarity these days. But we are the chefs. We sneak a bite of the most cooled pizza, savoring the blend of flavors. “Mama Mia! That’s a

good-a-pizza!” He exclaims, quoting a line from a childhood book called *Pizza Pat*. It was one of our favorites.

The clock strikes 5 and He tells me to go fetch my siblings and tell them that dinner is ready. Never mind the fact that it was not. It never is ready when he says it will be. Soon a stampede rolls down the stairs, myself at the front of it: simply trying to keep my feet underneath me so I don't get trampled. I pour soda into glasses for my sister and I. Perfecting the art of only making it look even, but I got more.

The food is perfect. Or is it the company that makes me think so? It does not matter to me. In these moments around the table we talk instead of argue. We share pizza instead of fighting over whose items belong to whom. All I can do is sit. Collecting the laughs and loud talking. My heart is full.

Anne Straka is a Junior at Arrowhead Union High School. She is involved in cross country, track, and cross country skiing. In her free time Anne likes to visit coffee shops, hike, read, or hang out with friends and family.

My Mainstay By Emma Ogden

Movement one: Alive

Pianissimo, Lento,

berceuse Breath, play-

I was born, in a family of mixed race, which takes a family history project to explain. They were always kind, always there, talked, and ate a great bunch. I never knew the strangeness of the world; I always had my family and I didn't need anything else.

Then as I grew up, I discovered books, music, and the way the sunlight feels if you lie in its path. I shared this with my family but they never understood my love for any of it. They seemed to only think books give paper cuts, music is sad, and the sun's rays give burns.

Movement two: Discovery

Accelerando, Slight Crescendo

Every day after school I would come home smiling, and my mom would ask, "Ok sweetie, what do you want to start with, piano or homework?"

I would immediately run to the piano and carefully pull out the bench and turn the light on. (sigh) I slowly put my hands on the keys and played. I could transpose any song, memorize it, and do it with my eyes closed. I practiced as much as there was to practice. At first, I thought it was to avoid homework, but then as the months passed I found that I had a passion for music. I couldn't part with it. I would finger scales on my desk, and hum my music until my sister threw a pillow at my face at night.

Later my mom took me to the local library. I instantly loved the smell of all the books. I would spend hours there and always end up taking home too many to carry out to the car. I would escape from these stories for hours reading all of them only a few hours after I had just picked them up.

I was always captivated by sunlight. The sun was warming, and letting clouds explode off the world around me-it was the sanguine sign of a new day. I would sit on my back porch: hot, painted wooden panels. Letting the sun warm me till I felt heat seep to my toes.

Of these three things, I constructed my new world. The sun was always out even in the rain. Music played every day even if it were some simple background noise, just something to inspire at the moment of course. I married my own made-up guy{s} and created new friends from the stories I devoured. I would get lost, adrift in mirrors talking to myself for hours...

My sister barged into my room. “- Emma”

I jumped up startled

“What are you doing?”

I wonder how long she had been there. “Oh nothing, just talking to myself.”

I looked back into the mirror and could’ve sworn I saw my reflection wink back as I ran out to catch up with my sister.

Movement 3: Alone

Strepitoso, Fortissimo, sortsando

During the whole summer of sixth grade, I would read, play piano or sit in the sun and do nothing else. I was too scared to play with any of the other kids, even some of my closest friends at times.

I had been told by one of my best friends that they no longer wanted to be friends because I was too “Sassy” for them. I was never a talkative person after that. I just thought no one would want to be friends with me, or that when I talked it would make people dislike me. I would play with my sisters outside sometimes but when a neighborhood friend would come outside, asking if I could play, I would sneak back inside

to my room, back to the world where all of my book character friends were, back to my piano.

“Hello there, Emma” Anne of Green Gables said with the sweetest smile. All of my favorite characters came around taking turns to greet me.

“Hello”, I smiled, rushing to grasp onto the only people that understood me.

Movement 4; Freedom

Con Passione, mezzo piano,

After feeling so alone for so long I almost gave up. I thought there was nothing meaningful in practicing the piano, lying in the sun, or books. Year after year passed when 8th grade came, and I met my best friends: Emma, Ellie, and Evy.

