Issue 18

Solitude, by Edward Zhang

Editor's Note

No Editor's Note in this Issue

Poetry

To save flowers By Marina Chen

Warm chrysanthemum

the same color as butter bled into strawberry jam

went limp two nights ago.
I sobbed and cut the stems,
filled a vase and arranged the blooms. If they were to die,

I might as well enjoy the show.
Is there a point to giving
a gift that dies like stop motion? Or are they the ultimate

gesture—here, a fragment of life—
trimmed from the life-source
of pulsing Earth—I trust you will try to preserve them.

This is my secret: it's possible
to save flowers, for my
watered chrysanthemums flourished—turgid rebirth.

I awoke the next morning,
their discarded stems like
snapped chopsticks in the sink, new buds emerging.

Marina Chen is a high schooler from Washington State and member of the Seattle Youth Poet Laureate cohort. Her work has been recognized by the National Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, Live Poets Society of New Jersey, the Hanging Loose literary magazine, and others. She writes poetry about everything she loves (and many things she doesn't.)

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summer solstice By Emma Chan

I want to call your name,

the noise ricocheting sharply like a shot around the narrow walls

and fly down an alleyway filled with light to meet you

midnight-blue skirt pleats billowing like petals, breeze caressing my skin

I want to secretly slip my hand in yours for a fleeting moment

as we bob along, buoyed by an effervescent zephyr

separating and coming back together, weaving like singing swallows

across the gentle cobblestone waves

the rosy hint of morning sun on your lips

and the fresh scent of summer in your hair

I want to succumb to the pull of promise

and prowl the bustling shopping streets of Ginza at lunch break,

burning up with the thrill of doing the forbidden

and the giddy excitement of being free

I want to run and run and keep running forever

in a sobbing sky

the gray mist blooming over emerald rice paddies

splashing in puddles and feeling the wet, sinking, soaking chill

and watching you fling the shaking droplets from your limp, hanging hair

I want to laugh like there's no tomorrow

the air squeezing out of my lungs in gleeful bursts

as we try, and fail, to snag a plushie from the claw machine for the sixteenth time

and walk away with empty hands, light wallets and brimming hearts

I want to lean against you on the subway ride home

reaching up to tightly clasp the oscillating handles

and not quite being tall enough, but that's okay

I want to press a soft kiss to your cheek

as the sky dims around us

holding a cup of bubble tea in one hand and

the faded smell of leather and eraser shavings in the other

I want to feel the world grind to a halt

hearing the melodic chime and the rush of crisp, biting night air as the doors open

letting in a constellation of serendipity

idyllic, infectious, intoxicating, igneous, ichorous

I want to lie on a velvet carpet of viridity

watching the festival glow like an ember of hope

a village, a tradition, a home coming alive

tucked into the crook of silent, listening mountains

seeing “大” branded into the sleeping valley with apoplectic torches

and the fireflies performing their sacred dance

rising up, up, up into the satin curtain of darkness without a care in the world

and vanishing as soon as their light begins to shine

I want to discover more

in you

and in me

than we ever thought possible

cradling the strawberry moon in our hands

holding the orphic fire in our souls.

Emma Chan is a sophomore at Kent Place School in Summit, New Jersey, where she plays the piano for her school's Chamber Orchestra. She is a page editor and staff writer for her school newspaper Ballast. She loves writing and hopes to pursue history, philosophy or literature in college.

Once Peace By Tyler Clayton

Once time to travel to Wisconsin or go to the mountains.
Always time to play fun board games, like checkers and chess,
there was always peace and time to relax,
there was no hassle trying to travel to school in the morning,
And nothing to do in the afternoon.

Now,
I move from school to soccer,
soccer to home,
home to conquering homework,
and the homework to bed.
On weekends, I have games for my travel teams,
and I have to go get groceries more often.

I miss the days of peace and time to relax,
I miss the time I get to travel.
I miss the fun board games.
I miss the past as a child.

Tyler is a student at St. Patrick's School in Rolla, Missouri.

Thank You Grandma By Victoria Olusanya

for teaching me how to live with others
as “one another,”
Thank you, Grandma, for teaching me
Yoruba, answering my
questions that I
decide to ask while
you were sleeping, like “Grandma, what is 2+2?”
Thank You, Grandma,
for teaching me that you are helping
Us prepare for
Tomorrow.
Thank you for forgiving me
for the accidental slamming of
the microwave, kitchen trash, the fridge, and freezers,
pantry cupboard doors, the
spice cabinet above the stove, and
nearly everything in the house,
that has a door and can be shut.
Thank You, Grandma, for playing along with O’Ryan
And me whenever we call you
“Gam-Gam” and responding as
“Grandson-grandson.”
Thank you for all
the fun laughs of calling
“SpongeBob” “Spongeoun-Box”
but Please…. DON’T stop.
Thank you for teaching
That we should always
Be T-R-U-E TRUE.

Thank you for always cheering
me up, when you
Don't mean to, like when I
came home from 4th grade crying.
Thank you for tickling
Olivia, O'Ryan, and me
whenever we're sad,
and for reminding us
to be a child of God
ranks above all else
in the world.
Thank you for inviting
us to all of your church programs,
Exposing us to
your beautifully amazing voice.
Thank you for teaching us
discipline when we
need it,
and for the Bible
"Meetings" that would
often take place on
Tuesday's in the living room,
while we sat on the beige couch,
And teaching the Olusanya
Grandchildren that it's okay
if the world mocks and spits
at us for doing what's right.
God even tells us that the pain
of Jesus isn't easy,
and you can't take the easy

road out, but the narrow pathways
and difficult pathways to life eternal.
Thank you for having us memorize
Psalm 23:6, and helping me know that
"Surely God's goodness and mercy
Shall follow us all the days of our lives,
And we shall dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever and ever, Amen."

Victoria is a student at St. Patrick's School in Rolla, Missouri. This is her first publication.

Red Light, Stop By Nour Gajial

Khayaban-e-Ghazi road:
Red light, stop.

Knock! Knock!
Can I have some money?
God bless you and your family.
Can I have some money?
At our window, the old man begs

AC leaks from the corners of our white Lexus.
The tan leather seats provide safety and comfort for our family.
The dam of privilege is broken.
Two limbs remaining.
Two wooden structures in place for each leg.
Mismatched foam flip flops.
A kameez dusted with mud,

stained with tobacco,
and absorbed with the stench of Pakistani gutters.

My eyes recede under the influence of shame,
body numb, clogged with feelings.
Please! Please! Can I have some money?
Crinkled change from a dinner outing,
converted to the old man's meal for two days.

The red light of income flickers.
Pivot, wobble, limp.
Crooked teeth on display,
Squinting eyes filled with mirth.
Pivot, wobble, limp.
The dusty pavement has been reached.

His weak hand lifts up,
like a salute from a soldier.
At the dusty rocks he waits
for the light of income to shine again.

Nour Gajial, is currently a sophomore at Lakeside High School in Washington. Most of the time you might find her drawing, writing, or rowing on Lake Washington. In her free time she enjoys listening to music and spending time with her three-year-old brother.

I Lived Through the Winter that Buried You By Cassidy Black

i want you to come back to me
healed because i'm selfish & you left
me to wade through the weight of losing
you. i've spent so much of my life wrestling
with death & all it has taken
from me.

i pushed through
the silence & the static. the light settled
into my skin when i clawed
my way back. metal tooth ravaging
as i paced along my mind's
interior.

now i know
no one could keep you. you,
closed-doors & driver's seat
laughter. you, cold december
& bloodstained
mercy.

Cassidy Black is a psychology student, libra sun, and postcard collector from rural Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared in Rising Phoenix Review, Ghost City Review, and Recenter Press Poetry Journal, among others.

I find it lying in the grass beneath the shade of a jack pine.
Red streaked saliva drips off yellowed fangs and pale gums
while its chest pulls in shallow breaths that rise and fall
like the restless boughs above its body.
When I look down into its hazel eyes and unpleading pupils,
I know there is nothing anyone can do.
Even still, I stand beside it.
I stop watching the blood trickle from its side.
I close my eyes and imagine its undeath.

The wolf sucks bloody saliva back into its mouth.
It stands up while pulped organs and shattered bones
reform. The bullet spits out of its side and flies
across the field – back down a rifle's barrel.
The casing leaps back up from the grass and glides
into the chamber at the slide of a lever. The casing
remarries the bullet when the man pulls the trigger.
He lowers the gun, locks eyes with the wolf,
And watches it walk backward into the woods.

Nick Trelstad is a twenty-one-year-old poet and undergraduate in the College of Saint Scholastica's English program. He has had previous works of poetry published in literary magazines such as Sink Hollow.

Raw By Tess Woodhouse

I should like to be raw
One day
Undiluted
Free from fear and fate (and you)
No expectations
No one to live up to (or down to)
To be accepted
As individual
I should like to be raw
To be me (whatever that may be)
And this world
That is something
Yet to be
Discovered (or said out loud)
But I think (I know)
I should like it
To be raw

Tess is a red-haired girl who likes reading Jane Austen, watching too many property programmes, drinking hot chocolate and thinking too much.

It Happened While I Was Admiring Her Feathers By Gabriela Szczepankiewicz

Despite your brown belly, you still carry the vermillion
trademark of Virginia in the flecks of your rusty
tipped wings, my marvelous madam Cardinal.

Sing for me, my sweet, clumsy mother bird.
Twitter in tones like a digital blaster

and dance with your straw feet that jut and jive

about the round nest in oblong ovals:
your legs skip-tripping on feeble, unborn pebbles.
Fly in that forgetful flutter as you forage for food.

But be back to your twig-bowl abode holding
four little futures. Babes awaiting a hatching,
all asleep until that day. Even the odd

fifth egg. The fatter, foreign egg—laid in haste
by a stranger too cowardly to stay and nurture
her own soon-to-become brood Cowbird,

that breaks first. A chip and a chirp
and you're called to your work, my simple spring-singer,
attending to your newborn. Not yours,

I mean to shout, but the wind rips out the sound.
Your song like a gunshot rings your return.
I gape as I watch your red crested head lean

down and bid from your blunt, peachy beak
the lumpy puke-slime that slides
into the wide smile of the lone little

parasite. A predator's offspring. Perfectly content
with the presence of a surrogate mother. It sits in the soggy nest
with your four fetus babes—dozing in dribbling pools

of feathers, and bloodied pink yolk.

