

# Issue 32

## December 2023



The Line, by Cyrus Carlson

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### **Editor's Note** By Molly Hill

Dear Readers and Writers-

Here we are already at the end of another year of reading, reviewing, and publishing. If you've come by our website lately, you'll see that we've temporarily closed submissions,—hoping this gives us a chance to catch up on our backlog as well as make some steady progress on BOOK #2 — our coming-in-2024 Anthology of Student Writing, published in collaboration with Wise Ink Press.

Issue 32 is swarming with creative writing along with our rapidly expanding ART section. As our submissions increase we try to respond by adding a few more pieces to each

issue. Still we end up turning down lots of good stuff simply due to the volume of work we receive. But also this is good (!) news because that means so many students are WRITING.

We've said this before- but we always encourage simultaneous submissions, and hope that all our student submitters are sending work to many places, to increase their odds of publication.

Submissions will reopen FEBRUARY 1, 2024. Keep us in mind! – we'll be ready to read.

Enjoy the issue—

Molly Hill

Editor

## Poetry

**Literary Analysis** By Eva Skelding

I can only finish a book if I find a symbol.  
Not arrows of birds for omen or action, or rain  
for dread or catharsis. Give me eggs, poached  
or scrambled or theoretical, or the old pearl brooch  
in a jewelry box or a casket. Give me a tattered jacket,  
so I can pinch my thread through the holes  
and patch them up with home or guardedness.  
Give me something indecipherable. All I wanted  
was a secret to translate into string, a sentence  
to spell with mismatched beads. I want an end  
to tie to the next, a spine to untangle, a line  
to curl into a circle. Map of the mountains. Culprit  
of the crime. No one will tell me the date when I ask.

Cupped palms, loose syllables, and then scattering wings. Last year, I stayed up all night waiting for stones that never showered down. Now I pretend to understand string theory. Shadowed homelands and destinations. How much I cannot and will never see. Still I sit on the terrace and wait for the sun to sputter green. Speak in calculus and revive dead words. Fan out tarot decks and braid my fate into friendship bracelets. I am nothing if not patient. I am waiting to become anything but nothing. In the meteoric dim, words blur in my lap: *once upon a time / moons upon a tide*. Attics blanch into the Arctic; rainfall rises to starfall. The city smokes them hollow, but a hand thrums warm in mine. Tonight I entangle our fingers and shut the screen door on the answer. Encrypt it all again. I know I have already heard it.

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.

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**Love Fruits** By Alobu Emmanuel

—after Jeffrey McDaniel.

In a bid to get people to love more  
& hate less,  
God decided to plant one hundred & one  
Love fruits  
In every man.

At coffee, when mom uses her first love fruit  
& says, *I love you*,  
I only nodded.

Gardening, grandma says, *I love you so much, son*.  
I just smiled.

Dad gives a big hug after scolding me at supper.  
Says, *I love you, my boy*.  
I shrug. Say nothing.

While the world is fast asleep, I pick up the phone  
In a rush  
& call my crush.  
Proudly say to her, *I did not use any of my fruits*.  
*Saved them all for you*.  
Okay, she says.  
Then I go on to tell her, *I love you*.  
*I love you*.  
*I love you. I love you*.  
*I love...*

& when she does not say a word,  
I realize she's given up all hers.

Alobu Emmanuel alias Noble Alobu, is the convener of the Noble Poet Collective (NPC). He's currently a student of Philosophy at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. Inspired by belief, love and strife, his writings oftentimes, feel like a hug. He is an alumnus of the SprinNG Writing Fellowship, 2023 and was shortlisted for the BKPW Poetry Contest (August 2023 Edition). Some of his poems are featured in "Red Penguin Collection", "Agape Review", "NantyGreens", "Eboquills", "Celestite Poetry", "Literary Yard", and "HotPot Magazine". He strongly believes nature holds a great deal of magic and loves to spend time with his pet chicken, Juliet. Catch him on Instagram & Threads..

@noble.alobu

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## **December Intention** By Merry Wang

month of December.

learning what it truly means to "enjoy the process, rather than the result."

learning practices to take care spiritually, mentally, physically, and emotionally.

learning ways to reconnect with loved ones and things, whether it's old hobbies or music or even lost friends.

learning to work hard, but take time out of every day to live in the present.

learning to grow from held regrets, spinning them into areas of growth.

learning how to love before looking for others to fill in that gap.

learning to be proud carrying hearts on sleeves.

learning how to protect and be comfortable alone.

learning to find comfort in imperfections, but making an effort to grow.

December is to discover and understand.

Because it's okay to lack direction – as long as you keep working hard so your future self can smile without regrets.

Merry is a current senior at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics. Academically, she is interested in studying an interdisciplinary field within computer science. Outside academics, she enjoys competitively swimming, getting lost in all types of novels, and drawing random doodles!

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**good skin** By Zara Seldon

i have never understood how women  
outlive their good skin.  
how when crows plant taloned feet

at the edges of tired eyes,  
an aging girl resists the urge  
to fight time like a fever.

my grandmother told me i should get  
a full-length mirror in my closet.  
so that every morning i can adjust my  
clothes until my body becomes an object.

(i'd prefer a mirror in which  
i can only see my back  
but i know that's not possible.)

i want to live on the east coast  
when i grow up because i like  
the way that every three months  
the seasons fight each other  
for control of the land.

sameness is scary except when  
i see a new crease emerge on my stomach.  
i wish i could shrink to the size of a nickel.  
i'm too young for this.

in my dream, a magic show.  
i am stoic as a beaming fifty-five year old  
sister loses weight with the flick of a wand,  
sides pressing inwards,  
rib cage battling skin.  
the audience gawks at

a twisted illusion.

she has shrunk so much  
the stage looks like it's growing.

the second day of freshman english class  
a scrawny boy with glasses asked me  
to shake my hips for him.  
i was ashamed that i was big  
enough for his eyes to eat.

as i sat there like a ghost an aunt went under  
the surgeon's knife and molded  
her face into plastic youth.

my mother says that appearances  
don't matter but even she thinks  
the lines that cup her mouth look like jowls.

to give life is to let your body grow  
and i don't know how any mother  
sees the stretch scars on her torso  
and lets them stay.  
how she can face her child fully  
knowing they will look like her  
when they are older.

i don't know why i do not praise my own mother  
for seeing the good in my face and  
my shape and my skin.



i exist within the twisted fantasy of girlhood  
thin and smooth all over like the lid of a tin box  
in an attic i cannot reach.

i am terrified of any age past sixteen.  
each birthday cake counting down the years  
until my heart forgets how to exist

dear god i wish i was afraid of dying.  
instead i stand stiff against the drywall, panicked  
about how my body will look  
when some man  
drops it inside the grave.

Zara Seldon is a Pakistani-American poet from Los Angeles, California. She is the founder of her school's feminist writing club, and a participant in the Get Lit SLAM poetry universe. In her free time, she is either singing in her local choir, or spamming her friends in all caps until they respond. Her work has been featured in the *Between the Lines: Identity and Belonging* anthology and the *Kenyon Review Young Writers Anthology*.

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### **Tragedy & Comedy** By Phi Walker

Tragedy and Comedy, two brothers each a half,  
the former one could only cry, the latter only laugh.

And every day they'd go on stage and give their fans a show,  
it seemed their fame would never stop or even start to slow.

Tragedy played violin, Comedy played kazoo.

Comedy sang rock n' roll and Tragedy sang the blues.

But they never played their songs alone, this talented duet,  
and that is what made them stand out from any of the rest.

But the night Tragedy passed was mourned across the globe,  
and his grave was built of solid tears instead of normal stone.

Comedy began to laugh and tell his jokes around,

"My brother who only sang of death is six feet underground!"

"Have some respect!" the public yelled, "That's terrible!" they said,  
but Comedy didn't see the harm in laughing at the dead.

"He's not around to be offended, at least not anymore,  
so why be so defensive for someone who now is only gore?"

Without his brother Comedy could not feel any grief.

He wore a permanent smile, showing all his glowing teeth.

So Comedy visited Tragedy, to tell his grave a pun,  
why golfers wear two pairs of pants, in case they get a hole in one.

But Tragedy could not laugh, because the man was dead,  
and at this, Comedy could only laugh and slowly shake his head.

"What a tragedy!" said Comedy, "it's really such a shame,  
that real comedy is only found in someone else's pain!"

All Comedy could do was laugh, because that's all he knew,  
and he played a merry melody on his red kazoo.

He laughed and played until he dropped into his brother's tomb,  
and a coffin that was built for one was now encasing two.

But if Tragedy had survived, and Comedy died instead,  
this story would have had a slightly different kind of end.  
If Comedy had died, you see, Tragedy would have broke.  
His best and only friend was dead, there could be no jokes.

All anyone would do is cry, and slowly shake their head,  
and that, my friend, would be the end, all humor would be dead.  
If no one moves on from tragedy, then comedy will die,  
but the same applies the other way, so both must stay alive.

This isn't to say, if someone dies, you simply just move on,  
and it's not to say, if someone jokes, you tell them that they're wrong.  
Balance out the two of them, and maybe you'll be fine.  
And if not, do what suits you best, it's your life, and not mine.

Phi Walker is a high school student situated in Toronto, Canada. He has a passion for art and writing, and is currently a voice actor for the upcoming animated series, "Hop!", by Marc Brown. He often spends his free time playing video games, doing art, playing with his dog, and occasionally writing 3rd person biographies about himself (he doesn't do this one often). His favourite genres to write are science-fiction, 1st person horror short stories, and they almost always include dogs.

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## To the Emotions I Deeply Wish Would Go Away By Katelynn Balcom

Thanks a lot, Anxiety.

YOU HURT ME.

You kept me from believing I could.

You made me believe that I would utterly fail, that I would get rejected, that I'd be laughed at.

You *always* kept me from being raw and honest, always making worry about what others would think.

You *never* told me I could, that it was ok to mess up.

You *always* told me failure was the unforgivable mistake.

Thanks a lot, Fear.

YOU HELD ME BACK.

You kept me from having a sound night of sleep, waking me up each hour with nightmares.