I met them at a youth group and they were always affectionate and brought the greatest out in me. They always talked about how convivial and maybe even sometimes astute I was. I never before realized I could be loved by people other than my large family or the world I created. We would talk about music, lay in the sun, laugh, and talk about the latest books that we'd read. I could finally share my world with other people.

Finale: Love Maestoso,

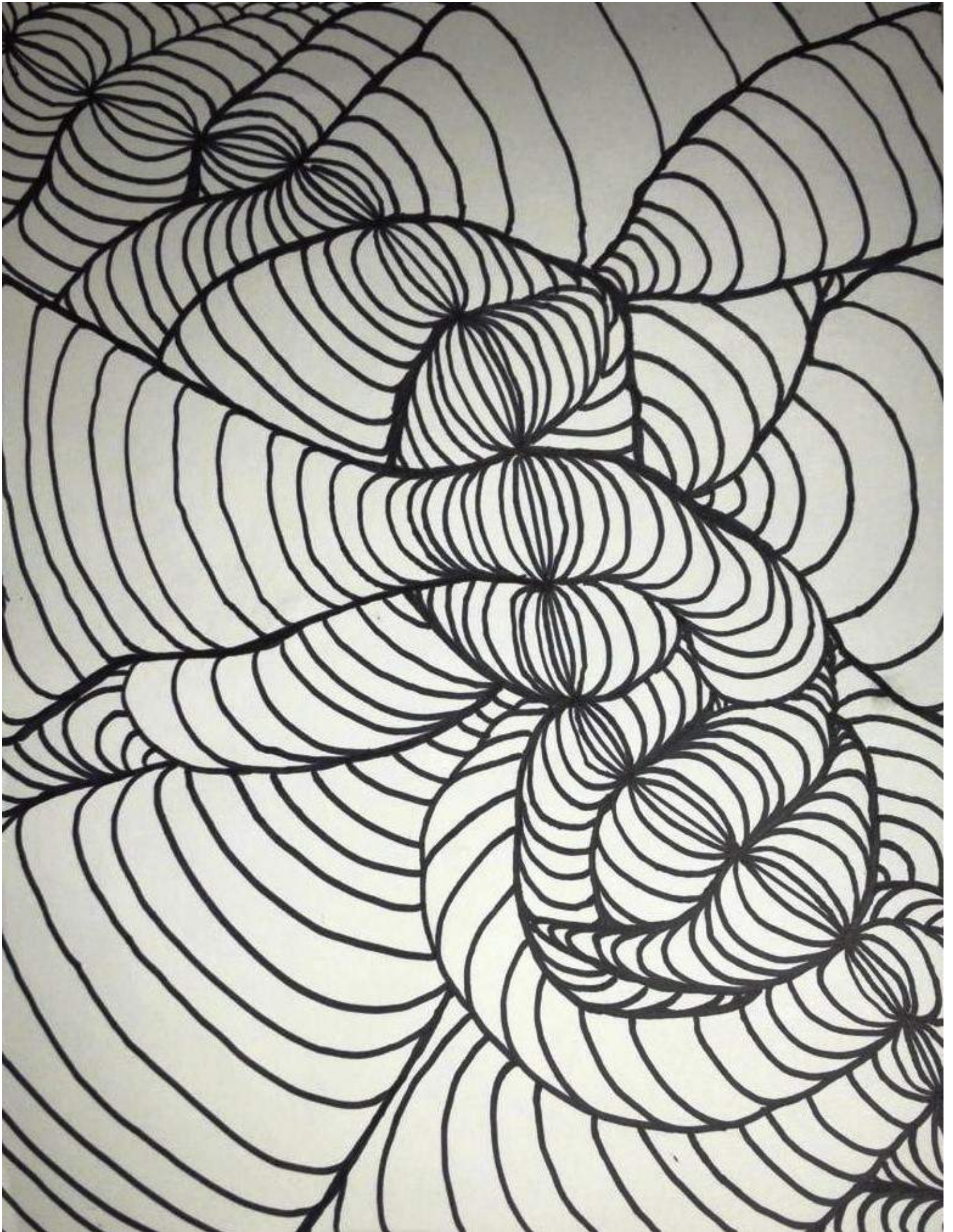
Mezzo forte

After all of my years of friendship, even with fictional characters, I have never felt so loved. As my worlds were tearing apart, my friends were always there to keep me standing. They understood me almost more than I did myself But I will always give credit to the sun that gave me warmth, the music that gave me life, and the books that first gave me something to hold onto.

