

# Issue 35 / September 2024



This Golden Age

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## Editor's Note

No Editor's Note in this Issue

## Poetry

**To Be With Gaia** By Abi Fauver

I would like to dig my own grave with my bare hands.

Death, my usher, please allow me this last plea,

With soil caked under wilted nails  
And wedged between sunken palm lines,  
Weathered joints snapped from cold, hardened Earth  
A lungful of petrichor inhaled deep as She splits.  
When finished, I may finally find my peace,  
Accepted unto Her, the body now tethered like soul.

In this, I am no longer her's but Her's,  
Definitively, knowing a Mother's embrace.

Abi Fauver is a longtime lover of writing constantly looking to grow and improve. She is based in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where she often finds inspiration from the nature surrounding her. Her current inspirations for writing are based on her ongoing spiritual journey, going back to her roots, and gender empowerment.

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**Aphrodite Rebuilt** By Jasmine Hummel Newell

Call me Aphrodite.

Encase my soul with sea salt as if it were fine marble.

Hand me gold to fill in the cracks of my demeanor, silence my flaws.

Hang the doubts that assault my head like steel string over a cheater's wedding bed.

It's often said you are your own worst critic, yet mine can't seem to stay hidden.

Forbidden to give anything less until I move on to the next goal in a race I didn't know anyone was winning.

Quitting became an old friend to flirt with, unbidden and emboldened while my mind is rolling through what I used to be.

Call me Aphrodite.

Hand me pearls in place of prayer beads.

As I mourn the child I used to be, the one fixed on the TV.

Hungry for literature's history, filling that empty living room with journal pages like an after-school activity.

Encase my soul in sea salt.

So some unnerved part of me could believe that my potential did not die in puberty.

Promise me that the nine-year-old girl I used to be, is still carefree in the cracked red brick and worn playground concrete burnt into my memory.

Where you met me, hold my passions dearly, I plead.

Call me Aphrodite.

Let me be reborn in the sea with a beauty only seen in words forged by me.

Admire them wholeheartedly so I could fix the hole in my chest; Be better than the rest, it seems to scream.

Doubts that feed, yet never cease pouring over every piece.

The least of my expectations is perfection.

Without correction, anything less and I feel as hated as Helen of Troy, a mere toy to a petty goddess

Lost in the comparison, doubts set in.

Hanging heavy like steel string through the sting, I merely ask a single thing.

Call me Aphrodite and rebuild me with the beauty I can not see yet wish to be.

Jasmine is an nineteen-year-old newly graduated author based in Canada, taking a gap year to focus on her publishing career. Jasmine has had her work published twice in Polar Expressions anthologies, and has attended many Sage Hill youth workshops.

Outside of her writing, she enjoys storytelling of all kinds, whether that be screenplays, theater, and the many flavors of prose or nonfiction.

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**Ghazal for [            ].** By Kyla Guimaraes

*After R.L. Wheeler*

On Saturday nights, my neighbors [    ]. It floods my bathroom sink through the ventilation that connects our apartments, curling in tendrils. The room stinks with [    ]—that is, it smells like loss.

They're violating the building's policy: *don't [    ] on weekends, the children are sleeping.* But tonight the stars have crept into their eyes and distorted their vision, and they've lost

the ability to read fine-print regulations. I'm not surprised they've succumbed to the allure of [    ].

Winning all the time is exhausting; sometimes you need to set yourself up for failure. [    ]'s a losing

game, but with the room coated in the angry pant of [    ], it feels like winning the lottery. Their love for the taste of yellow light and plastic utensils creeps underneath the closed bathroom door. *Losers,*

I think, as [    ] crawls over my pillowcase and steps carefully down the hallway, turning on the lights as it goes, searing my pupils with ugly yellow love. I sleep on the couch, hiding from [    ].  
*My loss,*

I figure, when I fall off of the yellow cushions in the middle of the night and hit the floor hard. When I brush my teeth the next morning, I end up swallowing lingering [ ]. It is like drowning in losses.

It's easy to mistrust people who try to overflow the bathtub every Saturday night. On Sunday morning my mom and I air out my room with orange rinds. [ ] hovers in my gums, my throat raw as if I'll lose

my voice. Between spasms of hate, [ ] teaches me guilt, in words. On Saturdays, it says, your neighbors realize they don't want to lose each other. They speak through [ ]—through loss.

They don't know themselves without [ ]. [ ] suffocates because it's love.

Kyla Guimaraes is a student and writer from New York City. Her work is published in or forthcoming for The Penn Review, Aster Lit, and Eunoia Review, among others, and has been recognized by the Alliance for Artists & Writers and the Young Poets Network. Kyla edits poetry for Eucalyptus Lit, and, in addition to writing, likes playing basketball and watching the sunrise.

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**a grieving girl's crying log** By Ashley Mo

age 7 / ski lift slick with frost / legs slid out / from under me / reached for father like a lifeline /

gloved fingers closing over nothing / but an open mouth / silenced screams / bruised  
back

age 8 / the smell of chlorine / feet kicked too fast / near sharp tile concrete /

red splotches in dark blue / goggles wet / not from pool water

age 12 / math test scribbled in burgundy ink / x after x / after x /

mother sits / with her head in defeated hands / wishes i were like her / top of the class

age 14 / recently / parents only seem to remember / how to shout / and blame /

and throw / do they still know / how to love?

age 15 / a total of nine / bruised handprints on my arms / for each time /

screams slipped from my chest / i only wore long sleeve blouses that summer

age 17 / crumpled over the toilet seat / hands shaking / because of two /

undeniable red lines / undeniable little stick

age 19 / muffled yells / *don't come back* / suitcase wheels / scraping

chalk-covered sidewalks / bitter swipes at swollen cheeks / i just want to be free

Ashley is a high school sophomore in San Jose, California. Out of all the writing genres, she enjoys poetry and creative writing the most. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing national awards, and she was the Grand Prize Winner of the Saratoga Loves Poetry contest. She is an alum of the Sewanee Young Writers' Conference, the Kenyon Review Young

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### **Accidental Birdwatching** By Abby Ciona

Distracted? Me?

*"Drink - your - TEEEEEEAA" (Eastern Towhee)*

I'm trying to keep up with your conversation, you see,

*"CONK - la - REEEEE" (Red-Winged Blackbird)*

but the birds keep interrupting my thoughts.

*"Chick - a - DEE - DEE - DEE" (Black-capped Chickadee)*

Do you not hear them? I'm trying to listen to you,

*"WhEEEEP, whEEEEP, pew, pew, pew, pew" (Northern Cardinal)*

but I am hearing a melody that would rival a symphony



“FLICK – a – flick – ER – FLICKY” (Northern Flicker)

if you’re willing to listen, too.

Ooooo – wHOOo, hooo, hoo hoo. (Mourning Dove)

Abby is a Canadian writer of fiction, poetry, articles and essays. Her work has appeared in publications including *Love Is Moving*, *Keys for Kids*, and *Reclaim Today*. When she’s not holding a notebook, you can often find her playing with her camera collection or exploring nature. She is currently studying Media Production and Writing at Redeemer University in Hamilton, Ontario, and you can connect with her online at [@abbyciona](#), [abbyciona.com](#), and [abbyciona.substack.com](#).

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**Linear Z** By Rina Olsen

i unzip my great-

grandmother’s black-

and-white lips and

reach down

to grab

the pit of

her stomach. her

eyes: panes of glass

birthed from the

mercy of stones.

the child of *language*

and *English* is

languish. i

*languish*

in a language

that never put

me in a chokehold, that

never slid the cold

metal coin of want

in my shoulders.

the tongue, a

hammer. i hammered

my great-grandmother's

photograph into a word

i could not pronounce.

i pulled out

the strips of *hangul* from

her chest and hammered

them into the trolley tracks

next to her shadow.

her face, a

sentence in which

each period

is a bullet hole.

her face, a sentence.

she hammers

her knuckles into the

sign for

*let me go*

but we both know

that every butterfly

leaves a shadow of

its wings on

its chrysalis. *a*

*reflection is never*

*honest in a soju*

*bottle, you say, and yet*

*we keep trying to*

*read it. i touched*

my hand to my face

in the swollen glass

but the summer heat

wept my name away.

*teach me to read*

*my own flesh*

was what i said,

and she took the tie of

her *hanbok* and wrapped

it round and round my

eyes and ears before

screwing my jaw

shut. under my fingers

she laid pomegranate

seeds in bruised Braille  
bodies. *this is the only*

*way to learn.* write

something on the wall  
in unfermented  
pomegranate juice, great-  
grandmother. send me

plummeting into

the summer heat so that  
i won't have to intoxicate  
myself on what i'll throw  
up later. all i ask for is

my name, next

to the little sun on  
the lip of every soju bottle.  
an apostrophe at the  
end of every world.

Rina Olsen, a high school junior from Guam, is a fourth-generation zainichi Korean-American and the author of *Third Moon Passing* (Atmosphere Press, June 2023). A

2024 alum of the YoungArts program, the Iowa Young Writers' Studio, the Adroit Journal Summer Mentorship Program, and the John Locke Institute Summer School, she has been recognized by the John Locke Institute, Sejong Cultural Society, Walt Whitman Birthplace Association, Carl Sandburg Home, and Guam History Day. Her most recent work has appeared in The WEIGHT Journal, The Round, and Milk Candy Review. Find out more at her website: <https://rinaolsen.com>.

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## **Evaporation** By Julia Volpp

*After "Woman Catching Fleas" by Maestro Jacomo*

She gathers her materials: canvas, acrylic, brush.

Loneliness has never been a friend,  
still she can't help but love the tremendous  
way it makes her feel: aching, cold, unloved.

A one-sided relationship is still a relationship, right?  
So she writes love letters back and forth to herself, of dreams,  
of promises, of a dead fly she suffocates  
in an empty paint water cup. She uses the cup later  
to paint a scene all in red: mountains  
and clouds and hearts dripping with  
catalysts.

The painting is melting, eyes running  
like candle wax down an immaculate cheek,  
the flame that once cast it in shadow now flickering  
in heat radiating from canvas.

Soon it will be gone. For now,  
it has only become something else. Something  
more lovable than the original,  
because flaws are what make us human and humans

are what make paintings  
and even if it will someday dissolve, it hasn't vanished yet.

When it's done melting she starts anew,  
laying canvas with brick to create something more permanent:  
a ruin.

The brush dips in the paint, but the water  
is too cold so she adds more white, for warmth.

Fanning across the painting it runs like an avalanche of color,  
drowning out the canvas.

The white screams too loudly so she covers her ears with paint;  
when that isn't enough she breaks the paintbrush in half  
and plugs them.

She still sees screaming.

She throws the palette at the painting and it muffles everything for a second but when it  
slides  
down there is more white falling  
and she no longer can carve out  
a bubble to breathe in.

Julia Volpp is from the San Francisco Bay Area. Her work has been published by The  
Alcott Magazine and has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.”

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I waved goodbye to the moon last night

but I was really waving goodbye  
to you.

Or the you that you were

Before

Before what, exactly?

I am not sure.

Certainly before you turned 16  
when the treble in your voice turned bass  
But not before grade seven  
when your weeds of legs sprouted up  
so that your face  
glistened  
as it touched the Sun.

Perhaps it was just before  
age 13  
that momentous birthday  
when the unspoken threshold is finally crossed:

youth becomes adolescence  
child becomes teen  
innocence becomes curiosity  
becomes experimentation  
becomes rebellion

becomes regret

Becomes

of us all

What is the 'before'

you may ask?

I am not sure.

The only *before* that matters anymore

is the one that precedes

your death.

I am the lost time traveler

stuck in a never-ending loop

reliving every precious moment with you

Before

We never got to say goodbye, though,

did we?

The sand in your hourglass

had already run out

Sitting in a

motionless

mound, at the bottom

of tinted glass.

No

we never did get to say goodbye,

did we?



So now every night,  
I sit by the bay window  
in your favorite, leather chair,  
drinking tears and warm, honey tea  
while your college sweatshirt hugs me.

And as I gaze  
through misty lens  
towards the watching sky,  
I see your perfect, little face  
smiling down at me,

and so I wave  
goodbye  
to the moon.

Nicole Orejuela (she/her/hers) is a twenty-year-old undergraduate junior from Brookfield, Wisconsin, studying psychology at Northwestern University. An ardent writer since elementary school, Nicole won her first writing contest in the 4th-grade for her essay on the Peel Mansion Foundation. Since this early accolade, Nicole's love for writing and storytelling has only grown as she's progressed in her academic career, and her poem *If I Were a Boy* has recently been published in the Alcott Youth Magazine. When she's not drinking too much coffee at a local café or reading a new psychological thriller novel, Nicole enjoys creating new literary pieces in the form of short stories and poetry and hopes to one day publish a book.

