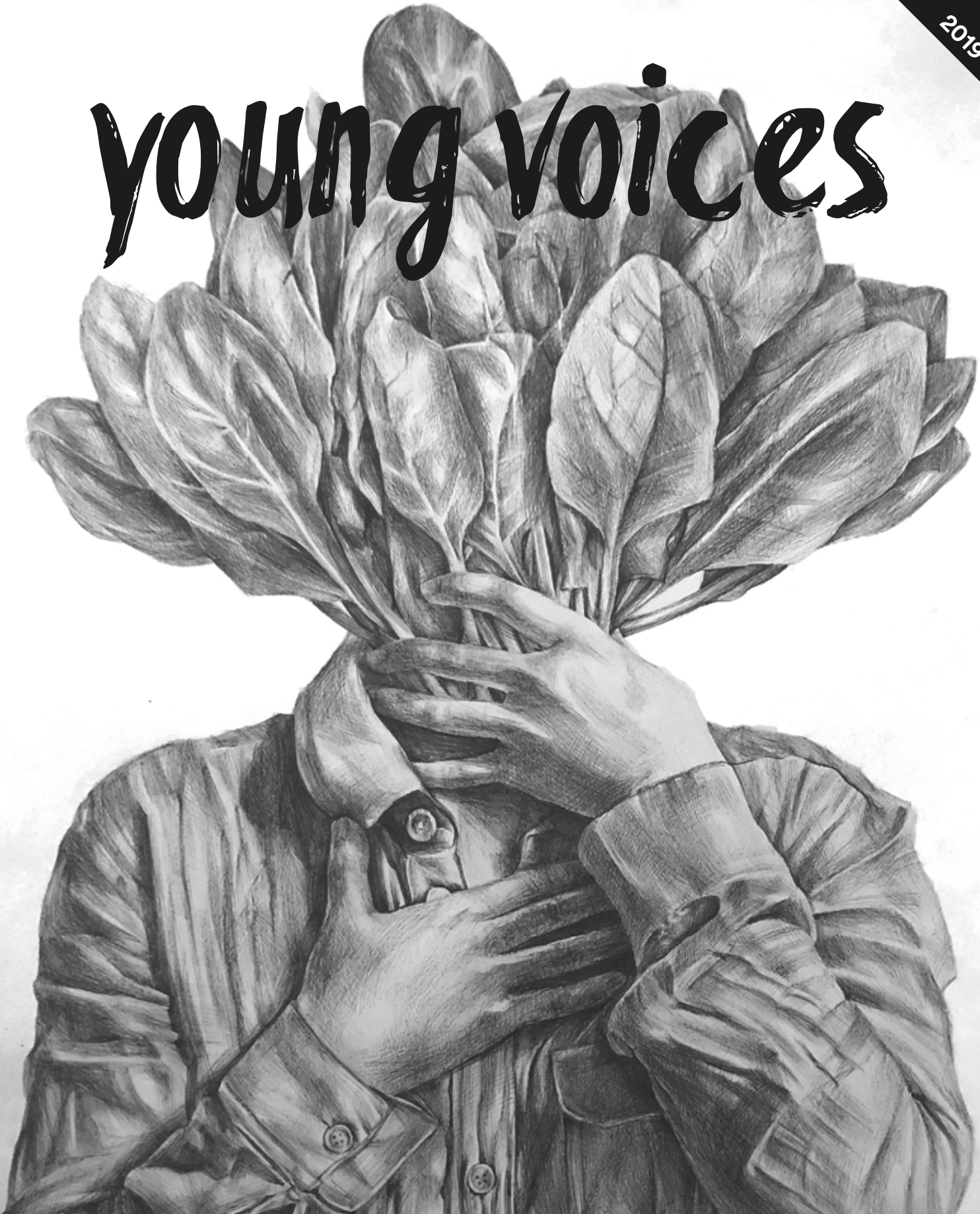


2019

young voices





The Beast Within

Cathy Lu, 17

welcome to young voices 2019

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in Young Voices 2020

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See page 79 for details.

Cover Art by
Alicia Tian, 17

The writing and art in this magazine was created by talented young people from all across Toronto.

Their humour, compassion, anger and intelligence make these pages crackle and shine. Whether their pieces are about technology, racism, nature, despair, or love, their expression is clear, passionate and original. Making art is often a solitary pursuit, and for many writers and artists in this magazine, this is the first time they've shared their work with a broad audience. As the audience, you'll find poems and photos, drawings and essays that will challenge you to see the world from new perspectives and maybe inspire you to make your own voice heard.

All the pieces in the magazine were selected by teens working with professional writer/artist mentors on editorial teams. A big thank you to them all for the thoughtfulness and care they brought to their work.

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The world always seems brighter when you've just
made something that wasn't there before.

- Neil Gaiman

Click. Beep. Ding

Notifications come from everywhere.
My eyes glimmer at the likes.
A craving, something I can't let go
As I jump into another world filled with fabrication.
I live under a mask, a different personality.
It whispers, I can't get away.
It's the truth, the attention pumps my adrenaline.
Each photo posted, it tightens, not allowing me to leave.
The toxicity of social media traps me,
The type of person I become no longer resembles me
Suffocating me, making me forget the priorities I have.

Hours pass by,
My phone would still be calling for attention.
Days would flash before my eyes,
But my eyes would be glued to my phone,
Too attached to let go.

Judy Zhou, 14

Breaking Out

“Where were you last night?”

The floor is determined to betray me as I creep out of bed and tiptoe down the short hallway of my apartment. The wood creaks and groans under the weight of my footsteps. By the time I get to the door, my heart pounds like I’ve just finished a marathon. As quietly as I can, I leave and make my way to the elevators. My body relaxes as I step inside. With each level I pass on the way down, my heart rate begins to steady. Three floors left. Two floors left. One floor. Lobby. Out of the entrance doors, and into the warm summer night that embraces me like an old friend. I am high on the feeling that spreads throughout my body with each step I take away from home. I am free. The streetlights pour pools of honey onto the concrete in which my shadow dances with glee. There are sirens wailing in the distance. A raccoon scurries across the street. My phone buzzes, and I realise I’m late. I hurry over to our spot, and she’s already there, waiting. Linking arms, we march along into the night. The streets are empty except for us and the sound of our giddy laughter that echoes between the buildings. We pass her apartment, and our old school. We pass the strip of restaurants where the smells of today’s specials still linger in the air. We pass the park where we used to spend hours lying in the grass on hazy summer days. We walk and walk, our voices ringing out into the night like church bells. I know we’re getting close. I can hear the music from a block away. We run into the house, returning hugs and yelling greetings as we make our way to the basement. The air is thick with smoke and laughter. She turns and mumbles something, handing me a cup. The pounding of the speaker steals away her words before they reach my ear. I grin anyway and take a sip. Seconds, minutes, hours pass. The room is jumping along to the beat of the music. My head is spinning. I am mesmerized by the dancing bodies and the colours bouncing off of the walls. With a sinking feeling, I know it’s time to go. I grab her by the hand and drag her away from the noise, pointing frantically at the time on my phone. The bright screen illuminates her face, and I see her widen her eyes and nod her head. We run, trip, stumble our way back home. The city lights have never looked so bright. This journey has never felt so short. We part ways at her apartment, and she clumsily blows me a kiss before rushing through the doors. I think I am in love. I make it to my building and slip inside, overjoyed that I’ve managed to hold on to my key. The lurching of the elevator does not help with the nauseous feeling in my stomach. I hope my rattling of the doorknob is not actually as loud as it seems to me. I silently thank the floors, as this time my steps barely make a sound. I almost don’t make it to my bed. Sleep comes quickly, and I drift off with a wide grin on my face.

“Sleeping in bed, of course. Where else would I have been?”

Katarina Rezek, 16



The Healthier Folk
Isabella Vella, 17

As The Moment Came

It was a gloomy and unwelcoming day
When I arrived at the bygone building.
The droplets of rain pecked at my skin,
As they each rolled down my bare arm.
I stood wet with my hair wild, under
The blaring yellow light of the packed lobby.
Soaked coats rubbed against mine,
Generating and adding to the electricity.
The loud voice of a man filled the room,
As agitation flowed from one to another.

I saw his mouth move with clear precision,
Speaking that of centuries worth.
Though I nodded along with the rest,
His voice flowed past in a hurry.
I felt I could wait no longer,
Better avoid this altogether.
Leaving my home had been hard enough,
And the unknown was even more gruelling.
Taking the next step, although like the rest,
Would separate me from the past.

From the eastern dawn of light, China,
Full of potential and prosperity,
Thousands of years of ancient history,
Carved into the country, carved into me.
I was the next generation of the dragon,
Now I am the holder of the maple leaf.
I would still carry my old home with me,
There would just be another part.
I would still be proud of my origin and heritage,
There would just be more to take pride in.

As the moment came,
I felt the same hope, the same reminiscence.
"That I will be faithful and bear true allegiance..."
The words that connected me to both worlds.
Back in China, the only place I had ever known,
I had only been allowed a glimpse at the sun.
And now that I could have another,
I could only wish to expand that horizon.
I took the oath with little doubt,
At the wonderful and bright future, that's near.

Raymond Liu, 14

Vol sur les ailes d'un rêve

Pendant l'automne, je vois les oiseaux
S'envoler au loin, dans les pays chauds.
Je me demande toujours ce qu'ils font
Quand ils arrivent enfin à leur destination.

Alors, un matin d'automne assez frais,
Je m'agrippe à un oiseau prêt à décoller.
Cet oiseau est grand, et il est gros,
Il ne s'arrête pas quand je monte sur son dos.

Je regarde en bas, on est au-dessus de l'eau.
Ouah, le paysage est tellement beau!
Perché sur l'oiseau je m'émerveille
À l'immense beauté du lever du soleil.

Le gros oiseau vole sans cesse, en zigzag,
Je sens sur ma peau les gouttes lancées par les vagues.
Et quand le vent froid commence à souffler,
Ses plumes chatouillent doucement le bout de mon nez.

Le grand oiseau est très fatigué,
Il ne peut plus me porter.
Je sais que l'oiseau se sent mal,
Donc, je saute en bas dans l'eau glaciale.

Je frappe l'eau et je commence à couler,
À couler, couler, couler et couler...
Personne n'est là pour me sauver.
Oh, non! Vais-je me noyer?

Soudainement, j'ouvre les yeux.
Tout va bien, tout va mieux:
Je me retrouve dans une pièce sombre.
Je la reconnais: ma chambre!

Ce n'était qu'un cauchemar,
J'ai eu une nuit vraiment bizarre!
Alors pourquoi le grand oiseau au loin me sourit
D'un air qui semble dire: Merci?

Daria Ilas, 12



Snow Days
Anita Zheng, 14



The Last Life

Kiko Li, 12

The Summer We Were Sixteen

We remember our sixteenth summer and the sun setting on our city as we walked in shining white sneakers through dirty whispering streets. Our hair was tangled. Our hearts were heavy like in the spring when the flowers are so brilliantly alive and the blossoms droop down with the weight of their own vivid colour and gleaming pearls of rain.

It was sixteen years after our eviction from the womb. Our faces repulsed us. We had learned shame and wore it well. In the night our dreams came like brutal waves breaking on our bodies and we shuddered. Begged for our mothers. In those days we belonged to the living. We were so wild, broken and alive. But that's not entirely true, is it? Some of us were dust and still are but we love them anyway. We love that dust.

We remember the sun like a golden pendant we just wanted to rip from the goddess' throat. We remember the boys calling us pretty and how we hated them 'cause they were liars and they dreamed of nothing and we, we were so full of dreams. Dreams sharp as razor blades and it was like every thought cut us deeper and every breath brought us closer to death.

We remember the men coming out of their holes to taste us with their hungry eyes and the words they wove into our hair. Bad words. Evil words. It hurts to think about them now.

Our mothers hated it when we swore and we loved them for it. We loved how they believed in our softness. How they wanted to protect it. God, we loved them. Our mothers. Our mothers who were once just as we were: cruel and scared and desperate. We loved those proud aching women and we cried because we knew they would have to die. We never forgave the universe for taking our mothers away.