Emma is a hard-working student busy with marching band, piano practice, and of course, writing. She hopes to continue this pursuit of writing and to teach the next generations the power of words. This is her first published writing with Blue Marble Review and is excited to do more!

Art

intertwined By Logan Weghorst



intertwined

Logan A. Weghorst enjoys drawing and painting, in addition to working with wood, clay, and metals. His colorful “CAT” painting was featured on the cover of Parakeet Magazine’s debut issue. His monochromatic sketch, “Filling the Void,” appeared on Cicada Society’s blog. “Smile,” one of Logan’s pencil drawings made it to the semi-finalist round of Art of Unity’s 2022 Creative Award, putting the piece in the top 15% of 279 submissions from 52 countries.

Form and Content By Huan Gu





Form and Content

Huan (Joy) Gu is a student at the Cheltenham Ladies' College, UK. Her artworks are inspired by her city walks and restaurant hunting around Shanghai. She focuses on the dynamic and fluid lines of infrastructure from her photography of buildings in both London and Shanghai. Together with these lines and an antique background, she created "Metropolitan lines". Her interest of food prompts her to ponder about the relationship between diet and mental wellness. We live in a world where everything is easily accessible, but the knowledge of harmful effects due to these conveniences is concealed. Through her pieces, Joy hopes to reveal problems related to health and wellbeing for the society to discuss and improve. At the same time, she desires to inspire those encountering her work to focus on loving themselves as a crucial goal in life. She has initiated this process by informing more communities of the health effects of fast food by publishing an art piece called "Cezanne's Takeout" through the Celebrating Art contest in 2022.

Our Birthday By Min Jung



Our Birthday

Min Jung is an 11th grader attending high school in NYC who has recently migrated from South Korea. Her works have been nationally recognized by the Celebrating Arts organization. She plans to continue pursuing art as she grows up, specifically in design and illustration.

Bleached By Rhea Jain



Bleached

Rhea Jain is an artist from the San Francisco Bay Area. She sees art as a catalyst for change, a disruptor of thoughts. Her work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers. When not painting, she can be found coaching young girls gymnastics or volunteering at her local animal farm.

Strung Along By Emma Chen



Strung Along

Emma Chen is a high school junior in Northern Virginia. She is interested in the arts, economics, and volunteering. In her free time, Emma visits art museums and listens to music.