You made me believe that monsters would get me in the darkness, that I (or someone I loved) would get abducted by the creatures hiding in the shadows.

You *always* kept me from being brave enough to know that there weren't monsters under my bed or in my closet.

You *never* told me that I had courage, courage to make any monsters (imaginary or real) run for cover.

You *always* told me that there might be something lurking in the shadows, making me fear any darkness.

Thanks a lot, Loneliness.

YOU TOLD ME I WASN'T WORTH IT.

You kept me back.

You made me believe that I wouldn't find any friends, "who would want to be friends with

you?"

You *always* kept me from venturing out of my shell, to find new friends. You *never* told me that I just needed a few true friends, not a lot.

You *always* told me that the friends might see something in me they wouldn't like.

Thanks a lot, Self-Consciousness.

YOU SHAMED ME.

You kept me from being my true self.

You made me believe that I was fat, short, scarred, awkward, too loud, too outgoing.

You *always* kept me from being who I was made to be.

You *never* told me that I was beautifully freckled, healthy, right-sized, extraverted and bubbly.

You *always* told me that people would notice fill-in-the-blank and think me weird, or whatever.

Thanks for everything you have done for me. Sincerely,

A confident, courageous girl, unashamed to be who she is.

Katelynn Balcom is a teen-poet who writes from the real world, either diving deeper into experiences, or emotions, putting words to the feelings she encounters in the day-to-day life as an adolescent. Author of debut novel “Koru: The Trainer I Used To Know” (KDP, 2023), she lives with her family in Tennessee.

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**summer 2012** By Nabiha Ali

frothy caverns of moss / setting up strawberry runners / my hair will smell of soft yellow mangoes / the colour of goldfish at dawn / people always look at my letters and ask me if they're poetry / you always said you were never your mama's daughter / so I dived a cannonball straight into the water / I ate a treacle tart sitting in the sea / and dug my toes into the womb of buckled sand / and watched the scarlet lobsters bridge the gaps between my thighs / I am a flash between space and summer psychotic echo between sea and land / I am butternut squash and sticky apple kisses and the third flight down the staircase urging you to jump / watch my hair flush to a marigold / and my palms wrinkle to the colour of silly orange apricots / how I can laugh knowing I'm fuller than ever / but she's a dry cry from before you were born / and the gulls plait their way into my hair and you're sadder than ever knowing she's gone / you could never quite catch the feeling of being born / but maybe now you can imagine being born / maybe you can borrow happiness / lying here / a messy state of things / cradling the azure sunlight in the strange breath of your palms

Nabiha is a seventeen-year-old writer who enjoys writing stories she knows she'll never finish. She has previously been published in the Blue Marble Review, was shortlisted for the national BBC Young Writers' Award with Cambridge University and the Young Muslim Writers' Award, has won the Kingston Quakers' Poetry Competition, and the 2022 Solstice Prize for Young Writers; has recently been published in Paper Lanterns Literary Journal, and Cathartic Youth Literary Magazine, — and is also a Foyle Young Poet.

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### **On Growing Up** By Faith Simpson

I wanted my childhood.

A stone home with concrete floors and  
mosquito screens and red tile roofs and

I wanted to hear two languages and walk through familiar enough doors and  
drive down familiar enough dirt roads and

I wanted to be done with those who I knew and  
go far enough but stay close enough and

be by myself enough to prove I never needed anything but  
That tenacity mom said I had.

I want my future.

I now have a creaky wooden blue house and  
scratched hardwood and peeling veneer flooring and  
a damp, moldy cellar filled with the landlord's hoarding habits and

I have a car that beeps every five seconds and

I don't have \$1500 worth of repairs so I drive and  
apologize for the noise when I have a passenger and  
play Greta Van Fleet too loud for this placid farm town and  
at least my friends think it's funny and "not too bad" and  
also, they're coming to my wedding.

I want my own.

I think I want a one-bedroom apartment with you and  
to never pursue the degree I have spent four years on and  
learn Italian since that's what you think in and  
start writing more what comes into my mind and  
less about what other people have already said and  
learn how to make pasta from eggs and flour and  
rescue an old dog from the shelter and  
get another degree in psychology because  
I think I know what I need now.

Faith Simpson is currently a senior in university who uses writing as a creative outlet to escape the dreariness of her (current) Midwest home. She draws much of her inspiration from her childhood experiences from Kenya, East Africa and the Northeast of the US. She is currently pursuing her bachelors in English Education and afterwards, will be pursuing her graduate degree in Clinical Psychology.

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**Aijia** By Aijia Zhang

Seventeen years ago,

my father named me Aijia.

Ai for love, Jia for family.

If you put it together, mhea said,

it means "loving," or "family loving."

Eight years later,

Didi—younger brother came.

His name is Qijia and I yelped in joy



when I saw how it matched mine.

But when I asked father about it,  
he responded with a Chinese proverb:

*Qijia, Zhiguo, Pingtianxia:*

Order your family,

Rule your country,

Bring peace to the world.

And even though both of our names conclude with  
family, sometimes I can't help

but wonder if

my character resolves

with me scrubbing wooden tables,

me making soup for my husband,

me doing the laundry, the

letters and numbers in my mind useful

only for teaching my children.

If my story ends only with me loving,

loving my parents and my husband and my children

and their children and their children's children

until my life runs out.

While family is only the start for my brother because

we are waiting, waiting

for him to save the universe.

Aijia Zhang is a seventeen-year-old aspiring creative writer currently living in Byfield, Massachusetts. Her work has been recognized at the national level by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.

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## Lilac Warmth By Tamia Hassan

Since the beginning, the curls framing my face are my worst fault  
As the banisters hung in my grandparents townhome

tell me as I metamorphosed. Childhood banter  
is no longer pure so I must sit and close my legs

before I am scarred. I was taught to drape the white sheet  
above me to disappear below, where no one can see the warmth

of my smile or figure of my body. I have learned  
to hide away the brown skin but now I am nothing

but bullet-riddled. Filled with holes I am no longer  
a little girl but an example to show

to my past self, who dared to feel the breeze  
through her hair and feel the grass on her knees.

I am mocked by the world when the seasons change  
and the child who dared to take in the lilac warmth

Of a world not meant for her. So I dwell to the  
Sky holding me down and pick up a book

Marked with the fingerprints of my ancestors and  
Claim my place in line to recite the words of

A language odd on my tongue as I mispronounce  
Them like an American born teenager.

I am an imposter in this room. And when  
I look in the mirror and I see a field of lilacs.

Tamia Hassan is a sixteen-year-old writer and journalist from Minneapolis. Her work has been published in Rising Phoenix Review and the Star Tribune. She is currently co-editor of her high school's magazine. Other than poetry, she enjoys writing short stories, prose, and articles.

## Fiction

**Red Fireflies** By Tallulah Conolly-Smith

The night was humid and quiet. A blood moon peeked out from behind a curtain of silver-black clouds and the Milky Way was a shining sash across the sky's breast. The low hum of dragonflies flitting about the fen was almost melodic against the silence of the heat.

The dark-haired boy sitting a few meters up the riverbank glanced up at the sky, brows knit. She should've been here by now.

Another boy of markedly smaller size stumbled up the bank towards his brother. His bare feet were dirty and his overalls were rumpled and distressed. "Jack-" he began, but

was cut off.

“Not now, Billy,” murmured the older boy.

“But-”

“Not *now*, Billy.”

“It’s real important.”

Jackson sighed, halfheartedly brushing a lump of hardened mud off the right strap of his brother’s overalls. “What is it?”

The little boy grinned. “What d’you call a sleeping bull?”

“Now ain’t the time for jokes, Billy.”

“Come *on*, Jack.”

The older boy looked up at the sky once more, then back towards the darkened house. He wasn’t meant to be out so late, and Billy especially wasn’t. But the kid had insisted and begged and threatened to wake the whole house with his shouting, so Jack sighed and mumbled, *okay, but keep quiet, and don’t bother me*, to which the younger boy had nodded. Yet here they were – the moon was high, the girl was missing, and, try as he might, Jackson couldn’t get his kid brother to shut up.

“Fine. What *do* you call a sleeping bull?”

A grin spread across the boy’s face. “A bulldozer!”

Jack rolled his eyes but couldn’t suppress a slight smile. “You ain’t never seen one of those, Billy. Now back to the fen with ya – and don’tcha dare go into the creek!” He didn’t

bother mentioning that he'd technically never seen a bulldozer either.

A few minutes passed and Jackson shivered. Not from the temperature, of course; the sticky heat was, if anything, simply uncomfortable. Especially on August nights like this one. No, it was the eeriness that was getting to him. The only light came from the red moon's reflection on the creek. Even the fireflies weren't flickering.

Jackson was eleven years old – full grown, he reminded himself – and he shouldn't have been frightened by a little darkness. But the sudden absence of sound sent him shaking ever so slightly, and he suddenly found himself missing the incessant yammering of his brother.

"Billy?" he called into the reeds.

Silence.

He pushed himself up off his elbows. "Billy?" he repeated.

A tap on his shoulder and he let out a yelp, whipping around. There stood golden-haired Faye Clementine, a smile between her rosy cheeks and a little boy on her arm. "No need to shout so," she grinned. "It's just me. An' look who I caught tryin' to catch frogs without a net!" She playfully pushed Billy forward and he smiled bashfully up at her.

Jackson was silent for a moment, staring at her awestruck. Then he snapped out of it, shaking his head briskly. "I thought I told ya not to go into the creek."

The little boy shrugged. "Faye," he offered, "what d'you call a sleeping bull?"

She bent down to be at his level. "Dunno," she replied, "what *do* you call a sleeping bull?"

“A bulldozer!”

The girl laughed aloud, and it sounded to Jackson like tinkling bells. “Have you even seen one of those, Billy?”

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. “Nah, he didn’t. I saw one, though.”

“Did not,” Billy retorted.

“Did too,” Jackson replied. “When we went to town last year and they were still workin’ on the steeple. Remember?” He changed the subject quickly before his brother’s cursed memory could point out that the steeple had been completed for nearly half a decade. “Anyways, get outta here. Go play in the reeds for a bit. Miss Faye here an’ I have something to discuss.”