Gabriela Szczepankiewicz is a rising senior at Old Dominion University. After switching out of a STEM major, she found her passion for observing and exploring the world via creative writing. Spurred on by her achievement of winning an honorable mention in the ODU Undergraduate Poetry Prize Competition two years in a row, she hopes to publish her work and continue her creative aspirations.

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she discovers (for a living) By Katherine Wong

a paleontologist once told me her bones could lift the world. she showed me, let me stroke the splintered ridges, run my hands along the epiphysis grooves. in her closet is a collection of old relics, and she asks if i want to be fossilized. i tell her no, but she pours the pitcher anyway, and my skin cumulates honey that hardens into a prison of amber. i'm left to collect dust.

an astronomer once told me that the secret to finding extraterrestrial life was to look inside. i press my face to the telescope's eye and see myself hinged to the curvatures of the cavity, plastered along the partitions, and she collides into my soil with her burning, sweating, kinetic energy. i am a floating cadaver, bruised with the imprintations of craters, trapped in time until quantum mechanics can invent a device to fish me out of this well.

a civil engineer once told me how to fix myself. she said build bridges from your heart to your head. if you use up all your materials now, you'll end up broke and confused. well i'm

confused right now, i answer. so my hands reach for planks of wood and i build a dam, stack the logs into syncopated staggers until i get a wall that is too tall for her to climb. there are splinters lodged into the silver linings of my palm, and the reservoir billows out into an erupting wave of white foam. gone is the dam, gone are the nonexistent bridges.

Katherine Wong is a student at Orange County School of the Arts (OCSA) in the Creative Writing Conservatory. She enjoys writing speculative fiction, poetry, and songs. Her work has been recognized in numerous competitions including the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. She also is a writer for the LA Times High School Insider and frequently reviews science fiction entertainment and covers current public health issues. Outside of writing, Katherine plays the piano and runs a community service project called STEM THE ART, which teaches youth a combined curriculum in the sciences and the arts.

anesthesia By Suhanee Mitragotri

ma's hands run through thick black keratin,
each stroke bleeding coconut oil for my

parched scalp to sip. i listen to the beautiful
melody of ma's country, rhythms born from

cracked sugarcane & turmeric paste, tunes
beaten out of hollow wood & fractured

fingers, & words hurled as tongues strike soft
teeth. marathi letters drip like molasses from my

parents' lips, but broken marathi consonants crumble
from mine. i glance at their product in a shattered

mirror.

[*brown girl can't speak brown words?*]
i've taken a beautiful culture and dirtied it in

my palms. tears tumble from long eyelashes, each
drop stained mahogany from cacao eyes. each

utterance another disgrace to my lineage. yellow
t-shirt & jean shorts expose skin. each seam

is stitched to epidermis & tugging thread dyes
fingernails scarlet. wearing brown flesh like a

deer hide, there is a different girl underneath.
her blood runs red like ma and pa, her skin a

rustic blend of earthen hues like ma and pa.
but her brain runs blue

& bleeds of society's anesthesia.

Suhanee is a seventeen-year-old living in Massachusetts. She has a strong passion for writing and dancing. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her dog and cat, as well as laughing with her sister.

Still Life By Elane Kim

the backyard hyacinths
are in full bloom. sun
spills on windows
& stains glass
blood orange. we
are just waiting
for the springtime,
for weeds to grow
out of sandboxes,
for the neighborhood
children to scrape their
knees on concrete.
we are waiting for
the tears & the band aids,
for the sun to set, for
the hyacinths to die
in stillness, beautiful
for a moment. here are
all the ways we fail
to be still, to accept
our fate. here we are,
beautiful for a moment.

Elane Kim is a teenager who loves poetry, chemistry, and just about every kind of bread. She is very passionate about environmental issues, and her writing has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers. She is very happy to meet you!

Fiction

The Hills Have Eyes By Arja Kumar

SORRY GIRL, *NO PHONE MEMORY LEFT*, the truck's hand-painted license plate read in a sideways flirt. Two rainbow bunches of streamers bounced from the sides of the jalopying vehicle. A bundle of sugarcane sticks fell out of the open back. One side of the truck read *I LOVE GANDHI*, the other, *LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL*. Our car looked like a toy in comparison. I pretended not to be afraid of it toppling over onto us. I pretended we weren't stuck in traffic in the middle of India, on our way to the hills.

The driver of our car glimpsed backwards every so often with his clean fatherly eyes. His face was ruddy, stubbled from going without shaving for a few days, and patchy from old pimple bruises. When we would ask him how much longer or to stop for a bathroom, he'd reply in a low obedient mumble. When we would stop for tea, he'd put one arm behind his back in a servile stance and drink from the hot steel cup in long thirstful sips—staring at the Indian sun. He had small children and got nervous when my grandfather told him we were going to the hills. *How many days*? he asked. *I don't know!* my grandfather would say. *Nobody tells you how many hairs on your head you're gonna be born with!*

I was a sardine—jammed with six sleeping souls bouncing up and down as the car continued through the rock-laden roads. Time became a big blur of jet lag— since we'd flown from the U.S. to my grandparents' house in a quaint, forgotten town. I tried to wriggle my phone out of my pocket to listen to music, but my sister's heavy resting head jerked when I made the slightest move. I sighed and wiped the fog off the window with a spare unicorn-speckled sock.

My cousin, Charlie, woke up and yelled, "I'M SO HUNGRY!!!" She rolled the window down all the way and stuck her head out, searching for food like an impatient animal. A cold breeze and smell of something fried and crunchy, mint and spices, and piping hot

cardamom tea blew into the car. The rest of the troupe slowly awakened and shook the siesta from their eyes.

“We can’t get off anywhere now,” said my aunt, yawning. The cars in the jam were motionless like a bad Salvador Dali painting.

My other cousin, Alicia, poked the back of my head. “How’s life?”

“Cheeky,” I replied.

“Cheeky?” she questioned.

Outside, there was a man clad in orange garb wandering with a walking stick. He looked like a wise man of some sort—a turban wrapped around his head, clay beads hanging from his neck, holding an iPhone up to his foggy eyes. Maybe he was Socrates. Maybe he was a social sage. I imagined him sitting criss-cross on a great mountain—the high sun illuminating his wrinkled face—maybe taking a selfie. He tripped over a stone and howled in silent pain. *Why didn’t he just cry it out loud?* He felt around the ground frantically, feeling for his walking stick. The people that came and went passed him. Some gave him a sorry glance; some perhaps debated with their own conscience if they should drop everything and help him. In the end, he wiped the blood off his knees and picked himself back up alone.

Everybody in the car began talking about everything under the sun—*loudly*. It was as if the pressure building in our ears from going up was making us hard of hearing. My mom and aunts talked about cleaning up our poop when we were little babies, my older cousins talked to each other about their friends getting engaged, my sister and younger cousin argued about YouTubers, and my grandfather ranted to the driver about there being no phone service now. The noises clashed and tripped over each other and the

honking cars passing by sounded in a cacophony. The driver shot a tense glance in the rear-view mirror, distracted and confused how to switch lanes.

A beggar quietly palmed my window like a ghost. "*Give. Please give, madam. I am hungry.*" I looked at the woman's rough hands, then at her dirty face and dark eyes half covered by a scarf. She could've been known as beautiful if it were raining—if the water washed away all the dirt and suffering.

My grandfather rolled down the window and barked at her in the same Hindi tongue. "GET AWAY! BREAD IS ONLY BUILT BY HARD AND HONEST WORK…THE HILLS HAVE EYES!" He rolled up the window, angry. The woman palmed at his window. My grandpa cursed and the car jumped forward.

Everybody continued talking, but a loudspeaker on top of a small church ahead suddenly overtook all of the noise in my mind. There was chanting—verses, hymns, a maybe truth. I say maybe because I couldn't understand all of it. I looked around the car to see if anybody else was hearing what I heard. Nobody. I looked out the window to see if anybody else in the city was hearing what I heard. It was impossible to tell.

~

I'd heard the chant before, upstairs in my grandparent's house—when I locked myself in the bathroom and sat on the toilet seat to cry. I was wearing my winter jacket then, and my butt was frozen from the cold seat even though I was wearing two pairs of pajamas. I held my head in my hands and wiped the frustration out of each burning eye. *Why are you so serious?* asked my aunt. *You're not fun anymore!* complained my cousin. *You're too sober*, said my uncle. I could hear my younger sister and cousins laughing loudly in the room next door—they were watching a scary movie and eating spicy potato chips.

I stood up and went over to where the noise was coming from. I looked up at the window that was too high to see out of and continued listening to the chant. After each verse, a small congregation echoed a response back. I imagined them sitting in a small circle in the temple two blocks away. *What kind of people would sit in that little temple on a Tuesday night?* I wondered. *Don't they have anything better to do? What were they saying?* They sounded like holy ghosts.

> *Pain and suffering are the remedies; pleasure and comforts are the diseases.*

What did this mean?

~

My grandfather cussed out a toll guy and told him to fear the hills. My mother fell asleep again, probably praying. The last time we came here, the priest gave us flowers. She had been wanting us to come back here for years. She was running to the hills in full speed, and my father—he couldn't wait to run back to my grandparents' home. He was in the other car and was nauseous. He had been acting strange and childlike since we landed, running to my grandparents' home with an open embrace, like he was going to hug the giant house, jumping up and down on the terrace when he saw kites flying, requesting a cup of warm milk only from the hand of my grandmother. *Milk*, *milk*, *milk*, he would always sing. *I loveeeeeeeee milk.*

There were patches of fog and smoke then. The cars and people that passed by were apparitions. There was a woman in a fancy car, staring at me with her pierced nose turned up. She looked like she'd been royal or something in a past life. She looked like she used to have smiling old woman's eyes. But now, she had the eyes of a politician's wife. There were men with horses decorated in flowers and garlands lined up on the sides of

the road—waiting to take the next pilgrims up the hills. There was a woman in a yellow lehenga dress sleeping on a cot—flies settling on her unconscious face. There were two men crouched by a fire that ran only on dead grass and straw—no shoes, thin hats, both sharing a rough blanket, tapping at their iPhones in one hand. There was an infant and a mother with half her breast out—the milk dripping down to the ground—an injured wild dog lapping up the tiny puddle. Animal or human, out on the street or in the quiet of a hidden bathroom, there must've been some meaning in our suffering. Our living was incomplete without it.

I could've sworn these hills had eyes. How could they be blind to this all? No, the hills understood. The hills saw all.