Still, we tried to get on with it, the dancing, the laughing, shaving our legs till they were smooth as sandbars, rising like sacrificial lambs to the scale, our spines curled as we peered down at the numbers that came to define us. And the men. The men went on naming us like Adam in his garden and we, we wanted to run but couldn't 'cause we weren't women yet. Whatever soul we had was soft. With a whisper, a man could sculpt us into whatever shape he desired.

We tried to run. We begged for our mothers. Still, to this day, we remember that summer and all the ones we lost to rope or bottle. Some of us are dust now. Some of us are ghosts; when we call their names, they shake their heads and descend again into the mist.

But don't for one moment call us weak. 'Cause we're just like our mothers. Just like our fathers. Just like all the soldiers who came before us and forged this moment from their red blood. Just like the birds singing and the old woman baking her pie. Just like the wolves howling and the buffalo falling with that beautiful animal dignity. Just like Mother in her pink dress, we are brave.

Frida Purdon, 16

H

H comes to me whenever I close my eyes.

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“Something bad is about to happen.”

“It has been about to happen for a long time. Or, it has been happening for a long time.”

“Which one is it?”

“Both. Something bad is happening, and something worse is about to happen.”

His defeated sigh was enough for me, with all my limited understanding of social cues, to know he knew what was going to happen.

“Can it wait another day?” he ventures.

“Why?”

“I don’t want to feel anything today.”

I don’t either. “Okay.”

We’ll drift through the days, the nights, like we don’t have anywhere to be, because we don’t. It’s okay like this, because when I wake up, he’ll be dead.

I never knew how much I relied on H until he was gone. I never appreciated him as much as I should’ve, because you don’t appreciate the floor you walk on, or the air you breathe, until it’s gone. And then you’re falling. And then you’re choking.

I met him three years ago, moving into my roommate’s apartment. I was in the elevator, carrying a cardboard box with *FRAGILE* written in my cramped handwriting. It stopped at the fourth floor. He got in, and the doors slid shut.

“Moving in?” he asked.

“Yep,” I replied.

He got off at the seventh floor. I didn’t see him again for another two weeks.

The second time, I was standing in the parking lot. It was late, almost 12 am. He tapped my shoulder and I almost jumped a foot in the air. “Jesus Chr—”

“It’s you,” he said, unnecessarily.

“It’s you,” I repeated.

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for a taxi.”

He blinks. “At 12 am?”

“Yeah,” I said defensively. “I’m going to a party.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” I waited for him to leave, but he didn’t. “What’s your name, anyway?”

He paused for such a long time I didn’t think he was going to answer. “H.”

“Your name is H?”

“It’s Harper.”

“Oh.” I stifled a laugh. “I’ll call you H.”

My taxi arrived then.

Circumstance is going to return us to the moment we say goodbye, which is an unsettling mixture of *if this person leaves me, I will die, and I never want to see him again.*

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“You know this is all in your head, right?” he asks.

“It’s all in my life,” I reply.

I can feel the end of this, like I’m falling through the dark. I know there’s going to be an impact, but I can’t see it.

I’m waiting, every second of every day, to break.

“You have to get up,” he tells me. “I’m dead.”

“Can’t it wait another day?”

He doesn't reply. I open my eyes and he's gone.

The night after that, we're at a restaurant. I tell him I'm in love with him.

H laughs. "No, you aren't."

"I am," I insist.

"There are two types of love," he says. "The kind you'd kill for, and the kind you'd die for. You aren't either."

I haven't given it much thought before, because at the time it had been irrelevant. People think life is worth living because of love. I hated that. "That's not true," I object.

"Really?"

"Yeah," I say. "Because you're the kind I'd live for."

"But I'm dead."

"But you're dead," I echo.

The third time I met H, he asked me out on a date.

The fourth time I saw H was at a coffee shop at an intersection near the apartment complex.

The last time I saw H, he stopped by the apartment to say goodbye. "I have to get to work," he said. "I'll see you tonight?"

"Of course," I had kissed him one last time, and I ruffled his hair one last time, and I said goodbye one last time.

"See you tonight."

It wasn't that long ago, but it feels like it happened in another lifetime. I think my life has been divided into three sections – before H, during, and after.

"Do you know about Jezebel?"

I turn my head to look at him. "The queen of Israel?"

"Yeah. Her servants pushed her out of a window and her corpse was eaten by dogs."

"Aren't you my subconscious?" I ask. "Why is my subconscious thinking about the queen of Israel?"

H cracks a smile. "When she knew they were coming to kill her, she sat down to put on her makeup. She refused to die without dignity."

"But she was still eaten by dogs."

"She was still eaten by dogs," he repeats.

I wait for him to go on, but he doesn't. "You're saying I should let go of my dignity?"

"Yes."

"And what will that get me?"

"Well, your corpse won't get eaten by dogs."

I look at him.

"It's time to wake up, Jezebel," he says.

The next time I go to sleep, I don't dream of him anymore. It's the best sleep I've had in months.

"Hey," a voice says, and I crack open one eye. My roommate leans over the bed, and her hair falls over her shoulder. "Are you awake?"

She's been tiptoeing around me ever since H died. "Yeah. What's up?"

"Could you go to the store?" she asks. "We're out of – um, everything."

I know she's perfectly capable of going to the store herself. "Sure."

It's the first time I've left the apartment in months.

Right now, I am all that is, how H would describe it. Everything else just *isn't*, because he refused to believe the world is so much bigger than ourselves. And he was right. H was bigger than the world.

I've always been what *isn't*.

I get in the elevator on my way back from the store, and right before the doors slide shut, a woman squeezes inside. Her arms are wrapped around a large cardboard box. "Eighth floor, please," she puffs.

"Moving in?" I ask.

"Yep."

I smile, pressing the button for the eighth floor.

The 4 and 1 White Walls

The walls aid in my selfish suffocation, it has been three days since the accident and they are now my constant companions. Pain, doors, and medication have isolated me from that world, barring me even further from speech and self. So I watch the world in my window, and it passes slowly, pane by unending pain. Perched above in patient strife I wonder preposterous and pondering staying still, and waiting...

Sentient not quite yet. I'm struck deeper with waiting for a means to end this. The time passes and with it the opportunity to finish. Even if I wait I still give assistance to my cause, for the only way I live is to die a little each day. So I count up those precious days, hours and moments. Filling them up with words trapped in unconsciousness and get them caught in my throat. Instead, they find their way into pens and spill scratches of ink onto pages...

Still, I wonder how to speed up the process of living and the thought of such things keeps coming closer to action, turning into accidents of rage or livid passions. Even still, the remaining four white walls of skull impede these thoughts from speech, but once they are uttered the state of sanity is breached.

Victoria Martin, 15

The Girl and the T-Rain

Off the train

A girl limps down the station 5 foot 5 but full of pizzazz
Then I see it...

Her clothes B L O W
me away, as the rain shimmers in the light
as if a kaleidoscope is shining its colours down on the earth

I try to race towards her then I S

L
I
P

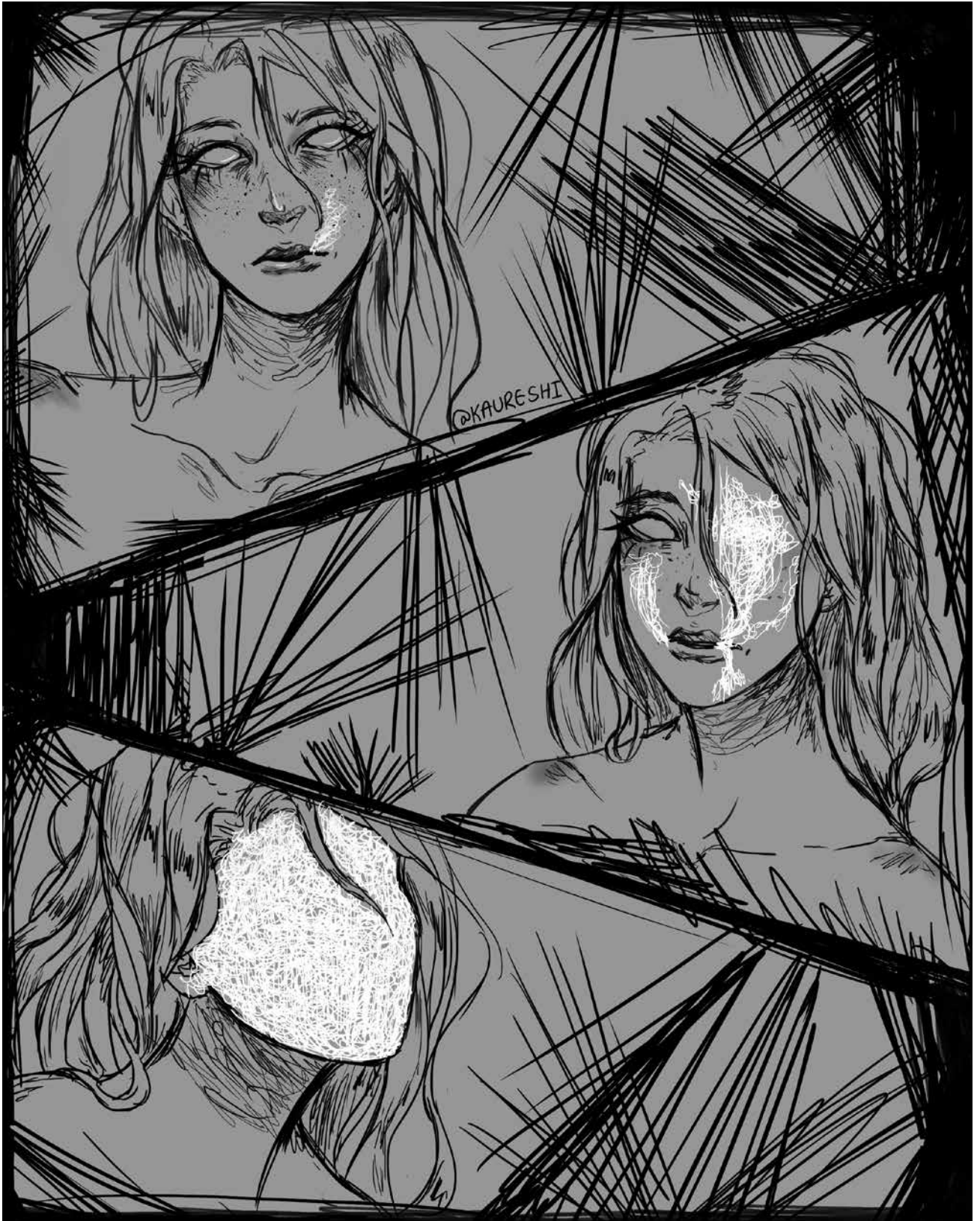
I look down to see the wood panels are drowned in water
I turn and start walking while I continue to S

L
I
P

Trying to leave the New York City train station, I see her walk D
O
W
N

The stairs vanishing amongst the others

Lee Brenner, 14



Interlude

Fatima Qureshi, 19

Anonymous Kids

The only light in the classroom is the light of the smartphones, clutched in the sweaty palms of five pale-faced teenagers. Their long limbs fold at awkward angles under the desks, their necks resting on the cold chair legs. It is just past eight o'clock. School should be starting in ten minutes.

It is Girl #1 who thinks to tell them to get under the desks. When the announcement rings out, loud and panicked on the PA system, she rushes to the classroom door and locks it.

"Get under the desks!" she says fearfully.

Now, back on the dusty floor of a school, they are painfully childlike. Girl #1 sat and cried on a floor like this when she failed that math quiz in second grade. Same yellow. Same linoleum. A floor like the one that Girl #2 and Boy #1 – who went to elementary school together – lay on, pumping their arms up and down together, smiling ear to ear as they yelled, "Dust angels!" to the chagrin of pretty much everyone. It is the same floor, in the same school, that Girl #3 knelt on every time she threw up into the toilet of a secluded bathroom – hung over from Sunday night parties. And this is the same floor that Boy #2 threw down his backpack on the previous year, claiming he was, "Done with this effing school."

Girl #1 wants to cry now, as she looks around at these "kids" she has known for what feels like forever. She thinks about leaving this school, this classroom. She thinks about her acceptance letter from McGill and how the crisp envelope felt in her hands; it felt like escape. She thinks about the way she will probably leave the school today – a bullet through the chest.