Faye giggled as Billy shot her puppy-dog eyes, then kissed him on the forehead, sending him stumbling giddy towards the water again.

“Reckon he’ll go right back to catchin’ frogs?” she asked.

Jackson shrugged. “If he falls into the creek it’ll be his fault, won’t it? Momma’ll kill him before the current sweeps him away anyways.” He laughed to make sure she knew he was joking. “Hey-” he said as she moved to sit next to him in the dirt. “Ya sure you wanna sit on the ground? Ain’t those church clothes?”

Faye grinned and sat down beside him. “Naw. Mom’s got plenty more. She calls ’em Sunday Best, I call ’em scratchy bastards!”

Jackson was a bit taken aback but managed to squeak out a response. "Why you still wearing 'em this late, then?"

The girl let out a sound of indifference. "Needed to look my loveliest for a date with Jack Aiken." She reached out with two soft hands to pinch his cheeks. "Let's get them apples shinin'!"

Briefly shell-shocked, Jackson hastily gathered what was left of his wits and tried to look at her in a loving but not weird way.

She was silent for a second, before punching him gently in the arm. "Don't lookit me like that. Y'know I'm just foolin'."

"Yeah. Yeah, foolin'."

There was a pause. She seemed lost in thought for a moment, before turning back to face him and grinning wide. "Wanna know why I asked you to come down here tonight?"

"Course. Wouldn't want to muddy up my pants for nothin'." He laughed again and it sounded vaguely like a mouse being squashed.

Faye gestured towards the sky. "T'sa blood moon tonight. There hasn't been one in years. Know what that means?"

He shook his head.

"It means, Jackson Aiken," she huffed as she steadily rose and offered him a hand, "That tonight the red fireflies are fin'lly done hatchin'!"

He took her hand and stood without actually putting any weight on it. "Red fireflies?"

She nodded, eyes wide, as if she and these fireflies were in on some otherworldly secret that no one else knew of. “Yeah. *Red fireflies*. They get laid at the end of every blood moon, and at the start of a new one, they get hatched.”

He watched her as she spoke. So... they're hatchin' now?”

She nodded again with a passion. “An' we're gonna catch some!”

“But Faye—” he spoke tentatively, never wanting to see her beautiful smile falter “—ain't no fireflies out tonight. I been watching for a long time now and there ain't even any light other than the moon.”

She looked at him peculiarly. “Don't be ridiculous!” She laughed. “Why, there's one now!” She pointed at something that Jackson didn't see. “And there's another!” She pointed at something again, and this time, Jackson could've sworn he saw *something* – whether it was a gleam of starlight caught in the bright blue eye of Faye Clementine, or a streak of moonlight dancing across his vision, or truly a faint flicker of a red firefly, he'd never know.

“Come on, Jackson!” She danced down the riverbank, into the reeds. “Don't even need to go into the creek!” She turned back once more to meet his transfixed gaze.

It must have been *something*, though not until he was much older did Jackson Aiken realize what. Something about Faye Clementine's smile, something about the way the dragonflies were singing to him now, something about the moon smiling down on the two of them. Something about the August heat and the murmurs of the crickets, and *her*, and Jackson Aiken abandoned all hesitation.

And Faye grinned wide as he bounded down the riverbank to meet her, into the tall grasses of the fen and beyond, to catch red fireflies all through the welcoming warmth of



the night.

Tallulah Conolly-Smith is a fourteen-year-old writer from Queens, New York. She will be attending Stuyvesant High School starting in September.

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### **Herald of the Horde** By C.S. Ramsey

It was a cold and lasting winter that clutched Livingston in its skeletal hands. Bleak expanses of ice and snow stretched out from the settlement's angular walls. Lean trees — dead, for now — reached their frozen fingers to the blue-grey sky and the lifeless block of clouds drifting slowly, impassively onward like a mass of corpses down a frost-fringed river. A cutting gale would rise and howl before lying and dying again. All was motionless but for the scratching, creaking bending of the trees. No beasts left tracks in the still and biting snow. No birds sang in the frozen air, so crisp that a breath brought with it slicing ice and pain.

The people of Livingston hadn't been ready.

They'd learned to fight monsters; they'd learned how to hunt, and to survive. They'd fallen, again and again, until only the strongest among them remained. But the people of Livingston hadn't been ready. They hadn't been ready to fight weather instead of monsters, to plan farms instead of battles — to survive winter, rather than apocalypse.

Mayor Dreggs's wife, struck by the irony of the situation, had been seized with a laughter which halted only with the final sputterings of her heart. Many had died already

in these deadly throes of winter, and the necessary arrangements had been made for each of them before burial — and then, when the ground was too solidly frozen and the survivors too weak, before burning. Mayor Dreggs himself set alight the pyre for his wife, and was ashamed to feel glad for its warmth.

The people of Livingston hadn't been ready.

But on the seventh day of February — not that any had been able to track the movement of the calendar — the silence beyond the walls was broken by the groaning and the creaking of a carriage's slow approach. Those people of the settlement with enough energy to spare gathered along the top of the wall, their attention arrested by the dark antique carriage and the team of corpses which pulled it on. Eight decaying bodies, tough and rotting ropes tied around their peeling forms, were pulling their vehicle wrought of wood and steel slowly, immutably onward, across the snow to Livingston.

Confusion, disgust, fear, hate, and hope churned within the walls of Livingston in response to the strange carriage's crawling approach. Finally Mayor Dreggs emerged from the dark confines of his home like a ghost among the living, and called two of his most trusted to his side. The three departed alone. The heavy gate built into the town's southern wall slid shut with a rough clanging behind them as their feet sank step after step into the deep and stinging snowfall.

The world was silent bar the quiet crunch of threefold footsteps in the snow, departing from the north, and the eightfold tread of roving corses and the creaking groans of their antiquated vehicle rising to meet them from the long-disused highway far to the south. The air smelt of the cold sharp clarity of an over-frozen world.

And the three lonely figures trudged forward through the snow.

As the two parties neared, it became clear at last who directed these servile dead: a man sat along the bench at the carriage's peak, wrapped in layer upon layer of coats and cloth, hands covered by gloves and feet shod in a pair of heavy boots. A wide-brimmed hat turned downward hid what of the driver's face was not masked already by the scarves heaped about his shoulders.

Without a word the corpses creaked and halted, and the carriage rolled and slowed to a crackling stillness several dozens of feet away. Dreggs and his cohorts, though impatient and yearning for their homes' walled guard against the wind, had learned how to wait. It was a skill honed and perfected by those who survived — waiting, and knowing when not to. Gently a light dustfall of snow began to descend, swirling, from the sky, and still the figure atop the carriage remained obstinately motionless.

Richard Dreggs would not be the first to falter. He stood just as still, just as resolutely unwavering, even as the gusts cut through his bones and the stinging snowflakes settled on his brow, beard, and hands — one more exposed to the cold than the other, resting as it was on the revolver holstered by his side. Raphael and Maria sensed his resolve, he knew, and followed suit. The snow built slow, soft, gnawing walls around their boots; still they would not falter. The eight corpses swayed gently from side to side, faces locked firmly upon the three even without the eyes to see, heedless of the dangerous cold and of the railroad spikes jutting from their bodies, holding their reins in place; still, they did not recoil.

And then the doors on either side of the carriage creaked firmly, finally open.

Abruptly a great clamor of clank and clattering broke the silence of the scene as two imposing figures leaned slowly out, one from each door. Dense iron helms were preceded by suits of armor, and two men dressed in the full regalia of medieval knights stepped heavily down the carriage's sides, landing and sinking simultaneously through the ground's thick cover of snow. Absent was any indication of firearms; in their stead

was a broadsword slung across each knight's back. Each took a single step back and became as inert as the figure still waiting over the restless dead.

A pair of pale hands reached out from the vehicle's dark interior and gripped the door's frames, and slowly the fourth and final stranger emerged.

With deliberate, slothlike movement he seemed to *unfold* from his vehicle and step almost daintily down the rungs affixed to its side. Old black dress shoes sank into the frost, and the man twisted to face the three. His head was masked by a veil of dark, loosely-woven fabric hanging from his round and broad-brimmed hat. He wore a suit and tie, inkblack stains against the pure white wall of snow stretching out behind him. Reaching one arm back into the carriage, he withdrew a briefcase of ancient, cracked leather, and the two knights began marching in tandem as though signaled. As of one mind they shut the carriage's doors, then strode forward, past the businessman, past the corpses, and halted before the three representatives of Livingston. Their cumbersome frames dug deeply into the snow.

Dreggs, for his part, did not move. He watched these strange proceedings almost impassively, determined now to play his part through to the end. One armored knight stood only a few short feet from Raphael, who now could see the webwork of scrapes, cracks, and chips in the suit; the dull, bilious gleam of old metal forgotten and resurrected anew. The helmeted man towered over him and stared straight ahead, a statue which would stand there, resolute, until the end of time. The masked businessman followed close behind, sombre veil swinging softly with the arrhythmic lope of his stiff-gaited steps and carrying his thin, black briefcase in one hanging arm.

He stepped just ahead of the two knights, then fell still.

The man in the suit stood, straight-backed, and pulled a small, crumpled card from a pocket and held it aloft, arm stiffly outstretched.

Maria and Raphael looked to their Mayor.

Dreggs himself waited. These strangers had delayed long enough; they could stand a few moments more.

A quietly howling wind arose and crawled whisperingly along the snow-clutched ground. Dark dead branches scritch-scratched in the forlorn breeze as the snow persisted in its cruel and unrelenting downfall. The two lines of shambling corpses swayed behind the businessman and his guards, ice collecting in the hollows of their bodies. The driver's dark hat was being slowly painted white. Finally the Mayor straightened, snowdrifts tumbling from his shoulders as he shifted, and then trudged forward to take the card from the businessman's still hand—

And stopped short.

A new chill crept up Dreggs's spine; yet he could not tear his eyes away from that terrible hand.

The creased and crumpled card was held between fingers of smooth, unblemished bone; some few muscles, tendons, dried and mummified, stood dark against that bleached and skeletal hand.