Lost in Transit, Resized Chess By Siya Gupta



Lost in Transit



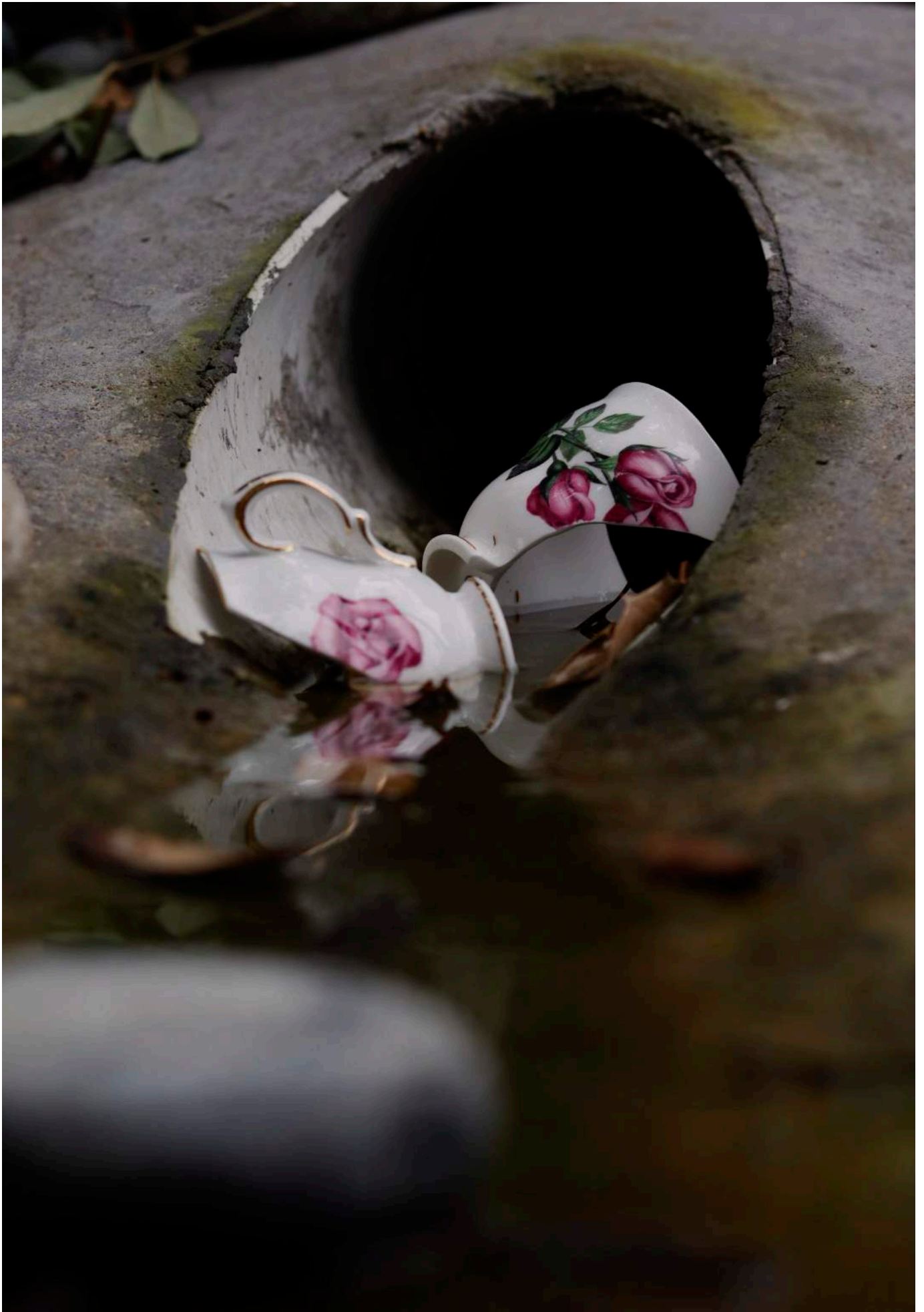
Resized Chess

Siya Gupta is a junior at Herricks High School on Long Island. Her photography has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. In her free time, Siya enjoys doing paint by numbers, making coffee, and roller skating around her neighborhood.

Photograph, Teacup, Necklace By Paige Glowacki



Photograph





Teacup





Necklace

Paige Glowacki is a photographer born and raised in Dallas, Texas. Her work features her experience of emotions that are difficult to express in words. Through portraits, especially self-portraits, and still life, Glowacki explores the feeling of being overwhelmed. She captures the simultaneous beauty and destruction in the world around her. Glowacki creates images that are both visually striking and emotionally powerful. Her work exists as a way for her to communicate complicated ideas without utilizing words.

This project explores feelings of nostalgia of her childhood with her Ukrainian grandmother. The stark contrast between light and dark emphasizes the eerie and unsettling nature of innocence. Her work explores the surreal and evokes a sense of unease and discomfort, creating visual metaphors for emotions and ideas.

Contemporary art often challenges perceptions of reality and explores the theme of societal decay. With an eeriness that arises from something familiar and simultaneously unsettling, she creates a sense of loss, nostalgia, of strangeness, an artful fluctuation between presence and absence. She is reminding others that there is still beauty to be found in decay and ruin.

Recurring Dream of California By Clementine Zei



Recurring Dream of California

Clementine Zei is a high school senior from the Greater Boston Area. Her writing has been published in Cathartic Youth Literary Magazine, Down in the Dirt Magazine, and Curieux Academic Journal. She has also been recognized for her essays with Silver Keys in the Scholastic Arts in Writing Awards as well as the annual Boston Mayor's Poetry Program. Clementine is inspired by surrealism, fantasy, and dreams, often incorporating personification, folktale, and the expansiveness of nature in her writing. Outside of

literature, Clementine is passionate about film and is always excited to watch a new series or movie.