She believes in heaven. Sort of. She forces her eyes back to her phone and continues scrolling with a chipped orange acrylic-nailed finger through Instagram.

Girl #2 is looking at Boy #1 through the curtain of her hair. She is thinking about how in ninth grade, back when she was still half a head taller than him, she didn't like his new friends. How he didn't like hers. How an uncrossable barrier seemed to form between them. How they slowly stopped talking.

She watches his brown eyes move across the screen of his phone, thinking of a joke she knows he would love. She wants to see him smile.

Boy #1 shuts his phone. The blackened screen reflects his tense face. He studies himself closely and swallows to hold back tears. Boys don't cry. He catches Girl #2's eyes across the room. Tears start to roll silently down his face.

Girl #3 taps her fingers nervously across the floor. They've been sitting for an hour already, the five of them, and she wants a cigarette. She adjusts the rhinestone glasses on her face and bites the inside of her mouth until she tastes blood. She feels numb. A notification pops up in the corner of her screen: her sister asking, "Are you okay?"

Reading those words sends Girl #3's world spinning. She can see her sister's face, her mother's, her father's. The echoes of the lies she told them reverberate around in her head. The drinking, the smoking, the partying. She is not okay. The words spill around inside her, threatening to overflow. If we get out of this classroom alive, she thinks, I will make things right.

Boy #2 is using Snapchat to take photo after photo of himself with the sunglasses filter. He is not sending them to anyone. He is saving everything to his camera roll. "You're cool, dude," he whispers to himself, "you're cool." He is having a hard time convincing himself. *If I die at least I won't have to hand in my math homework*, he thinks. It's darkly comforting.

The classroom remains silent. The five students sit underneath the desks without moving.

The classroom door bangs open, momentarily bathing the students in fluorescent light, before engulfing them in a hailstorm of certain darkness.

That night, a news reporter in a grey pantsuit says almost serenely, "Five students in the classroom of Dale Street Collegiate School became the victims of a currently unidentified shooter... he is thought to have entered the premises at about eight in the morning before the school was in session..."

"...the students will currently remain anonymous..."

Beth. Glenna. Max. Anya. Connor.

"...the victims have now been hospitalized..."

Beth. Glenna. Max. Anya. Connor.

"...there are no fatalities."

Sadie Derry, 14

This ball of yarn we call an Earth

There once was a man whose word was law,
His law was all we had.
Then happen did as happened would:
His power drove him mad.

He used his fists to split our world
Into its many strings.
Hew the world from one to myriad:
Its great and tiny things.

One string held all of avarice,
One string held all of woe,
One string held all the fear in us,
One string held *vin Bordeaux*.

No longer were the cords of love
Joined to the chains of hate.
No longer could one see the links,
Between tempest and fate.

The child was split from parent, too,
Sent to distant climes of space.
And ne'er would one see conjunction of
The smile and the face.

The man could not enjoy his deed,
For his eyes and heart were split.
He could not triumph or despair,
Or be moved the barest bit.

I fear a story told in rhyme
Holds not as high esteem
As experts writing monographs,
Or numbers on a screen.
But know!
Fixing things is difficult.
Destruction is routine.

Aleksi Toiviainen, 15



Society, the Puppeteer
Tajreen Ahmed, 15

Island

I am alone on an island.

Alone because, before me, the hands of humans have not marred its surface. Beautiful trees, taller than our imaginary giants, whispering with the ocean wind. Small flowers dotting the expanse of the meadow. Little birds singing in the trees. Foxes lurking in the shade. Pure nature, untouched by artificial means.

It takes me a while to realize that I'm not really alone. I have the birds and the foxes and the flowers and the trees to keep me company. I have my mind, my hands. I can build. I am not lonely, because I have the company I need; I have myself and I have the island.

I am alone, but it is a pleasant sort of alone.

The second day, I find a small alcove of rocks and tree shade. Pine leaves carpet the ground, softening every step of mine. The sound of a nearby creek weaves through the forest. I gather up some stray leaves and push them together into a rather fetching bed and curl up underneath the safety of the rock.

The rest of the week is spent exploring every inch of this prison of sorts. The more I learn, the more the island seems like a haven. Little birds squabbling over a pool of water. The trees embracing me wherever I go. The island is so full of life. Prisons are supposed to encase, to strip happiness and comfort. The island has done everything but that, welcoming me into its fray and encouraging me to explore my curiosity and stretch my courage.

The real world is much more of a prison than the island. What world that loves me would want to tear me away from this haven? What world that loves me cannot grasp when to leave me alone and when to stand by my side? What world that loves me wants me only as what they see me: their perfect daughter, their perfect student, their perfect friend, their perfect emotional support system. They see illusions and they fall, tricked, and force those illusions to become a reality. They are lifeless.

I was so willing to give to them. Because I loved them. But they took from me without shame. And now, they're going to try and get me back. Because they want that perfect image of me back in their perfect little worlds.

The island doesn't judge. The island doesn't ask. There is a solidarity and there is a kindness.

It hits me then: I do not belong in the world of people.

They come to save me after two months.

At first, I run. I don't want to leave this safe haven. It has given me all I've wanted – acceptance, warmth, kindness, hospitality, so much more. I don't want to go. I want to stay here, with what little I've ever asked of the world and received, in this tiny island. I want to stay here, free, wild, within the warm arms of nature. I want to stay alone with the trees and the foxes and the birds.

If I go back, I lose the trees. The foxes. The birds. The peace. The serenity. If I return, I will be lonely again. Because people think alone and lonely mean the same thing, when they don't, not really. But nature understands. Nature always understands. Nature doesn't judge. Nature doesn't care so much.

It takes me a while to accept that at the end, this island is small. It won't be long until they find me and take me home anyways. People who are desperate, who believe they are doing things in the name of what they perceive as "good," will not stop at any obstacle. This is human nature. It's inspiring and it's vulgar.

I am not meant to stay with them. But, for some reason, they need me.

So I surrender. I return to the true prison.

Ashley Kim, 14

This Is Me

Do you fear me?
Do you pity me?
Do I make you want to walk on the opposite side of the street?
Or do you feel the need to liberate me from my “oppressive clothing?”
Does the way I dress scare you?

Do you see me as a person?
Who has emotions?
Or do you just see me as a scapegoat for all your frustration, commotion?

Does yelling at me give you relief?
Does it make you feel better to know that now there are two upset people on this street?
One who thinks it is okay to blame innocent people for others’ mistakes
And one who is frustrated because they are judged because of their beliefs
Do you see why I might be a little resentful?

Resentful because I have become a person you fear
Become a person you blame
Become a person you hate
A person you hate so much to the point that you don’t even see my humanity
I’m just a punching bag

I am tired of answering your blasphemous questions
Of your persecution
Of your hatred
I am tired of being the person that you’ve created in your mind
The person that is weak, oppressed and helpless

I am not one who hides my beauty because I am ashamed by it
I am not one who is forced to cover up
I am not one who can be told that school is not the place for me

My future is not to stay at home, cook, clean and take care of kids
unless it is that which I choose
I am not a girl who believes in religion that degrades women
that oppresses people
that condones the death of the innocent

I am the girl who is hopeful that my future is what I make of it
I am the girl that knows that education is an opportunity I should not take for granted

I am the young woman who chooses to cover up
to conceal my beauty
because only some are worthy to share with

I am the woman who believes in religion
One that cherishes women
Frees people
Builds society

I am the woman that is judged based on my appearance
Judged based on the acts of people who misrepresent my faith

I am the woman whose mother fears for her
Fear that one day I won't get the opportunities that I deserve
Fear that the cause of my death will simply be because I believe

I am the sister of the man you want to "send back home"
The sister of the woman that gets harassed on the train
The sister whose shoulder muffles her cries
I am the daughter of the old man who gets persecuted by airport security
I am the daughter that calms his fragile old heart

But no more
Not today
Not tomorrow
Not ever again
Because today

I am the one who demands respect
I am the girl who demands equity
I am the woman who deserves to be exonerated

Will you be the ones who will give that to me?
Will you be the ones who will acknowledge me?

Because I am a girl who continues to be
I am just another girl you see on the street
I am the woman I choose to be.

Faiza Chowdhury, 15



*Judge me by what's in my
head, not on it.*

Salva Nooreen, 13

Is it a Wild Without a Hunt?

The forest is green and dark and full of creatures that haunt the dreams of children. It is their home.

Once, there was a girl who was pregnant with gods. She did not know the man who sought her bed was the King of the Pantheon, how could she? But girls who carry magic and power in their wombs do not stay naive for long.

And so the girl hid away her swollen belly and told no one of what she had done and in less than nine months' time – for gods are tricky like that – she was blessed with twins. The elder of the two sat by her mother's side and whispered to her brother to come quick, their mother had been waiting for them a long while. A long while of hiding and lying and growing. When both babes were born they grew – for gods are tricky like that – and they grew to the age they desired and one was a young man, ready for the adventure. The other was a girl ready for a hunt.

They sought their father out, after they bid their mother thanks and wished her luck, and they asked him for gifts for their birthday. He granted them, for the King of the Pantheon has everything and can give two of his children simple gifts. The boy wished for the sun, medicine and luck. The girl wished for a hunt and for childbirth, wildlife and the wild itself. And she wished for virginity, for she did not want what her mother lived through.

The girl was given the moon as well, to parallel her brother. And so the moon became her chariot and the forest became her home.

And it became the home of her hunt.

Her hunt is made of girls who have been hurt and tricked, who have been lost and scarred, who have wanted more than the little they are offered. The girls who call the gorgons and hellhounds and minotaur creatures, because they are not scared of them and many of them have faced humans who are more monstrous than the vicious cyclops who hides behind the waterfall.

And these two girls, these two hunters, as they race over fallen leaves without making so much of a whisper of a noise, they are looking for adventure. They stop by the foot of a grand tree and climb together, neither girl helps the other for this is a race. It is a competition and it is an adventure. And while the goddess who leads them has taught them how to help it was something that had to be taught, and it is hard to remember things like that when you are in a race.

They reach the top together – not once has the one beat the other – and they clasp hands together.

They do not stand or completely peek their heads over the canopy of trees. It is day and not the night, the time when their protector graces the heavens with her chariot. They may not be scared of the monsters of the wild, but the gods are different cruel creatures who will take pleasure in taking them apart if they leave the domain of the goddess of their hunt.

A forest can go on forever, and one thick with trees and birds and deer and wolves and girls looking for adventure can be a wild that is difficult to take a moment away from. And so now that the race is over the taller helps the shorter down to the next tallest branch and their eyes catch together. The shorter smirks and the taller brushes hair away from her face.

They could take this moment together.

Instead they leap down to the ground, as silent as the rabbit that the taller points to, and the girls smile at each other once more before they slip into the shadows of the green to explore the wild. The wild that is waiting to change its paths and enrich the adventure for its hunt.

Rey Duff, 16



Rabbit Hole of Rings

Elizabeth Rosen, 12 &
Micah Fekete, 12

Melancholia

The first time I listened to a Duke Ellington song I was 13. My friend had recommended his music to me. “His jazz is golden,” she had said, “but not the extravagant type. It’s slow and soft.” That day I had gone home and found a whole slew of his songs on YouTube: *Japanese Dream*, *Star-Crossed Lovers*, *Night Creature*. My favourite one was his piano solo of *Melancholia*, a haunting blues song with the syncopated pulse of perfect fourths and minor thirds and a treacherously slow tempo – so slow it burned itself into your skin. I don’t know why but that song stuck in my head all week. All the notes seemed to seep into my soul, tucked deeply into my bones. It was the perfect hymn for a sad, rainy day.

The second time I listened to *Melancholia* was much later when I had just turned 16. My friend and I were walking home from school amid the brutal Canadian cold of December. The ground was newly minted by snow – white and untouched and pure. Our boots left footprints on the sidewalk.

I had met Sarah at school and we had bonded over the strange paraphernalia of high school life: math homework, lack of sleep, the vagaries of our families, the howling madness that was in general characteristic of teenagehood. She had been in my classes for the past three years and we had made small talk – about our shared distaste for certain subjects and the weather and whatnot – but never had we connected. It was only in junior year, when all my other friendships seemed to be drifting apart and my relationship with my parents seemed to be crumbling, that we had begun to talk in a deep and painfully honest way. We both seemed to be grappling with our own midlife crisis, trying to learn how to handle the aimless and lonely ennui of our everyday life.