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**of ink and dreams** By Urvi Goel

before it learnt to  
break at the hands of boys

my heart twisted at  
lives curved into  
yellowing paper with  
the shadows of a  
hundred hands dancing  
over sacrosanct phrases  
my breath whispers with  
pages that melt into  
my fingers leaving a  
dust of desire and dreams  
i find myself in  
the corners of worlds in  
sentences tucked away like  
lovers' notes  
invisible to the wind  
i breathe poetry and  
bleed prose and there are  
paragraphs inked on my arms  
if you cut me open you  
would find the centuries flood  
out of me like blood  
it is quiet here i  
am not here i  
skip stones across galaxies  
find secrets pressed into  
pages like autumn leaves  
transparent dreams with  
sunlight tearing through  
knotted canopies  
the words carve castles

into the air and i  
pour into rooms  
full of the perfume of  
stories i haven't lived yet

Urvi is a poet, artist and musician at heart. She is currently in high school in Bangalore, India. She co-hosts a podcast, whY A book, focusing on young adult literature, a topic about which she is very passionate. She also has a blog:  
<https://gotablankspace.wordpress.com>

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### **Red Scare** By Savannah Sisk

There is no tragedy without loss,  
or at the very least,  
a lack of something.

I am consumed by my family's loss of heritage,  
of religion,  
of mother tongue-  
there should have been no loss,  
there should be no aching lack!

No man nor woman should fearfully shed anything for fear of retribution.  
My ancestors should never have felt the need to suppress themselves,  
fearing persecution in the land they fled to,  
seeking freedom.

My great-grandfather should not have been ashamed to speak with an accent.  
He should never have felt as if he was doing his children a favor,  
refusing to teach them Russian.

As a result of unfounded fear,  
I am empty,

void of what should have been mine,  
void of what should have been passed to me,  
void of true connection with those who fled and those who died!  
What was for so long a thing of pride,  
turned to a source of shame,  
souring like milk left in the sun  
by those who allowed paranoia to consume them.  
Worst of all, my familial tragedy is common.  
The Red Scare was only a single instance  
of a single boogeyman,  
who we are always reinventing.  
I am not alone- I am one of many,  
stripped of a heritage  
I would have proudly embraced!  
For those who could have passed it to me did not, out of unjust fear.  
I bear witness to the slow death of their memory.  
I may tell my children their story,  
but I will never know how to tell it in the way it was written:  
In Russian, a language I was never taught to speak.  
I cling to what is left,  
to the few fragmented pieces of my heritage,  
preserved by diligent grandmothers and great-aunts.  
Potitsa dough rolled thin across a table,  
brushed with butter,  
sprinkled with cinnamon sugar.  
Small jars upon which pictures of forests and pretty girls are carefully painted.  
Inside, written prayers are kept safe.  
And pictures,  
and stories,  
of endless sacrifice.

Savannah Sisk is a sixteen-year-old woman who lives in the American South, where she spends the majority of her time daydreaming about ways to move to New Zealand. She is extremely passionate about writing, having loved to write ever since she learned to hold a pen. Most recently, her writing and poetry have been published in the Alcott Youth Magazine, Quail Bell Magazine, and Across the Margin Literary Magazine. Her work is forthcoming in the Academy of the Heart and Mind Literary Magazine and Anti-Heroic Chic Literary Journal.

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## 10 things to do before you die By Selena Zhang

1. stir raspberry soda into a champagne flute. Setting sun / cheek pink & neck yellow.
2. buy two fountain pens. Black / Blue. Siphon the ink across your palms. Wash in the sink.
3. visit China. Tell *nainai* again, again, again, until she forgets.
4. buy a cat. Make sure it will love you back.

5. pour yourself a bowl of music. Eat it / cross-legged / 6th period classroom.

6. go star-gazing. Find an empty highway. Be anywhere, anything. Let the grass kiss your skin. The fireflies flit away, the wind like a snake language, swallow the hot air, let nothing breathe down your neck. Empty mall / empty ride / empty waters / empty hot-air-balloon. Be anywhere, anything. Be anywhere, anything.

7. take the SAT.

8. curl up in bed. Don't think about the dying or the bucket list or the whirring refrigerator downstairs. Don't think about the future /past / present at all. Knock on your knee thrice for extra protection. You know the rules.

9. go to college.

10. finish this poem.

Selena Zhang is a high school student living in Montgomery County, Maryland. Her work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers and is featured/forthcoming in the WEIGHT Journal, the Eunoia Review, Sad Girl Diaries, and The Candid Review. She particularly enjoys writing poetic interpretations of her dreams.

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**Ringleader** By Marcellus Whetham

My mates and I agree on one thing:  
It's easiest to think when your hands  
Are curled up in fists and everyone  
Knows you for your loud words

Or louder punches.

Your ruffled up uniform,  
And your abandoned tie.

And no one knows about how your mother  
Screams like glass shards or how  
You lie alone in a dark room sometimes  
Because you're too much of a man to cry.

And that the word whispered around is not a label of such,  
but a verb of what you do  
Which makes it not as bad as the other words  
you've been called before.

And we all agree (though we don't say it)  
The fun never lasts as long as the scab or the pain

or the tears that you wish you could shed  
in a half made bed.

But we don't know what else to do  
and no one would believe us if we changed  
and to be honest I don't even think we would be strong  
enough to brave the laughter like the others do.

And so we agree.

Marcellus (they/he) is a queer, neurodivergent teen exploring family, love, and religion through their words. They love nature and cats, occasionally engaging in fencing sabre.

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### **American Sonnet for Inconceivable but Not Unexpected Deaths** By Livia Daggett

The service is slap-dash. Hard not to believe  
in signs and wonders when sun breaks sunken clouds  
the second the pastor taps the mic, but his speech  
is tone-deaf. Don't speak to me of Jesus. I want to remember.

Death makes parents of children and children of parents.  
See my father and his brother in sleeping bags on the floor  
of their father's house. See my grandfather never alone.



For dinner, they feast on steak, chicken, chips, salsa and guac,  
grown men turned little boys rogue in the kitchen.  
I drive my family to the service. My mother cries in the backseat.

In the box in the ground, hand-hewn by my uncle the carpenter,  
beside my grandmother's ashes, her requests:  
a TJ Maxx-looking necklace still in cellophane packaging  
that says "Gratitude" in cheap nickel. Her 40-year AA chip.

Livia Daggett is a copy editor by night and a senior at the University of Pittsburgh studying writing and philosophy. She has previously been published in *Imposter: A Poetry Journal*. She loves to read, knit, and provide overbearing care to her houseplants.

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**Plummeting Bird** By Samantha Szumloz

It has been the year of tests,  
the year of my soul's partial death,  
the year that my guardian angel decided  
to let go of my hand.

I ripped through the atmosphere for months,  
trying to grab the clouds and planes above.  
Each time I'd try to save myself, though,  
they'd slip from my grasp.

So I continued to fall  
like the first raindrop of a downpour,  
crying for a parachute, screaming for someone to save me  
from the cold pavement below.

No one heard me scream except the air.  
No one heard me weep except *me*.

All I could do was brace for impact,  
and pray to God that I would learn to fly  
before I hit the ground.

I learned.  
I scraped my feathers against the pavement,  
  
but I learned.

Samantha Szumloz is a junior Writing Arts major minoring in creative writing at Rowan University. Her work has been featured in publications such as *Moria*, Woodbury University's national literary magazine, and *R U Joking?*, Rowan's comedy publication. She is from Hamilton Township, New Jersey.

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## In Our Traveling Bathtub By Jenna Mather

Sometimes I think about how I love you even in my dreams. One night, I imagined we were spies, traveling to a mansion in a bathtub instead of car, and you pressed my back against the cold tile when you kissed me. But, a different night, the train you rode slewed off its tracks into a ravine while I watched through the glass windows of a diner. I will never forget how I chewed my tongue while I looked for your body in the rocks and twisted metal. For hours I convinced myself you were alive; only when I woke up were you dead. Those four minutes—when writing your eulogy was more impossible than any traveling bathtub and my bedsheets were a concrete casket—that was the nightmare. But then you told me *good morning*, and I was back in my dreams. Funny how my mind taught me what losing you feels like, so I will never let myself wake up against anything but our cold tiles.

Jenna Mather is a graduate of the University of Iowa, where she studied English and creative writing. With her poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction, she tries to untangle the complexities of love, womanhood, and the writing life. On any given day, you can find her in a coffee shop—or online at @\_jennamather and jennamather.com.

## Fiction

### **The Golden Fish, Retold** By Khalila Soubeih

Once there was a fisherman who lived in a run-down apartment near the shore. He spent his time fishing and selling his catches, though they were always small. One day, as he was fishing, he caught a strange fish, the likes of which he had never seen. It was small and golden in the sunlight.

“Oh, please let me go,” said the fish. “I am not a fish, but a transformed prince, and I must go back into the sea.”

“I don’t know what I’d do with a talking fish anyway,” said the man, and released the fish.

That night, he recounted the strange experience to his daughter.

“Well,” she said, “if it really was a magical prince, surely it could have granted you a wish. You should have asked for somewhere better to live.”

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Feeling guilty that he'd not thought of that himself, he went down to the docks early the next morning.

"Oh fish!" he called. "My family is suffering, and I believe you owe me a favor."

The fish swam up next to the pier, bobbing in the tide. "What is your request?"

"I would like a nicer place to live, somewhere clean and not broken."

"Consider it done."

Sure enough, when he returned that evening, his daughter was sitting in the living room of a small house. There was a garden in the front, full of lettuce and carrots and beans. Inside, they each had their own bedroom, and not a single faucet leaked.

"Thank you," said his daughter. "I am glad to see the fish was not lying."

"As am I."

"Perhaps, though, the fish can do another thing."

"No," he said. "This is plenty for us. We shouldn't be greedy."

"But wouldn't you like a second floor? And a dog? I know you've always wanted one."

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The man couldn't deny that. The next morning, as he set out his crab traps, the fish came to surface again.

“Is the house to your satisfaction?” it asked.

“It’s a very lovely house. But, you see, we’ve always wanted a dog, and I’m afraid it’s still too small to have one. If we had a second floor, we could have a dog.”

“Consider it done.”

When the man got home, he was greeted by a large black dog, wagging and begging for pets. His daughter laughed and hugged the dog.

“Do you think, Dad, that the fish has more tricks up his sleeve?”

“Even if it does, we shouldn’t ask for more.”

“If he can make a dog appear, though, he must be able to make me a boy.”

“I will not ask the fish for anything more.”

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The man saw the fish again, but did not ask anything of it, and only threw it a scrap of his bait. When he returned home, everything was just the same as it’d been before. His daughter was sitting on the sofa with the dog, a book propped open in her lap.

“Dad, you didn’t ask the fish.”

“I told you, we’re not going to bother the fish anymore.”

“If I can’t ask the fish, then I can at least ask you.” She closed the book. “Please, I just want to be a boy.”

“But you are not,” said the man, and he went and cooked them dinner.

As the weeks went on, she asked more and more. Every time he returned home, she stared at him in disappointment. Every time she asked, he refused. He remembered sitting in a doctor’s office and being told, *it’s a girl!* and he simply did not see how that could not be true.

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The fish continued to pop up around the docks, seemingly nodding at the man. It didn’t speak to him again, or if it did, he didn’t hear over the crashing of the waves. One night, long after the other fishermen had gone, he stayed, hauling up shrimp traps and throwing back the occasional rockfish.

Once again, the golden fish appeared.

“Old man,” he called, “do you have any other requests of me? I am forever in your debt, and surely by now, you’ve found some flaw in the house and dog.”

“No,” the man said. “I do not.”

“Not you? Or your child? Not even a bone for the dog?”

“No, thank you.”

“Very well.”

It was nearly midnight when he made his way home, under a cloudy and starless sky. In the dark, he did not recognize the building. He’d gotten so used to the house that seeing once again the broken-down apartment did not register.

His key still worked though, and the apartment was exactly how he remembered it. The kitchen was small and one of the burners didn't work. The bathroom sink always leaked, and the pull-out couch where he slept was creaky as ever.

The only difference was his daughter's room. She was not there, and neither was the dog. The bed was made, only her baby blanket missing. A stack of books sat in the corner.

The man raced back to the docks.

"What did you do to my house?" he demanded of the sea.

"What house?" the fish answered. "The house your son wished for? The house in which you refused him his life? The house that I gave, not to you, but your son? It is still his house. But it was never yours."

"I don't understand."