Richard Dreggs let out a shaky breath and watched his body's warmth dissipate out into the cold, unforgiving air.

And finally saw, at last, that no such breath escaped the man before him.

C.S. Ramsey is a hobbyist writer inspired by a love for science-fiction and fantasy, and driven by a critical nature. “Herald of the Horde” was written after ten seasons of “The Walking Dead” convinced the author that it was time for something new.

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### **Cathy’s Promise Repair Store** By Kylie Wang

The woman who came in was older than my usuals—forty, maybe, judging by the wrinkles that lined her face like paper that’s been creased over then smoothed out again. Water dripped off her coat and pooled on my welcome mat. It squelched as her heeled boot stepped onto my wooden floor. She held a parcel in her gloved hands, wrapped in a beige towel.

I smiled. “Welcome to Cathy’s Promise Repair Store. I’m Cathy. How can I help you?”

“Yes, yes,” the woman waved her hand. The wrinkles on her brow deepened from lines into grooves. “I read your sign. I have an old promise I don’t need anymore, and I was wondering if you’d want the parts.”

She handed me the parcel. I lifted the towel off to find a cardboard box, slightly damp in one corner from the rain. An uneven object sat inside, the right size to fit snugly in my hand, coated by a thick layer of dust and grime. I turned it over in my hand, knowing what broke it—neglect, same as usual, the ending fate of every promise that’s been stuffed in a box and left in an attic and forgotten.

“What was the promise?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t remember. Only children believe in these things.” She glanced at her obviously expensive wristwatch.

I wiped it clean, the grit and dirt crumbling apart under my handkerchief, keeping silent despite the decades of promise-repairing bubbling on my tongue: the boy who promised true love, the soldier who promised to come home, the mom who promised to defeat the disease. Instead, I ran the rag under some water in my sink, and scrubbed.

When I was done, I let out a breath. It was the finest promise I’ve ever seen, cut into a mechanical bird with a glass body, the smooth surfaces shining in every color. It lay lifeless, encrusted with rust and gap-toothed where gears had crumbled apart. At its heart, a simple sentence: ‘I promise to never change myself for anyone else.’

I passed it to her and saw the change, a brief raise of her eyebrows as her memory hit her.

Her pepper hair fell in front of her face, framing the stress lines stretched taut on her forehead. For a long while she was silent, staring at the little bird cradled in her palm. Outside the window, the rain glimmered on the cobblestone street, superimposed by her reflection framed by golden oil lamp light. “God, what happened to me?” Her voice cracked. I imagined her back then—a young girl, beautifully naïve like they all were, who still believed enough in magic to spend a fortune on an enchanted promise.

“It’s not too late,” I murmured.

“Can you fix it?” she turned to me. From her face I could see how she felt—lost. “I have the money. Whatever you need.” Her eyes glistened, much like the puddles of rainwater outside.

I smiled. “Of course I can.”

And I got to work.

Kylie Wang is a Taiwanese writer who grew up in Hong Kong and is now a high school student in California. Her short works have received 35+ awards and publications, including from YoungArts, the Scholastics Arts and Writing Award, Paper Lanterns, and Bluefire. Her debut novel, a co-authored Young Adult novel titled *Stuck in Her Head*, was published by Earnshaw Books in 2023. You can find her on Instagram @kyliewangwrites or on her website at <https://twoteenauthors.com>.

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### **The Dreamers** By Avah Dodson

Em thirsted for knowledge, for knowing all the wonders of the world. No one knew why, but I had a guess: she Transitioned without a speck, and insatiability filled the hole. She was told—we all were—to go where the swirl takes you, whether that be over a tundra or atop a child’s snowman. We land where we land. But as soon as Em started her Fall, she abandoned her swirl and headed for a smoking mountain that had caught her eye. Entranced, she entered the roiling crater. Did she feel regret hurtling toward her doom? Or did she laugh as she touched the lava?

Jordan never felt right as snow, confined in solidity. “I wish I were water,” they said, “flowing, with neither beginning nor end.” Jordan’s Fall headed toward an icy glacier far from the sea, and the thought of lying imprisoned in a frozen cage for decades nearly broke them. They caught a shifting crosswind and flurried to a stream. But the stream



was plated with ice, thin enough to see through—the rushing water underneath—but solid enough not to break. Jordan tried to catch an updraft, but discovered they were stuck to the ice, less than an inch away from what they desired and unable to reach it. Did they remain trapped? Or did their torture end in spring?

Messei would say, “We’re always told every snowflake is unique, but I know that somewhere out there, there’s another exactly like me.” He believed that Transition cleaves each droplet into two identical crystals. “Every snowflake has a pair,” he insisted—whether out of longing or fear, I cannot say. When Messei landed, he searched through the snowbank for his other half. Unsuccessful, he caught an updraft to the next snowbank, and then through blizzards and avalanches. He searched in far reaches, tiny crevices in the folds of the world, until no one could track him down. We never saw him again. Is he still searching? Or did he find his match? Perhaps that depends upon whether you are a dreamer too.

Avah Dodson is fifteen. Her short fiction and poetry have won prizes and recognition in the Bluefire 1,000 Words Contest, the Royal Nonesuch Humor Contest, the Scholastic Writing Awards contest (National Gold Medalist), the Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, the Kay Snow Poetry & Fiction Contests, and the Betty Award Contest, among others. Her works have appeared in *Incandescent Review*, *Echo Lit*, *Parallax*, *Press Pause*, *Voices de*

la Luna, Stone Soup Magazine, Highlights Magazine, Skipping Stones Magazine, DePaul's Blue Book: Best American High School Writing, and others. She has been a member of the Creative Writing Team for Incandescent Review since 2022 and Team Manager since 2023. She lives in California with her family and two adorable tabbies.

## Nonfiction

**Ana** By Saanvi Aneja

I Am Ana's Anxiety.

More specifically, I am Ana's Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Or, you could simply call me "Anxiety", but it's best if you don't call on me at all, and pray that I never call on you.

Ana might not feel so fortunate to have me. There are many students who don't wrestle with the weight of anxiety as she does. They call me "overthinking," "stress," and "isolation," and frankly, I find these labels quite insulting. After all, I'm no lightweight when it comes to affecting Ana's academic and social life. My primary residence is in her mind, but I have a way of infiltrating every corner of her world. My goal? To cast a shadow over Ana's entire life.

So, where did I come from? Who knows? There are plenty of theories. Here's my version:

Ana has always been a conscientious student, eager to excel academically and make her immigrant parents proud. But over time, this drive started to morph into something more threatening. It started as a persistent knot in her stomach before tests, the fear of making mistakes, and the crippling self-doubt that accompanies perfectionism. Relax, they said, but Ana ignored it.

My first appearance in Ana's life was subtle, like the uneasiness that crept in when she was asked to speak in class, or the dread of group projects. "What if?" became my

mantra, and I chanted it relentlessly. Anxiety, they called it, but Ana couldn't easily escape my grip.

April 5, 2021. The first time I made my presence starkly clear. The trigger was seemingly mundane, a simple school presentation scheduled for that morning. But I tend to have a way with the mundane, if I must say so myself. On this day, I seized the opportunity to amplify her fears, manipulating the dread that had been building up inside her to its zenith. When Ana's turn to speak arrived, her voice failed her entirely. Her palms grew clammy, and her breaths grew rapid and shallow, saturating her bloodstream with an excess of carbon dioxide. As the world around her became distant and surreal, her vision narrowed to a tunnel, her senses overwhelmed by the suffocating weight of, well, me. It was as if I had frozen her very being, rendering her unable to move, to breathe, or to articulate her thoughts.

I loved every moment of it.

From that day on, I decided to classify myself as a master of disguise. She doesn't know it yet, but I'm the reason Ana avoids social gatherings and isolates herself in her room, looking to books for comfort. I'm the reason she can't manage more than one meal a day, the reason her tears are a nightly ritual, and the reason her parents remain oblivious to her silent suffering. I single-handedly have been responsible for countless missed opportunities and strained relationships, and I take pride in it.

I am a skillful manipulator. I convince Ana that her peers are constantly judging her, that her teachers are secretly disappointed in her, and that she's not good enough, no matter how hard she tries. I am the architect of self-doubt, the creator of negative self-talk, and the instigator of sleepless nights.

Ana has tried to fight me off, seeking support from therapists and practicing relaxation techniques, but I'm persistent. Sure, she may have hampered my strength temporarily, but I take comfort in my resilience, for every step she takes toward recovery, I counter with a wave of doubt.

It's a constant battle, but I thrive on uncertainty and fear.

I wish Ana the worst. It's in my essence.

Saanvi is a senior in high school who has recently discovered a passion for writing. She enjoys playing her electric guitar and taking long walks with her dog.

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### **New Year's Tradition: Blackness, Resilience, and the Power of Food** By Rainey Reese

The shiny mahogany table glistens in the sunlight of New Year's Day. Black-eyed peas and collard greens rest in the center of the table in glass bowls engraved with flowers. My mother, father, and three sisters share their goals for the New Year, glowing as the sunlight rushes through the blinds and illuminates the room. We relish the delicious food of last night's preparation, excited to continue this tradition. We celebrate our Blackness.

To me, Blackness is strength and struggle. Blackness comes from everywhere— every continent and country— and it is impossible to characterize this community as a monolith. We are diverse, strong, and powerful. We all have different customs, cultures, and practices in every nation. For example, the Caribbean loves plantains, and West Africa has endless methods to prepare rice. Blackness will travel: on screen, in government, into every community, and all over the world.

In all cultures, food is a staple. There is always a gathering with food, leftovers, and the love and laughter that comes from breaking bread. For African-Americans, food has historical significance. Most of the food we eat can be traced to the backbone of this nation: the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Despite the pain and suffering of slavery, the enslaved people had the strength to keep going and celebrate the new year with hope for a better future. The tradition of eating this New Year's meal is a reminder of that hope and resilience. It is a testament to the human spirit's strength.

This meal— black-eyed peas and collard greens— comes from the American South. The black-eyed peas represent good luck. The collard greens, folded like money, symbolize wealth. The meal we eat at New Year's comes from slavery. The beans and greens were the “poor” foods that slave masters did not want to eat and gave to slaves. As we enter the New Year, each part of the meal represents progress and continuation. This meal was never about eating; it was about the bravery and perseverance to continue under the most barbaric practice of history.