“Here,” I passed Sarah the left earbud that was connected to my phone. My fingers looked red and raw in the chilly wind. I pressed play on the song, and slowly, the blues chords replaced the silence between us. One by one, the notes rang in my ears like coins dropping into a glistening sea.

Melancholia itself isn’t that special of a song really; instead it’s Ellington’s performance that gives the music its special colour. The repetitive pentatonic melody upon which the entire song is built traps the listener, promoting a certain brand of loneliness that’s hard to capture in words. Underneath the slowly darkening sky, I think both Sarah and I were able to feel the music tug at some invisible string around our hearts. The chords spoke in a way we never could.

When the song ended, Sarah opened her eyes and passed the earbud back to me. “It has no steady beat,” she paused, slowing down.

“I like it, I think. It feels mysterious, eloquent in a way I can’t quite say. It reminds me of a cold winter evening, sort of like today,” she looked around at the landscape around her – the wind rustling through bare branches – the clouds distant.

When I had met Sarah, we had both been inexplicably isolated in our own little worlds. We had grown into ourselves, cocooned in our web of daydreams, far far away from everyone else around us. But the friendship seemed to have pulled us out of our shells. Despite the uncertainties of age sixteen, despite the untouched and binding territories, despite the world stretching itself for miles and miles like the deep sea, we had found comfort in each other.

“You know, I never got to thank you for...for just being there every day, I guess.”

A smile passed by my lips. It’s funny how we had grown so used to each other over the course of only a few months. Our conversations had filled up a lonely hole in my heart that had stretched wider and wider since my entrance to high school.

Sarah returned my smile.

No words – just a tender glance, her hands pressed on top of mine.

Nazanin Soghrati, 16

Dear Humanity

Dear Humanity,

When I was first created I was elated to have the abilities to support the lives of so many species. I was glad I would have some company to keep. As far as I knew, at least I wouldn't be isolated and presumably lonely like Pluto and my siblings; Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune.

When you were first created you had no survival skills. Obviously, you didn't know how to make a living. So I decided to help you. I worked with the Sun to give you food, water, soil, and air. You knew that. In return, you washed my hair (what you knew as grass), you kept my skin healthy (you called it soil), and you gave me a name. At that moment, we became allies. Friends, even. I was happy back then, and you were too.

I watched you grow. I was there when you celebrated your very, very, very first birthday. I was there when you hunted your first deer. I was there when you built your first boat, saw your first sea, and sailed your first ocean. You grew smarter. Although, I'm not sure I can say wiser. Over time, you became more civilized. To this day, I still don't know if it was for the better or the worse. Because after that, you built villages, and towns, and cities, which took up far too much of everyone else's space. Need I remind you to be nice? To share?

Your kind is one of the most populous living. You've existed for a very long time now, but I've existed longer. I still remember when some of you used to apologize after killing an animal. Do you? I remember when your electronic devices didn't rob you of your attention. Yes, I really am that old. I remember when you got into fights with the ones you called First Nations. Except they weren't just fights to you. They were wars. I can even remember when you would play with your friends; the rabbits, the birds, and the squirrels, instead of shooting them.

So please, remember something about me. Remember that even though you pollute, you waste, and you kill, that I still believe in you. I know you are still the same humans I knew hundreds of thousands of years ago, which is why I don't doubt humanity has or will find the solutions to the problems you created. I want you to work together, and start using them.

I've told you many times before, and I'm telling you again right now. Global warming is real. Climate change is real. Air, water, and land pollution are real. It's true that there are holes in the ozone layer. It's true that you are putting everyone on this planet in danger, most of all, myself. I know you're hearing me, but are you really listening? I'm telling you all of this and if you still don't believe me, then do me a favour and tell me, what do you believe?

I gave you every single necessity you seem to think you own and in return, I get – I don't know – a world of waste and a dangerously high fever? Never in the entire history of the universe would I think that you would be the cause of all of this. I guess I've underestimated you, huh?

I'm worried one day I'll lose my faith in you. That one day, I'll become too weak, and I'll have nothing left to give you, and nothing left for you to receive. I'm here to remind you to use those gifts wisely because everything comes with a limit. Everything has a lifespan. I know you sometimes forget that I have one too. When my time is up – when I can't take anymore, just know that when I disappear? So will you.

You spend billions of dollars looking for life on other planets, but you spend trillions killing this one. You're in the process of destroying me and you're considering leaving me to sort out your own mess for you while you go do the exact same thing to Mars. You do know that even if you find a way to move to Mars, eventually Mars will have to write a letter to you too, begging you, urging you to stop this nonsense, just like I have no choice but to do so right now.

I don't even think you would have to move to Mars if you corrected yourself here. If you change your ways, maybe you could stay. Maybe we could be united again, like the allies we used to be, that we were, all those centuries ago.

I sent so many warnings to you through nature. At the time, I thought you didn't receive them. Only now do I realize that I was wrong and that you have simply chosen to ignore them. I hope with all of my heart that this message will not go unheard, for it may be my last.

Yours faithfully,

Planet Earth, Mother Nature, Father Sky
and everything that represents
the well being of this home
and what comes with it

Clara Wang, 14

Fond Memories

I remember when I knew all that I needed to know
I remember being everyone's friend, thinking I mattered to them
I remember when energy didn't have to come artificially
I remember when I was able to take oxygen for granted
I remember when emotions made perfect sense and didn't leave me confused or overwhelmed
I remember when I felt free and decisions were a breeze
I remember when conversations didn't feel like interrogations
I remember when every compliment wasn't told by a lying serpent
I remember when the outdoors was full of wonders instead of horrors
I remember drifting into slumber like a leaf drifting downstream
I remember when everything was an ally, not a foe
I remember when weekend events were exciting, not scary
I remember when a carefree feeling didn't make me suspicious
I remember being able to express myself at any time
I remember when it didn't feel like I was constantly trapped under a weight
I remember feeling hope
I remember feeling joy
I remember feeling confidence
I remember being a healthy me
...Where did the times go?

Lily Yee, 15

Grandma's Words

Kira sat at a short wooden table fit only for a sheet of paper, and all the ideas in the world, if she had any. Her feet lay on the surface, the soles casting a dim shadow in the light. A raw pencil lay between her nimble fingers, tapping on the paper, the lead barely making a mark. Her hooded eyes half-closed, as only silence hung in the air, and she stared. Stared with forceful eyes, thinking and thinking and thinking. In her head billions of things came out but none of them were a single bit close to an idea. A sheet full of blankness, as her mind was. *All I need is a walk*, she thought to herself, but something in Kira convinced her that something else was bothering her.

Kira left the kitchen and walked down the hallway, which wasn't very long. The first room was the den where her mother was perched on the sofa, feet crossed over in a relaxed position, as she popped sunflower seeds into her mouth, one by one. Her smacking lips projected a southern accent, mumbling the same moan and complaint repeatedly, barely loud enough for Kira to hear. "Oh why did she have ta die? Why couldn't it be somebody else?"

The next room was her own. She peered inside. On her bed was her brother smoking a cigarette. He had heavy eye bags, yet what he did on the bed was not sleep. His shirt was buttoned loosely, revealing most of his curly chest hair. Next to him was a sleek woman, her golden brown hair thrown down messily and thick colorful makeup coated heavily on her face. They continued to roll about Kira's bed, her brother taking small pauses to pull his mouth off of that thing full of nicotine and tobacco, while his girlfriend adjusted her hair, then they went back to what they were doing before, trashing the bed while doing it. Kira shook her head and continued down the hall.

Next was her father's study. The room was full of spare sheets of paper, some stacked into tall piles, others not at all. Each sheet had a separate idea he had come up with for another book of his, noted down then mentally thrown away and given up. The physical idea still existed, but never bothered to be touched. Near to the door was his trash bin full of coffee cups. Kira pinched her nose at the smell of rotting coffee beans. It filled the room since before she could remember. Her father was seated at the desk in the centre. Suddenly he looked up and realized her presence near the doorway. "Kira," he said, his brow creasing, "Why in tarnation are ye lookin' in me study? Scram!" Kira quickly closed the door, but that couldn't block the cries of her insane father.

Kira paused. The end of the hallway had come and Kira realized what had been bothering her. She headed back to the kitchen and sat down once again at the table where she was before, smiling a sad smile. Her grandma would always stay in the kitchen when she visited, baking dozens and dozens of sweet treats. *The only person in this famille of mine*, Kira thought, *that is actually somewhat worthwhile*. She sighed. Today was the anniversary of when her grandmother died in a car crash. She looked at the nearby wall where her grandma displayed a portrait of most members of her *famille*. Kira gazed at the portraits and silently cried. She remembered the day of the car crash. She remembered what had happened before.

“What is wrong with ya?” Kira had just stepped into her home, only to hear her grandmother’s rants. Kira tossed her bag onto the floor and lay herself in a wooden chair “Oh, puh-lease, grandma. I get some respect, acting like this, being like this. I don’t suppose you get any at all talking like *zis*.”

Her grandma was silent for a moment, holding in her breath. Then after that slow pause she continued “Kira, I have a question, and I want ye to answer honestly. Why?”

“Excuse me?”

“Ye heard me right sugar. Why? Why ya gotta be what *they* are? Why is there a problem to be yer-self? Why ya gotta change yer-self? Why?” Kira stopped looking at her grandmother and now stared at the table. Her grandma slid over a small mirror and quietly asked, “Is this who ya have to be?” Kira glanced up at her grandma, who gently held her hand in hers, “Be yer-self. All ya gotta do is believe.”

Kira pushed the mirror away. “I’m done with you, old hag.” She withdrew her hand. “You may think nothing has changed since you were a little girl, but it has. It’s the 21st century we’re in right now, not one of your fantasies.”

Kira turned away and headed upstairs, hearing her grandmother’s sigh, “If ya think so, sugar, after all, everyone in this *famille* ain’t themselves no more, all changed at the hands of society.”

Kira kept her grandmother’s words in her, even if she hadn’t believed then. She still dressed and acted how she thought she should have, until that night of the departure.

“Sugar, Grandma’s a leaving.”

“Yeah,” Kira mumbled, “So what about it?”

“No, not much really. Just remember your grandma’s words, hon. I know ye always try being other people who ya think is better, but trust me, ye, Kira, are the best when ye are ye.”

Kira looked back at the paper — a sheet full of white, nothing, blankness — then back at the portraits. For the billionth time she thought to herself, *What a famille I have*. Only this time meaning it in a different attitude. Then, with a slight smile thinking of her grandma, her pencil tip touched the paper, and she began to write.

Ivy Wen Xin Chen, 12



Reaching Into the Past
Émile Constantin, 17

Paint

You know that Virginia Woolf quote? On Being Ill, “the poverty of language in pain,” or some other wordy nonsense like that. What it means, in its purest form, is that language fails in the description of pain. Words can describe love and loss and elation, but the feeling of a bruise or broken bones is simply out of reach. We use words like “pounding” and “pulsing” to create a vestibule for our feelings, metaphors.

I suppose it’s no different when it comes to pain you can’t see. No, not headaches, but a headache of a sort. What can I use to describe nothing and everything at once?

Have you ever heard that if you get hungry enough, when you’re really starving, your stomach eats itself? You literally cannibalize yourself. Your brain says, “Hey, you really need some food. Look at all these calories right here!” and your stomach dissolves itself. It’s pretty hardcore, if you ask me. That’s sort of what it’s like. When you’ve been deprived of feeling for so long, your brain gives you the easiest thing to feel: sad. Sometimes angry, but mostly sad. And you can only feel sad.

The Sad becomes overwhelming. Maybe because there was nothing to feel before The Sad. Like if you threw a can of blue paint at a blank wall. It’s all you see and feel and hear and it overtakes you. But your brain, it loves it. Imagine not being able to eat for two days and then getting your favourite meal given to you for free. You devour it. You don’t bother savouring because you’re too focused on living.

It’s like that, except you’re the meal. It devours you. So you don’t think about living anymore, just surviving.