"Your son spoke to me. He told me of the wishes he'd asked for. I gave you a chance, tonight, to be honest. To care for him. And you did not. If you cannot make one selfless wish, you do not receive any wish. It is your son's choice whether or not he finds you. I've made sure you won't be able to find him."

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True to the fish's word, the man never saw his daughter again. It was as if she had disappeared, or, more accurately, never even existed. Across the bay, there was a small, two-story house. Inside it lived a young man, a daughter who was once someone else's son, and the dog.



Many years later, when visiting an old friend, the fisherman thought he saw his daughter. He recognized the dog on the leash, but not the man holding it, laughing with a friend. He wondered, then, if the fish was right. If it really was true that he had a son. Or, maybe, he just missed the dog.

Khalila Soubeih (they/he) is a creative writing student at Western Washington University. He writes about queer magic, often set in their home of the Pacific Northwest. In their free time, they can be found exploring tide pools and on Instagram as [@starful.khalila](#).

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### **Night Clerk** By Mary Russell

My mother was dead, and I had been driving in a cold dark night for what seemed like eternity.

The sign for a motel glowed neon in the dark as I drove into town. I pulled into the parking lot as the sky shrugged on the navy-blue night like a threadbare jacket. The motel parking lot was dark and deserted—it could have been abandoned, but for the lemon-yellow light glowing in one of the windows.

I parked, crossing the lot and stepping into the lobby. The door banged shut behind me. Standing on the threshold, I took off my earmuffs—it was a frigid night, and my car's heating had broken two months ago.

The motel wasn't a welcoming place. The carpet was faded and frayed, and the overhead lights were broken. This forced the clerk to resort to a sun-yellow desk lamp. Even she had something of the dead and discarded about her. Blue circles were smudged under her eyes and her thin hair was pulled into a fraying ponytail; I guessed she was fifty. I could see her skull beneath her skin, drawn in indigo shadows. A cigarette dangled from her lips.

I asked for a room. She stretched out a hand to hand me the key to Room 4 and asked, "What brings you to town?"

I fumbled the key as she handed it to me, and dropped it. I crouched to retrieve it and rose to answer, "Funeral."

"Oh. I'm sorry. My husband died two months ago." Those bruises under her eyes must have come from the kind of sleepless nights I was familiar with. She frowned and sighed and said as if to herself, "Sometimes I wonder how people keep living."

"My mother thought it was God."

"I don't know about that. My husband is dead." The clerk stubbed out her cigarette. "Good luck, anyway."

I followed her directions to a slightly derelict room. Turning the key in the lock, I dropped my suitcase on the floor. I did not bother to turn on the light before I fell into bed.

I checked out that morning with a different clerk. I left. I went to my mother's funeral, and I never saw the bruised-eyed clerk again. But sometimes I still dream about that old motel. And occasionally when I wake up I will remember how the motel sign glowed in the dark like a lighthouse, and how it was I and a stranger in an unremembered town had at our core the same deep corrupting fear: that there was no point, that they had died

for no reason. I still don't know the answer to her question, but there is a strange comfort in knowing I am not the only one asking it.

Mary Russell is an avid writer (and reader) of fiction, mostly fantasy but occasionally realistic. She was published as a winner of the 2021 "It's All Write" regional contest at aadl.org. When she isn't writing or being a high schooler, she enjoys reading, painting, and playing the violin.

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### **Grass Stains** By Conner Wood

Someone told me the other day the world was ending, and I laughed because I was too drowsy for such a sweeping proposition. I supposed however there was no reason to disagree, and in that way it was a small question, obvious even. It all seems so small, newscasts coughing up phrases like "global boiling," "permafrost collapse," "atmospheric clogging." A picture of a fishing boat caught in an oil current. A line to take a selfie with the last oak tree. Grandpa still says the term "global warming," and I'm not sure if he's stuck in the past or if he's sugarcoating. I always decide it's best to let it be.

When I come home I flick on only the stove light, too late for the sheerness of the ceiling fixture. I light the stove, crack an egg over a pan. Fill a cup of instant ramen with water, stir in chopped mushrooms, scallions, and into the microwave for three and a half minutes.

I flip to channel R-2 on the television and a newscast runs. On the screen is a little white speck flying with the stars and the deep black, something about scientists fleeing the planet.

Soft pops ease onto the pan and I cut off the heat. The yolk wobbles intact to a perfect orange as the microwave rings. I pour the ramen into a bowl, mix in oyster sauce and

arrange the egg on top of the broth. Leaning against the counter watching the newscast, I mix the yolk and let it cool.

*It is unknown where the scientists plan to go, some sources say they will attempt to reboot the colonization of Mars, a project untouched by any nation since the 2088 disappearance of the Athens 72, thirty years ago.*

I used to walk outside with a respirator mask just to feel the sun, a dim glow through the pastel smog hanging in the sky. Sometimes I think the smog might disperse, but it only swells back, dust pebbles raining in its wake. I remember a speck puncturing a man's windshield on the corner of 33rd. He got out, said, "somethin' tells me it's better a' stay where the air's thick, you know what 'a mean?" We both laughed, and strung our masks a little tighter.

*Other sources expect the scientists to land on Jupiter's moon Europa, whose surface has still thawed just thirteen percent, is, as far as we know, uninhabitable.*

Uninhabitable, I whisper back to myself.

Out my window my street's fresh-air turbine lay dismantled on the ground, and pilfered bits; bolts, plating, shafts, are left behind and scattered between every intersection. Only 32nd Street is left clean, where a mural of *Peter Pan* is preserved in the center. Passerby pause; some to cry some to titter, but all frail and fixated on the gouache foliage of Neverland Jungle, the glass water of Mermaid Lagoon. I walk near them but not beside. Neighborhood moms complain they're turning into ghosts, but I think they're only considering it.

*The International Department of Astrogeology believes they've discovered three impending earth fissures, or tears in the earth, only at about several hundreds times anything we've seen before. The first is set to open in one day's time on Feb 24.*

A map of the Western Hemisphere appears on the screen. *The first fissure is expected to stretch from Ottawa, Canada, to Matanzas, Cuba. A red line crawls between the two cities, it passes right below my feet. The other two fissures will intersect at Ngari Prefecture, Tibet, and span an even larger area at -fzzt.* I cut the newscast.

I open my door and DC is floating, half dead half living. Screams choke the air, out of dread, out of anguish, or maybe just to be heard. Broken glass on either side of storefronts, punctured windshields stained not with dust but blood, and shivering backs hunched in corners, praying. On the yellow lines dividing 33rd Street, a man screams with his eyes closed. "End of the world and we're here prayin' to different people, tellin' one another he's prayin' wrong!" I look up and down the street and decide he must be right. It's too dangerous to appear in a car, too distracted to care for another ghost floating before the mural. As I drift away from the chaos and down 32nd Street I notice the breeze ripping across my jeans. They're decidedly too baggy and do nothing for the cold, but I cherish them for the grass stains around the knees.

By 35th Street the mania of the fissure is nearly inaudible, save for a few stray shrieks echoing overhead. Instead it's replaced by droning newscasts left running in empty houses. They sound through broken windows and up and down streets. I need to know, but I wish I wouldn't have to so soon.

*Sources suggest -fzzt- fissure will come much faster than expected -fzzt- eight hours at most.*

*Researchers in Beijing believe the fissure will -fzzt- swallow much greater an area than -fzzt- expected.*

In the last six hours communications went blank. I try to call my parents but nothing, only a beep and a message.

*Sorry, Verizon internet services have been shut down for the foreseeable future. Stay safe!*

Similar messages are posted on Google, Facebook, sad smiley faces and “stay safes” at the end of the world. I too drop to a corner, and feel my eyes burn and face melt against the wall, collapsed.

I spend the last few hours in the Natural History Museum. It’s silent but the lights are all on. It’s incomplete, turnstiles frozen in place and ‘did you know?’ plaques hanging unviewed. I feel the bustle of visitors in the museum walls, distant like the face of someone you used to recognize. In the surface of a gemstone, emerald jade, I study my reflection. It’s hazy and multiplied but if I squint hard enough, I can see my eyes hang. I laugh, trudging aimlessly through the city and exhausted like a fool. Beside a fossil of a *Barosaurus lentus* I choose a bench with a cushion. It’s meager and weathered, but I wipe my eyes and know it’s perfect. With my coat spread flat I turn to my side, smiling, too content to be pensive. I only close my eyes and wait to hear the fossils rattle. I’d bet they’re tired too, I’d bet they’re smiling.

Conner Wood is a junior at New Providence High School. When he’s not writing, he may be found singing, studying, or eating at his favorite bagel shop.

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### **The Perfect Shot** By Ciana Tzuo

It’s a chilly night in the middle of autumn. The wind howls outside and a dog barks in the distance. The town is silent except for the local bar at the edge of town. A warm light illuminates from the windows and the sound of music fills the air.

A man walks into the busy bar in a beige suit and bowler hat. He orders a whiskey and finds a table in the corner. He plops down, exhaustion filling his bones. Soon enough,

another equally tired looking man slides in on the other side of the table with his own drink. He glances at the guy across the table, "Mind if I sit here?" he asks.

"No problem," he responds with a wave of his hand as he takes off his bowler hat.

The other man nods before reaching into his coat pocket and conjuring a pipe. He fills it with tobacco before lighting it. Smoke floats up and the pungent scent of tobacco mixes with the smell of alcohol and sweat.

"So what brings you here?" The man lowers his pipe and puffs out smoke, addressing the man across from him.

"Not much, just here to shoot the mayor," he lowers his glass, swirling the contents, "how 'bout you?"

"Really?" Shock marred the feature of the man with the pipe, "Same here. I guess lots of people here come with the same plan."

The other nods before reaching out his hand, "John, pleasure to meet you." The scent of tobacco engulfed him as he leaned over the table.

"Lawrence, pleasure to meet you too," he responds with a firm handshake.

"Up for some cards, John?" Lawrence challenges once he pulls back.

"Why not? The night is young." John replies, grinning.

The game starts quickly. With alcohol in their system, and a comfortable rhythm of cards, they start talking .

“So you’re shooting the mayor huh. How you reckon you take the perfect shot?” John starts.

“Well... for starters, I usually use a tripod.”

“I use a bipod sometimes too.”

“I never thought of that, but stability is definitely important.” Lawrence contemplates before setting his cards down.

“Oh definitely, and the angle has to be perfect. A little off and the shot is completely messed up.”

“Of course! Being higher is better though. A clear shot with no people in the way,” Lawrence describes passionately. “Also gives a better escape route,” he adds on as a last-minute thought.

“Nah, I’d rather be closer. Gotta be up and personal and catch the exact moment. Plus, it lets me see more details.” John creates a finger box, peering through it as he imagines his perfect shot.

“Yeah, yeah. You know what’s the worst, when you’ve got everything lined up and your subject moves!”

“Wildlife?”

“Sometimes, but mainly people.”

“That’s tough, but when you get the right shot, it’s like everything clicks. There’s something satisfying about getting the perfect shot.”



“Right! That feeling when you hit the bullseyes.”

“Bullseye-” John responds perplexed before brushing it off, “Not the way I would describe it, but everyone has their different styles I guess. It’s a tough job but one that pays well.”

Shrugging, Lawrence lets out a hearty laugh, “Of course, gotta pay the bills somehow. But one missed shot, the client gets mad, and all the work for nothing. It’s a demanding industry!”

“Sure is!” John agrees fervently as he offers his glass to Lawrence in cheers.

“To a perfect shot! Amen!” They cheer in unison, clinking glasses.

The men continue in conversation, cards long forgotten. A feeling of mutual connection between two strangers on a cold night.

The next morning as the mayor walks out of the back entrance of the town hall after the town meeting, two shots are made: one accompanied by the soft click of a camera, and the other by a sound of a body hitting the ground.

Ciana Tzuo is a freshman in high school who has always loved reading and now wants to further her passion in writing. Her international and bicoastal upbringing has given her a unique perspective on the world. Outside of writing, she plays golf competitively and does musical theatre.

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## Lettering By Ananya Mandrekar

You steadied my chubby hands as I wrote, carefully distinguishing each block letter. You guided my pencil to make sure that I could hold it with a perfect grip. You gave me stern reminders not to slouch while writing; that it was an age old practice that deserves respect. Week after week, I memorized the letters, just as I learned to sit up straight. I learned when to pick my pencil up and how not to smudge the graphite while writing quickly. I was so excited that I would know how to write before everyone in my class. I used a ruler in the beginning, without your knowledge, to make my lines look straight. The ruler met my hands with a smack soon after you found out.