Book Review

The Cruel Prince, by Holly Black By Gabriella Montez

Before anything else, I promise, this isn't a story about a weirdly beautiful "evil" prince whose heart suddenly aches and then everyone realizes he's actually just misunderstood. At first glance, *The Cruel Prince* is easily presumed to be an amateur story of young fairies, mortals, and typical YA fantasy fiction. Nonetheless, it becomes a triumph of political court, backstabbing, and sensational betrayal. *The Cruel Prince* is just the kind of book you pick up, read a couple chapters of, and put down, though only so you can immediately search online to see if there's a sequel. In a phenomenal manner, Holly Black creates a complex mythical world which only glues a reader's hands to the binding.

The Cruel Prince follows seventeen year old Jude Duarte, who witnessed her parents' murder as a child. Taken by their killer to an opposite world, mortal Jude and her sisters enter Elfhame, a High Court of Faeries and mythical creatures. Jude, raised among fey, is desperate to prove herself in a society despising humans. The youngest prince of the court, Cardan, is determined to make Jude's life a living hell, —though Jude becomes wrapped in much deeper than the surface. Between deceptions, scandals, and bloodshed, Jude slowly becomes a phenomenon in the High Court of Faerie, and is tasked with a life-threatening alliance to save not only her sisters, but the High Court.

For starters, Holly Black's creation of the beautiful world of Elfhame is absolutely magnificent. Where magic hides the horrors inside, Black's very own Elfhame is jam packed with intricate details, various structures, creatures, and rules. With so much to unpack, Black manages to give just enough to the reader without being too heavy with exposition. It's extraordinary. Not to mention, the aerial writing and realistic dialogue make for the most entertaining action sequences. There is never a dull moment in the

entire novel; even in the smallest moments, Black's prose is flowy and spectacular, constantly bringing vivacity to the darkness in the story itself.

The epic plot of *The Cruel Prince* is simply undeniable. Halfway through the novel, it's impossible to trust any character. With constant twists, if you think you know something is going to happen, I promise you, it's not (though something even crazier will). Between betrayal and surprises, *The Cruel Prince* keeps your nails short and your palms sweaty. There truly is not a single scheme you can predict, or say you saw coming.

With beautiful writing and an epic plot, the characters really put the cherry on top of *The Cruel Prince*. Jude is a striking character to have as a protagonist. With her incentives constantly battling between good and selfish, it's nearly impossible not to like Jude. In one of her best quotes she declares, "If I cannot be better than them, I will become so much worse." (Black 210) She absolutely empowers her mortal self and never lets her guard down.

Jude's family dynamic is intriguing, particularly with her father figure,—otherwise the man who killed her biological parents. His role is fascinating, and easy to learn to love. Nonetheless, it becomes inevitable to not adore the young prince, Cardan. With a devious and cruel attitude, Cardan's character development and backstory is majestically unfolded throughout the novel.

The Cruel Prince will leave you admiring cunning and heinous characters that you swore you'd never even think of liking.

In short, a marvelous fantasy fiction crafted with both intrigue and deception, *The Cruel Prince* conveys the terrible faults of magic, while yet still making you wish for it. Unpacking a dark fantasy can be heavy, but Holly Black makes it feel effortless.

Gabriella is a rising writer who loves all things written, from fantasy fiction to poetry. When she's not writing or reading, Gabriella spends her spare time drawing, running and playing soccer. She's a part of her high school's independent newspaper, The Spectrum. With passion for all literary involvement, Gabriella's work is eye-catching for all young readers.

Flowers for Algernon: A Cruel Metaphor By Boyun Liu

“Had I not seen the Sun, I could have borne the shade; but light a newer wilderness, my wilderness has made.”

-Emily Dickinson

Have you ever thought about the question “Which is worse: not knowing who you are and being happy, or becoming the person who you always wanted to be and feeling alone?” If you're hesitant to make a decision and want to find an answer, “Flowers for Algernon” might be the book that can give you some inspiration.

Flowers for Algernon is a science fiction written by Daniel Keyes in 1966. It differs from many other science fictions in that it doesn't have heavily featured elements of technology. The book is written from a first-person perspective. In the beginning, two researchers, Dr. Strauss and professor Nemur, perform an operation on a mouse named Algernon to make it smart. They want to test the procedure on human, and the protagonist, a mentally disabled man named Charlie, wants to become smart so much that he agrees to undergo the risky operation and records the his progress in reports, which documents how the operation initially makes him smart, but ultimately results in his regression to his previous state of mental disability.