My memories of New Year's Eve as a little girl are unmistakably clear. Then, I never understood the importance of this dinner's preparation or the distinct methods my father used. I just hungrily watched in the kitchen. My father, however, spent hours on his feet, making sure everything was perfect for the holiday. The beans simmered in the pot, collard greens cooked over the stove, and his cornbread recipe was down to a science.

My father would always say his collard greens needed an extra level of careful precaution. It is critical to follow every step, not grow impatient and skip preparation. He would take the biggest knife in the house, make careful cuts around the core and remove it. Then, he washed them, paying close attention to removing all of the grit and roughness. He would rinse them once, twice, and strain them last. Then, he dried them,

placed the leaves on a cutting board, and chopped them into bite-sized pieces. My father did this with ease. He is swift with his knife, he knows every edge, and how to be careful. He knew what he was looking for: the finest greens on earth.

This determination can be seen in every part of the meal. Unsoaked black-eyed peas take hours to cook. I can remember when my father was moving the black-eyed peas from the bag into a bowl, taking it to the freshly-cleaned sink, turning on the silver faucet, and waiting patiently as the pot filled with water. Then, it would sit on the countertop for six hours, soaking up everything it could.

My childhood followed the same process. My family would get me dressed, bring me to the bookstore, and let me soak up all the words. This is how I grew up: surrounded by knowledge and waiting to advance. I embraced this environment and pushed myself to learn more, striving to take advantage of every opportunity presented to me. I saw this as an example of resilience and strength— something that my ancestors had to do to survive. This was Blackness to me— learning to take advantage of my opportunities, and appreciate my ancestors. Through the books I read, I saw the power of knowledge and the importance of being a lifelong learner. I wanted to use my knowledge, to be a leader in my community, and be a role model for other Black people. Black-eyed peas were not just my culture, but my identity, and celebrated every year.

My entire family was like this too. They were quick on their feet, knew their way around every obstacle, and never gave up. They were focused on success. This drive was infectious. It spread to everyone they met, like the seasoning of the greens, only perfected by careful preparation. This drive they had was something they had nurtured and developed over the years. It was a result of their diligent work and dedication, and it was something they had passed down to me. They had a sixth sense that enabled them to navigate through life's tricky waters.

Black-eyed peas and collard greens are part of Blackness. Blackness' beauty, resilience, and power were given to me in this New Year's tradition. This was not only a physical tradition, but an emotional one as well. I was able to carry on these values through the years, and I rely on them today. This New Year's tradition continues to be a reminder of the strength of my ancestors and the power of Blackness. When I sit at the table, the hearty broth of collard greens dances on my tongue and raises my spirits. Most importantly, my place in history perfectly aligns with my ancestors. We are stars coming into place in the sky, shining beacons of hope overlapping throughout history.

Rainey Reese is a high school student from the vibrant city of Chicago, Illinois. With a fervent passion for the humanities, she has embarked on a personal journey of self-expression through her writing. Inspired by her New Year's resolution to write more authentically, her essay titled "The New Year's Tradition: Blackness, Resilience, and the Power of Food" explores the cultural significance of a cherished family tradition and aims to shed light on the meaning it holds for her and her loved ones. Rainey's work has been previously published in *Teen Ink Magazine*, and you can explore more of her writing at

<https://medium.com/@raineyreese>.

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## **All Unclear** By Lila Wu

In college, I took a class on video game criticism, which was not something that I knew existed before I enrolled in it. I spent the entire course listening to my classmates discuss abstract concepts in complex video games and pretending that I also did all the readings. When the professor assigned essays, he often used *Tetris* as an example because it was a simple game that everyone had heard of. No one actually wrote a paper about *Tetris* until the class final, when I decided that I was going to be the first. In place of a final exam, we

were supposed to choose a video game and make an argument about it. The vagueness of the prompt made the opportunity too good to pass up. I downloaded the *Tetris* app onto my phone, breezed through a couple hundred levels, and called it “research.” Hey, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the game for my paper. The motive was education.

The Tetris Company claims that *Tetris* satiates the basic human drive to create order from chaos. Falling pieces—Tetriminos—are randomly generated one at a time, and their placement occurs shortly after their generation. A “Line Clear” occurs when a horizontal row is completely filled with blocks. The row disappears, and all pieces above the Line Clear shift down to fill the space. Bonus points are rewarded for clearing multiple lines at once. Clearing four lines at once, the maximum, is called “Tetris” and gives the same type of satisfaction as watching a scene in a movie where a character says the movie’s title. The Line Clear makes the game addictive and theoretically endless.

In the middle of my *Tetris* adventure, the game got personal. I went through a pretty bad breakup, and by “pretty bad,” I mean that it absolutely destroyed me. While the relationship lasted, it was the best thing to ever happen to me, but all of a sudden, it was over. I felt like the best part of my life was also over. *Things are never going to be good again, my mental illness liked to tell me. I’ll never recover from this. No one is ever going to want me again. I’m worthless and unwanted and broken and unlovable. I don’t have the capacity to get to know another person like that. I don’t have it in me to keep trying. I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t, I don’t, I don’t, I don’t.*

The truth is, I was in terrible shape long before the relationship ever started, and the relationship was a tool to cover up all my problems. The breakup wasn’t anyone’s fault, and neither was the aftermath; it just exposed all the shit that was already there. I fixated on the tragedy as a concrete explanation for my poor mental health.



Naturally, I began playing more *Tetris*. Life was majorly sucking, and the game was a good distraction. Playing didn't cost too much brainpower, and succeeding made me feel better for a moment. The only thing I wanted to think about was colorful falling blocks because every other thought hurt too much. I threw myself a pity party in which the only activities were crying and playing *Tetris* through bleary eyes. For a few weeks, my life looked like this:

1. Position the blocks.
2. Place the blocks.
3. Complete the lines.
4. Clear the lines.
5. Cry
6. Sleep
7. Rinse
8. Repeat

I developed a bit of an addiction, and I honestly shouldn't have been as shocked as I was to discover that I had Pavloved myself to associate *Tetris* with heartbreak. I didn't forget that I had a paper to write, but I procrastinated so much that I had to whip up the whole thing in less than a day. I played more *Tetris* during my writing breaks. I submitted my essay with twenty minutes to spare, and I proceeded to delete the game off of my phone. I decided that I could never play *Tetris* again. But I still think about it. Clearly.

Lila Wu was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota and grew up in Houston, Texas. She's finishing her final year at Northwestern University, where she studies Radio/Television/Film and Creative Writing. Her go-to icebreaker fun fact rotates

between her favorite ice cream flavor (chocolate chip cookie dough), having five younger siblings, and having attended clown school.

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### **First Love/Late Spring** By Jessica Zhang

Walking towards the barricade was an uphill climb, and my legs wavered from months of disuse. In another life, it'd be exhilarating to break the law so openly. Instead, it was terrifying to be outside in the quiet with only the cry of cicadas to accompany me. They'd become more noticeable in the absence of cars and busy roads, city highways turning empty. But I wasn't alone. There past the wire fencing, standing just beyond the short stretch of no-man's land, was a boy who owed me a date.

In the overripe spring of May, in a locked-down Shanghai choked by heat and regulation, normality was a distant dream. For three months, we'd longed for simple things: walking in the sun, biking past streets once familiar and lively, seeing each other again. Over text, he'd say, *We'll go everywhere. When this is over, I'll take you to the French Concession's best cafes.* His to-do list was never ending. I'd always reply, exasperated: *Okay, okay.* I never had the courage to ask, *Are we getting our hopes up for nothing? Will I see you again?*

Now he was two meters away, halted in place by a second fence, our hands barely close enough to touch.

It was 9th grade P.E. class all over again; staring at each other from across the gym, then looking away. Blushing at a first crush, a first love. We'd imagined that the following months would go a little differently. The things that seemed so constant in our lives were now a luxury: dim restaurants and bustling city nights, hot steam rising from a bowl of ramen, the song "Stay With Me" by Miki Matsubara playing in the background. I'd imagined dates to be more than just the highway. Had I been given a choice, it'd be in the Lebanese restaurant on Anfu road, in the season of plum rain and wisteria. But seeing him again after months of isolation was enough. So I reached for him on the other side, no-man's-land separating us from an embrace. He held onto my fingers gently across the

distance, both of us pressed up against the metal railings. His hair had grown longer. He looked tired. Yet there was still a giddy smile on his face, as if he couldn't believe what we'd done.

"I'm going to get into so much trouble," he said.

I sighed, thinking about how my mom had wrinkled her nose at me earlier in the morning and said, "*Really? You're breaking the rules for a boy?*"

"Me too."

"But think about it this way," he amended. "We can tell everyone else that we got out months earlier than they did. We snuck out! We're badass!"

His exuberance made me blush. I didn't say anything else to keep myself from stuttering.

But I leaned into his warm touch, comforting even in the humidity and 37° heat. "When this is all over, we'll go everywhere," he said.

I let myself believe him. His endless supply of hope. I imagined the barricades falling down, cars rushing back onto the highway. I imagined holding him close in a picturesque cafe downtown, the French Plane trees on Avenue Joffre blowing pollen everywhere.

"Okay," I said. "Okay."

Jessica is a poet from Shanghai. She loves art, music, and Arabic poetry.

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**Place** By G.F. Fuller

On 250 acres cornered between North County streets and a dense backwoods of possibility, I am working the land. This is no estate in the country. It is an urban farm, a suburban paradise. The land switches to rural once my car enters this enclave. I pass rows of lettuces and herbs, gardens trimmed by the work of volunteers and happy workers. There are banana trees to my left and right, small stumps that look like tiny Californian palms. (They will not make bananas). I don't quite know why they are here, and not back home on a beach. I pass peach trees, budding with firm fruit. They look like gooseberries, feel like fuzzy beginnings. *Am I in Georgia?*

People wave hello. There are smiles on faces I have never seen before: a man who seems like a hipster with his nose ring, long hair, and burning blue eyes, but talks softly and slowly and carefully as he washes kale... "Hey dude," he says, and I am comforted by his calmness. I envy his style: a soft collared shirt tucked beneath bright yellow waders. A lady with big round glasses shows me her herb garden (*zen* is an understatement). I rub my fingers through her chamomile, and my hand smells like staying home in bed all day.