Oh, the difference? Living and surviving are very different. Living is experiencing and seeing what lies ahead. Surviving is bare bones, I-need-the-basic-necessities-to-not-die. Water, food, will. Whatever it is, I don’t know, ask Maslow. That’s surviving.

And eventually the need to survive starts to be eaten too. And what’s left after that?

Not much, that’s what.

You don’t really do much when that happens. Think too much, cry too much. Eat too little.

Then somehow, you splash a little more paint. A new colour. Yellow? Yeah, let’s go with yellow.

And you miss the wall. You’re so weak you miss the entire wall, or you think you do. But a little splashes up onto the baseboard from the impact of hitting the ground.

And sometimes that’s enough. Sometimes it’s not, but most of the time it is. And that little speck of yellow, it reminds you there’s more. There’s so much more. More is relative to what you believe and want. Do I believe I deserve more yellow? Yeah. Do I want to see more yellow? Yeah. Maybe I’ll paint the whole wall yellow. That’d be nice.

But painting is a long process. Sometimes the paint dries up. Sometimes you get too tired. Sometimes someone comes in and throws another colour on the wall. Blue, purple, red.

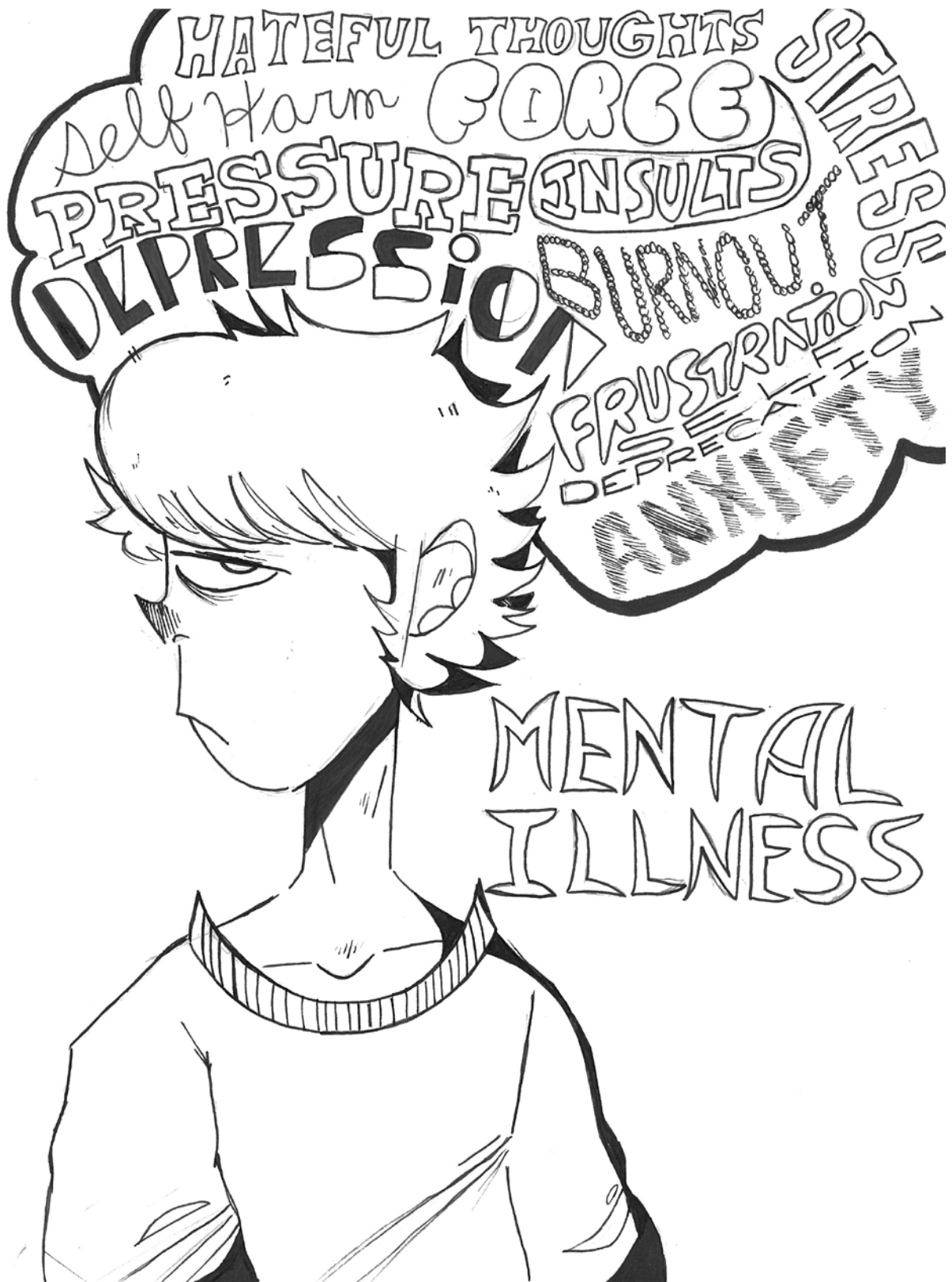
But maybe that’s the point. The end result might be great, but it’s how you get there that makes it interesting. It gives us stories to tell, reasons to live.

You know, I don’t know what I’m saying either. I guess I am like Virginia Woolf, in that sense.

Superfluous.

Yeah, and way too reliant on metaphors.

Max Kaufman, 16



Mental Illness
Chloe Lawford, 13

Ghosts

Vantablack is the darkest substance in the world. It sucks the light out of reality. It looks unnatural, wrong, like the cloth of a black hole. There's an opposite to vantablack, and it's what ghosts are made of.

Ghosts are a surprise. There is no rustle in the bushes, no chirping with dawn. Ghosts don't make noise unless they want your attention.

Ghosts glow, and they blind. They loom where you least expect them – that hole you just tripped over, like falling into a grave, was the home of a ghost. They glow underground like a hidden world.

If you are lucky enough to have one look at you, you'll know to stay far from the woods again. Their eyes burn holes through you, and you don't stop thinking about death for a day and a half.

It's sudden, when they scream. It comes unexpectedly and without warning every time. People are used to it, but you all feel the scream of a ghost and the death of someone you never knew deep within your bones. You share a look with the people around you, think about your life thus far, and carry on silently.

The day comes when they all scream, all at once, and the silence afterwards is deafening. The loss crushes the ghosts, they fall one by one, and no one hears them drop to the ground. Ghosts don't make noise unless they want your attention.

Azrin Manzur, 16

You Aren't Gone, Just Not You

You say I'm as gorgeous as a flower.
You ask her if I'm the oldest,
That's the third time in an hour.
You stare blankly at her face,
A face your eyes have traced for countless years.
You ask "Who are you?"
We think the same thing while talking to you here.

I notice the pain etched onto her face
As she struggles to bear through the news.
You've taken three more doses of your medication,
the other doses slipped from your mind.
So high you can't remember
the few pieces of yourself you haven't forgotten.

You aren't gone, just not you.
Your laugh is one my young ears
have not swallowed enough to yearn,
A person I have not had enough years to explore.
But I see the longing for that laugh and person
where it's vivid in their memories.

A laugh that used to ripple like a stone skipping across
a lazy river,
A warm personality that resides in each of the children
you've raised.
Now, your gaping, vacant eyes
are those of a vintage bisque doll.
Your cold, belligerent attitude is
One she can no longer recognize.

Samantha Melo-Centanni, 14

Involuntary Memories

Eglinton Subway Station bustles with life. Students from North Toronto C.I. and Northern S.S. alike have been released from their teachers' claws and chatter amicably among themselves as they wait for the train. A greying man in a wrinkled suit drags his feet and looks at his Rolex, impatient. All these people are strangers mixing together, all with the common need to get from one place to the next, moving purposefully toward the future. Elijah sits alone and studies a murky puddle in between the tracks, and imagines dunking his head in to drown out his thoughts of the past. Everything seems to remind him of the summer he was deployed in Iraq. It's late December and the frigid wind gusts through the darkened tunnel and into his pants, and it reminds him of the feeling of the coarse Iraqi sand scraping against his skin. A student's warbled laugh pierces the air when her friend tells a joke and he swears it sounds like a baby shrieking when gunfire blasted over the desert.

A group of boys loiters nearby. They stand so close to the edge of the platform Elijah's hands sweat. He remembers being that carefree in high school; those days seem like hundreds of years ago, not ten. They jabber about their after-school plans: dinner at a burger place and then a movie. Elijah wobbles in his seat. His favourite meal used to be chicken burgers from the South Street Burger at Yonge and Broadway. Every Friday he would treat himself to one and a Coke. But that was before Iraq. Now, cooked meat reminds him of the scorching smoky heat of the endless desert, the grease that covered his gun and the smell of singed human flesh. He hasn't been back there since. The stump of what used to be Elijah's left arm itches in reminder of that fateful summer. It still does that sometimes; the skin prickles even though it doesn't exist anymore. He tries not to scratch, it only brings attention. He's gotten enough pitiful gazes to last a lifetime.

A thin woman brushes by him and her breath smells like the cigarettes his buddy Allan used to smoke before the accident. They had been hard to find overseas, but somehow Allan had always had one to spare for Elijah. They used to smoke together when they couldn't sleep, looking out into the sand dunes till the sun peeked up over the horizon. Allan doesn't smoke anymore because he's buried six feet under.

"Excuse me, may I sit here?" the woman asks.

Elijah startles, and jolts his head upwards to look deep into her ocean eyes. Her long blonde hair is painstakingly straight. She wears a perfectly ironed black pencil skirt and buttoned-down shirt underneath her wool trench coat. Her red lips match her cheeks. He feels like a slob in her presence. She looks about the same age as him, but worry marks and wrinkles cover his weathered face while hers remains smooth. A five-day-old stubble dots his chin, and dark circles rest under his eyes.

She looks at him expectantly. Her eyes, blue like polished marbles, remind him of Allan. He had the same eyes, and straight blonde hair. He can almost see Allan's hair glinting like molten gold in the desert sun when he looks at her.

"Um... yeah," Elijah stumbles after a second too long. His already frost-pinched cheeks turn a darker shade of crimson. He scrambles to move his messenger bag from the other half of the red concrete bench and sling it over his shoulders. His eyes dart to the sporadic monitors hanging overhead, indicating that there's two minutes 'til the next train arrives.

"Thanks!" she chirps, settling beside him. "Freezing today, isn't it?"

"Yeah..." Elijah mumbles and looks deep into the puddle. It's impossible to make conversation. He only manages sentences of the one-word variety.

I shouldn't have left the house, he thinks. He thinks the same thing every week when he ventures out of his apartment to go to his 4 o'clock appointment on Fridays at his therapist's office. He swallows his anxiety. His ragged journal from his time overseas and his Medal of Sacrifice burn a hole through his messenger bag and into his hip. The subject of his session today with Dr. Stevens. The medal is the hardest to look at. When he touches the glossy silver and silky red ribbon, all he sees is the death of his best friend and not the brave sacrifice their country claimed they had made. He sees Allan's smile, hears his witty jokes, then sees it all taken away in a second. Over and over again.

The train rattles to a stop, dispersing the stagnant air. Yesterday's forgotten newspaper blows across the floor, sticking to the side of the train as the wind swirls. The doors swish open and Elijah lets the woman enter first. They stand next to each other, less than a metre apart. She gives him a once over, and Elijah feels uncomfortable under her scrutinizing gaze. His heart beats fast.

"I know you," she offers.

"...You do?"

"Yeah, I'm Sophie Brodeur, Allan Brodeur's sister. I remember you from the ceremony. When they gave you the medal. I have Allan's back at my apartment. You're his friend Elijah, right? He talked about you all the time in the letters he sent home."

"Oh. That's me."

"Do you want to get lunch sometime? I want to know about more about that summer... about my brother's last few months. I understand you were very close to him..."

"Um."

"It's fine if you don't want to, no pressure."

Elijah looks at Sophie, smells Allan's cigarettes on her breath, sees his happy glint in her eyes. She knew him, he tells himself. *She knew him like I did, as a best friend. As a brother. She is going through the same thing you are.*

"Yes," he says. "I'd like that."