After I could write without looking at the letter guide, you berated me for not knowing how to space out my letters evenly. After I learned spacing, you called my pencil grip an insult to evolution. When I got blisters from writing so much and begged you for a break, you told me that unless I made sacrifices, I would never get anything in life. So I wrote. It didn't matter which teacher called my printing beautiful, it had to be up to your standards.

But it still wasn't enough for you. After I learned printing, you made me learn how to join letters together in cursive. You made me practice drawing uniform circles and ovals every day so that every word looked even. You taught me how to make my letters slimmer and neater, how not to pick my pencil up at all. You made me work on making sure that all of my words were the same height. It was a disgrace that I had to use lined paper; I had to be able to write without looking at it all.

Day after day and page after page of practice, I thought that my handwriting had finally improved. But you didn't think so. You pushed me, saying that I had the potential to write neater than type. I fought back, saying that my handwriting was neat, just not good enough for you.

After I moved away, every letter and card that I sent you was met with remarks of how my handwriting was deteriorating. I tried my best with every letter and punctuation mark, but you always had something to say. I admire the clarity of my handwriting and am thankful for your early intervention. But I am left wondering, did we take it too far? I received every award for my penmanship, and I always gave you credit, hopeful for appreciation which I never received.

Now, I try to steady your hand, guiding your pen as you sign. You cast me glances of hatred as my hand shakes, but we both know that this is best for you. I feel a salty tear well in my eye, the kind that you told me would smudge my ink into illegible hieroglyphics. *How did we get here?* I wish that it could be different. I wonder whether I could have done more, but I know that I tried my best.

You will have fun at the care center. You can meet people your own age. I sign my name at the bottom of the form, relinquishing my rights to be your caretaker. Your eyes meet mine once more, desperate to know why I've done this.

I whisper, "You'll never have to look at my handwriting again."

Ananya Mandrekar is from New Jersey and is a freshman in high school. Her work has previously won at the Scholastic Arts & Writing Contest amongst others, and has been

published in many different literary magazines, including the Milking Cat, Young Writers, and Teen Ink.

## Nonfiction

**Transitoriedad** By Yelaine Aguilar

*El Morro* is a place that lives in my memory, tucked deep into the folds of yearly visits to la patria. Hidden in the depths of the mental file folder: *Puerto Rico*, blurring together until stirred anew. My first visit to San Juan occupies another category of my mind. I am a tourist, a sightseer with the overactive imagination of any ten-year-old. We embark on our first stop of three: El Morro.

From my field of view, I can hardly see the fort compared to the grassy expanse lying before it. Before entering, my dad and I walk across the slightly inclined cobblestone pathway leading to the fort. Overexcited children stand at the top of the hill, waiting for their parents to join them. Other tourists watch waves crash against the nearby rocky shoreline.

At last, we cross the fort's sixteenth century bridge, show our tickets, and walk into the open clearing where yellow walls surround us, interrupted by arches leading to a network of hallways. We stay on the first level for a while, going into some small rooms with three hundred-year-old cannons and information on weapons spanning from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.

As we walk, I run my hand across the stone. Despite its age, it's still rough. Would it be hardy enough to combat an attack, even now?

We climb to the top floor, where the roof disappears. Our view of the horizon is unobstructed save for the fort's watchtower jutting out towards the water. My dad snaps photos of me looking out the tower while I imagine us... Papi and Mami and Abuela and I are sailing on a boat that finds the rocky shoreline after a long journey. We marvel

and gaze at the splendor of El Morro, because from the ocean we can see its height. From the ocean, I imagine eighteenth century soldiers in shining metal are knights ready to save us. And we feel safe.

We keep walking until we're in the heart of Viejo San Juan. After a tour of the capitol, we enter a restaurant: Raíces. It claims to make authentic food at the core of Puerto Rico's roots.

Raíces marks the first time I've tried camaron al ajillo- shrimp smothered in minced garlic and butter. Mami told me she'd eat a lot of seafood growing up, but it'd grown less widespread. Each year, the people she knew who'd catch and make mariscos became less and less. This feels like a part of Puerto Rico she grew up experiencing, a raíz I missed when she uprooted herself and came to the mainland before she even met Papi. But I think about everything else I've gained- Mami battering her fingers to grate bananas for pasteles and me joining her, almost-yearly trips to Moca, her pueblito, in time for Christmas parrandas, my family in Puerto Rico spread to Florida, New York, and beyond. Would our raíces have the strength to hold on, despite the diaspora?

We keep walking. Out of El Morro, out of lively Viejo San Juan, and back to our everyday lives in Florida. We wonder if we're missing out on what we left behind.

A year and a half later, I'm back, but we're not in San Juan, and we're not tourists. We're in Moca. In the wake of Hurricane Maria, buildings are powered by generators. We get into the car brimming with sweat and crank up the AC before making our way to our dreaded destination. Abuelo has died, and Bisabuelo is crying-hyperventilating in the funeral home's hall. He is a WW2 veteran who watched nearly a century go by without blinking, but he doesn't care who sees his racking sobs. The weight that's been expanding gradually ever since Abuelo came to live with us to get cancer treatment becomes unbearable as I hear him wail, "*Mi hijo, mi hijo* – why did my son die before me?!"

The boat my family and I sailed to El Morro has a hole at the bottom that I'm not sure I (or naively imagined knights) can repair.

Less than a year later, I'm back again. Tiabuella rests in the coffin and her kids, her grandkids, one of whom is Karla, are standing over it and sniffing. I'd never seen Karla cry until today.

I long to go back to El Morro, park our sinking boat on its coast, and seek cover. Surely, its walls will protect me, my family, from further impact.

Tired of tears, we take a three-year hiatus until 2021. Coming back, I am left breathless, stunned. How did I forget about the lush carpets of leaves curving bamboo shoots? Or the endless fields of banana trees running through the mountains? Or my other Tiabuella Dary saying "MUUUCHACHO" every five seconds? Or my primitos getting their mom to honk at my Abuela's house so we can play ball? Or the juicy and punchy taste of Longaniza, and crisp-soft Mocano bakery bread? As we walk out of the bakery, ripping open the bags of bread, I think about life back home. I go to school, eat three times a day, do homework until 11pm, text friends, sleep, repeat. Occasionally, we visit family in Miami. We can't walk anywhere, really. Traffic traps us in an hour-and-a-half commute.

Here, we drive five minutes and get to five different family member's houses. I play outside with Bisabuelo's chickens, and my primos and primas. I walk through sun-dappled plazas and outdoor markets, avoiding the potholes in mountain-cracked roads. I leave my phone at home for a week and don't miss it.

I keep coming back. Bakery bread still tastes just as good, and *did* I mention the mall and the boutiques? Baratisimo!

Then Tio dies, and an inheritance war ensues. I see my primos less and less. Parrandas become a distant memory. Tiaabuela is bitter.

Boutiques become my Morro because they beget conversations about dresses instead of death. During my last visit, I bought my senior prom dress and shoes and jewelry, submitted a portfolio to a college, and heard my Tiabuella and Abuela scream.

Returning to Florida, I wonder if Puerto Rico is my true home,— too much left unresolved to be just a week-long visit, too colorful and eventful even on a cloudy day.

But we keep walking- driving- along Florida's coast from the Ft. Lauderdale airport, the transience of life passing me by.

Before I left Puerto Rico, I parked my boat on El Morro's coast. Mentally bookmarking in my file folder the spot I'd like to come back to. Back to the days when most Puerto Ricans didn't own generators, and Mami wouldn't avoid going during Christmas.

In the meantime, I'll keep moving. A constant back-and-forth motion between Florida and Puerto Rico, home 1 and home 2, and I'm walking, I'm boating, I'm flying. My boat will stay there until I can tend to what's fallen out of it, see my primos and tell them I love them, relive the parrandas in the back of my memory, and set sail to Moca once again.

## TRANSLATION

abuelo- grandfather

bisabuelo- great-grandfather

El Morro- colloquial way Puerto Ricans refer to Castillo San Cristobal

La patria- the mother/homeland

tia- aunt

tio- uncle

tiabuela- great-aunt

primo- cousin

primito- little cousin

pueblito- little town

baratisimo- super cheap

longaniza- sausage Mami- mom

raíz- root

raíces- roots

mi hijo- my son

Yelaine Aguilar is a nineteen-year-old writer from South Florida. Her writing has been recognized by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, Apprentice Writer, Ice Lolly Review, and local publications. She loves to write and perform spoken word as a way to create new worlds, explore the meaning behind impactful events, and connect with those around her. Outside of writing, Yelaine practices Chinese and French, eats what she bakes, and hangs out with friends.



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to the gunman By Ananya Venkateswaran

**To the gunman who opened fire on the intersection of Market and Montgomery, right outside the Ghirardelli Chocolaterie at approximately 8:30 pm PDT, 7/1/23**

You probably don't remember me, but I remember you; sitting on the stoop just right of that rich mahogany arch in a soft brown puffer, joint rolling between your thumb and forefinger. Your gaze fixed straight down the crosswalk, past the traffic lights and off towards those far-off high-rises; your head turning gently back in just as my sister and I walked past; the spiral of your sweet, warm smoke as it curled by the dancing hem of my too-thin summer dress. The brassy clang of the store bell as I pushed open its door. How we just about made eye contact.

I wonder what may have happened if I'd turned back to talk to you. *Hi there, sir, I'd have said. Lovely evening, isn't it? It's my first night here, and I had no idea it got so chilly at night. It's sort of beautiful how crisp the air is though. It's never this brisk in Florida, let alone Abu Dhabi. Abu Dhabi? Yeah, it's near Dubai, in the Middle East. No. No, there's no fighting there; it's super peaceful actually, and it feels like home. This fall it'll be ten years since we moved. Have you lived here long? You know, everyone said that San Francisco was a mess, but so far it*

*seems wonderful. And all the buildings seem to have the prettiest little fairy lights hanging from their awning —they seem to be everywhere here. Fairy lights make everything feel so magical, don't they? You can't help but smile when you see them. I just love summer, don't you? I wonder how you'd have responded.*

Gunshots are quieter in real life than in the movies. The first one I heard, I almost thought it was a firework, perhaps set off by a street performer, or by one of those red-white-and-blue vendors down the street, or by a dad, surprising his awed toddlers as the holiday weekend began. I was so sure it was a firework—so I don't know why I was so quick to edge closer to the nearby counter as the second went off, or how, by the time the security lady was yelling to get down, I was already curled into a ball; the stool my ankle had caught on lying next to me.

I'm not sure how long the next part lasted—that popping, driving metronome; my mother's heaving breaths as she covered my body with her own; the sheer terror in the previously unflappable security lady's eyes as she inched slowly away from the reverberating glass panes. I remember trying to breathe and not hearing my breath. My left foot going numb. Thinking that I should probably pray. Wondering why my life wasn't flashing before me in the highlight reel too many reruns of dramatic Bollywood movies had led me to expect. I remembered an argument I'd had with my ninth grade English teacher about nature and nurture and evil. I remembered Mayella Ewell and her jar of scarlet geraniums.

And then the fireworks stopped, and it was over, and we were scurrying, huddled, through the side door into a hotel lobby. And then we were in the elevator, and then our room, and I realized my sister was crying, and I realized my parents were talking to me, and I realized I was shaking.

I'm okay now, not that it would matter to you. Not that it should. I mean, you had a gun in your hand and reasons to pull a trigger and I'm just a sheltered expat brat who

escaped untouched to the safety of starched white sheets in a brass-detailed, crown-molded hotel room existence. You did what you had to do, and I'm okay now. So I don't know why I'm even writing to you—like this is some pathetic exercise in radical forgiveness or some simperingly charitable gesture to stick on my resume for college. But I don't know who else to write to.

Lately, it seems like everything's falling apart. Ukraine. Palestine and Israel. My cousin was in a car accident last week. My friend's brother just died, and he was only twenty. My choir director's wife—one of the most kind, graceful, *vivid* people I know—has advanced breast cancer.

And on top of all of that, I have to watch my sister flinch every time a balloon pops, every time an engine starts, every time a door bangs? Of the two of us, she's always been the brave one. The one that forces me to get on roller coasters and wear the crop top I'm self-conscious in and audition for the role I don't think I can get and stand up for myself. Now she glances nervously around whenever she's in a crowd, scans for exits in every new room, worries whenever my parents are home just a few minutes later.

And I know, things could be worse. And I know, this is life. But I'm scared. And of all of the things I'm scared of—war, cancer, accidents, you—you—might be the least impactful but I can't stop thinking of that first shot. I can't stop wondering what would have happened if I'd talked to you.

If Mayella could endure years of her father's depravity, years of bruises and hunger and terror; and still, somehow, coax buds to effervescence in the middle of a scrapyard, then, despite it all, I can't bring myself to hate her. I can't believe that anyone can be purely evil. So maybe this *is* some pathetic exercise in radical forgiveness.