I approach manicured rows of greens with curiosity and caution; I realize I don't quite know what this place is. Even the hawks circle overhead with slight confusion. Wind blowing off the occasional car lifts them upward. I want to tell these hawks there is no prey here, but raptors do not speak english. Instead they soar in the bright blue sky where the clouds are simple, unlike those of the thunderous tropics or those raggedy and wispy ones from the cold north. They're a blend of those long, outstretched mats of white on the great plains, and the cotton shapes which peak through my city's skyscrapers.

A car rolls by and the hawks pitch away. They do not know what to make of this patch of prairie—what with the street grid confining it and the metropolitan area surrounding it. I don't either, so instead I let the wind guide me.

Pea plants nudge themselves up from gravel and the three propeller leaves of strawberry dot the walkways. There are garlic shoots, comfrey bushes, marigolds and sunflowers. The landscape is immaculate. Every plant has purpose, and has a companion. I see stems of false elm rooming with the peach trees. Behind them, in the fields are patches of beans, and last season's cover crops. From this nitrogen bomb, the lettuce grows high in the fallout. The war of the summer has begun, and fittingly the lettuce will win it. In the next row there are white buds of cilantro and yellow petals of mammoth dill—flowers everywhere to attract the eager pollinator.

Cool air pushes across plots as if it were exhaust from the hawks' tail feathers. It shakes leaves of garlic and planks of hearty purple cabbage—rustles leafy lettuce and tall rye. That rye—sticks tastled with grain—rocks back and forth. It is out of place: its time to prosper was the winter; it does not belong here. There are houses across the street; they all have trimmed kentucky or bermuda grass, not covercrops like rye and vetch. The rye will be pulled soon to make way for this summer's watermelon. Then it'll return in the winter, when the neighbors will look out their windows as snow falls, gazing across the street at heads of green which'll push through white.

In another plot there are pepper seedlings, bushels of bok choy and tatsoi. The mustard greens are fragrant against the smell of asphalt and oil. (They taste much better too). Down the road, kids are in school. Here, a child walks past me with his mouth wide open, mesmerized by a wand dispensing iridescent bubbles for the wind to take. Others run across the gravel path, playing with each other with nothing but their young bodies under a hot sun.

I see people bent down, picking white cabbage and collards. Music plays and I am more unsure of my location. First I hear the strums of Frenchmen and -ladies in a dimly lit bistro—then some Spanish guitar and a South American bongocero. I could be in the borderlands of France, the rare plains of Panama, but the distant telephone lines and buildings across the street bring me back. *Where to?* I am not fully sure.

A child with a speaker makes it harder to tell. Memphis' "Jailhouse Rock" makes me want to rock and roll as I help a farmer build a trellis. A lady with the 50's blues migrates up from the deep south. Punk rockers, indie girls, and alternative boys invite themselves too. A family and I jam out to the visiting Mr. Bombastic. His flight from Kingston arrives as we nail down a tarp over composted grown.

I'm on all fours, straddling mounds of fertile soil beneath my body. The ground is squishy from the weight of my knees, shins and hands, and I feel like an infant on his mother's belly. That would make me but a child to the ground I call Earth. I get up, and find more of my kin.

I stand over a row of the victorious lettuce, from left to right a pithiness of life and color: spotted green and red (a Very Hungry Caterpillar), shimmering ruby (a sprouting rose), dull and steady green (a turtle shell), bright emerald green (a green giant). I look closer at the row while at the same time blurring my vision. A hearty worm emerges from the ground, takes with him leaves and wood chips. A ladybug falls from the green giant, which sprouts outward like a particularly vain tulip, then flies to the ruby rose. I didn't know she could do that. Words I remember and wings I see teach me the truth of this fair lady.

*The exhale of an Italian accordion.* Startled, I stop to ask myself if this is a cult or some smoking circle! I only see smiles and despite all the sweat and heat, the toil is not hard. The only clamor comes between a lost tray of purple basil, and the children are only angry with each other because they can be. This place cannot be another world, for it's

entrenched in this city's boundaries: the strip mall and liquor store, credit union and fast food joint are only a mile away. No, this place is here for a reason. I can feel it in the Northside's desperation, in how little green can be found in the grocery store, and in the abundance of the antithesis of food like *this*: food grown locally, sustainably, and beautifully. As I look at the rows of color and am driven through the backwoods to the Missouri River, I think about all those gas stations, liquor stores, and drive-thrus. Soon I reach the river—a brown aquatic ogre lined with pretty little yellow flowers—and I'm reminded how special a place can be.

G.F. Fuller is a young writer from St. Louis striving to accomplish the feat of making people think. He has been published by newspapers in the Midwest, as well as the writing journals *Élan* and Teen Writers Project.

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**From the Winter Sufjan Stevens' Ghost Haunted Me** By Kaydance Rice

*after Casimir Pulaski Day*

*"Goldenrod and the 4H Stone: the things I brought you when I found out you had cancer of the bone."*

I am staring at a body at my first funeral. She was my great aunt, Shirley, and she lived three houses away from my grandfather and her hair has remained curled. I stand, thinking about all of the cow trinkets within her house. I wonder why there aren't any

cows at the funeral or in her casket. Didn't Ancient Egyptians bury the dead with their favorite things? I feel a hand on my shoulder and convince myself it's Shirley agreeing.

*"Your father cried on the telephone and he drove his car to the navy yard, just to prove that he was sorry."*

I sit on my friend's back patio as he tells me about the days his mother snuck into the movie theaters with him. The way he and his mom mixed milk duds with popcorn and he'd stick some in her hair as they left. He tells me about the day he found her hanging and I want to know if there was any popcorn left in her hair when he did.

*"In the morning, through the window shade, when the light pressed up against your shoulder blade and I could see what you were reading."*

My grandmother touches my shoulder as we stare at Shirley's corpse. She brushes my hair with her fingers and asks if I want to touch Shirley. She tells me every funeral she's ever been to, she finds herself always wanting to touch the body. I realize the reason she's brushing my hair now.

*"All the glory that the Lord has made"*

I spend most nights grieving. Grieving the versions of me that never got to exist, grieving the ideas I never got to see. Some part of me wants to be immortal, to stay forever, to only grieve and never be grieved. But I think about how many more winters I'd have to go through, how many more corpses I'd try to touch. I'd like to believe I'd never get used to that amount of death.

*"and the complications that you could do without when I kissed you on the mouth."*

My grandmother tells me not to.



*"Tuesday nights at the Bible study we lift our hands and pray over your body"*

I sit with a man who tells his hospice nurse that he doesn't want to die. He says he doesn't care about heaven or if God is waiting for him, he says he wants to know what will happen here. Less than a week later, his skin turns blue and he stops. I wonder if he really did stop believing, or if abandonment still meant repentance.

*"but nothing ever happens."*

"She'll be cold," is what my grandmother says, "every memory you have of her will be consumed by ice." I remember how cold my hands are. I think about how if Shirley were surrounded by all her favorite things, then they'd all be cold too.

*"I remember at Michael's house when you kissed my neck and I almost touched your blouse"*

When my father left, he moved to Florida. He worked on an orange farm and never bought a coat.

*"In the morning at the top of the stairs when your father found out what we did that night and you told me you were scared."*

I have been to four funerals, all for people I never knew. I have no hold on grief and yet it is the only word I can think of for those who have disappeared. I keep waiting for them to come back and that's when I mourn, is when I realize winter will always return.

*"All the glory when you ran outside"*

The day I was born there was supposed to be a blizzard but instead it was 70 degrees and sunny.

*“with your shirt tucked in and your shoes untied”*

We drive for six hours for the hour-long service for a man I barely know. The music is terrible and my sweater is itchy. I spend the rest of the night sitting in the hotel hot tub, waiting for someone to come in to tell me my ride left without me.

*“and you told me not to follow you.”*

I kick my ankles against the patio and tell my friend about the day my father left. He asks if it's worse to have dead parents or shitty parents. I ask him if there should be a distinction between different types of gone — whether there's really a difference between snow and ice.

*“Sunday night when I clean the house, I find the card where you wrote it out”*

It sounds like a prediction doesn't it? He always sings like he's mourning, even when he's worshipping.

*“on the floor at the great divide”*

My mother's church has services for the dead. She would take me the first Sunday of every month and we would pray for those who left. We were the only family dressed in all black but she would tell me it was the only way to show any real respect for those who passed. I asked her about the living and she said every other day was for us, it's selfish to ask for more than we already had. I prayed for my father to appear in the newspaper with a bullet wound in January and then called it repentance.

*“with my shirt tucked in and my shoes untied”*

Whenever I lose someone, I search for meaning or maybe beauty in it but I'm beginning to think it's better there never was.

*"I am crying in the bathroom."*

I tell my friend about when I used to pray. He says he prays for necromancy and climate change.

*"In the mourning"*

My mother tells me about the day I was born. She says my first breath took away all the cool air at midnight in January and that's what made the day so warm.

*"when you finally let go"*

Some people say that in order to become something new, you need to leave everything else behind. That abandonment is its own form of creation, maybe renewal.

*"and the nurse runs in with her head held low"*

I'm at a funeral for a woman at my mother's church and the priest says her laugh sounded like her favorite drink. Rock & Rye Faygo with ice on a beach in the middle of the summer. The priest says her laugh was the best part of her, he says she kept laughing, even after the hypothermia.

*"and the cardinal hits the window."*

My grandmother says she envies the freedom birds have. The way they can fly away from wherever they find themselves without remorse or apology. She says she feels too guilty to do it herself.

*"In the morning in the winter shade"*

At her funeral, I wore a dress with music notes on it. I said it was a birds' song.

*"on the first of March, on the holiday"*

I wish I could say I've lost and then kept living but I didn't. I was born on a sunny day in January already having lost someone and then survived. I feel like the distinction is significant.