"We are hereeeee!" my grandfather sang. We were at the bottom of the mountains. The tall giants loomed over us like bright green gods in the cold air. The driver was tired now. Everybody huddled their stuff together, took their phones off the chargers, and fumbled to put back on their shoes. My mother got out fast; ready to run to the hills at full speed. I got out of the car and tilted my head up high again at the wonders. My father came out last, eager to get the pilgrimage over with and run back to my grandparent's house. The lights of the hotel went out.

"Uhh the light will be back shortly. Please come in," said the doorman.

I don't think we needed that artificial light anyway. A flock of black birds cawed over the burning orange Indian sun. It didn't matter to me; I was running to wherever the sun was.

Arja Kumar is a human, writer, and nineteen-year-old college student from Illinois. Her work has appeared in literary magazines including KAIROS, Sweet Tree Review, Literary Orphans, Portage, Blink-Ink, and Bop Dead City. When she is not writing, she likes to cook, paint, and stargaze.

And Then By Alexandra Berman

Three minutes before I picked up my medicine from the pharmacy, I stopped by the cereal aisle. The rows of colorful boxes seemed endless under the bright CVS lighting. Who in the world needs this much cereal?

I picked up a box. Cheesy Pops! "A slow drift into disassociation," the mascot promised. Serving size: one whole box. I put it in my cart.

I moseyed over to the pharmacy in the back. It was five o'clock on a Sunday. The only people there were me and a little old lady. She reminded me of my grandmother, but not quite.

I nodded at her and she nodded at me. Polite, but no more than what was necessary. We both looked ahead towards the desk. A woman in a white doctor's coat was puttering around in the back.

I don't like doctor's coats, or pharmacies really. They remind me of why I'm here.

Every time I refill my prescription at a new pharmacy, the pharmacists ask "Dilaxoiantrone? What's that?" and I have to tell them, "It's new. It's an experimental drug for retrograde amnesia." And then they say "Dilaxoiantrone? What's that?"

And then I finally get my stupid pill bottle, and then I walk home, and then I go to the medicine cabinet and put it next to all of the other bottles of Dilaxoiantrone, and I put my

Cheesy Pops! next to all of the other boxes of Cheesy Pops!, and then I remember that I have to go refill my prescription at the pharmacy before it closes.

Alex is in ninth grade, and was born and raised in New York City, where the inspiration is endless. When she is not out running (preferably in the rain), she can usually be found drawing, writing, or reading, with a cup of tea in her hand and a cat in her lap.

Father and Son By Jodie Meng

A glob of water slams against the living room window when my dad declares we'll be eating out tonight.

"What for?" I say, staring at the downpour. "We have more than enough ramen to go around."

"No. We're going to Sichuan Bistro." he says. Before I can protest, he tosses me a large umbrella from the closet and my raincoat. "Zip up. You can stand a few raindrops."

As he drives towards our destination, I'm still mystified about the source of his newfound resolve. He didn't demonstrate any peculiar interest in dining nor seem mindful of my activities in the prior days. After sharing a nightly meal, we would head towards our usual activities. I recall recent evenings in my bedroom, packing for college and chatting with my classmates over social media, while my dad sat in his office, engrossed in a meeting. I rack my brain for out of the ordinary events, but nothing warrants his adamant gaze, fixed on the clear space between the windshield wipers and rain.

The restaurant is tucked between a DMV facility and a tiny convenience store. After we rush inside, shoes splashing through puddles in a largely empty parking lot, my dad's troubled expression melts into the yellow light. A young waitress a few years older than I am, seats us and hands us our menus. Around us, a few other diners, who probably arrived before the rain started, peer at us curiously.

My dad seems oblivious to this. He folds his arms and asks me excitedly, "Remember this place? We used to come here all the time with mom." Of course I do. When I was in middle school, we frequented the place for authentic Chinese cuisine, a rarity in my suburban town. Our usual order was a large bowl of Dan Dan noodles, an aromatic dish with minced pork, chili oil, herbs, and onions. Sichuan Bistro was my favorite restaurant at the time.

"Yeah, it's been a long time since we've come back." When my parents' work ramped up and a relative became sick after my eighth-grade graduation, it became more difficult for us to dine as a family. When we did, we usually visited fast food places, and Sichuan Bistro eventually fell off our radar. The situation with our relative has been resolved since, but work still carves off ample time from my parents' schedules. Currently, mom is overseas on a business trip, leaving me to spend my last days at home with my dad. I wonder how Sichuan Bistro resurfaced in his mind.

"Too long," says my dad, shaking his head. He grabs a menu, and his eyebrows furrow. "They changed owners," he says, as he flips through the pages. "Ah, at least they still have the classic noodles. What a relief."

He waves the waitress over and orders the item, then adds magnolia tea for us to share.

When she leaves, he turns to me. "Terrible weather, huh? Hopefully it's not this way when we leave for the airport."

I suddenly become conscious of water soaking into my socks. “Why are we here?”

“What do you mean? You’re leaving for college soon and we haven’t visited one of your favorite childhood sites in years. You’re never going to come back, you know. Might as well make the best of the little time we have left.”

The nonchalance of his language pains me. “I’ll come back to visit,” I protest.

He sighs. “Infrequently. As it will be, for a long time.”

I get the feeling that this visit to the restaurant is more for him than for me.

—

The waitress brings us a teapot and two teacups. “Enjoy,” she says. My dad pours the steamy liquid into cups and hands me one. I fan it with my hand, then take a sip.

The tea travels down my neck like a ball of warmth. I shudder, feeling it seep into my muscles and organs, filling my insides with its mellowness.

Simultaneously, my dad sets down his teacup, his forehead wrinkling in disgust. “They diluted this! This poor excuse for tea tastes more like water than magnolia. Probably used a few pinches of leaves to make a liter.”

“It’s nice though.”

“Really? I know you have higher standards than that. This is disappointing.”

I shrug and sip my tea again. When I drink, I forget the feeling of dampness on my feet.

—

“You’ll call us, right?” My dad is staring at the TV at the back of the restaurant, where a news anchor is discussing the damages of the storm to the nearby city. The words slip out indifferently.

“Of course I’ll keep in touch. It’s going to be a huge adjustment for me anyway, so I’ll probably call often in the initial days.”

“You’ll be fine. Don’t you already know quite a few of your classmates? Tell me about them.

“Well, there’s Kabir from Texas, as you know, who’s going to my roommate. We met over the Facebook group for admitted students. He shares a couple of the same interests as me, like computers and outdoorsy-stuff, so I think we’ll get along well. I also know a few people from the class Discord chat, like Fumiko, who’s from California and Alexander, who lives all the way in Great Britain. And of course, there’s Steffie and Manuel from my school, so I won’t be completely alone.”

“That’s good. Very good.”

“Dad, you know you’ll still be in my life, right?”

Thunder rumbles in the distance, and I pick up my teacup to avoid his gaze. Have I gone too far, bringing his emotions to the table?

“Yes.” he says softly. “You’re right. It probably won’t even make a difference.”

“What do you mean?”

He stares directly at me. “I haven’t been present in your life the past few years, have I? Always at work or taking care of someone else. You don’t demand much, but I haven’t

been much of a father."

I'm startled by his confession. When I was younger, I admit, I resented his prolonged absences. I returned from school everyday to an empty home, where I played video games, watched TV, and occasionally, worked on homework until my parents came back later at night. Often, my father would adapt a disciplinary role when he saw me, as he endeavored to limit my screen time and fit rigorous standardized test preparation into my schedule. His distant, authoritarian parenting did not sit well with my adolescent self. I yearned for caring company.

Yet as I see him now, with his salt-and-pepper hair, thick eye bags, and lined skin, I understand that he weathered through his own storm in the past years. He is a tired man, lifeblood diminshed by late nights and stress. When I realize he has aged, a rock drops into my throat, sending ripples throughout my body, then sinking into the deep end. I remember the scenes of my childhood: birthdays, playgrounds, skipping stones, bike rides, barbecues, fireworks, and restaurants. Each memory is imbued with love.

"You were never a bad father," I say.

He blinks away something in his eyes. "Thank you, son."

The waitress arrives with a large bowl of Dan Dan noodles. We thank her, and I split it between two bowls, passing one to my dad. When I inhale, I'm overwhelmed by an all-too familiar aroma of a decadent, spicy sauce. I pick up a large chunk with my chopsticks and devour it.

My mouth is aflame. "How do you like it?" my dad asks.

Desperately, I gulp my remaining tea and pour another cup from the teapot. "I think I chewed on some peppercorns."

My dad laughs softly. “Yeah, they really added a lot more spice than usual in this dish. Quite opposite to the tea in terms of flavor.” He watches as I continue my ritual of drinking tea and refilling my cup. “Sorry for dragging you into this.”

The fire in my mouth subsides, but it leaves a lingering warmth. “No, this is the best experience at a restaurant that I’ve ever had.”

Jodie Meng is a member of the Class of 2020 at the Illinois Math and Science Academy. This work is inspired by a restaurant she frequently visited in her childhood and her recent experiences with college admissions.

The Underground By Anna Kiesewetter

Rena had never felt so exhausted.

It wasn’t that she was doing much of anything–in fact, quite the opposite. She had grown listless counting the fissures in her stoic cement walls, grown weary as days blurred into weeks of hearing nothing but the voices in her head.

As the evening air drifted in through her cracked-open window, she found herself padding towards its sill, staring out into the frozen ghost of a metropolitan jungle.

Sure enough, that telltale wisp of steam snaked towards the twilit sky, a beacon in the growing night. Looked like the Underground was in full swing.

Hesitantly, Rena inched open the door as the murmur of the RoboScreen drifted up the hall, a ceaseless hubbub spewing its ugly message. “97 new plague deaths reported

today," it intoned. "This is a reminder to practice social distancing. Those attending public gatherings are subject to imprisonment under Emergency Order 1204."

Social distancing. God, how she hated that phrase.

She had one foot out the door when a withering voice sprung from the walls. "Where do you think you're going?"

Rena winced. "Sorry, Grandma." She swallowed, throat thick with her lies. "I just wanted to get some air, walk outside. You know I've been cooped up all week."

"Better cooped up than dead," her grandmother muttered over the intercom. "Be careful, Rena. I'm getting weaker, and with this recession I can't afford for you to get arrested."

"I know," was her only reply as she swept through the entryway and into the alley, her silhouette bleeding into the inky shadows.

To her relief, Rena only passed a few RoboCops as she navigated the labyrinthine streets, maintaining a cloak of darkness all around. As she approached the line of steam, she found herself in front of a series of nondescript garbage bins.