Zoe Arzuman, 18

The Tattoo Artist

The lock on the door of the tattoo artist's shop clicks into place with a solemn finality. It's autumn and the brisk wind chills him as he walks to the subway station. The sharp cold of approaching winter pierces his chest, burning his lungs. The rainbow of leaves swirling and tumbling on the ground distracts his gaze, causing his legs to stumble. The neighbourhood has slipped into moral greys that get darker as the sun fades below the horizon. As he feels in his pocket for a public transport fare, his hand brushes against the sharp corners of a small cue card. He pulls it out, a client had handed it to him when explaining the concept behind her desired design. She wanted a tattoo with meaning. He could appreciate that, after all he's an artist and likes to imbue meaning in his art. It's always hard for him when people come in asking for tattoos he knows they'll regret, but what can he do? This girl, however, had wanted meaning.

She'd shared her life story in the hour it took him to tattoo her feather-soft wrist. The story she told was tragic, and unfortunately all too common. Her brother, his sister, it seems like everyone knows someone who was either successful or at least attempted to take their own life. One of the leading causes of death among teenagers is suicide. He pulls the sides of his jacket tighter around him, his throat tightening with repressed remembrances of his sister. It's easier to avoid connection and loss. Shakespeare was wrong. It's much better to have never loved at all than to have loved and lost. That pain stays and haunts forever.

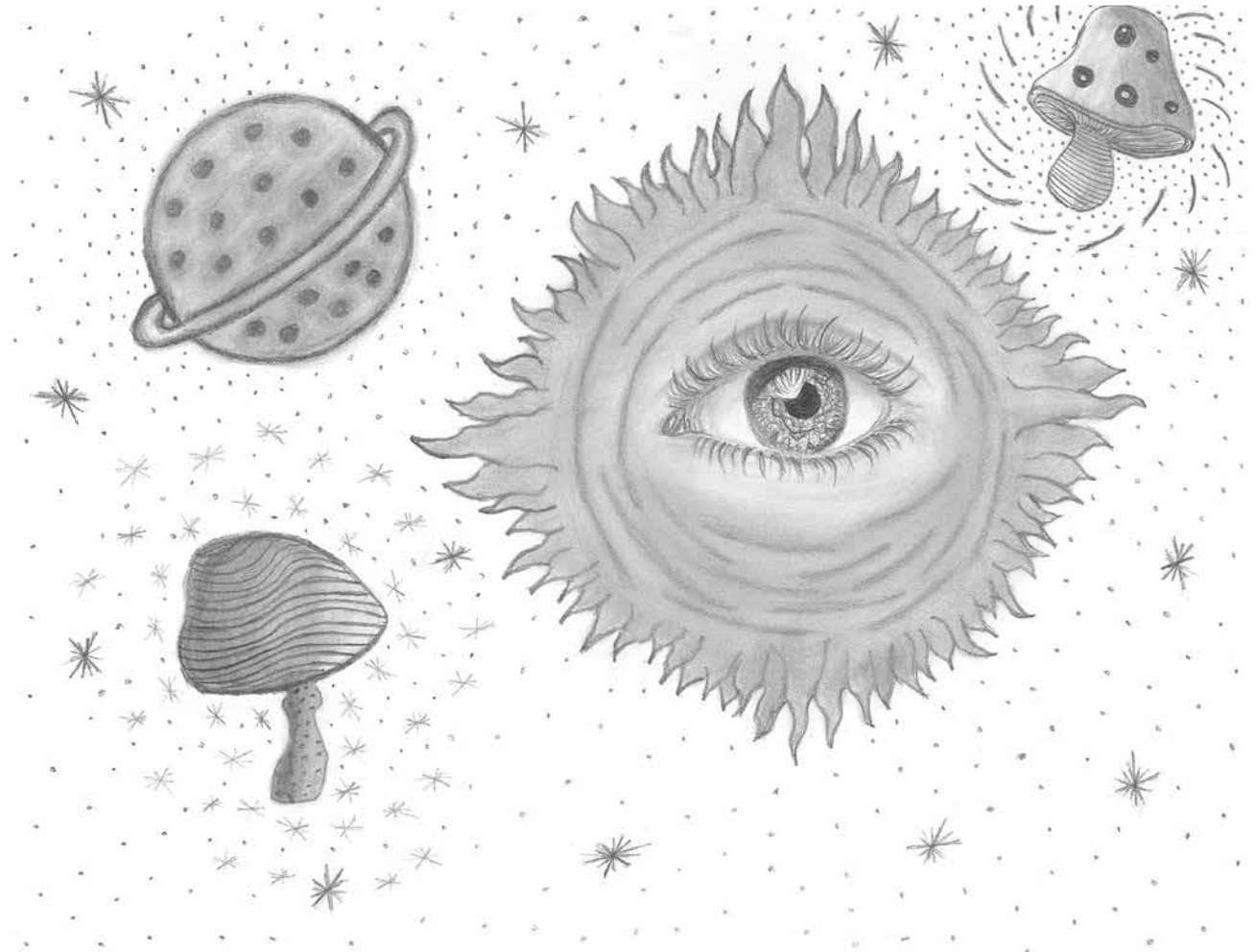
He rubs the edge of the card the girl from the shop had handed him. Its sharp edge bites into the pad of his index finger. On the card in small, neat script is the name of a website about mental health and suicide prevention. He knows his limits. He tends to avoid potential triggers but when the girl from the shop had innocently handed him one he hadn't wanted to hand it back. Sometimes it feels good to hurt. It helps you know that you're alive, to feel that spiraling, hopeless, painful existential loneliness.

The train pulls into the station, heard before it is seen, the rumble and screech of metal on metal comforting in its familiarity. A sudden intrusive thought reminds him of how easily he could jump in front of it and end his suddenly fragile-seeming life. He startles at the thought, pushing it violently into a dark box he keeps hidden in a deep corner of his mind. He boards the train like everyone else, briefly wondering what troubles exist in the lives of his fellow passengers. No one ever asks. The train is crowded with commuters coming home after a day of work. Some probably had good days, some had bad days. Even within the hustle bustle of rush hour, with the press of people making their way back home, he still has a pillow of air around him. People are wary of him, his size, his ink. He doesn't mind. He might do the same in their position.

The train twists and screams through a tunnel, fluorescent lights flickering through the windows, throwing everyone against each other like a life-sized pinball machine. As everyone rights themselves he glances around, everyone is in their own world: reading, knitting, talking, texting, playing. There are so many solitary ways to occupy oneself. The soothing, automated voice comes on announcing the next station. There's a rustle of movement along the cars as people gather their belongings in preparation. Again the screeching, grinding stop, then the chimes. A whoosh of air as the doors open. People pile on and off in a rush to be there, wherever there is, not appreciating the journey which is often said to be more important than the destination. When it's his stop, the tattoo artist lets himself be pushed out through the train doors, up the escalator and out onto the street. His apartment is around the corner. A short walk that will feel longer and longer as it gets colder.

He eases his door open, entering the dark apartment lit only by the dim light of the hallway. The light switch is white against gray walls, smooth to touch. A soft tap and his apartment is flooded with bright lights. He cringes and taps again, grateful for the dimmer feature he had installed. The empty rooms look bleak, lacking life. He slides his arms out of his jacket, leaving it to hang on the solitary hook by the door. He is looking at his life with fresh eyes today. He is imagining how his life would look to a stranger and seeing how lonely his life looks from the outside. Feeling how lonely it is from the inside. Maybe he should get a cat. He knows he should get more interpersonal relationships going in his life and a pet seems a reasonable place to start. Cats are known as low maintenance creatures. It could be beneficial having something to come home to every night.

Tamar Sonenberg, 18



Feeling Spaced Out

Mackenzie Melichar, 16

Change

“Young people are changing the world”
the headline of every news story.
From The Washington Post to CNN
“David Hogg will bring gun violence to an end”
Hashtag MarchForOurLives
Hashtag MeToo
Hashtag
Hashtag
Hashtag

Does anybody remember
That game we played called tag?

Double tap this,
Retweet that,
Adults constantly complaining
When I was a kid
We played outside
With a baseball bat,
None of this
Fingertips tapping away
On your phone
Every single day
Doing all that you can
To not be another unknown.
We used to have our eyes
Glued to the end line
In races,
Not to a screen
Where all you see
Are soulless faces.

What does it even mean
To be a child anymore?
It used to be playing outside
With your friends for hours,
And your mom calling for you,
Begging you to take a shower.
I used to be proud
Of the scrapes on my knees,
Now all you hear are kids saying
“Please,
Please Mom, can I have
More time on my iPad,
And if you refuse,
I will go ask Dad.”

We used to make bets
About who could jump higher,
Not who’s a better liar
About what they’ve been
Doing on Instagram.
We used to fear strangers,
Not invite them into our DM.

With megabytes
Running through our veins
And information overload in
Our brains,
Childhoods stripped away
By the addictive nature
Programmed within us
Like some sort of software.
We ought to ask ourselves;
Are young people changing the world
Or is the world changing young people?

Adrianna Georgiou-Prattas, 16



Youth

Christina Kim, 17

Statua

Checking the mirrors and shifting my pose
I know these aren't the thoughts that I chose
Where points contradict and shapes are assigned
The things I remember aren't too kind

Following eyes, the looks they take
I see the marks you'd like to make
On skin and bone, on marble and stone
Is this my body, is it my own?

Experimentation turns to sensation
Obsession rather than fascination
The breath of my lungs wasn't ever perfume,
This mirror of mine cannot be my tomb

I'm not sure how you feel inside
Perhaps you only run, then hide
But before you say what's best for me:
I shall sculpt, and then I'll see!

Jeanne Polochansky, 17

The Wild Youth

We are the reckless and confused
Enviied and despised, our crimes cause such outcry
We are the wild youth,
Incorrigibly stupid with nothing to lose
Or so I've heard,
We remain unexcused and unamused, wholly undeterred
Or so I've heard.

Yet we are the wild youth,
Idealistic cynics, burdened with too many truths
Chasing unknown futures and half-formed dreams.
With hopes of better things,
We'll go into the future now and watch our lives unfold.

The clocks are set on blurry visions
Our lives still unmade creations.

We are the wild youth,
Bold and brash,
Lost and confused.

Tahsin Bakth, 18

The Good Times

There are hazy memories
framed on every wall
of better days
and promises
that were meant to last.
I grasp onto
the goofy smiles,
the infectious laughter,
begging to remember
what had faded away.
Take me back to
less chaotic,
happier,
and the girl
who used to
wake up
with the sun.