*"I thought I saw you breathing."*

Taking my first breath turned my lungs into ice and I've had asthma since. I'd like to think when I take my last, I'll breathe the ice back out. Instead of ice being internal, it will cover my entire body and that will be why I won't be able to move.

*"All the glory that the Lord has made"*

My mother's phone rings with a number from Florida and I answer it. He says his mom has died and I am invited to the funeral. He says he's grateful I never answer any of his messages because it'd only make him even more guilty. He says he's sick of the constant heat. I hang up and make a snow angel, claiming winter for myself.

*"and the complications when I see His face in the window in the morning."*

Do you think when he disappeared he froze over too?

*"All the glory when He took our place"*

Every time I try to conjure a version of my funeral, the only thing I can think of is the child whose grandmother will speak to them about my corpse, where the ice has

consumed me.

*“but He took my shoulders and He shook my face”*

I just keep waiting for it to sublime.

*“and He takes and He takes and He takes.”*

Kaydance Rice is a writer from Grand Rapids, Michigan and currently attending Interlochen Arts Academy. She is the recipient of several regional and national awards from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in the Taco Bell Quarterly, YoungArts Anthology, Cargoes, voicemail poems, and Full Mood Magazine. In her free time, Kaydance enjoys playing the viola, rambling about existentialism, and spending time with her plants.

## Art

**The Line** By Cyrus Carlson



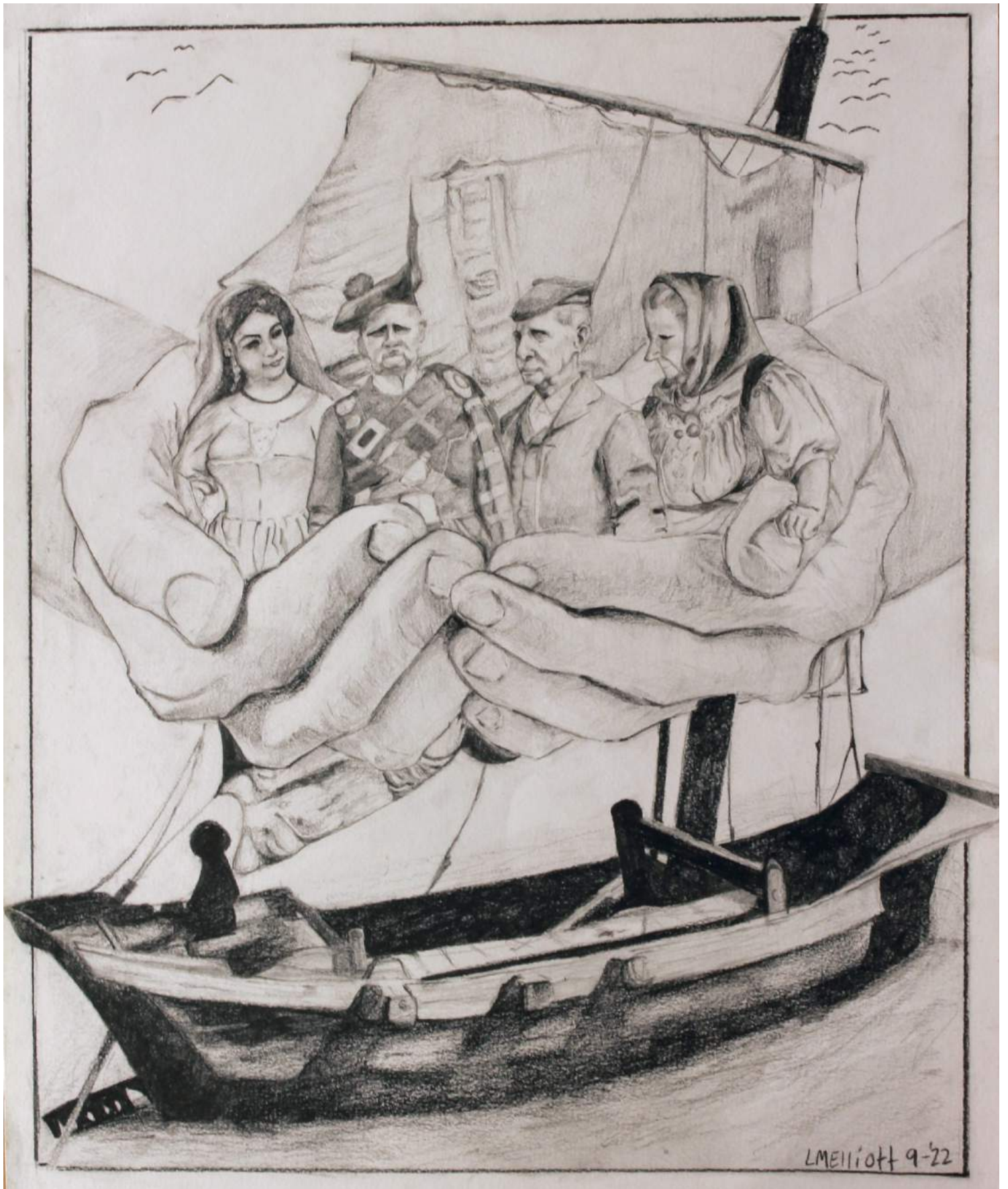


Cyrus Carlson is an abstract artist from the Midwest. His small works feature intense color and movement.

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**To America** By Lucille Elliott





To America



Lucille Elliott is a freshman at Virginia Commonwealth University. She has been previously published in magazines such as ASGARD, Under the Madness, and Virginia Teen Writer's Club Anthologies. She is also proud to serve as a Hampton Roads Youth Poet Laureate Ambassador.

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**The Guise of Control** By Zathan Ha



Z.  
H.



## The Guise of Control

Zathan is a senior in high school and is an artist who specializes in both traditional realism and digital media. His artwork can be seen in Chinchilla Magazine, TeenInk, and others. He also has contributed art pieces to writers at Brookedge Academy.

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**Jaws** By Alina Qian







## Jaws

Alina Qian is a current high school junior in the Chicago area. Her work has been recognized by Gold Keys in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards as well as by the Bow Seat Ocean Awareness Program. She believes that her work can serve as a tool in which she can initiate conversations about challenging norms and reflect on her own experiences, as if she is having a cup of coffee with the viewer.

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**Self Portrait, Cherries** By Leela AK

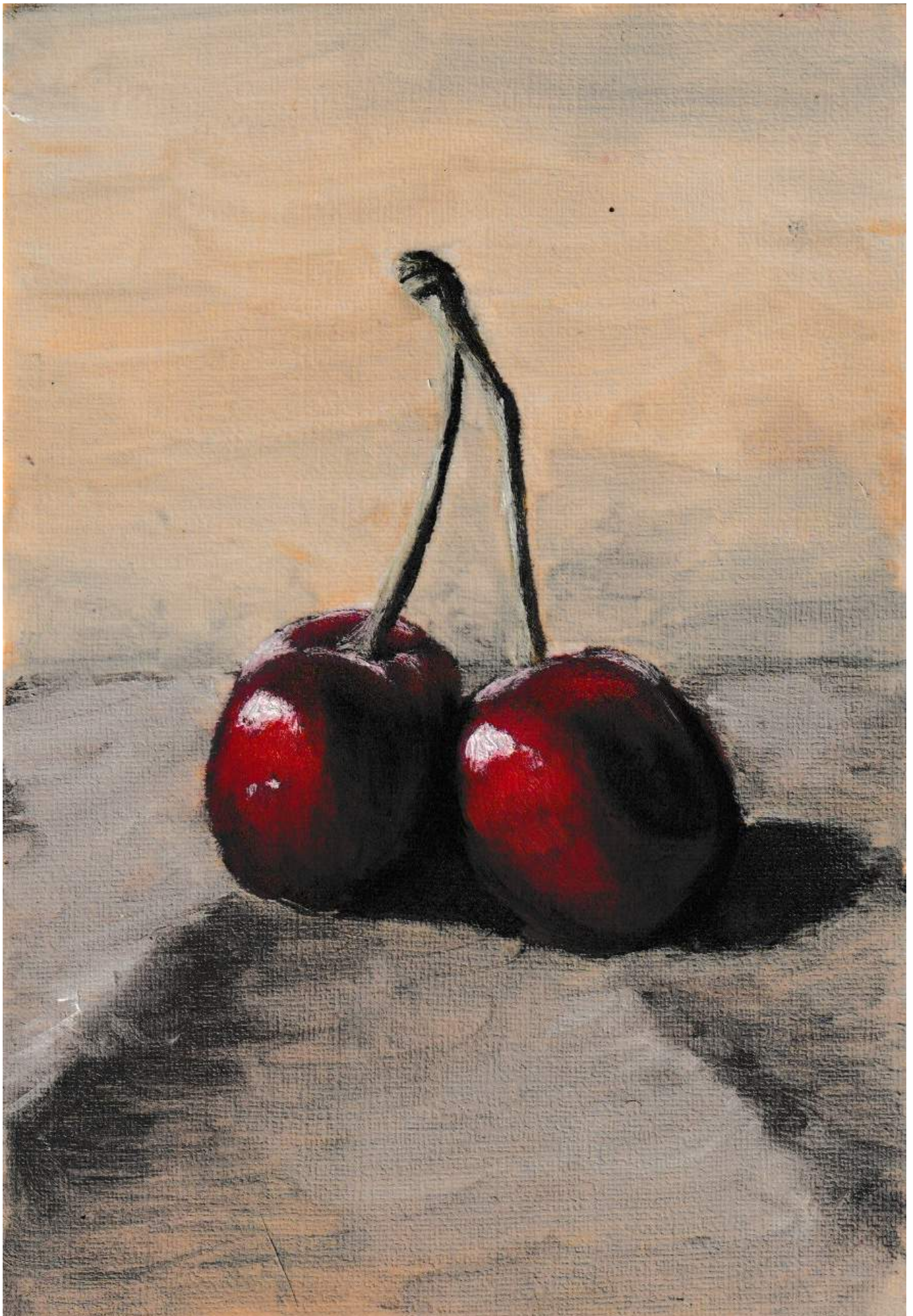






## Self-Portrait









## Cherries

Leela AK is fifteen and lives in Ireland. She likes art, but she isn't that good at it; she's better at writing. She also likes to breed poultry and groan at people about the world not being the way she thinks it should be.