Left of the steam and down, Glenn had messaged her. Tinged with incredulity, she opened the rightmost bin, a rusted metal heap.

To her surprise, it had no bottom. A chute emptied straight into the earth, the ingenious work of teenagers with more of a rebellious streak than she could ever quite fathom.

After a brief fall, her landing was soft enough, cushioned by a wide net strung across the chasm. As Rena clambered up, a sweaty hand pulled her to safety.

“Welcome to the Underground,” came the raspy voice of a gangly man-child. “Behind those doors you’ll find the only party in the city.”

Rena nodded her thanks, quickly extricating herself from his slick grip, as she crossed the narrow strip of rock to the set of doors. Already, she could feel rather than hear the reverberations of earsplitting techno music pummeling the rock walls like a feral animal. Her own palms dampening, Rena pushed open the doors, and entered the pounding beast.

It wasn’t the pulsating music that hit her so much as the heat. It was like a furnace, a churning, angry inferno tingling with electricity. A massive throng of tangled bodies twisted in sync to the raging beat, a mess of limbs and lips and wildly thrown-about hair. While everything above was strict and contained, circular masks and shut curtains, the Underground was rugged. Dirty. It was a blur of movement cast in primary colors, a primitive scene of bold youth.

Rena’s heartbeat began to merge with the pulse, as a mad grin danced its way onto her face. Almost feverishly, she found herself edging into the crowd, when out of the heat came that decadent voice she’d been waiting for. “Rena!”

“Glenn!” He was as tragically handsome as ever, ruddy color brightening his devilish face. “It’s been too long.”

He smirked as he snaked an arm around her. “If you weren’t such a rule-follower, we could’ve been down here a lot earlier.” With one swift movement, he pulled them into the frenzy, dancing away amidst the circle of feral teenagers.

His hands on hers were like furnaces themselves, insatiably burning. Something within her had yearned for this for so many days shut up in her room, had clawed and screamed at her to venture out or risk suffocation. With bodies jostling them on all sides, she

found herself pressing closer and closer to him, so much that their breath mingled as they talked.

“Do you think it’s safe to be down here, with all these people?” Rena’s eyes slid to his.

Glenn’s face twisted into a frown. “No plague talk. We party to forget, to escape–not to discuss.”

Gripping her palms tightly, he spun her around him, a whirl of color and movement inundating her senses. By now the heat had seeped into her until it melded into a glowing core within her heart, keeping her moving, round and round. As Glenn dipped her back, she felt the world lurch before her, then come flying back, a delirious rush of vertigo coursing through her veins.

But not only did the ground come rushing back to her–so did his arm. And on it, a blistering splotch of decaying purple skin.

Suddenly, the cavernous room seemed cast in cold tones of blue and grey. The pulsating music, the voices around her, were lower, muffled, as the room swirled in slow motion.

“Rena? Rena, are you okay?”

Her voice was faint, weak, not at all her own. “Glenn–Glenn, look at your arm.”

His face blanched. He began to yell something, but her ears had stopped working. All around her, the dancing petered out into a growing mass of spectators, jostling each other to catch a glimpse, wide eyes blinking with trepidation.

And suddenly, the party was extinguished. Perhaps someone had called the authorities, because the disease control droids were swooping in from all sides, spraying a stinging

mist into the humid air, their metal frames sinister and artificial against the wild color of the Underground.

“Please remain where you are,” came the droids’ nasal voices. “It is reported that Citizen 0368 is exhibiting signs of the plague. As we vacate him from this illegal gathering, all citizens present will be imprisoned in the Quarantine.”

The Quarantine.

“No, no, no,” Rena muttered, petrified.

And as she gazed around the room, every face mirrored her own. Terror mingled with outrage was etched across each tragically prideful youth, as murmurs gave way to a trembling fervor.

Group by group, the teenagers crept toward the exits, until huge droves were clambering madly up the ladders. The droids sprayed their mist, spouting frazzled reproaches, yet they were no match for the sheer number of youth struggling their way out.

Rena watched in growing horror as the cavern emptied around her.

They could all be infected. Every last one of them. Yet still they continued up into the city, real-life sewer rats wreaking invisible havoc on an unsuspecting population.

And as much as Rena hated to admit it, she ached to follow them. Ached to escape into blissful ignorance, that teenage drug of unadulterated self-absorption.

She couldn’t face being locked up, forced to acknowledge the truth of the increasing horrors around her. Couldn’t live in this constant nightmare of death and fear, without

even the possibility of escape.

Rena took one last sweeping look around the cavern, and shoved down the voice of morality clawing up her throat. For a fleeting moment, her eyes met Glenn's as the droids raised him onto a gurney, locked in a raw second of bitter loss. And then she turned, following the last of the partygoers up the ladder.

#

Rena awoke the next morning to the grossly cheerful chime of the RoboScreen's news alert. For a brief second, normalcy reigned, before the memory of the night before slammed into her like a truck.

"Breaking news," it recited. "425 new plague deaths reported last night."

Rena moved to shut it off, but the RoboScreen wasn't done. "There appears to be a new pattern. All deceased persons housed a teenager aged 15 to 19 in their dwelling."

Drop by drop, Rena felt the color drain from her face, as a muffled cough echoed from downstairs.

She had known this would happen. And she'd left anyway.

Rena sank onto her bed, numb, as the tide washed in, wave upon wave of guilt crashing into her. Minutes bled into hours, a timeless, endless expanse as the rising water slowly pulled her under.

Eventually, Rena's broken gaze drifted back to the window, and she stiffened, sick to her stomach.

After its brief respite, once more the tendril of steam curled ominously, tantalizingly, out from the Underground.

It was almost boastful. Shameless. A snake threading its way through the reddening sky.

Despite everything, the party continued.

Anna Kiesewetter is a high school junior from Issaquah, Washington. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Writing Awards and is published or forthcoming in Skipping Stones Literary Magazine, the Lumiere Review, and Kalopsia Literary Journal, among other magazines. When she's not scribbling down stories, she plays the violin and enjoys eating anything matcha-flavored.

Frances By Max Gardinier

When my mother left us, I asked my father why she couldn't come back. He leaned over me and whispered: "She don't love us anymore." He smiled, but I could see the sadness in his watery eyes. "She just don't." His breath smelled of whiskey and in the low lighting of the room, he looked old and sickly. I became cold and rigid, after hearing his words. I felt empty. He kissed my cheek and left, and soon after, the sound of his sobs seeped through the thin wall that separated us.

Three months later he announced that his great aunt, who had no children, had died, and he had inherited her old beach house. My sisters both began to cry; they didn't want to leave their friends behind. And slowly I realized what moving meant. How it meant I had to leave the house in which my mother had raised us. All my memories of her would slowly leave me. I could never again look at the back deck and think of when I painted it

with her, never again look at the door and remember her holding me after it closed on my fingers, never again look at the mirror in her bathroom and imagine her smiling back at me in the glass, hairbrush in hand. So I left the room, and I crawled into my bed, and I cried, but I tried my best not to make a sound. I wanted the Earth to swallow me up and the world to forget I existed.

Dad didn't care. We moved, and for months I couldn't forgive him. I stopped talking in an attempt to punish him for what he had done to us. For fifty-three days I didn't say a word. I drew out plans to run away, and live freely, relieved of all my troubles. I wrote stories of a young girl who fell off a boat and realized she could breathe underwater. She found her mother, a beautiful mermaid, and she lived alone with her, deep in the depths.

But my mother was no mermaid.

Dad couldn't afford a psychologist, so he begged. His begging eventually evolved into punishment. But he soon realized he had nothing to take from me.

The school would hand me detention after detention, for refusing to answer questions, until finally they suspended me for insubordination. Dad had to work, so for four days I was home alone.

On the third day, the phone rang. Not many people knew our new phone number. The caller began to speak immediately after I answered, "I know you told me I shouldn't call, and I know I fucked everything up, and I'm so, so sorry, dear God, I'm so sorry, but you have to forgive me baby, please–"

"Mom?"

There was a long silence.

Then she hung up.

That was the first word I'd spoken since we moved. I was glad my mother was the only one to hear it.

I ended my mute phase after that. I'd grown out of it.

She died a few months after that call. Dad wouldn't tell me how. He wouldn't let us go to the funeral.

Guilt clung to my back for a long while, hanging on my shoulders with its claws deep in my flesh.

————

Every night, whenever I reached that state of mind in which I was neither fully awake nor fully asleep, I'd sneak outside and visit the fairies that lived in the leafless trees of our backyard. I would lay down in the sand, and face the sea, and they would come and dance on my shoulder and my side. I'd wake up in bed the next morning, with sand still in my hair.

Sometimes I would rub my eyes, and the fairies would transform into clueless lightning bugs, flying aimlessly in the cold night air. They were trying to hide themselves from my conscious state of mind.

Some days of the week, I'd remain in that state between sleep and wake, even while I drew, or studied, or chatted with my teachers, and the only thing that'd wake me up was

a good night's sleep. I feared that one day the sleep wouldn't be enough, and I'd be stuck in some kind of perpetual limbo, never to be fully conscious again.

I became obsessed with my mother. I felt I had to learn how she died, why she died, where she died. If I was at fault for her death. I wished I could talk to her. Every night I prayed to God to let me speak with her again, a full conversation, one that started and ended with happiness and love. But God stopped listening to my prayers after a while.

I felt entirely hollow, as I had that night the year before. I spent my days sitting on my bed, facing the wall, thinking of different stories and narratives and characters to keep me company. My body grew smaller; food all tasted the same. It was all the same, and I was stagnant, like a festering body of water.

I spent my nights on the beach.

Her name was Frances. Dad wouldn't tell me her maiden name.

Like my spoken word strike, my search for answers ended abruptly, when I no longer had the energy to search for her ghost. But she never stopped haunting me.

————

The fairies danced on my shoulder, I laid in the sand. I watched the ocean. A figure rose silently from the water. The moonlight bathed her silky skin. Slowly she walked to my body. She wore a long white dress, unsullied by the sea's predative waters. I watched from outside myself as she bent over and dragged a ghostly hand along my cheek. She walked around me with great caution, then lay down behind me, her body against mine. I closed my eyes.

These nights, I could not tell where the sky began and the sea ended.

When I woke the next morning, tears stained my white sheets. I realized that I no longer felt isolated. I felt whole again.

———-

Years later, when the fireflies were no longer fairies, and the sand was no longer cushion, I looked through an old family album. By this time, Dad had died, my sisters had married good-looking men, and I had started college.