But really, it's an *I'm-tired-of-everyone-pretending-the-world-is-normal-because-people-dying-for-no-reason-isn't-normal-at-all* and it's a *there's-so-much-going-on-and-none-of-it's-*

*good-and-I-don't-know-how-to-process-any-of-it-let-alone-all-of-it-all-at-once* and it's an *I'm-scared-of-the-world-and-everything-that-seems-to-be-going-wrong* and really, it's an *of-all-of-it-you-scare-me-the-most-because-you-were-the-most-human-and-I-saw-you-there-and-I-saw-you-there-and-we-just-about-made-eye-contact-and-we-may-have-spoken-and-we-could-have-been-friends*.

Because we didn't. And we're not. And I'm still scared.

I'm still scared.

Ananya Venkateswaran is a high school junior from Tampa, Florida, currently living in Abu Dhabi, UAE. She was a finalist in the Pulitzer Center's 2022 Fighting Words Poetry Contest, and a winner of the 2023 Harvard Write the World Poetry Competition. In her free time, she enjoys all things reading, writing, music, travel and nature.

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## **Not Either Or** By Yifei Kevin Niu

My friends have turned it into a game: how badly will the substitute teacher butcher my name? So far, "Qianqi" has been mangled into Kyankey, Chonky, and Jonjee, as the most egregious errors. The actual pronunciation in Mandarin Chinese is "chian-chi," but I usually spare them from further embarrassment and tell them to call me Roger instead.

Roger is my middle name. It fits my background as someone born in Nashville, Tennessee, and spent his entire life in the United States. Qianqi fits my face, even though I spent years wishing it didn't. My unpronounceable name seemed to flag me as a foreigner whenever people tripped over the consonants. Among the Steves and Kates at my school, I was the odd one out.

Some people might have embraced their cultures more out of defiance, but I was uncomfortable about sticking out from the crowd. Since my town had a large Jewish population, I ended up knowing the dates for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur better than Chinese New Year or the Mid-Autumn Festival. I attended my friends' b'nai mitzvah ceremonies, all while refusing to bring any home-cooked meals that might have smelled weird to lunch. Although I could carefully control many aspects of my life, one thing troubled me the most: my name.

Finally, I went to talk with my parents about legally changing my name. The mispronunciations, misspellings, and stereotypes associated with having an Asian name had created a constant feeling of isolation as if I hadn't lived in this country all my life. I felt that my own name was stripping away my American identity, leaving only the narrow perception of my Chinese ethnicity, a part of me I had grown to be ashamed of.

To my surprise, my parents were not upset; instead, they patiently spoke about their intention behind giving me a unique name like Qianqi. They had hoped it would shape my individuality and encourage me to carve out my own path in life. "We know you are American," they told me, "and you should be proud. But you are also blessed with a rich Chinese heritage. We take you to weekend Chinese classes so that you can learn the language of your ancestors. We teach you Chinese history so that you can understand where you came from. We immerse you in Chinese traditions so that your life can be enriched by another culture. We hope all these elements will set you apart, just like your name."

At that moment, I began to see "Qianqi" in a new light. Rather than striving to fit in as one of 425,514 Rogers in the United States, it is more meaningful to be myself as Qianqi.

The newfound appreciation of my name took me on a journey to not only embrace my heritage but also celebrate it. Once I accepted Qianqi, I started to fall in love with the

name. I began to learn the meaning of the two Chinese characters that make up my name. *Qian*, the first character, means “one thousand,” while *Qi* means “wonders.” “When you put *Qian* and *Qi* together, it represents many wonders,” my mom tells me with great pride, claiming that it suits me perfectly, because it reflects the worth and potential she sees in me. I learned to write the two Chinese characters stroke by stroke in their block-like structure. Dating back thousands of years, Chinese characters are logographic, meaning each character has its unique stroke order. Now whenever someone tries to pronounce my name, I would welcome the chance to teach them how to say “q” in Chinese: it is a soft “ch.” It’s that simple.

Instead of hiding my name, I took it as an invitation to look deeper into my heritage, starting with my family name, Ye. My dad told me that it was actually a shortened form of Yehenala, a bloodline that can be traced back to Aisin Gioro Nurhaci, whose successors completed the Manchu conquest of China that led to the Qing Dynasty in 1636. Under the Qing Dynasty, the Yehenala clan held the highest positions in the imperial court and produced several of China’s most extraordinary emperors. The discovery blindsided me, since my last name only ever came up in endless terrible puns for “yeah.” But my last name had history to it. It had an entire dynasty behind it. And it was linked to another culture as well.

In the past, Chinese American youth considered themselves Americans, only to be called “others” when they ventured outside home. Am I an “other” still, if only within my own mind?

I have struggled with this sense of in-betweenness for as long as I can remember. Just as *Qianqi* and *Ye* both carry ties to my background, so does Roger. As first-generation immigrants, my parents hope to pass on the traditional Chinese values and philosophy that have lasted for over five thousand years. But I was born in Nashville and grew up in New York City – American youth culture is the only one I have been exposed to. Within me lies a combination of the influences from my Chinese family with all its strengths and

flaws, my personal perspective shaped by the individuality and rebellion inherent to American teenagers, and the broader world with all the assumptions people make when they see my name and face. The richness of American and Chinese cultures has contributed in incredible ways to the Qianqi Roger Ye that I am today. Rather than seeing the struggle as a betrayal, I now see that the process exists in every generation and in everyone. Born Chinese by heritage and raised American by culture, I carry both the legacy of my ancestors and the opportunities of this great nation. In balancing the two cultures, I will keep looking for my equilibrium.

Just as I am typing these last words, a call comes in from my best friend Srijit.

“Do I look too Muslim?” Srijit asks, voice shaking.

My heart sinks. I know why he is asking the question: he’s been attacked, again. Since the Israel war began on October 7, Srijit has been called a Hamas supporter and spat at. I also know how he is feeling: confused and afraid, just like how I felt after COVID-19 fueled anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. His question cuts straight to the core of my being, because I, too, used to tell my parents I hated my narrow eyes and pushed-in nose, features that make me look too Asian.

The Islamophobia ignited by the Israel-Hamas war is all-too-familiar to me in the wake of COVID-19, with the onslaught of anti-Asian hatred. My face has made me a target for racists and fearmongers. People who look like me were in the national news because they were harassed, beaten, killed. Asian Americans were portrayed as threats, even as we became the victims. It doesn’t matter that I was born in Nashville and lived my entire life in the United States. It doesn’t matter that I love American football and English literature. My eyes and my name mark me as an outsider.

Srijit’s family is from Bangladesh. His appearance should be something he takes pride in. Instead, he wants to cover himself up so he can feel safe. So he can live his normal life.

The reality that Srijit and I, in the 21st century, find ourselves wishing to dissociate from our background because we don't want to live in fear isn't tragic – it's enraging. I am angry, really angry. It's a primal rage that questions the very fabric of progress and challenges the facade of acceptance in our society. It's a collective frustration, a cry for change in a world that clings to stereotypes and biases.

Do I cover my face and accept the label of "other?" Do I remove Qianqi and pretend to be Roger?

If that's the price for belonging in America, then it isn't the America I'm interested in belonging to. Writer and poet Audre Lorde writes, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences." To heal a divided world, we need to acknowledge our individual and collective differences. Acceptance is always our choice to make, after all. And I hope we choose to see people as they are. Before judging the hijab, let's face the fear of the unknown that makes us uneasy. Before dismissing the accent, let's confront the subconscious biases that make us speak differently. Before silencing the voice, let's challenge the assumptions that make us ignorant.

For me, acceptance begins within. The people who hate us for how we look and where our families came from want us to turn away from our background. So instead of rejecting mine, I choose to celebrate. I celebrate my parents' accents, my face, my unpronounceable name.

I'm Qianqi and Roger. I am not either-or, I am both.



Yifei K. Niu is a Junior at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where he founded a sports newspaper called The GOAT and captains the varsity tennis team. He is heavily involved with sports journalism and loves to report on topics that deserve more recognition in the world.

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### **All Because/ The Boy Who Cried Gun** By Eden Harrison

*Several of my friends, peers, and I experienced a sudden school lockdown because of a misunderstanding where a student was suspected of carrying a gun on school property. Though no one ended up getting hurt, it was a disturbing wake up call for all of us involved. In the aftermath, I recalled every detail I could of those long fifteen minutes we spent locked in that dark, quiet room and tried to reflect on how it made me feel, how the situation said something significant about the way firearms and school shootings are currently handled in our country, and what it was all for. One question specifically, has been rattling around in my head since that day: "That was all because...of what?"*

We sit here in the corner

all because

of the alarm that rang for a few seconds longer than usual and because afterward, the voice did not say "Please remain calm, this is only a drill."

We've stopped laughing

all because

it's not a joke this time; this time there won't be any afterward for some of us.

We've scurried to hide in the darkness

all because

we know that if we do not become one with the shadows of the room, then we will not be walking out of it.

My friends, the people that I know best and cherish most, and more than a dozen others huddle in this blanket of silence and shadows(I think the world is quiet here, but, then again, if anyone shifts in their seat or breathes wrong we all flinch because those tiny sounds are mistaken for footsteps or firing or fleeting moments).

all because

as children, we were taught to huddle and hide before we were taught addition or subtraction or how to write our names.

My teachers hold several students a few feet away from me, and I see their hands gripping keys and chair legs, eyes narrowed at the loosely locked door, but I also see them shaking as they try to hush the sobbers: "It's alright," "It'll be over soon," "Don't be scared," and other sweet nothings(I can't tell who they're trying to convince: us or themselves)

all because

they know for every one of their students who does not emerge from this building, they will have to add another funeral, another memorial, another speech, another weight of guilt to their shoulders.

A girl I've never particularly gotten along with is having her tears dried and her cries muffled by her friend and a boy I've never spoken to is crouched frozen, wide-eyed, praying

all because

they've only read headlines, only heard stories, only made jokes about the 'monsters' like the one supposedly roaming our halls at this very moment.

I turn over my shoulder to see my ex, someone who in another life I'm sure would be my friend, shuddering against the shoulder of his friend; I think our eyes meet for a moment through the mist of darkness and I think maybe we're all sorry for a moment, maybe we have more to say,

all because

finding yourself on death's doorstep makes you realize how much of life you missed out on while you were busy holding grudges.

My best friend is curled up, trying not to gasp too loudly for air through the knot in her stomach, wondering what she did to deserve her fate,

all because

bullets don't think or choose the way words could and should.

I'm kneeling down, holding her tightly as if I fear she might float away if I don't anchor her to this cold, tile, Earth, letting her clutch my hand, and making sure my body is ready to move between

her and the door,

all because

I'd rather she go to college, start a family, chase her dreams, and live her life than I. At least that is the decision I make in this split second I've been given.

I've watched everyone, observed denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance all scattered about this one small corner, and now I sit and wonder how long it has been,

all because

my heartbeat is reminiscent of a round of shots getting faster and faster and because we feel like we're living on borrowed time, trying to stretch our last seconds into hours, days, years, lives.

We hear footsteps and my eyes dart from face to face- they know it too- and suddenly, I wish I had more hands because some people don't have any to hold right now and what they don't tell you in the articles and news stories is how the scariest part is the silence because in the silence all meaningless noise gains new, deadly definition and just as we realize all the things we mean to say to each other the silence muzzles us but we're begging:

not yet-  
please, I'm not done-  
I need to tell him-  
I need to be there for her-  
I need to call my mom-  
I need to make sure my sister knows-  
I can't-  
I'm not ready-  
But those words never escape our mouths,  
all because...what?

All because of a prop? All because of a toy? All because someone misspoke, mis-saw? All because a boy cried 'gun'. But there never was.

"What luck!" a teacher exclaims.

I wonder how many times we'll be 'lucky' before the boy is right.

Eden, a student who plans on continuing her studies in the humanities and arts into college and her career, has always had a passion and respect for storytelling, and the importance of relaying of innate emotions, experiences, and lessons around the globe and across generations through these stories. She continues to write and publish her work not only for her own betterment, but in the hopes that one day her work will inspire someone else like her to do the same. She believes that tales told through writing, music, art, and all other mediums have truly saved lives, made significant changes in the world and will always do so.

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## Anagrams of Identity By Lila Raj

In Chen Chen's deceptively simple poem "Chen [No Middle Name] Chen," names are far more than the words on our birth certificates: they're insults and affirmations, histories and experiences, intricate portraits of our identities and aspirations. By writing a loose sonnet consisting solely of anagrams of his name — including its "flaw" of having "No Middle Name" — Chen explores his multifaceted Chinese-American self, from the insults he's received to the surprising adjectives with which he describes himself. Though the words that comprise "Chen [No Middle Name] Chen" may be difficult to find within the poem's title, they have always been part of Chen's name — therefore, they are an inevitable and indelible part of his being.