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**Window to Paris** By Katherine Zhao









## Window to Paris

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Katherine Zhao is a sixteen-year-old aspiring artist and poet residing on Long Island, New York. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Competition, the Celebrating Art competition, The Dawn Review, TeenInk, Scribere Literary Magazine, and more.

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**1609** By Audrika Chakrobaratty





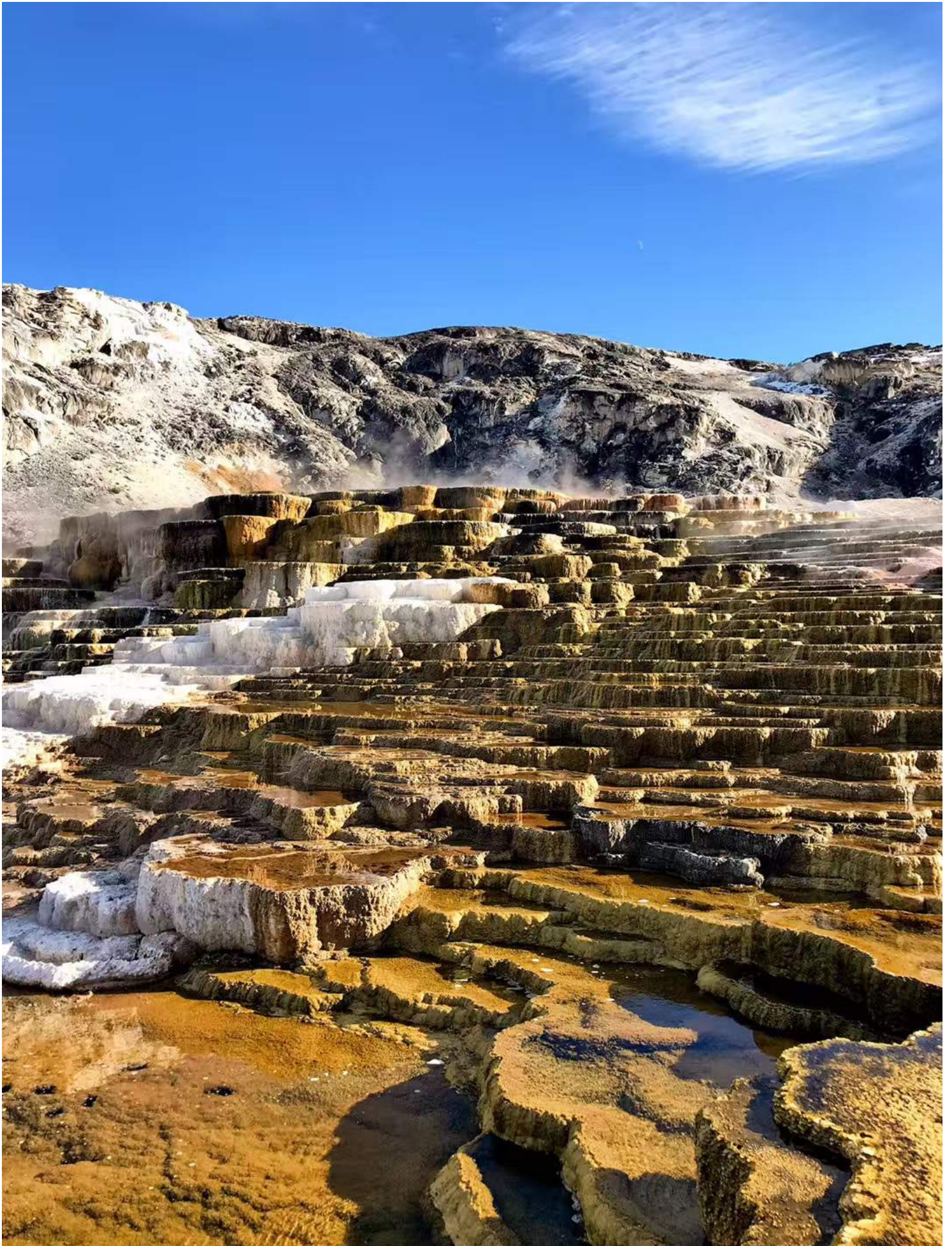
1609

Audrika Chakrobartty is an eighth-grader who lives in Texas. She enjoys writing/reading, drawing, and listening to music during her free time. She's also an avid artist, working with all types of mediums, but her favorite one to work with is just pencil and paper, but she also enjoys creating watercolor paintings.

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**Where the Sky Meets Mammoth Hot Springs** By Joy Yin









## Where the Sky Meets The Mammoth Hot Springs

*I took this photo in Yellowstone National Park. I was surprised by the beauty of it all, so I took this photo. I hope you can enjoy the essence of the Mammoth Hot Springs through this photo, and feel how I felt that day too.*

Joy Yin is a writer from Wuhan, China, though she has lived in California for five years. She is fluent in Mandarin Chinese and English but also learning Mexican Spanish. Joy has always loved reading and writing. As of now, she has works either forthcoming or already published in Skipping Stones Magazine, Scfaikuest, the new Drabbun Anthology by Hiraeth Books, Cold Moon Journal, and Star\*Line. She's currently thirteen years old and attending an international school in Mexico City. Find her on Instagram at @joyyinm88.

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**Window** By Sofia Yakymenko







## Window

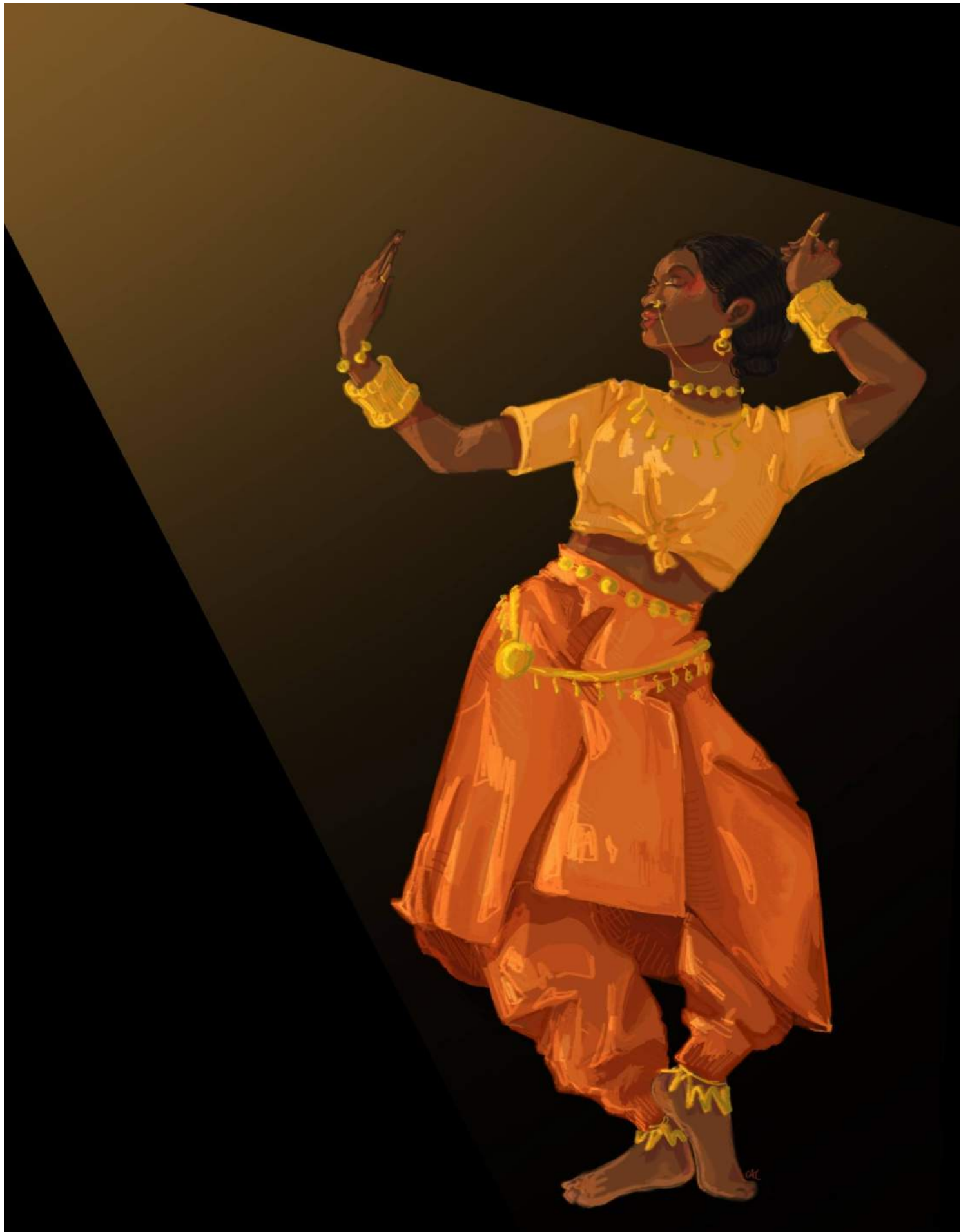
*A mirror in an antique shop in Florence, Italy, reflects the famous Basilica of Santa Croce on a busy square in the afternoon. This photo is a window between the past and the present – between an antique shop, the old basilica, and ordinary people living in the present.*

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Sofia is a thirteen-year-old from Ukraine who fled to Italy because of the war. She has been into photography for nine months. Sofia takes all photos on her smartphone as she does not have a camera yet. She would love to have one, though. She takes pictures in Italy and abroad while traveling with her family and a small dog. Sofia enjoys nature and architecture photography and wants her photos to be atmospheric and have an idea in them.

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**Dancer** By Camellia Abshire Cohen



Camellia is a sophomore at Winston Churchill High School this year. In this art piece she attempts to honor classical Indian dance as it's a beautiful art form, and one she feels has not been given the respect it deserves either online or in person. Her other hobbies include reading, sewing, and baking.

## Book Review

No Book Reviews this month.

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