I recognized my mother, not from my early childhood, but instead from the night she had taken everything undesirable from my mind.

I drove back to the house I grew up in, the summer before my senior year in college. Someone had repainted the back deck, but the house did not belong to anyone. I let my fingers graze the door, let my mind wander in the old bathroom mirror.

I took this trip alone, as I felt that going with someone else would ruin the sanctity of the experience. I felt that no one could understand how much these hallowed buildings had meant to me.

Night arrived once I reached the beach house, and the moon colored the sand blue. After I moved out, my oldest sister sold it as a vacation home to a wealthy family in New England, and split the money between the three of us.

The home was empty.

I went out back and lay down. I closed my eyes and let the tears drift quietly down my cheeks. It felt as if my youth was ending. I didn't want to move on, I didn't want to leave the fragmented memories of my mother behind. I wanted her ghost back.

So the fairies danced on my shoulder.

Slowly, they healed the scars my guilt had left behind.

And I was at peace.

Max is a senior at Pope High School in Marietta, Georgia. He likes to spend his time reading, listening to music, watching an ungodly amount of Netflix, drawing, and writing novels he'll probably never finish. This is his first time being published.

Non-Perishables By Ricky Martin

My bunker is safe, I know that. I built it myself, buried it deep in my backyard, stocked it with food and water and guns and ammo, everything a grown man needs to ride out the end of the world in comfort. I had hoped for my wife to join me, naturally, but she walked out just weeks before it all hit the fan. She called me crazy, didn't believe me when I warned her that the end was near.

I bet she believed the sirens.

Even alone down here, I knew I was safe. I had fresh air, clean water, the radio said the detonations were in Maryland and Georgia (before it cut out, anyways), so I'd only have to wait a year or so for the fallout to clear away enough that the surface would be safe again. Everything up there is gone. I heard the trees being ripped up, I heard the houses blowing by in pieces, I heard cars and trucks being thrown hundreds of yards, but I was safe down here in my bunker. I never told anyone about my hideaway, except my wife, but she'd left the state to move back in with her parents. I hid it well, deep in the woods,

dug it out myself and rented the tools in cash. I made every precaution to be sure absolutely nobody would go finding out that I was prepping, lest they try and take my bunker from me.

And yet, someone's started banging on the door. At first it was just for a minute or two, every few days, but now, it's gotten more and more constant. It's been weeks since the nukes dropped, there's no way anyone's living out there, and if they are, there's no way I'd let their irradiated asses into my vault! That's their own fault for not being ready; politicians had been organizing furniture in a burning building for years. I could see it, but nobody believed me. Looks like I got the last laugh after all. Take that, Rodger.

For a week now, it's been nothing but constant banging on the metal door, a nonstop *whack*, *whack*, *whack*, I shout at them to go away and they don't listen. I threaten to grab my shotgun and make 'em leave, they don't listen. One day, I'd had enough, I threw open the door and swung my twelve-gauge towards the ladder, but there was nothing there but the tunnel. I closed the door, sealed it up all tight, sat down and the thumping started right back up like nothing happened.

Now, I ain't the superstitious type, never believed in ghosts or god or nothing, but whatever's out there ain't natural. I've tried all sorts of things to get it to leave, even sat in the tunnel for a few hours one day, but it just started banging from the inside of the door. I tried one of those rituals from TV, drawing the star on the ground and whatnot, but it just kept on smacking on my door.

Lately, I think it's been coming closer to me, like it's playing some game. Saw something in the corner one night—looked like a person, just standing there—but soon as I turned the lights on, it was gone. Sometimes I see it out of the corner of my eye while I'm eating or checking the radio, I thought to start keeping the shotgun with me just in case it gets any ideas.

Sometimes I talk to it. Folks might think I'm crazy, talking to a ghost, but it's hard being alone in the bunker, and this ain't no ghost. It's real, even if it don't talk back too much. It still bangs on the door all the time, never does want to shut up. I've put a few more shells into the door than I'm proud to admit, trying to get it to stop. The knocking's driving me mad, it never stops unless I open the door, but I can't open the door too much or the radiation gets in. Between the knocking and the rads, though, there are some days I choose rads. Is radiation even real? The government makes up all sorts of things, radiation's probably a lie to keep us away from the stuff they're trying to cover up. Leaving the door open hasn't hurt me yet, and it makes the knocking stop. It makes the knocking stop.

—-

A wanderer pushes back vines covering a manhole in the middle of the woods. Plants had flourished in the years following the nuclear Armageddon; radiation did wonders to help plants grow bigger than ever. The masked figure pulled out a machete and wedged it beneath the heavy manhole, prying it open with great effort, before carefully slipping down the ladder presented. This was how they survived; looting the remains of old bunkers for food and water, since just about everything left was either poison or rad-filled.

Ever so cautiously, they descended. Despite several years having passed, sometimes there'd be a living person still hiding out in some homemade bunker, and they typically weren't too keen on visitors. This one seemed quiet enough; the overgrowth covering the entrance was a good sign that whoever once occupied this hideout hadn't left in quite some time.

Reaching the bottom of the ladder, the survivor pulled a flashlight from between their teeth and shone it ahead, revealing a heavy metal door resting slightly ajar. Had some other scavenger beat this one to the stash? Undeterred, the looter slowly pulled the

door open, wincing at the screech the rusted metal produced. Taking a small breath, they shone light into the room, and were greeted by a scene unlike any they'd faced before.

A corpse rested facedown in the middle of the room. That much was common. There was a worn and rusted shotgun sitting atop the decayed body, and as the wandered inched closer, they began to make out a faded pentagram beneath the cadaver. The walls were covered in drawings; some of them were identifiable as various satanic images and glyphs, while the vast majority were a complete mystery. The shelves in the back hadn't been picked clean, so a careful trek to the other side of the concrete space revealed a trove of cans of non-perishables and cases of bottled water. This place would almost make for a good temporary shelter, if not for the fact that it looked like someone had been sacrificed in the middle of it.

As the masked traveler began carefully collecting cans and depositing them into a bag, a small sound echoed from the opposite end of the room—a faint pat, like a tiny foot against some floor. The survivor paused, shining light across the room, yet there was nothing in the empty doorway, only the sun shining through the manhole entrance above. After a moment, they passed it off as the wind, and resumed looting, albeit with a little more haste. This place was putting them on edge.

Not a moment later, the door slammed shut with a terrible echo. Darkness enveloped the room, leaving the vagabond with nothing but a flashlight. They quickly rose, aiming the light towards the door with one hand while the other reached for a handgun. The beam searched for the culprit, scanning across the painted walls of the bunker in frantic streaks, arms quivering as they backed towards the back wall of the small one-room holdout. The tin cans in their duffle bag rattled against each other as their back pressed into the concrete.

In the tense and fearful silence, a faint knocking could be heard from the other side of the bunker door.

Ricky Martin is a senior with a side passion for creative writing, especially flash stories and poetry. Fascinated by fantasy and science fiction alike, he does his best to find inspiration in every aspect of life, and aims to one day go on to be a professional author.

Nonfiction

Nian Says By Carly Fan

In second grade, a school psychologist diagnosed me with "selective mutism," which suggested that I decided to be mute. The word seemed accurate to me because, at some point, I thought I couldn't possibly keep this level of charade going. But after a while, it became easier not to speak than to speak. I didn't utter a word for two whole years.

It wasn't until later that I fully recognized my reasoning for choosing silence. During my grade school years, I lived in a town called Newport in Jersey City, New Jersey. There, I attended a mostly Caucasian school where kids stared at my lunch of spicy salmon sushi and asked, "Did you get that seaweed from the ocean?" Or, "Won't raw fish make you sick?" Or, "Do you ever get tired of eating rice every day?" This was the curse of being the only Chinese-American kid in Newport.

When I stopped talking, my school accepted my silence, except for one counselor who pulled me aside into a blue room and asked, "Why don't you talk? Why don't you talk?!" My response was to bite my nails and look at the cartoon stickers on her wall.

I knew they could force me to talk if they really wanted to, but by then I was more scared to talk than not because everyone expected me to be quiet.

My second-grade teacher Mrs. Williams would occasionally decide she was going to give it a try and call on me in class, asking, “Nian, what is two times nine?” All those little faces would turn to me, as if they were waiting for a rare parrot to speak its first words. With hopeful eyes, the whole classroom would wait for a moment, silently willing me to say something. Of course, I got used to those periods of quiet when everyone expected me to talk, but the more time went on, the more pressure I felt to make my first words monumental–like those of Abraham Lincoln: “Four score and seven years ago…” But I never spoke. After Mrs. William’s hope faded, her shoulders would relax and she would move on to the next kid and ask the same question. All the children would turn their attention away from me, somewhat disappointed that I had once again remained silent.

Occasionally, I would have a substitute teacher who would be unaware and would call on me, but a kid would pipe in and say, “She doesn’t speak,” to prevent the class from going through the whole awkward silence again.

Then one day a new kid showed up. She was a tall girl from Puerto Rico. Her name was Ivelisse, and she always wore long sleeves under t-shirts and had dark eyes that didn’t avoid eye contact when telling someone to shut up. When the teachers played music in the background while we would work on our art projects, she sang along in a carefree way as if she were the only person in the room. Looking back now, she was my foil–she was vocal and gregarious, and I was silent and timid.

As the year went on, Ivelisse and I always ate lunch together. To her, my lack of speaking was an opportunity to have an audience who could listen to her complaints. She would complain about her younger brother who picked his nose and the boy in our class who bit people. She would share her food with me–her homemade lemon bars, avocado quinoa salads, cream-cheese bagels, and spaghetti. During snack time in class, she swapped her granola bars for my Choco pies.

After school, Ivelisse's mom would pick us up and walk us home. Ivellise and her mom would never pressure me to talk. Instead, they would chat about her braces or her ballet classes. One day, I reached into my bag and realized I forgot my keys. Seeing my troubled face, Ivellise asked, "What's the matter?" even though she knew I wouldn't answer.

Knowing I was away from all the mean kids who made fun of my lunch, I no longer felt the need to hide myself. I replied, "I don't have my keys!"

"Oh my god. She spoke!"

Without keys, I had to spend my afternoon at Ivelisse's house, which smelled like unfamiliar spices.

From her kitchen window, I could see the cherry tomatoes in the small backyard garden. Her grandmother was sorting the refrigerator, and her kitchen table was piled with newspapers and Strawberry Shortcake comic books.

Spanish TV shows played in the living room as her dad sat there watching. Her brother's door was half open with a crooked basketball hoop nailed to it. Brooklyn Nets posters covered the wall.