Rachel Nguyen, 17

The Void

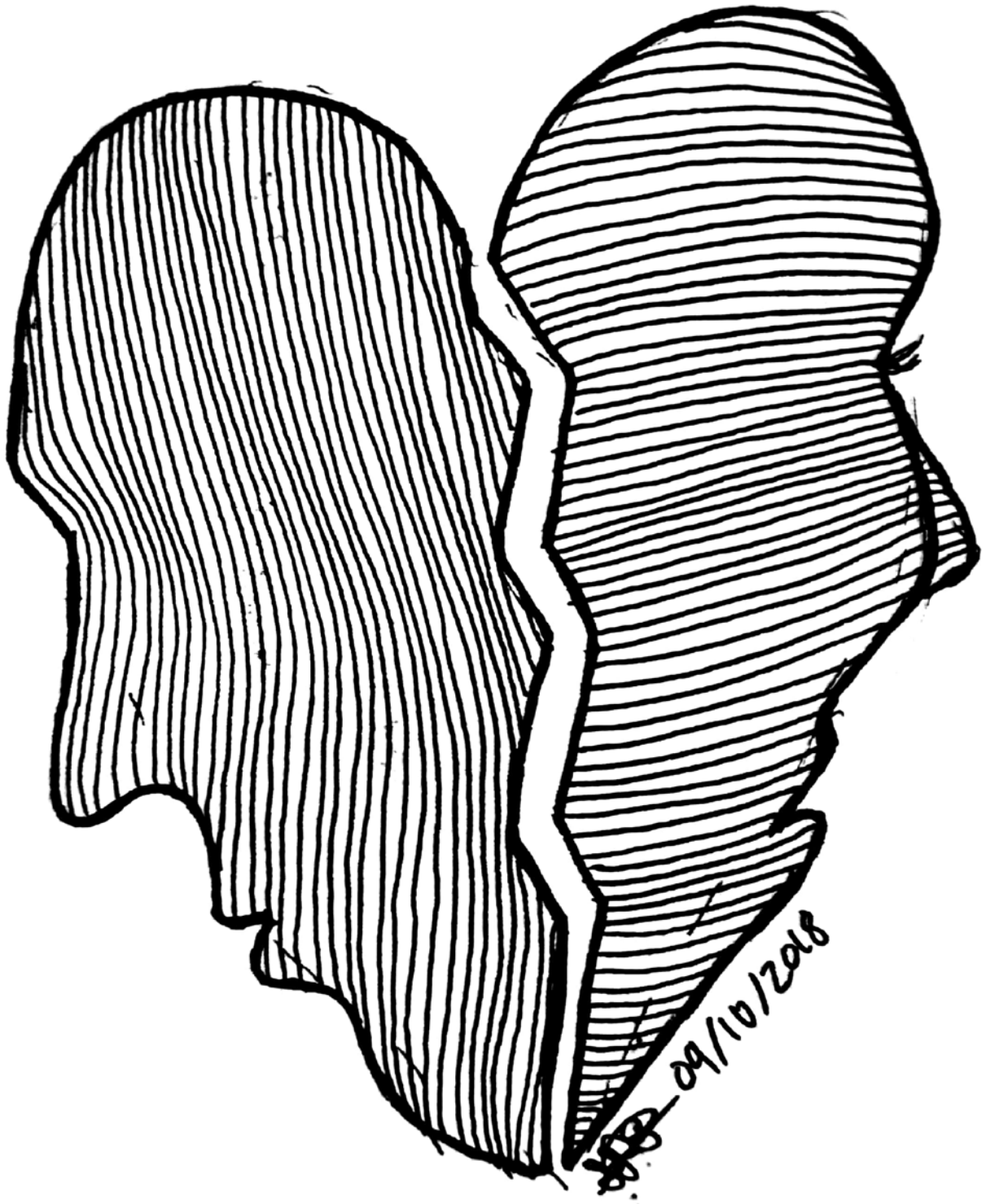
It waits at the edge of the bed
In the closet, in my head.
It has no face, just a void
It is a fate that I cannot avoid.
A creature in a dark disguise.
Waiting for my grim demise.
My memories are oh so blurry.
Hidden in a drunken slurry.
Maybe now I should start to worry.
The void might be behind this query.
It taunts me while I sleep.
Although it does not make a peep.
Its thoughts are loud beyond all words.
Even while I eat my curds.
It follows me wherever I go.
Stalking me from below.
The depth of hell is where it dwells.
It curses me with its evil spells.
It screeches loudly like a dying owl.
Speaking but one haunting word,
Meow.
The void... it waits.

Maya Mott, 15

Insomnia

Dark circles present themselves
As a result of many late nights
I lie alone in the dark,
Bearer of a heavy soul
Plagued with heavy eyes to match
Encapsulated in a warmth that does not
Seep through to my body,
I await a slumber that will not come.
My mind refuses to quiet
And the quiet of the shadows
Screams so loud

Aliyah Chea, 17



Differences
Shania Sukhai, 17

Are You Seeing Me?

There are specific characteristics of teenage friend groups, or, as we like to call them, squads. We love to stay in close contact, but only when it's through our phones. We love to hang out, but only if we can use Snapchat to document the event. We seem to live by the rule of quantity over quality.

I fell prey to this rule as well. But that all changed over the March break, when I volunteered at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. The days leading up to the program, I was full of apprehension. I'd never interacted closely with anyone with an exceptionality. As much as I thought of myself as an accepting, open-minded person, I was ignorant in my worries of what the job would entail. *How would we be able to understand each other if we could not speak? Would the children feel isolated? Would I feel isolated?* I didn't know anything, so I imagined everything.

But on the first day, my worries dissipated instantly. Volunteering at Holland Bloorview was different from anything I'd ever experienced before, like walking into a room where all the overwhelming contact we experience on a day-to-day basis vanished. Many of the children were non-verbal, so on some days I would go hours without having a long conversation. Things seemed to move in slow motion. It was an odd sensation, to feel as if I could take my time.

I was paired with a boy named Miles. Every day, the two of us would lie side by side in a room called Rest and Relaxation. The walls are lined with bean bag chairs, classical music fills the air, and plants grow along the windowsill. It is also strung with lights that change colour with a remote control. Miles loved that room. He used the remote to operate a light show, naming each colour, while I stayed silent, watching his eyes fill with satisfaction at every change in colour. At some moments, he looked at me and grabbed my hand. In the few seconds we held eye contact, he seemed to speak a hundred words. He understood me. He was content. Miles and I must have exchanged ten words out loud in those two hours. However, in that moment, I felt a meaningful connection solidify between us that had not been rushed.

As I walk the halls of my school all I hear is twitter, like that of birds. We almost never cease to talk but it's through our phones, not in person. We may have eight hundred followers on Instagram, but only a few who we can call true friends (if we're lucky.) Is that to suggest that children who may never speak, who may never be responsive, cannot make meaningful human connections?

Over the summer, I met a girl named Anna, who attended camp with her father. Anna has never spoken a word in her life. Her father will never hear her say the words, "I love you." He will never be able to hold a conversation with his daughter. He will never explicitly know what she is thinking – whether she is content, uncomfortable or frightened. When I first met her, Anna made me immensely sad. Without meaning to, I had jumped to the conclusion that she could not possibly lead a happy life, and would never form a meaningful connection with her own father.

I couldn't have been farther from the truth. Anna and her father had a beautiful relationship that blossomed right before my eyes. In one moment of eye contact, I could almost see a slew of words pass between them. "I understand you," her eyes seemed to say.

"I love you," his eyes said back. She could not stop smiling when her father was around. She reacted to his hugs with happy jerks of her feet. Sometimes the two would lie for hours together on a mat under the sun, listening to music. For 21st century teenagers this might have been the dullest activity, but for Anna and her father, these moments were the happiest of their lives.

The words I usually hear strung with the word “parents” are tinted with annoyance and frustration. In the evenings, I gravitate towards my phone more than I do to my parents. It’s hard to carry on a conversation when the notifications keep piling up, stacked upon each other like bills demanding to be paid.

At our volunteer training session, we were told that to create a sense of mutual understanding, we should look into the children’s eyes, and ask, “Are you seeing me?” However, I realized that I should really be asking this question to my own friends. Without our phones, our relationships are frail. Is the conversation lacking? Quick, look up a meme. Did an awkward moment just pass? Let me check something on my phone to avoid eye contact.

But perhaps you cannot make meaningful human connections by constantly looking down. Perhaps small, but meaningful gestures carry more value than grand gestures that are skin-deep. Perhaps a moment of eye contact, genuine smile, or touch of the hand can show someone you care more than any long-winded soliloquy or elaborate gift. Perhaps we must look up.

Slowly but surely, I am lifting my head. Now, at dinnertime, I leave my phone on the counter rather than on the table where it can taunt me. When I eat lunch with my friends, I keep my device in my bag, so that my attention is no longer divided between the conversation and my Tumblr feed. I have deleted Snapchat, but the friends that mean the most to me have not gone with it.

Making meaningful human connections is not about who has the most Instagram likes or the largest posse while strutting down the hallway. It is about small things. It is about patience. It is about taking the time to understand someone. It is about looking someone in the eye and asking, “Are you seeing me?”

Hana Sharifi, 17

Black

black
sempiternal black on my skin
in my heart, in my blood,
all I am is simply black.

and yet people see red
condemning my ancestors to bloodshed
and rubble,
thinking in their mindless bubbles
that black was a sin, a crime,
a misdeed to their darkened eyes,
but black is thicker than blood.

black is beautiful
and our kings and queens take that in their stride,
from head to toe, covered in ebony gold,
they never crack,
for black is royalty.

black is human,
our culture, our music, our love,
wonderful in its perfect imperfections,
black welcomes all,
for black doesn’t hate.

I am black and proud,
as are my fathers and mothers,
brothers and sisters,
black is beautiful,
and so are you.

Jesse June-Jack, 16

Compensation – The Tale of Immigrant Children

My mother carried me over the ocean, though she couldn't even swim.
With each wave that cracked against the boat,
Her womb swelled
With the thought of me.

My father clipped his wings, placed me on one arm,
My sister on the other,
And flew between two worlds
For us.

I am a glimmering configuration
Of air and sea,
Of wind and wave.
So I suppose that is why on land

I am disoriented.

And I suppose that is why I struggle to wash my dishes,
Or wake up on time, or clean my room,
As my parents let their tongues bleed,
Holding cloths over their scars and wounds,
While furiously,
Feverishly
Throwing soil in the paths of their children
To cushion any fall. To only allow us
To grow.

When my mother ties her saree
Each pleat washes into the other with the same pattern.
It all smells of sea salt, and I cannot help but wonder
How her fingers remember the ocean.
As it ripples with each step, I cannot help but wonder
How she wears her story with such grace.

I am used to seeing half my father's unsmiling face in the rear-view mirror,
As he drives across towns to drop me off at school.
I am used to seeing his eyes closed in the evening, illuminated by the grey glow of the TV,
Blaring the politics of a country that he hasn't grown used to being torn from.
That he hasn't grown used to not calling home.
Some silly corner of my heart yearns for hugs, or *I love you* or
I'm proud of you.
But what does that compare to work-worn hands and bag-laden eyes,
All in the belief that
I am worth it?
Those who have waged war

With the wind and sea,
With all of probability,
Bend their backs in order for me to climb.
Because pulsing through their mind
Is a future where
I am worth it.
And this compensation
Weighs so heavily on me that I fear
I may break their backs.
And they manifest into being
A love so great that I fear
I am too small to love it back.

Like the embrace of a breeze or the lull of the waves,
I suppose some loves are only meant to be felt.

I hear the tap of the keyboard
As my father types some email to some organization
That I have somehow let slip from my mind. Again.
“Mathu,”
He calls.
“Generational. Can you spell it for me?”
The wind whispers in my ears.
My rib cage rattles from the waves battering against it.
And my heart,
As I open my mouth,
G-e-n-e-r-a-
My heart:
How it swells.

Madura Muraleetharan, 17



2014

Emmeline Accardi, 13

Home

A kettle boiling over the stove
A television playing and no one watching
The remote hidden in a couch cushion

The kitchen is a mess
Piles of paper across the counter
Dirty dishes fill the sink

The toilet seat is up
The faucet is open a crack
A faint dripping noise echoes

The back door is open a smidge
So the dogs can come back in
Their bowl is always half full

A family sits outside
A laugh fills the silence
As smiles fill their faces

Nothing is perfect
Nothing is matched
Everything feels like home

Sage Von Kursell, 17

Suburbia

Welcome to Markham! I know it looks like your typical suburban community, but it's really so much more than that. It's the place that has shaped me in the most meaningful way.

We'll start at the corner of Main Street, Unionville. Picture a street right out of a storybook as little boutiques and cafes line this historic street. The smell of freshly-pressed waffle cones drifts from the Old Firehall. Behind you, that's the Varley Art Gallery. From a young age, this is where my creativity flourished. The accessibility to great art in this community was always easy as the Varley had an established spot in the heart of the community. This is where I am constantly inspired for my own work. The strong artistic presence within this community helped me realize how much I value the visual arts and was integral to helping me decide to take HL Visual Art and even to write my Extended Essay in the subject of art for the IB.

Further down the road, that's the Markham Pan Am Centre. Not only home to the Water Polo and Table Tennis competitions during the 2015 Para/Pan Am Games, but also home to where many of my goals were realized. Do you smell the chlorine yet? My day starts and ends at this pool with gruelling morning and afternoon workouts. It's where I learned perseverance and how to apply a growth mindset to everyday life. I learned here that it is through failure where you can grow the most. So in tenth grade when I struggled with freestyle, this pool is where I spent my time improving each part of my stroke to get better for the next season. It's also where I met the people that have fostered an important sense of belonging within me.