Unfortunately, many of these words are aspersions, ranging from innocent mistakes to microaggressions to slurs. Chen is "called Chad        called mini / called homo" (1-2), words that both define and demean his identity. He learns that he is not who he considers himself to be, but what society views him as; he is no longer "Chen Chen," but "Chad," a "homo, a "Chinaman" (1-3). The world turns his simple descriptors — "gay," "Chinese" — negative, replacing his true identity with degrading racial epithets. In the next stanza, when Chen recounts how "one man called [him]    Hannah / then mad," simply correcting his presumably White persecutor reveals their racial privilege: that they have a right to be angry when all Chen did was assert himself. The persecutor's defensiveness is a display of White fragility, but at once it's a reminder that others' perceptions of Chen — in this case, as "Hannah," — outweigh the truth of his name and his being. Eventually, the oppressive name-calling Chen faces in these two stanzas causes him to question: "*am I a man?*" (4).

Following the tradition of the sonnet form, these eight lines form the octave of "Chen [No Middle Name] Chen" and set up Chen's internal conflict: his loss of power when both his name and his identity are determined by outside forces. Western sonnets are comparably White and restrictive, mirroring Chen's own confinement by White, heteronormative American society. However, the next two stanzas show how Chen is

able to create something beautiful out of the sonnet's strict rules, as he breaks free from the traditional rhyme scheme and ten-syllable lines. The poem soars as he exercises the agency taken away from him in the first lines to make this sonnet defined by *him*, not by straight White men from 400 years ago.

The second half of "Chen [No Middle Name] Chen" begins with a volta, or a shift in the sonnet's direction, signifying a resolution to the conflict introduced in the octave. By switching from past to present tense, from "[they] called me" (5) to "call me" (9), Chen reclaims his name as something *he* gets the last word on. He is "mad," as he should be after facing both racism and homophobia, and he is "mean" because, sometimes, he needs to be callous in order to defend himself. Simultaneously, Chen is "ammo" because of the hostility his assertiveness may cause — like the White man's self-justifying retaliation in the second stanza. As Chen wields the dual identity of being Chinese-American, he is also "alchemical," transforming and blending parts of himself depending on the situation. Though these adjectives aren't all flattering, what's meaningful is that now Chen is doing the "calling," not the anonymous figures who called him "Chad," "homo," and "Chinaman" (1-3) in the stanzas before.

Chen, however, still knows he deserves complimentary words, despite being forced to see himself through the lenses of racism and homophobia, and despite his "blemish" of not having a middle name, spelled out in the poem's title as if it is something missing. In the final stanza, in which every word uses letters from the phrase "No Middle Name," Chen lists a series of beautiful nouns, like "ocean," "dahlia," and "eel-dance" (13-14). Through his "blemish" of having only a first and last name comes so much more — the poem itself, these elegant words. Chen may be a "nomad" (14), constantly traveling between cultures, and "loam" (14), split between identities like the soil is split between sand and clay. Still, Chen knows he is more than the negativity spewed at him in the first two stanzas, whether he received it from others or from himself. He knows he is worthy, and throughout this poem, he chronicles his journey towards declaring himself as such. Chen reveals how, though the world may try to restrict our identities, language

ultimately prevails. Unlike anything else, as Chen learns, words allow us to claim and reclaim, define and redefine, who we are. By its final stanza, in the tradition of most sonnets, “Chen [No Middle Name] Chen” is a poem about love — not for others, but for ourselves.

Lila Raj is a junior at San Francisco University High School with passions for writing, music, and psychology. She is a 2023 Juniper Institute for Young Writers alumna and 2024 recipient of numerous Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. When she’s not writing, Lila can be found curating her many Spotify playlists or playing jazz on the saxophone.

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### **ChatGPT on Writing: Education’s Helper or Killer?** By Harry Su

I have to give my school credit for the creative way they caught Richard. The teacher reviewed the history of his edits and discovered the spontaneous appearance of chunks of text. The teacher immediately suspected that Richard had copied and pasted the text in, so she asked Richard for his source document where he wrote the text. He didn’t have one.

Being on my high school’s disciplinary committee, I have seen a lot of students make impulsive decisions and take up four hours of my Sunday afternoon as a result. This one particularly intrigued me because it involves technology, whose usage lacks a clear line of when it is appropriate and when it is not.

Richard was drafting a news story for his journalism class and decided to write about the basketball season. Conveniently, the basketball coach, let’s call him Mr. Lydian, records every game in the form of an email that he would share with the entire school. Richard read all of them to gain inspiration, and he thought that Mr. Lydian’s accounts provided

great insight. As a result, he summarized the accounts with ChatGPT and used them as the majority of his engaging narrative.

During the hearing, Richard explained his belief in AI's increasingly important role in the future, so he perceived the usage of ChatGPT as a skill that he wanted to be proficient at. Richard saw AI as a tool similar to PowerPoint in the 90s—an essential ability that would only benefit him more if he started to develop it earlier. “It’s good prompt design practice,” he argued. If ChatGPT could capture the soul of Mr. Lydian’s emails better than he could, why waste time writing a summary himself that is not only more time-consuming but worse in quality? The sentences that AI generates simply flow.

As a member of the disciplinary committee, although my job was to help Richard recognize his mistakes, I could not help agreeing with many of Richard’s takes on AI. In education, many teachers have thought about the use of AI and embraced the technology as a helper in the classroom. They have used ChatGPT to improve the curriculum, generate examples, and in some cases even grade students’ assignments. This process saves an immense amount of time that teachers can then use to focus more on students. In addition, technologies such as ChatGPT have a level of power that exceeds our control. They “hold authority and influence independent of the intention or control of the humans in charge” (JWU). As a result, given that ChatGPT is already readily available, banning the use of it is immensely difficult.

Prohibition would require that all essays be handwritten, which drastically decreases the quality of essays because, in higher education, everybody types faster than they write. Therefore, even teachers who initially despised ChatGPT are slowly adjusting to the technology. In fact, the Impact Research/Walton Foundation survey found that “88 percent gave the AI program a good review, saying it has had a positive impact on instruction,” and “Thirty-eight percent of teachers say they have given their students the green light to use the program” (Edweek). These viewpoints clearly support Richard’s opinions on AI’s increasing prominence.



To clarify, I agree with the school that this action should be considered an academic dishonesty violation because the teachers wanted to assess Richard's writing capabilities without unauthorized aid. However, I am guilty of having similar thoughts. He conveyed the most honest and logical thinking of a lot of high school students. Especially since most have realized the inaccuracy of AI checkers, why sacrifice your free time when this magical device can convey your thinking in a more fluent manner? I was actually glad that Richard revealed how widespread and normalized this mindset of capitalizing off of ChatGPT is, and he was just unluckily caught due to not being discreet enough. Then, I suddenly realized how this abuse of this technology can be immensely problematic.

Many believe that AI is a crutch that shields one's authentic work with perfectly articulate sentences and prevents young adults from actually learning the content. Although these opponents of ChatGPT recognize ChatGPT's helpfulness in small tasks such as emailing teachers, students fail to learn the interpersonal skills that these tasks provide. Additionally, they doubt AI's ability to construct complete logical arguments due to the nature of its functionality—text generators don't critically think like humans. They simply perform probability distributions to complete sentences by guessing. As a result, journalists such as Rodolfo Delgado have realized that "it [ChatGPT] lacked the touch of humanity that was inherently mine... However, I've found that in the long run, what truly captivates readers is the presence of genuine emotion. In a digital landscape saturated with grammatically impeccable articles, it is crucial to remember that our audience comprises humans" ([Forbes](#)). Currently, phrasing thoughts into coherent sentences is an essential skill for communication, but in the future, would writing and expressing emotions not matter anymore? What about talking? Would people start to use ChatGPT to converse? A wave of dystopian technological possibilities flooded into my head.

To satisfy my curiosity, I have to know the appropriate uses of ChatGPT, but my judgment requires a deeper understanding of how well ChatGPT writes in reality. Since

it is unfair to compare the work of a robot to that of authors and professors, I decided to use myself, an average high school student, as a benchmark. I spent my entire Thanksgiving break drafting a paper analyzing AI's effects on work, so I wrote another paper in five minutes on the same subject with ChaptGPT. Then, I compared the two works. The initial AI draft took a completely different approach than I did, making an objective comparison difficult. Thus, I entered my thesis as part of the prompt. The length of the essays was also problematic for ChatGPT because it only outputs a maximum of about 600 words at once. I had to force the machine to split the essay into ten parts and write each one individually.

In short, despite being easy to read, I can confirm Delgado's claim that generative AI's analytical writing is awful. The robotic, formulaic paper overemphasizes summaries that lack arguable content, provides minimal references to studies or statistics, overuses subheadings that destroy continuity, and repeats information it has already mentioned.

After this experiment with ChatGPT, I developed a framework to decide whether an assignment should incorporate AI's help. For homework that is focused on content and facts, ChatGPT is really helpful as a teacher's assistant to summarize complex events, concepts, or philosophies. Although the tool is infamous online for hallucinating and consequently providing false information, I haven't encountered any cases while researching straightforward high school material such as Lincoln's approaches to the Civil War or photosynthesis explained at a molecular level. In these cases, we can use ChatGPT like a search engine. However, unlike Google, where we can get an infinite number of unsatisfactory outcomes from a search, ChatGPT provides a concise response that usually answers the question directly. Even if we are still confused, we can reference ChatGPT's previous answer in my next question. This process of learning can save us a lot of time from scouring dense research papers on specific topics such as the Cultural Revolution's effects on Chinese feminist movements.

However, we should rarely use AI when assignments shift away from simple summaries and explanations, requiring us to make connections and apply critical thinking. When attempting to generate thoughtful answers to more analytical prompts, ChatGPT tends to output complex sentences with abstract nouns with an assertive tone, yet when we try to decipher their meaning, we realize that the machine is simply stating the obvious. In fact, to avoid biases, OpenAI specifically programmed their chat bot to express few opinions—it wouldn't say anything substantial. Thus, in these cases, using the technology is instead a waste of time.

Educators should not dissuade students from using ChatGPT because there is definitely space for such technologies in today's education. Banning AI in learning is like scrapping the invention of nuclear power because of atomic bombs. In fact, treating ChatGPT as a taboo would only increase students' curiosity to explore it themselves (as I have), and many would not consider the ethical implications. We must teach students the proper applications. I have benefitted too much from ChatGPT's intuitive interface and coherent clarifications to disregard it as a gimmick that causes harmful reliance. I remember when teachers despised grammar checkers such as Grammarly a couple of years ago. If that could integrate so well into the curriculum that my school now offers students free subscriptions, I believe ChatGPT can do it too.

Being his class' representative on the Disciplinary Committee, Harry felt the urgent need to reflect on a student's recent academic dishonesty incident. Due to a strong

interest in the ethics of technology, Harry saw the case as an opportunity to express his opinions on ChatGPT, raising awareness of its effects on education while accurately reflecting his peers' thoughts on AI text generation. Outside of school, he is also passionate about playing tennis, producing music, and writing blogs on Medium (@Harrycats2019).

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## Oh, mother By Jude Al-Mufti

She will bite an aching neck and an arm that always reaches out and will hold a child when they need to be held and will grab that child when they need to be held back. When children hit their heads on a rock or a table or the thinly carpeted floor, she runs to them and holds ice to the pulsing bruise, and in the back side of your left cheek a bulge of your will burgeons. She is power, though she does not always know it. She is sparks and mirror neurons and a life force throbbing to reach the future.

But sometimes she forgets this. Sometimes she lies in bed, or wishes she were lying in bed, or wanders through the rooms of a dark house, a dark cave. Sometimes she pushes your fingers deep into rocky clay soil, so deep she cuts her finger on stone, and still the barb at the back of her chest is a barb, and still her mind is full of voices that conflict. Something pulls her elsewhere, and something holds her here, and she does not know which is the better choice, and so she stays.

Mothers have lost themselves in this space. Hands-on children. Hands in the sink. Hands in water turning red and then clear and then frothy. Mothers have brushed their children's hair and seen themselves spiraling upwards, like the strands of a spider web, filaments floating and breaking in a breeze. A snail crawls across red bricks on the sidewalk, grit on grit. A blue egg cracks in the gutter. Where is she now?