When we got to her bedroom, Ivelisse asked me, "Why don't you talk?" She looked at me as if she'd been waiting to ask this question all day.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"But you talked today," she added.

"Why?"

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“You’re talking to me now!” she said. She handed me her Nintendo DS to play Cooking Mama and suggested, “I have an idea. How about this? When you want to talk at school, you can just whisper in my ear and I’ll tell people what you have to say.”

“Okay.” The idea thrilled me although it sounded absurd.

The next day at school when Jimmy Miller was aiming spit wads at me, I whispered to Ivellise, “Tell him I hate him and knock it off.”

She paused and gave Jimmy a serious look and then said, “Nian thinks you have a ghost following you and you should watch out.”

Jimmy turned pale and put the spitball in his pocket, and I knew he was never going to aim a spitball at me again. I looked at Ivelisse and we shared a silent understanding that she was going to be my voice. But better. At the same time, I didn’t want her to do this for me forever. It made me feel as if I were a fraud, albeit a happy one.

The next time Ms. Williams called on me to answer a math question, I whispered in Ivellise’s ear, “I don’t know,” and she said to the teacher, “Nian says twelve and you look very nice today.”

Ivelisse began to answer for me all the time, but her answers were always different from my own as if she had created a character that was me but more interesting. One day, a boy made the mistake of making a rude comment to me about my lunch, saying, “Those dumplings smell so bad.” I kept my mouth shut, but Ivellise yelled across the table, “Nian says you smell bad!”

She gave me a smiling glance, and my face burned with a mix of shame and vindication. Around us, kids subtly began avoiding us. They would give us a wide path as we walked by and avoid eye contact. We were like the British monarchy of the past—capable of wielding frightening powers.

That following summer, Ivellise moved back to Puerto Rico. Before she left, I cried all night. I thought I would be losing the best friend I would ever have. She spoke for me, she accepted me, she invited me into her home, and she fed me empanadas. When I stopped crying, I knew I felt partly relieved. I no longer had to rely on her. I would have to rely on myself, but I hoped she had left part of her toughness with me. I hoped she would write me letters from Puerto Rico telling me how I should act without her. I wanted her to ask me how I was doing, and possibly send me pictures of her fifth-grade graduation, but for some reason, I never heard from her again. I imagined that the culture of Puerto Rico swallowed her up into a world full of delicious sofrito and fried plantains and happy Puerto Rican music, a world full of new friends, and she had forgotten her life in Jersey City and me.

At the start of third grade, as I sat in a classroom without Ivelisse by my side. The room was full of noisy third graders, and the teacher called on me to come up to the front. When I got to her desk, she asked, “How many textbooks are at your table?” I could tell from the look on her face that she was just testing me, like they always did, and she didn’t expect a response.

“Five,” I answered confidently.

When I turned around, all the kids were staring at me, and one kid whispered, “Oh my god, she speaks!”

And that was when the mystery that surrounded me was broken.

From then on, there were no more awkward silences when the world waited for me to talk. Nobody ever needed to say, “Nian says.” I spoke for myself.

Carly Fan is a junior who attends Great Neck North High School. She attended the Iowa Young Writers Studio the summer of 2019, and is also a past winner of the Walt Whitman Poetry Contest. During her free time she loves swimming and going on runs.

Tomorrow’s Today Too Soon By Sonia Mehta

You can never go home again.

The words to a story I never finished. I was not sure that they applied to my current situation. But they kept swirling in my mind. I was not going anywhere. My brother, however, was. Which meant that home would not be the same.

We were on a seven-hour car trip to his new home, a university dorm. My father kept saying that the next four years would be an amazing journey. Mother was quizzing him on the steps to do laundry.

“I’ll just mail you my dirty clothes,” he joked.

Mother could not be deterred from her mission to teach him how to solve every possible life obstacle. My brother only wanted to get to his dorm and start his awesome adventure.

I was mainly dreading the return trip with one-fourth of my family missing.

The worst thing about my feelings surrounding his departure was not knowing how I should feel.

“I will, finally, go through your closet and take several sweatshirts that I’ve had my eyes on for months,” I kept teasing him.

“They are still mine. I am not giving you permission to go to my closet.”

“Send me a complaint letter.”

That was how most of our conversations went this last year since I started high school. Once, we had been each other’s best friend. Now, we rarely had a conversation that lasted longer than thirty seconds. My friends used to comment that they envied our relationship. No one had said that for a while. There had not been a specific life-altering event in our sibling tie. Our shared path slowly started diverging as our lives moved on.

“Why can’t you two still be friends?” my parents would ask. Because we couldn’t. Sometimes though, there were moments. Like when I was forced to endure our parents’ unrequested advice, he would meet my eye for a quick second. A shared understanding. That is what I will miss most about my brother. What will I do now? Share the knowing glances with my own reflection? Or say sarcastic things to myself? I would probably not realize what I missed until I felt the void. His absence. Our absence.

My brother was rifling through a stack of gift certificates received at his grad party. One of them was from me. We had not exchanged actual gifts in years. Only cash and certificates. The last time was three years ago. He had been infatuated with martial arts then. I had made him a ceramic bowl and painted it with karate figures. The paint had run while heating in a kiln so that the fighting figures looked more like angry smurfs. My brother had thanked me, but there was no concealing the joy when he opened an envelope stuffed with cash from our uncle.

Father pulled off the road onto a scenic outlook. Both parents exited the car to stretch their legs. Or to stall.

“Do you want to come?”

“No, we are good,” we replied in unison.

My brother turned to me, “I guess, you’ll finally be the smartest kid in the house…”

“I always was.”

He paused before continuing, “you know if you need any help, several of my friends…”

“I’ll be fine,” I replied more curtly than I had intended. I knew that he had told a few of his senior classmates to keep an eye out for me.

We sat in silence for a while before I added, “If you need help with your newfound nerd status…”

“I’ll ask your friends how they put up with you.”

And then we reached our destination. Moving into his room went surprisingly fast. Mother quickly went into “mother mode” and started rearranging the pieces of furniture. My brother left to examine the rest of the dormitory. I was asked to unpack one of the boxes. On top were several cans of shaving supplies. Those should last him until he dropped his future son off to college. Next, a lifetime supply of face towels. I would have commented that he didn’t know what those were, but my brother was not in the room. Under one of the towels, I spied a familiar object. It was the ceramic bowl I had made him. I slowly placed it on his shelf.

Before long it was time to go home.

“I can’t believe today came so soon,” my father remarked. Both parents fought back tears and had a brief private talk with my brother. Then it was my turn. The conversation that played in my mind was, “I know, I always said I wanted a better brother. The truth is they don’t come any better. I will miss you”

The conversation that I had was, “See you soon.”

As I left his room, my feet felt like they were drudging through deep water. Each step was taking me away from the person who knew me best. You can never go home again. At least not to the same home. As I left the building, the front door clanged shut behind me giving a fatality to the moment. Our comfortable family chain was now missing one link. Ahead of me stood my parents next to our car. Father stared at his shoes. Mother was struggling to hold back the tears. What will it be like for them when I leave in a few years? I wondered why anyone would choose to have a family. Someone was always moving on, leaving sadness behind. Was life a series of separations from everything and everybody one cared about? Then I remembered the ceramic bowl. That insignificant, wonderful tender mercy. Surely, life was also a series of unexpected joys. I walked towards my family. Exhaling, I waited for the next merciful grace.

Sonia Mehta is an emerging writer and a high school sophomore in Central Ohio. Sonia submitted several of her works to the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. They won a gold and two silver keys. Her story “Porch” went on to win a National Gold Medal.

Moles By Rachel Liu

1. I met you three years ago in math class. The mole above your lip wasn't even dark then, barely visible, perfectly forgettable. I don't even think I noticed it until a week or two later, when I saw you laugh for the first time.
2. You didn't like me at first, but we became friends somehow, roommates the next year, and best friends the third. Neither of us remembered how. I guess it happened the way new moles appear, forgettable outside of a resounding feeling of novelty, the hey-look-I've-got-a-new-one-ness of it. By this, I mean to say that our friendship was careless and ordinary the way that moles are. By this, I mean to say that we stared at chipped corners of paint on the walls of our dorm rooms and talked about all the ways our parents had fucked us up. By this, I mean to say that we sprawled on the common room beanbag and complained about stupid, mundane things like mandatory meetings or the weather or the way your boyfriend loved you too much or the way you loved him too little.
3. A year after I met you, I realized that I wanted to touch you all the time, and not just in the romantic places either. Soft across the mole on your cheeks, high on your sweaty forehead after squash, low on the intersection where your arms joined your shoulders. Sometimes, I would confuse wanting you with wanting to be like you, as if our matching moles could be the matching friendship bracelets in a pre-adolescent fever dream. On the Sundays when time would feel just as elastic as the hair ties on top of your chipped dresser, we studied together. I dedicated myself to memorizing the way your moles settled onto the planes of your body in between memorizing dates and places for APUSH. I became very good at multitasking. Jamestown 1607. The mole trapped between your lips and the slope of your nose. New Amsterdam 1625. The mole just below your shoulder, splattered onto your bicep like a mini Pollock. San Francisco 1849. The mole, barely a dot, imprinted atop your jutted shoulder blades that looked like broken angel wings.
4. You hated your body. *I am so fat*, you once said, hair pulled up and squinting at yourself in the mirror as if your body was not really yours. I said *no, we wear the same size and you call me skinny all the time. No*, you would say, *it's not like that. We share some of the same moles on our upper arms*, you said, *but we're different.*

Fundamental differences, you said. And I thought: differences like the way I take myself seriously when I say I love girls but you don't and kiss them anyway. But I didn't say anything. You said that your shoulders were too broad and muscle-bound. Said you wish you had my body, all lithe and skinny like a real girl's. I hated you for that, thinking you didn't really want my body, not in the way I wanted you to. Thinking I didn't really feel like a real girl either because of the way I loved other girls. Thinking that maybe then, if I didn't *count* as being a real girl, you could love me.