The way the author shows the change in Charlie's intelligence is novel and surprising, through word spelling. Before Progress Report 8, Charlie made spelling mistakes in almost all the words he wrote, but after the operation, he gradually learned to read and write. As a result, the spelling mistakes began to decrease, and eventually, he could write like a normal person. Unfortunately, in the end, Charlie realized that his memory was fading, and he began to lose the ability to read and write. When I saw him return to a state where he misspelled almost all the words and didn't know about punctuation, I could feel the desperation and pain he felt. This reminds me of a short poem written by Emily Dickinson: **"Had I not seen the Sun, I could have borne the shade; but light a newer wilderness, my wilderness has made."** If Charlie hadn't had the chance to become intelligent, he could have endured his disability. But when he tasted the ability to read and write like a normal person, and even surpass them, he became afraid of being a stupid person again. The strong emotional impact results from the special way the author displays the change in Charlie's IQ. The story is simple yet intriguing and thought-provoking. It is a cruel metaphor that reveals the sad and grief-stricken parts of our lives.

Charlie always wanted to be smart because he wanted to have friends and to be liked by others, and he hoped his mother would be proud. But the reality was just the opposite. Although he became a genius as he had always wanted, people began to distance themselves from him. Sometimes it is just hard to have things both ways.

The old Charlie always smiled and remained positive all the time. Everyone at the bakery liked him because he didn't understand what teasing was. He laughed along with others and never got angry, just like a naive and innocent child. However, after he became intelligent, he started to realize that the people he used to consider good friends were making fun of him all the time. They liked to keep him around just to tease him. He became angry every time they teased him and started to talk down to others and make them feel dumb sometimes. His emotions became more and more unstable, and he shouted to vent his anger more frequently. He was struggling and angry with himself. He

thought that it was he who made the people at the bakery hate him, feel like idiots, and caused himself to be fired.

The operation not only made Charlie smart but also allowed him to experience emotions he had never felt before. He learned the feeling of love and fell in love with his teacher, Alice. However, every time he tried to approach love, memories of his disastrous childhood would come flooding back, clearer than ever before. He remembered how his mother hated him and always wanted him away, how his sister didn't want others to know he was her brother, and how other children made fun of him. These recollections were like nightmares that overwhelmed Charlie, making him suffer from the pain. But as Charlie's intelligence surpassed that of most people, Alice began to feel duller every day compared to him. It was hard for them to find common ground to discuss, so she decided to leave, and Charlie became alone again.

However, just when everyone believed that the operation was a success and Charlie would be a genius forever, something went wrong. One day, Dr. Strauss discovered that Algernon's intelligence had begun to fade, and the mouse was acting strangely. Algernon couldn't bear the thought of losing his intelligence and refused to live as he had before. He stopped eating and waited for death to come. When Charlie saw Algernon die in his hands, it was like seeing his own fate. Although Algernon was just a mouse in others' eyes, Charlie felt a deep connection with him, a feeling of sympathy, since he wasn't different in essence from Algernon. He, too, was an experimental subject, a sacrifice of the experiment.

At first, Charlie exerted all his efforts in trying to figure out why it was happening and how to stop it. But he eventually realized that the old Charlie Gordon loved people with all his heart, whereas now his heart was overwhelmed with his intellect. So he decided to be the old Charlie Gordon again, warm-hearted, kind, and positive, but dull and simple. Maybe that was his best destiny. Sometimes, only people with a heart full of love can have the key to happiness, not those with high intelligence.

Charlie is the epitome of all human beings. He went through the entire life of a normal person in just several months. The old Charlie represents the time when we are still naive children, without worries and understanding of the world around us. The smart Charlie represents the time when we grow into teenagers and adults, absorb knowledge, have more things to worry about, and begin to struggle with our feelings. The cruel metaphor is that we are all going to go through the process of growing up, facing emotional struggles, and feeling lonely.

Boyun(Iris) Liu, is an eleventh grader who is a passionate reader and reviewer. She hopes that her reviews can ignite people's curiosity towards those books. She invites you to join in the literature adventure — and hopes you can have a great time!