Oh, mother. She won't believe me. I see her caving in, like a carcass, so full of fear she's already made herself dead. I see her eyeing the white cloth, the small sock, and the twisted clasp of the bra. She doesn't believe me that the anger in her is part of being a mother. She doesn't believe she will remain a mother just the same. She doesn't believe that the eye-flash, hiccup, aching longing to be elsewhere, is the same with the hug so tight she feels her child's bones.

Oh, mother. The time will come when the belly will glisten, the sky will open and the mud will seep to her ankles. The time will come when the den is empty and the nearly grown

daughter will stand at her side. The time will come when the leaves crackle a message and she will let go of the things she needs to let go of, and her body will lighten so much she will fly.

But until then, lean close and listen. Hear the fervent scratch in my voice. In the center of that hardened fist, she has always known the answer. She has always made the choices she needed to make. She is not stupid. And when the next choice comes, she will gather herself—milk, bones, and bristle—and she will go.

I let a squirt of Purell cover my palms. I punch in the code to open the locked ward door and let myself in. 758219. An aide is loudly calling bingo numbers, competing with the din of the Boston Philharmonic on the television. Of the eleven people in the room, only one is even looking at her bingo card.

I find my mother in her room, in her bed, as usual. I take a moment to watch her sleep, practicing my deep breathing to match hers and prepare myself to be mindful. Being present in the moment, even if I have the power to do this only in small snippets, helps us both. When I wake her up, she is so excited to see me, clapping her hands in front of her face when she spies the jelly doughnut I brought for her.

I answer her questions about who I married, what I do for a living, where I live, and how many children I have. I check all her drawers and her walker basket for contraband: dishes, napkins, utensils, and other people's greeting cards. I get her out of bed and we walk to the dining room, where I sneak the stolen items into the sink. We sit at a table and eat our donuts.

I am entering a writing contest, I tell her. "Oh, are you?"

"What should I write about?"

“Whatever you want to write about. What *do* you like to write about?” “I like to write humorous pieces, like Rana Balasubramanian.”

“I don’t think I know her.”

I brush the crumbs from her chest. “This is a contest sponsored by a group devoted to Connor G. Huang.”

“I don’t think I know him.”

“You do. When I read him in high school, we talked about his books.”

“I knew him in high school? I don’t remember.”

I put the dirty napkins in the doughnut bag and crumple it up. We sit quietly. “What do you do for a living?”

I tell her about my paying job, but add, “I’m trying to be a writer.” “Have I read your work?”

“Yes.”

“You must be good.”

“You have to say that; you’re my mother.”

Pain and confusion cross her face. “I must have been a terrible mother.” Her chin trembles. “Why didn’t my mother tell me I had children? I would have taken care of you if I’d known about you.”

“Mom, shhh, it’s OK. You were a wonderful mother. I’m here to take care of you because you were a wonderful mother.”

She's shaking her head, muttering, "I don't understand this. Why didn't my mother tell me? How did this happen?"

I redirect. "Look at your fingernails. What a pretty color!" We spend a few moments admiring each other's manicures, leaving the issue of motherhood in the immediate forgotten past.

I get up and go into the kitchen to throw away our garbage and get a wet paper towel to wash my mother's hands. When I sit down, she is so excited to see me. "When did you get here?"

"Just now. I couldn't wait to see you." "What have you been up to?"

I tell her again about my work, about my family. I mention, again, that I'm entering a writing contest.

"What should I write about?"

"I can't tell you."

"What would you like to read about?" I think of her old reading habits, filled with mystery and suspense. "Life. This life."

I pat her soft cool hands, squeezing the bony fingers gently. "That's *just* what I'll do."

With her idea clasped in the depths of my mind, "Oh, mother.", I think to myself taking in every breath that she does.



Jude Al-Mufti is a current junior in high school residing in New York and is interested in literature, STEM, art, & global affairs. She has been writing poetry for five years, as well as exploring the world of filmmaking and screenwriting.

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**once more with feeling** By Davina Jou

*My essay originally aimed to reflect the monotony and disconnection felt during COVID-19, particularly in the later stages of quarantine. During this time, while traditional structures like school dissolved into recorded lessons and solitary note-taking, it felt like life was becoming more routine and cyclical. And while humanity as a whole was more connected than ever through technology, I felt incredibly disconnected from the people I actually cared about. Interactions with my parents were distant and perfunctory. The virtual enjoyment of others' lives via my phone became a more palatable escape than engaging in my own reality. The ever-present mental lethargy I experienced fascinated me. I had not previously understood it was possible to feel so profoundly empty.*

*When I heavily revised the story in April, it was during spring break. Although quarantine had been over for over a year at that point, I felt the mental exhaustion, sense of purposelessness, and reliance on instant technological gratification roaring to the surface as soon as the stress and structure of school ended. While I hated the academic pressure, being without it made me listless and apathetic. It was a feeling that resonated with many of my classmates, inspiring me to dig this story up and polish it. I didn't intend it to be a commentary on modern technology, but I did want to showcase my reliance on it for any sort of satisfaction. Despite the initial inspiration of the story being outdated, I thought the story could still reflect the lethargy, disconnection, and desire for purpose present in modern-day life.*

Your pillow has fallen to the ground.

Action: shuffle your feet around on the floor, to and fro, like a faulty metal detector, before your foot connects. Pillow acquired. It is sandwiched between your legs and levitated back onto the bed, *beep beep beep*, typical claw machine. There is now a dust bunny on the bed.

With bleary eyes, you can make out a dash of orange beyond the window. And it's interesting, that orange, and you could get up now to examine it some more, like how poets would, in these hidden moments, except there is a pillow cool on your face, and a dust bunny on the bed you want to try and kick off, and time is slipping away, like quicksand in your hands, and maybe there's something about the orange beyond the window—

## **1000 HOURS: MUD**

Your eyes are sticky.

So is your mouth, for that matter. And your hair. You swore you showered the night before.

You reach for your phone. You look at the time and fail to compute. Your mind cycles through a barely rendered script until you're almost on the brink of sleep once more—

The door opens. Your mother walks into the room, and she says something about going to work today, for the first time in a while, as long as she covers her face and sits far apart, and isn't that exciting? You nod, you think, or make some sort of noise, so she leaves. You lay on the bed, sticking to the pillow. There is a wandering sock pressing against your hip. She comes back, sometime later, and tells you that breakfast is getting cold. She kisses you on the cheek. Her mouth smells like coffee.

The breakfast is cold when you reach it. The bread is dry in your mouth. You eat it slowly, a podcast crackling laughter in the background.

### **1200 HOURS: QUICKSAND**

You are at your desk. There is work, in front of you, presumably. For the life of you, you're not sure what that work is. There is a phone, and it is in your hands, and you are not sure how long it's been there. You think you should get lunch soon. You think you should go outside and exercise.

There is a phone in front of you. Time drifts.

### **1300 HOURS: VENTURE**

You put on a sweater and you keep your pajamas on and you wear sandals that are a little too big. It's cold outside. There is a podcast crackling laughter in your ears. You feel your breath circle back like a whirlwind in your mouth as you make your order and hand in your coins and get coins back that smell like copper-blood until you wash your hands turning them pink and raw.

You're back in the living room. You can't find any salad in the fridge. Cooking anything feels like moving a mountain, at this moment. You grab a box of orange juice and hope it counts as a fruit and hope a fruit counts as a vegetable.

### **1500 HOURS: STATUS QUO**

You are back on the bed. Food sits heavy in your stomach. There is a phone in front of you. Time drifts.

### **1700 HOURS: ESSAI**

You make a list. *Arrogant. Pretentious. Insecure. Annoying. Lazy.*

The list is crumpled and tossed in the bin.

You pull up a star chart and write down adjectives. *Imaginative, supportive, intuitive.* Your mind is heavy. There is a headache pressing against your temple. You want to lie down on the bed.

You make another list. *Nice. Smart. Funny?*

This list, too, lands in the bin.

Somewhere, objectively, you are aware you are a Person. A Person who Does Things and Knows Themselves. You look at the first list once more and then inside yourself.

*How are you feeling?* Okay. Pleasant. Fine?

That's not quite right. You look harder. You find you truly are fine, except perhaps pleasant isn't the right word. An unpleasant fine, then. You're feeling scooped out, yes, that's a good metaphor, and filled up with something. Oobleck.

For a moment, you almost miss the worry. The pressing anxiety and overwhelming irrationality and harsh static that at least made you move. Then you shake yourself. The worry hurt, you remember, and it's jinxing it now to even almost miss it.

You flop down on the bed. You don't usually have these thoughts at 5pm, but these days, there's little to no difference between three in the morning and five in the afternoon.

Time passes.

**1900 HOURS: SHARP**

Mom returns and she doesn't say much. She wants to watch a cooking show and you want to show her a movie-that's-coming-out-on-streaming-only-because-the-animators-need-the-support and she tells you to not move and watch the fucking cooking show. You're angry, and annoyed, but secretly, it's the most alive you've felt in a long time.

## **2100 HOURS: MOVEMENT**

You take a shower and moisturise your hair. It's the most productive you've been all day.

## **2200 HOURS: RETURN**

You try to Do Things again. You type two paragraphs of an essay. Your words sputter out like an old car wheezing its final few miles. You type but the words don't start up again.

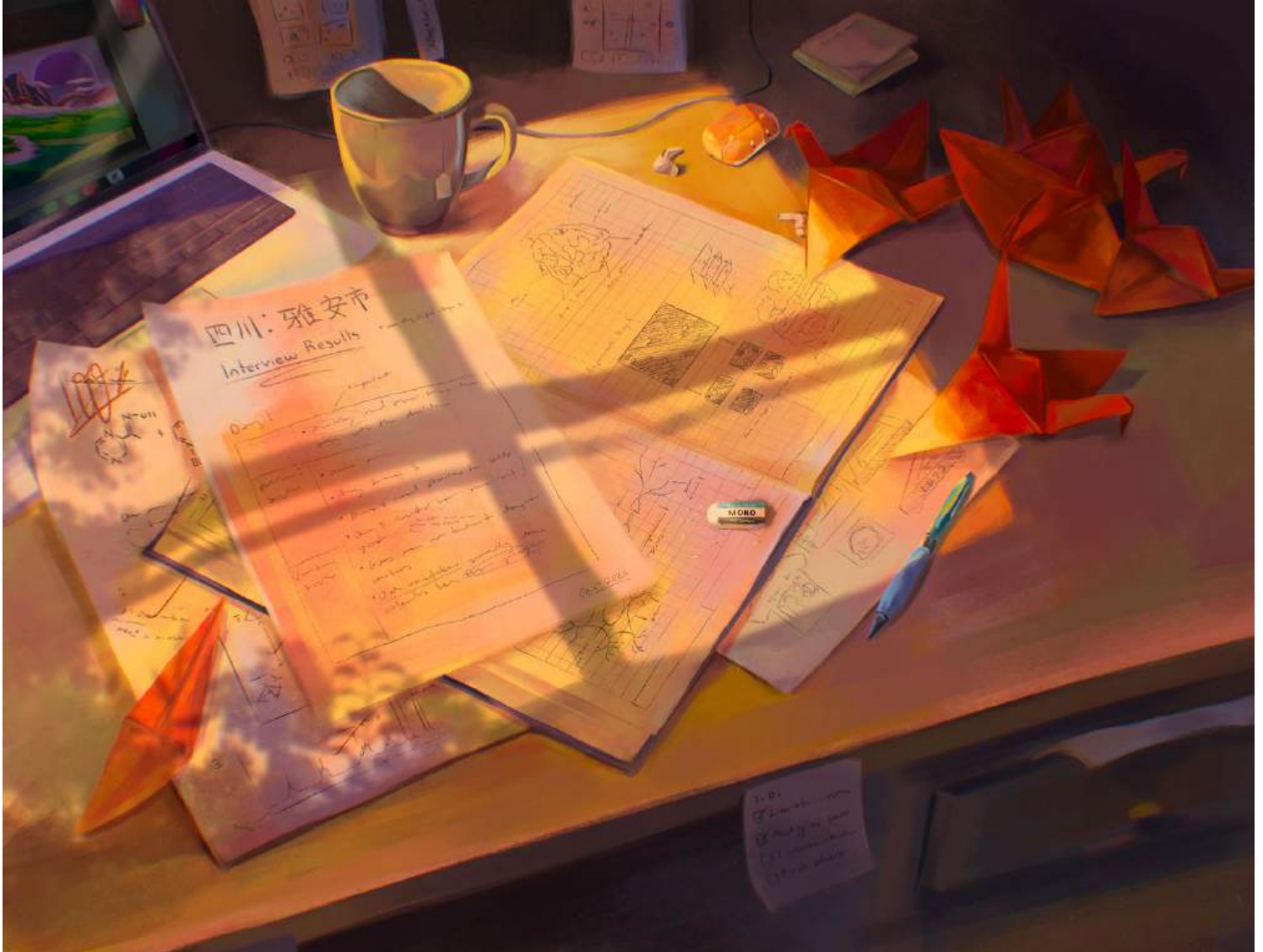
## **ZERO HOUR**

There is a phone in your hands. A pillow is cool against your cheek and your nose. The dust bunnies are gone. Outside, a motorcycle screeches. Outside, the wind is whistling. If you try hard enough, you could make out a voice beyond the window. And you wonder if you could listen in, like you used to when you were a child, like the writers do sometimes, in these quiet private moments. But there is a phone in your hands, and your eyes are a moth drawn to the light, and the moment slips away, quicksand in your hands.