5. Two years after I met you, I was relatively sure that I loved you, but it didn't make sense to me. On Sundays, I thought of all the concrete reasons I loved you, and I couldn't come up with any except for the way your moles looked like small, dusty little sprinkles in the sun. Sometimes, I wouldn't be very sure of how much I really loved you because being your best friend meant that I was also privy to all the cruel and selfish and terrible things you had done to other people like me. But none of those things had been done to me, so why did it even matter?
6. You were surprised when I told you I was queer. I thought that I was attempting, for the first time, to be honest with myself. You thought that I just hadn't talked enough to boys yet.
7. Three years after I met you, we ran to the library during detention, hid our footsteps as we tiptoed upstairs, and talked about our families in the dark. *My dad used to work a lot*, you said. *I didn't see him much as a kid*, you said. *By the time I woke up for school in the mornings*, you said, *he would be gone, and he wouldn't be back until eight. Sometimes*, you said, *when he collapsed to sleep after he came back from work, I would wonder if he could even wake up again.* We hugged and I felt as your nails pressed pale crescents onto my arms, and my nails onto yours. The warmth seeped through us where the marks stood out white and ghostly next to our moles.
8. *Hey, we match now*, I said. *Oh wow*, you said. *I didn't even notice.*

Rachel Liu is a writer from Beijing, China, and Paramus, New Jersey. A current student at the University of Chicago, she has been recognized in the Scholastic Art and Writing awards and The New York Times in various student contests. Her work appears in or is forthcoming from Polyphony Lit and Blue Marble Review.

A Piece of Me By Julia Peterson

I was two when it happened. There was a volcano, the rain came, and the mudslide. Destroying everything in its path, my family included. Who knew everything could be taken away from you at such a young age; I never got to know my parents. I don't even know if I had siblings. I don't know anything about my family, but they did leave their mark on me. As for how I survived, well, it was a miracle.

My name is Julia Peterson. Or at least, that's my adopted name. My real name is Julia Maria. Well, Maria is my middle name. I have a hard time saying my true last name. I'm from a small village in Guatemala. Well, I assume it was small, the mudslide wiped out such a large part of the country, and I don't actually know where exactly I'm from. I've struggled with my adoption all my life and now I'm finally ready to talk about it.

I was four when I was adopted, —into a family that already had four biological girls. My father always wanted a boy, but I guess I was too cute to pass up. My earliest memory was when I was six. I asked my mom "Why do I look different than you?" Then she explained it. At first my little mind thought, "Why didn't my real mommy and daddy want me?"

They didn't fully explain what happened to my parents until I was eight. I was sitting on my couch, and I asked my mother. "Will I ever get to meet my real mom and dad?" With tears in her eyes, she explained. "Your mom and dad died when you were two. That's why you were put up for adoption." I was heartbroken. I would never truly find out who I was.

When I was ten I started imagining what my real parents would look like. Did I have my mom's black hair? Does my dad have soft dark eyes? What about my birthmark, this mark they gave me? Did my mom or dad have one too? Something that sets us apart, proves that I am their daughter?

People act like I don't see it. Their glares, and how they stare at me as I walk past. They don't look at me, but at the birthmark on my forehead. I get lots of questions, "what's that? How did you get that? Is it a bruise?" I kindly explained at first, but soon I just walked away. This part of me, my family, my culture, was suddenly looked at as a flaw. Even my adoptive family commented about it, at first I thought it was a joke until it suddenly started tearing me apart from the inside out. These people that I trusted and loved for so long had turned into everyone else.

I was thirteen when I started to cover up my birthmark. My parents didn't agree with it, but they drove me to get make up. I had to pay for it. I thought I would escape the glares, and the teasing, but running from it only made it worse. By covering it up, people saw that their words were getting to me. I was letting them win, and their words escalated to pushing me in the hallway, and throwing water at me to wash off my makeup.

Now I know what you're thinking, "she should've told someone. That's what adults are for, to talk to about the bullying." But that never actually works. You see, it fixes it for the rest of the day. But by the next day, they've already thought of new nicknames and insults to spit at me. Of course, thirteen-year-old me thought they were right. Thought that if I never told anyone, no one would see me as less.

I struggled for a long time. It wasn't until I found a good group of friends that I started to feel accepted for me rather than pitied because I was different. I finally had people I could talk to, who would help me through all of my struggles and be true friends to me. I finally had a family. I've opened up to them a lot about being afraid of people looking at

me differently. Seeing me as weak. But, I realize now, that standing up for myself, shows I am strong.

I am sixteen now. I am open to sharing my story. I am adopted. I have an adoptive mom, and father, and I have four loving sisters. As you may have noticed, I have a piece of my biological parents and my background with me always, —reminding me that I am strong. I no longer see it as a flaw, but rather, natural beauty gifted to me from my past. I am not ashamed anymore. My name is Julia Maria. I am from Guatemala, I was adopted when I was four. And because of this I am who I am today.

Julia lives in a small town in the Midwest, but once lived in Guatemala. *"Being adopted was one of the best things that could happen to me, although there were times in my life where I really just wanted to live in my home country. My parents died when I was two, and it's been a very huge obstacle I've been working through for many years. I write to get my feelings out. I write because I can get so lost into the words. It's the best feeling. It's what I call home."*

Just Breathe By Lola Wang

I sink down into murky water. I'm submerged in dirty sea-green. Suddenly, I feel a rush of cold water. I turn my head. Soulless eyes stare back at me, dozens of them. The creatures look human, but they're not. Red-greenish veins run through their slimy, scaly bodies. I panic, and start to swim. Sharp claws dig into my skin and grasp my right foot, yanking me back. Before I know it, the vampire-like sea monsters rip off my feet and hands. I scream in agony, as they continue to tear me apart. It feels like a thousand needles burrowing into me.

I'm gone. Dead.

Until I'm not…

I'm back in the murky sea-green, back with the monsters, dead again and again. After the tenth, twentieth, fiftieth time, I realize it's a cycle I will never escape. I cry out, and ask for help. That's when I see her: Buddha, sitting cross-legged above me.

I wake up.

I was thirteen, living in Taiwan, the land of Buddhist temples, so I decided to visit Lung-shan temple to see what the bi-chio-ni (nuns) and monks had to say about my nightmares.

As my mother and I approached the temple's opening, I peered up to the golden, slanted roofs and noticed how beautiful the shimmering yellow looked against the blood-red walls. I stepped over the wooden block that separates the outside world from the inner sanctuary with my left foot, as I had been taught to do as a little girl—a sign of respect, showing you understand you are entering a holy space. When we got to the innermost courtyard, I saw hundreds of people praying to statues of Taiwanese deities. Some threw red crescent-shaped wooden blocks on the floor; others prayed towards the sky, upwards, into space, where Buddha and the Gods reside. My mother and I stepped into one of the booths and approached the two nuns.

"I keep getting nightmares," I said, desperate for them to stop.

"Are you participating in anything involving evil spirits?" one of them asked me, looking deep into my eyes, scanning for the answer.

"Well, I watch a lot of horror movies. Is that what you mean?"

When I thought about it more, I realized the nightmares began shortly after I saw my first horror movie, *The Conjuring*. I became addicted to the genre. I binge-watched television shows like *Supernatural* and *The Vampire Diaries*. I knew I should probably stop watching these terror-inducing shows, but they were so exciting. They made me feel a heightened kind of aliveness, whereas my nightmares just made me feel scared to go to sleep.

"Yes, stop watching all horror films and television shows. Distance yourself from all lower energy forms. And pray to Buddha every night before you go to bed. You can also listen to Miao fa lien hua jin every day to further distance yourself from evil."

That night, dimming the lights, I bowed down in 90 degrees to the painting of Guan-Shi-yin Buddha, the Goddess of Mercy, portrayed as a young woman dressed in pure white silk laced in gold. On top of her head rested a small crown with a painted image of a bodhisattva sitting peacefully in a lotus position. Remembering what the nuns told me to do, I clasped my hands, stood up, and whispered in Mandarin, "Thank you Guan-shi-yin Buddha for protecting me" before wishing for protection.

Looking down at my hands, I expected to feel magically changed. I'm not sure why. I thought maybe I would see a glow of protection, but there was nothing. I changed into my pajamas and climbed onto my platform bed. I looked at the clock: 9:30 p.m., the same bedtime I had since I was ten. I hesitantly turned off the lights and held my blankets tightly.

I am running as fast as I can through an abandoned hospital. I look to my right and see a younger boy sprinting towards me. He is human, like me, but I don't know him. Suddenly, a creature jumps out in front of us, baring its long white fangs. The pale concrete hospital walls darken in comparison to the monster's pale skin. I wonder if this is what the dead returned to life look like. Turning his head from side to side, his dark, red eyes scan the boy, who is shivering in fear beside me.

"Run!" I shout, grabbing his hand, and pulling him through hallways, as we turn and turn and turn, running as fast as we can. Yet, there it stands, in front of us. The same bloodthirsty eyes—

I woke up startled, gasping for air. I looked at my alarm clock. It was 2:00 a.m. I crawled out of bed, and walked towards the praying table.

"Save us, protect us!" I cried

Lying in bed, thinking about my prayers and what the nuns had said, I wondered if Buddha had tried to save me by providing me company. Usually, I am alone in my nightmares and the cycle never ends until the alarm clock rings. This time, I had a friend, a little boy, and before the monster could kill us, I woke up. I felt comforted, thinking that maybe I was being protected, and that sleep wouldn't have to terrify me anymore.

Praying to Guan-Shi-yin Buddha quickly became a ritual, and soon my nightmares became more and more infrequent. Every night, I stood at the praying table and reminded myself to "just breathe," a Buddhist motto I now cleaved to as a way to align with my higher self and energy.

Once I was no longer gripped by sea monsters and zombies, I thought about what my nightmares had taught me. They seemed to reiterate my belief that life and death are an endless cycle of karma and growth. Maybe the nuns were right and the horror movies were to blame, but I wondered if something deeper was going on. Perhaps I had done something horribly sinful in a past life and my dreams were reflecting my punishment. Now, I feel grateful for them. They helped me wake up to this lifetime and made me realize I have the power to improve my karma. If I stay on the right path, I have the chance to ascend higher in my next life.

In the meantime, I will continue to just breathe.

Lola Wang is a sophomore at the Taipei American school in Taiwan. She wrote a lot of personal essays but is starting to write some flash fiction and short stories. She loves drawing too, mainly sketching and painting. Golf is another hobby she likes to do. This will be her first publication.

We Do Not Apologize Now By Jordan Ferdman

We are in tenth grade and she cannot be older than thirty. She is new to our school as we are new to womanhood and when boys in class cut us off, she does not even glance their way. Her eyes remain fixed on us, even as our voices dwindle, and she doesn't tear her gaze away until we finish our thoughts with a period. When our voices dance into octaves, concluding our thoughts with question marks or apologies, she lifts a manicured eyebrow and shakes her head to coax us onwards to a resounding conclusion.