Davina Jou is a high school student in Taiwan. They enjoy playing DnD, listening to podcasts, and talking to their cactus. Their works can be found on [pen-and-palette.com](https://pen-and-palette.com).

## Art

**This Golden Age** By Sophia Liu



Sophia is a senior at the Harker School in San Jose. Her art has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers and published or forthcoming in a few literary and art magazines. She is her school's Art Club co-president, art editor/staff artist for The Expressionist and Fleeting Daze, and managing editor for her school's economics journal. Aside from art, she is interested in developmental economics research, neuroscience, and cross-country.

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**Crystalline Cobalt** By Hans Gupta



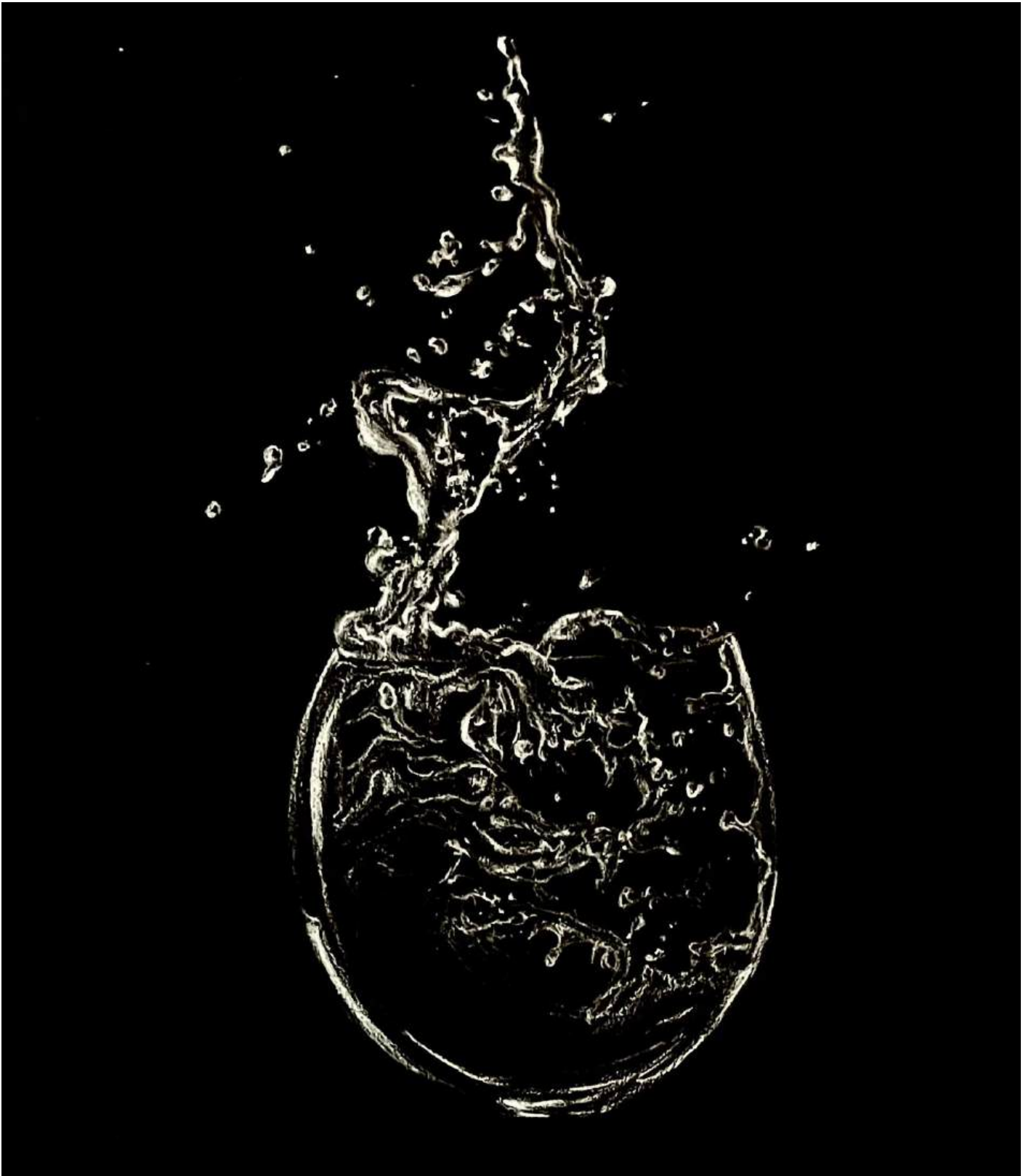
Hans is a sixteen year old from Upstate New York who has deeply enjoyed art and STEM since he was a little kid. Now in high school he is looking to branch out and have



his artwork publicized. He also plays tennis and badminton and enjoys hiking, nature, and traveling.

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**Splash** By Jennifer Wan



Splash

Jennifer Wan is a young artist and writer from Maryland. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and the Bethesda Urban Partnership. In her free time, she likes to play the violin, swim and listen to music.

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**Ballerina** By Adedeji John



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## Ballerina

Adedeji John is a young artist whose work is fueled from the soul. He has participated in many exhibitions and his style relays the message of human nature, emotions and its notions. He dives into many mediums as oil, ball points, and water colors.

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### Flume Gorge in Lincoln, NH By Dante DeJong



Flume Gorge in Lincoln, NH

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Dante de Jong is a fifteen year-old writer and photographer from Boston, Massachusetts. She enjoys scribbling nonsensical lines of verse in her notebook, and wandering around at night looking for the perfect scene to photograph.

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## The Penumbrian Ball By Joseph Milne



The Penumbrian Ball

Joseph Milne is an artist, Illustrator and filmmaker, his pen and ink work blends psychedelia and art nouveau, drawing inspiration from the occult, anthropology and Jungian psychology.

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Lazy Afternoon By Claire Lin





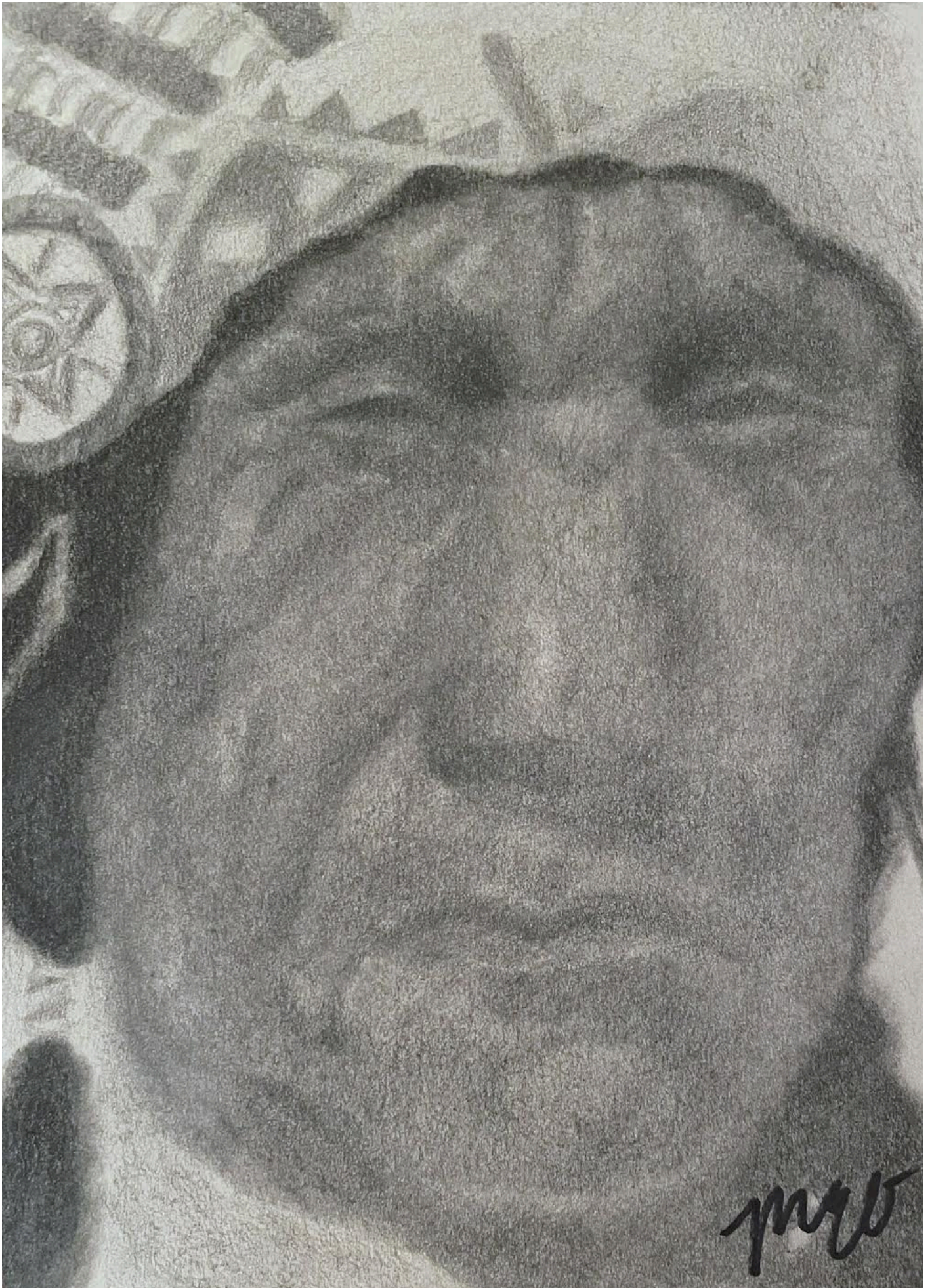


## Lazy Afternoon

Claire Lin is a sixteen-year-old artist from Princeton, N.J. who has been drawing and painting since the age of four. She is now tapping into the world of mixed media and exploring new materials in 3D. In addition to creating art, she enjoys watching sunsets, petting fluffy dogs, and going for nature walks.

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**Graphite Portrait** By Maddie O'Neill





## Graphite Portrait

Madeline is a junior at Georgia Southern University. She is pursuing a degree in Studio Art as well as Creative Writing.

# Book Review

**Book Review: Pet Sematary** By Sanskriti Singh

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE



#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# STEPHEN KING

**PET SEMATARY**

This gripping novel is by far one of the most chilling reads I've ever come across. Picture this: someone incredibly important to you suddenly passes away, leaving you in a state of utter despair. How would you handle such a heartbreaking situation?

The heart of Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* lies in exploring the mysteries of life and death.

The narrative begins with the Creed Family – Louis, Rachel, their daughter Ellie, their toddler son Gage, and their cat Church. The Creeds have just relocated to a small town in rural Maine, as Louis has accepted the job as the head doctor at the University of Maine.

Upon settling in, their elderly neighbour, Jud Crandall, promptly becomes their friend. Jud is a sociable old man and Louis and Jud begin to regularly spend time together.

Louis, along with Jud, uncovers a hidden pet cemetery, where the pets of the town's children had been buried for generations. Unbeknownst to them, this cemetery holds a dark secret that will soon come to light.

The Pet Sematary is rumoured to possess a mysterious force that brings the dead back to life, and that's exactly what occurs.

At first, I found the beginning a bit dull, but as you get further into the book, it becomes more and more mysterious. It's a classic horror novel, and King really knows how to make it spine-chilling.

*Pet Sematary* is more than just a scary story – it delves deep into the darker side of human nature, exploring themes of grief, loss, and the consequences of tampering with the natural order. Stephen King's unique blend of the ordinary and the eerie makes this novel a must-read for horror fans.

Stephen King's unique mix of the mundane and the macabre elevates this novel to a true horror tale.

I hope you enjoy reading this book- have a great day!

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Sanskriti is an avid reader, programmer, and author. Her writing typically focuses on science and nonfiction. She has been published as a writer, with a science article appearing in Bookosmia magazine. Additionally, she serves as the head of her school's editing department, as a writer for The Teen Magazine, – and has a strong passion for stargazing.

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