Her personal life is infinitely interesting to us. She does not wear a ring, but we think she is too pretty to not be married. We also know she would find deep flaws in that line of thinking, but we can't bring ourselves to care too much; outside her class, we learn quickly that pretty is the best thing we could hope to be. We wonder if, when she looks in the mirror, she is happy with what she sees. We wonder if the men in her life treat her well. We wonder how she comforts her friends when the men in their lives don't treat them well. We wonder if she thinks about us when we are not at school. She assigns exuberant amounts of weekend homework, and though we never discuss it, we think that is deliberate. We think and hope that she wants us safe in our rooms on a Saturday night, kneeling over a textbook instead of some boy.

She assigns more homework than any other teacher, and though we text each other nightly complaints — *how much time does she think we have to spend on her class?* — assignments are always finished in cherubic yearnings of "good job!" scribbled across the top in red ink. We exist in a constant state of anticipating praise, of batting our eyes

and shrugging down our shirts and hoping to be good enough. In her class, praise does not come with soreness and pain. In her class, we do not ice our throbbing knees with praise, but paste it in our notebooks as a reminder that she cares.

The boys in our class do not like her much. They say that she is a bitch, and though we can't quite articulate it, we know that they cannot think of any other words to insult her. Once, when she raised her arm to write on the whiteboard, she revealed a small stain of dampness under her arm and the boys snickered. She did not notice, or if she did, she didn't react, and we stared at her, wondering how she was able to be so unabashedly human.

She does not say anything when one of us leaves the classroom with crinkling plastic up our sleeve, or comes in ten minutes late with red-rimmed eyes. She does not hide her horror when we recount what the old math teacher whispered as we left the room. She does not apologize for cursing, does not apologize for anything.

Imagine Jennifer… we start our sentences, draped over each other in the library or on the bus. The latter half usually involves something sexual or banal — as we learned quickly, some things were both — and it is unclear which is more exciting. *Does she have three emergency Midol, two tampons, and a Hershey's Kiss tucked in the front pocket of her bag? Does she refuse to go down on boyish men, ask them why they want her mouth for their pleasure and not her words?*

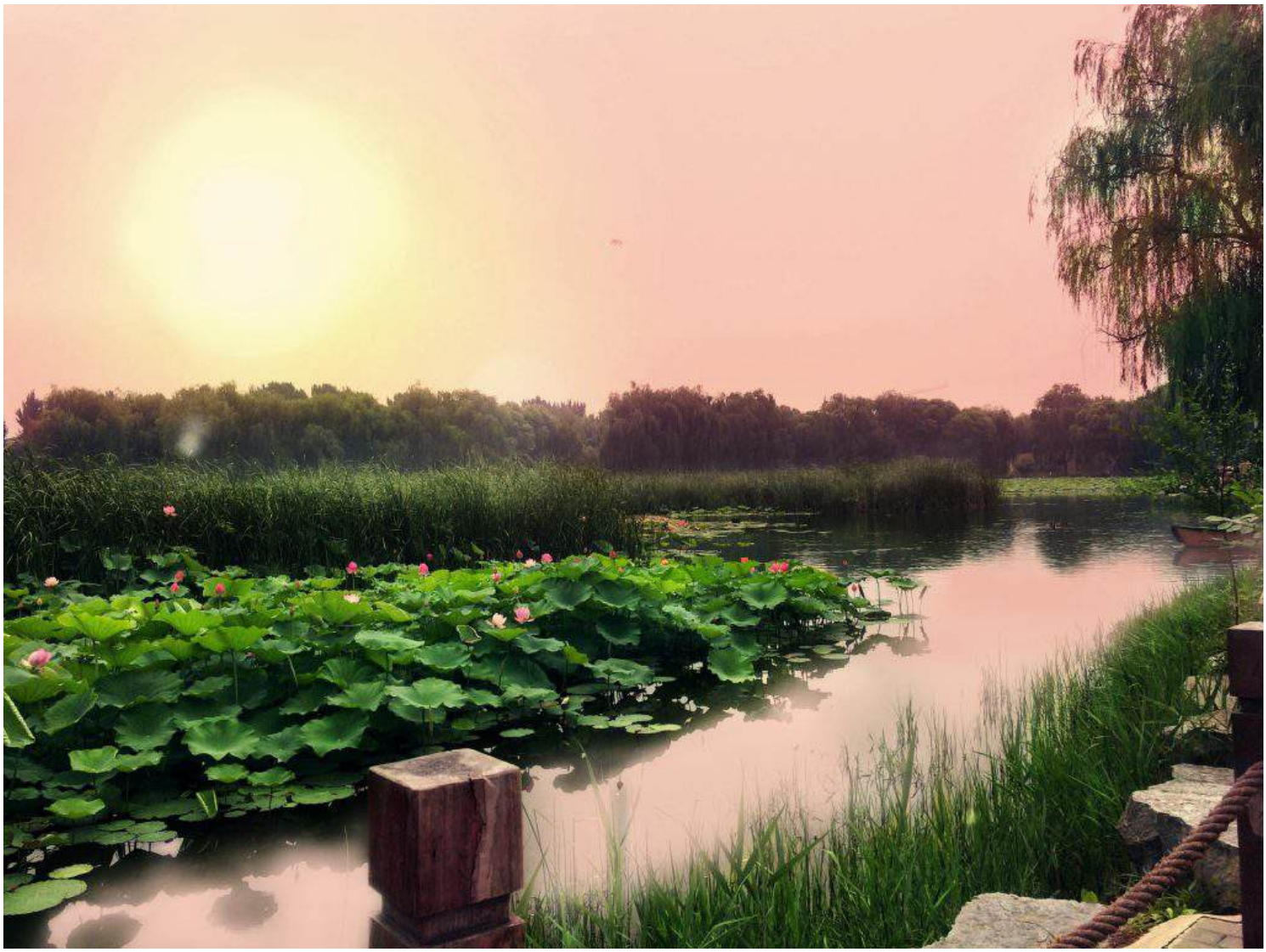
We wonder what she was like in tenth grade. We wonder if she looked down at her thighs and wanted to disappear, if she cried while getting her bikini line waxed, if she drank too much and did homework on Sunday with a hangover. We wonder if she was always the way she is now, and deep down, we hope not. We hope she found it somewhere, and we hope that it's out there for us too.

Jordan Ferdman is a junior in high school. She is passionate about the usage of the word "girl."

*At the author's request, payment for publication was donated to the Brooklyn Community Bail Fund : https://brooklynbailfund.org/donation-form

Art

Lakeside Reverie By Christina Sang



Lakeside Reverie

Lakeside Reverie is a photo I took as a freshman while on vacation in China. My dad and I went to a historical park flourishing with water lilies in bloom, and I really enjoyed the scenery.

Christina Sang is a junior at Methacton High School. Although her main interests involve business, she is open to the various possibilities the future holds, with primary goals of simply being financially stable. She realized in sophomore year that she was fond of Photoshop after taking a photography elective, and now edits photos as a hobby in addition to sewing and repurposing old clothes. She is currently the president of two clubs at her high school and enjoys having a means of temporary release from the brunt of her schoolwork.

Solitude, Disoriented By Edward Zhang

Solitude

Disoriented

The painting I did of my room is called "Solitude" and it was done using acrylic on canvas. I wanted to be able to capture my bedroom as accurately as possible, from the small paintings hung around my room to the small book sticking out of the cardboard box, in order for my audience to take a glimpse into my everyday life. I really wanted my audience to be able to look at this painting and understand a bit about me because just like how I use art as a way of communication, I want the audience to be able to use my art to learn more about me.

The last piece, which is called "Disoriented", is a piece done with pen on ink on toned paper, and it was mainly created as a way to funnel my creativity into something that was seemingly abstract yet realistic at the same time. This can be seen in the blending of a woman's torso into the background of a horse, or a thumb into that of an owl. I really had fun with this piece because it allowed me to connect seemingly unrelated objects into something abstract and critical.

My creative process is usually very spontaneous. Sometimes, I would have random things pop into my head, such as a fishbowl and an old grandpa in a street market, and then I would quickly write these ideas and thoughts down on the nearest paper. When I have the time, I look back on all the things I wrote down and I try to pick ideas that seemingly are unconnected and incorporate it into a piece that speaks about a recent issue in the world, or an opinion that I would like to share to my audience. Other times, I draw ideas from literature, movies, and songs, and use those as the driving force behind some of my pieces, such that certain songs create different brushstrokes or shades.

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

Road Trip, Chinese New Year By Joyce He

Road Trip

Chinese New Year

Both pieces were created using Adobe Photoshop and a Wacom tablet. The figures are all based on photos I took of my family members, both candid and posed. Before I start, I always have a very clear image in my mind of what I want the composition to be. I do some preliminary sketching then I just draw out the figures and objects, using online free stock photos or my own photos as references. After, I color and add shading; sometimes I finish up by adding a bit of texture using different types of brushes. I've never had much training in digital art so the illustration process is a bit of trial and error.

Joyce He is a high school student from Livingston, NJ. Her art and writing have been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and NJ Governor's Awards in Arts Education. She is proud to say she knows the Sound of Music soundtrack by heart and has gone on the Sound of Music tour in Salzburg. More of her thoughts and art can be found at her blog joocejournal.com (mild cringe alert).

Blue Still Life, Tranquility By Velda Wang

Blue Still Life

Tranquility

Tranquility(oil paint) is a piece that captures the power of the mighty sky, water, and land. While drawing this piece, I imagined myself in a mountainous village in China because growing up I watched many Chinese movies,— and it seemed that such a pure, untouched environment could only be found in a village where urbanization and all the destruction that goes along with it have not yet arrived. Blue Still Life (gouache paint), it is a simple still life, but the rich shades of blue allow each of the different objects in the painting to stand out, and I feel like all of the colors in this still life blend harmoniously and are unique from other still lives that I have seen. My creative process is not so much a process, but rather I like to take microcosms of my life whether it's reading a poem in class or watching a traditional Chinese movie, and letting them manifest on my paper. I especially enjoy painting landscapes because I find them very calming, and I also hope to convey that to the viewer.

Velda Wang is a current junior from Atlanta, Georgia. She believes that she is incredibly fortunate to have been able to take art lessons growing up, and so she wanted to provide this opportunity to others through her nonprofit organization, *Young Artists*, which gives art supplies and art lessons to inner-city children. Her goal is to inspire others and expand their artistic expression.

Book Review

No Book Reviews in this Issue.