Across the road from the Pan Am Centre, that's the Unionville GO Train Station. This station provided me with the access and, therefore, the possibility to attend school in the downtown core. For this, I am so grateful because I get to attend a school that I love. The station gave a commute between Markham and Toronto and this is where I learned to value my time. All four years I have been spread thinly across different commitments added on top of time on the train, but I know now how to make the most of it.

Let's walk further down Kennedy past the fields of transmission towers. Above these fields is where you get the best view of the sunset. There's nothing but wires that cut shapes into the pink sky.

Ah, the Milliken Mills Community Centre. Although it may look a bit run down, I assure you the vibrant community within these walls makes up for its appearance. This is where I spent most of my time as a child. Reading books in the library and attempting to skate on the rink. I learned how to swim in its pool and now it's where I volunteer to teach children how to swim. The children I teach come from a variety of backgrounds, but are constant reminders to not take life too seriously and to not be afraid to jump straight into the deep end (even if it's without a life jacket and even if it gives your instructor a heart attack.)

Hey, that's the sound of the GO train, it must be rush hour. Let's head back.

Every time I walk through Markham, with its identical-looking houses, I discover something new within its inherent mundaneness. The diversity within its small communities has molded me into the person I am today and I couldn't be more excited and sad to know that I am leaving this place in a year's time.

Katie Chan, 18



Howling Sky-Wolf

Daria Ilas, 12



My Sunshine

“You are my sunshine,”

Her eyelids fluttered, the ghost of a smile prancing carefully across her face. Her skin was paper white, her fingers trembling as they touched the snow below them, her breath shallow and fleeting.

“My only sunshine,”

She seemed to respond to my singing. As a thin trickle of blood seeped from her mouth, she raised a slender hand up and brushed it across my cheek. Her hands were cold, so very cold, but her eyes were warm. Her eyes looked like home.

“You make me happy,”

My voice cracked, salty tears beginning to sting in the corners of my eyes. She wasn't crying, no, she was smiling. Her lips curved softly to form the words that I sang, following along every so slowly. It was almost as if her throat held her words captive, keeping them far away as to not harm anyone. As if her words could ever hurt anyone.

“When skies are grey,”

The snow began to fall more heavily, but I held her in my arms. She was still warm, she was still alive. Her hair cascaded down my arm like a chocolate waterfall, catching snowflakes like a spiderweb. I could not feel the cold. I could only feel her, in my arms, her crimson blood staining my fingers. “The sky is white,” she whispered upon a cracked breath, her eyes slowly flickering away from me and turning towards the sky.

“You'll never know,”

I stopped, just for a moment, which made her turn to me again. “I'm not afraid. I'm not scared. Keep singing, please,” she murmured, her voice laced with honey despite the roughness in her throat.

“I can't,” I replied, my own hands starting to shake. I did not feel them, though. I did not feel the snow that began to coat my boots and her jacket, I did not feel the blustering wind that blew my hair into my eyes, and I did not feel her hand in mine.

“You'll never know, Cameron, how much I love you,” she sang quietly, her voice strained and her lips cracked. The cold was getting to her now. Her nose was tipped with the faintest pink, as were her cheeks.

“You'll never know, Lia, how much I love you,” I echoed, the words foreign and bitter on my tongue

She smiled again though, her hand squeezing mine, but it didn't feel like much at all. Her smile reminded me of the way I used to dance with her. I was never a good dancer; but she was amazing. She glided along the floor with swan-like grace, dragging me along with her like dead-weight. She never once seemed upset about it, though. No, she seemed happy. She was always happy. Always smiling. Even when her life was scampering away from her.

“Please don't take,”

Her grip loosened on my hand, her breathing becoming more desperate, more frequent, faster. She emitted a small noise that could have been sorrow, could have been pain, I did not know.

“My sunshine,”

She looked up at me, her brown eyes laced with gold. They were shiny, clear, holding nothing but pain. She began inhaling quicker then, a few glistening tears slipping from the barriers of her eyes only to slide down her cheek, dropping onto my knee.

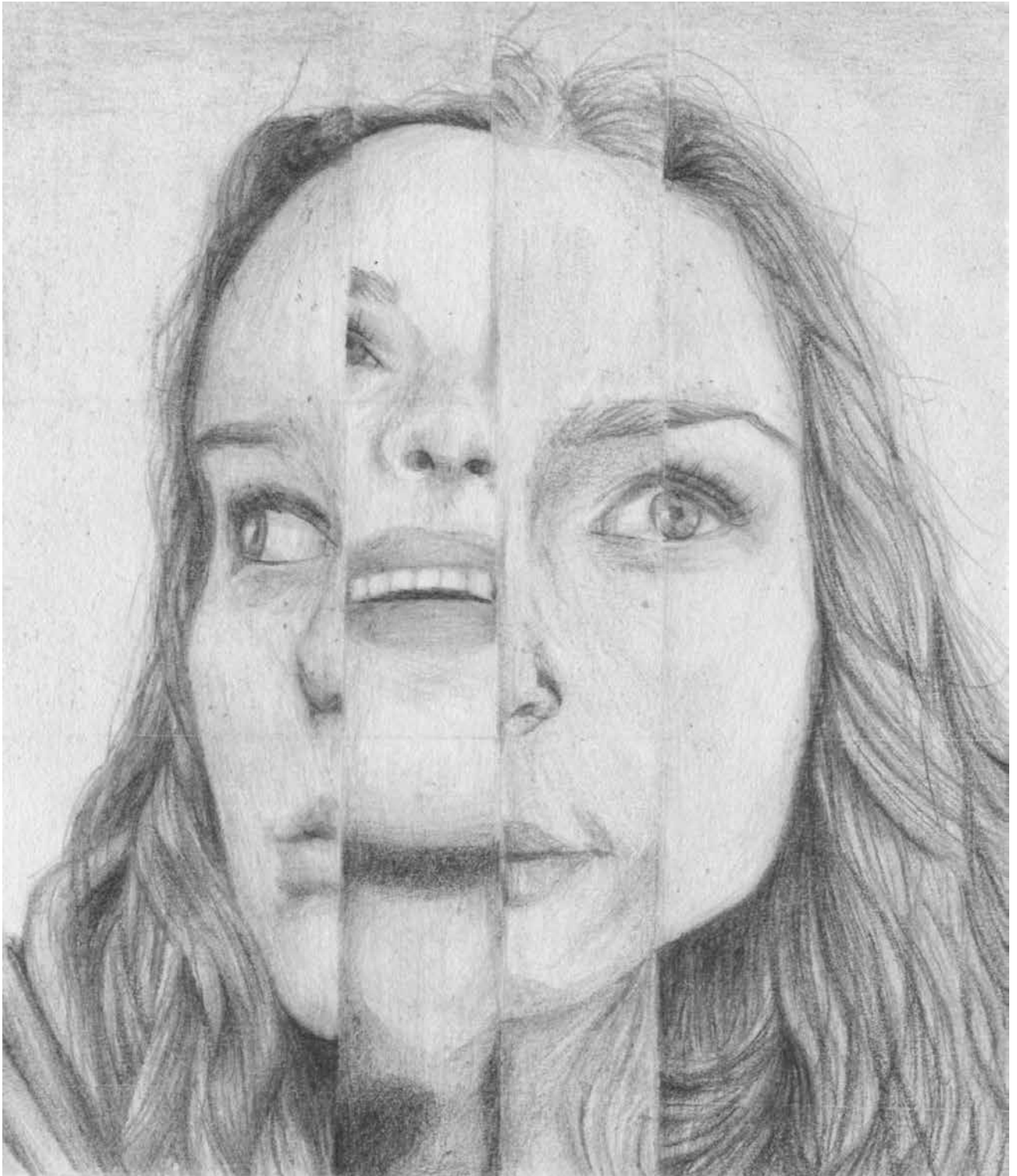
“Away.”

The words were phantoms. I could not taste them. I could not hear them. I could only hear the small, sad noise she made before her rapid breathing was swallowed up by the bellowing wind. She was still warm, I knew that. I could feel it. But her blood felt cold on my fingers. Her eyes held no warmth; they merely glazed over, fixed on me.

I swept a hand over her eyes, letting the lids close to cover the beauty below them. I then sat there with the snow falling on the both of us, the cold biting my toes, freezing her skin, draping across our hair.

I sat there with her in my arms and watched as the sun began to set.

Faith Proudman, 15



Me
Emily Withers, 17

A Conversation on a Fall Day

ding I hear the doorbell ring during a night of gaming.

“Hey guys, sorry I need to go AFK for a bit, someone’s at the door.” I say to my teammates online. I take off my headset and go downstairs. *I wonder who’s at the door. Aunt Karen and Uncle Jack are on vacation. They never take me with them.*

I’m in front of the door now.

I scratch my hair and realize that I’m still wearing my pajamas. My hair looks like a rat’s nest and my breath smells like day-old pizza. *Aughh, I should freshen up and change, this is no way to greet anyone.*

ding

Ah, screw it.

I slowly open the door a crack and peer through.

It’s a girl.

She’s wearing a hoodie and a pair of ripped jeans.

“Hi, I just moved across the street! I just wanted to introduce myself to my neighbours. My name’s Cassandra,” she says lightly.

Oh god, her voice is like strawberry flavoured.

I open the door a bit more and respond. “Umm, hey, my name’s Markus uhh ... “ I don’t know what to say. *Why am I so bad at this, this would be so much easier online.*

She’s staring at me now, waiting for me to continue.

“How’s the neighbourhood? I guess you met some other people before me.” I laugh nervously. *Oh wow, Mark, you’re so good at socializing.*

She laughs too, but more relaxed. “I knocked on a few doors, but no one’s home. I think most people are at work.”

“Oh yeah, it’s a PA day, so I stayed home all day. When do you start school?”

“Tomorrow, I guess. I need to catch up, it’s already halfway through the semester.”

An awkward pause.

We both don’t know what to say.

We stand on the porch and stare at each other’s shoes for a while. *Okay Mark, you have to salvage this conversation, it’s now or never.*

“Nice meeting you, I’ll see you at school tomorrow, right?”

I stumble around the words.

Wait, what, you don’t want her to see you at school, you friendless loser.

While it hurts, it’s true. I’m an outcast at school.

She smiles and seems relieved. “Yeah, I’ll definitely see you at school tomorrow.”

Seeing her smile makes me feel something inside. Something I haven’t felt since the last days of middle school, when I used to have friends.

“Well, thanks for coming by, maybe I can show you around the neighbourhood some time.” *I’m pretty sure she won’t want to be friends with an idiot, Mark.*

I tell my inner voice to shut up.

We say our goodbyes and she starts to leave. I close the door.

I’m about to run back upstairs, but something stops me.

Maybe I should invite her in. Get to know her a little. She seems nice enough.

I sprint back and yank open the door.

She’s almost at the sidewalk.

I hesitate for a moment. *Should I really do this?*

Yes, I do.

“Wait! Before you leave ... “ I call out towards her. I’m half hoping she doesn’t hear me.

She stops and looks back. I think she’s a bit surprised.

“Do you want to come in? I’ll make us a pot of coffee!” I scratch my head and await her response. *Mark, you don’t have coffee nor do you know how to make any.*

She nods her head to me and says “Sure, I’ll come in.” She turns back and walks to the porch. I gesture inside. She looks at me questioningly before entering and I put my hands up. “I’m not trying to do anything, I swear.”

“I believe you,” she assures me.

As I close the door behind her, I take a final glance outside.

It’s a beautiful fall day.

The air feels crisp as the warm-coloured leaves tumble down the trees to be strewn on the ground. I wonder why I never go outside anymore. I used to be an active kid.

Maybe it’s time to change, Mark.

I agree with myself. Shutting the door, I hope I can start to change.

With her.

Leo Liang, 14

For Not Loving Me

it wasn’t love at first sight
it wasn’t gradual
and you weren’t my best friend
it wasn’t “hi, nice to meet you,”
and then “i love you,”
it was nothing at all
until it was everything all at once
i didn’t love you
you didn’t love me
we weren’t a blazed out former glory
of the greatest story every told
we were like strangers
who in the between of a second
fell into the solace of each other’s embrace
and as i stood alone
in the second after
i found myself thanking you
for not being my best friend
and not being my at first glance
but most of all
thank you
for not loving me

Lakshana Kukanesan, 18



Ethereal

Jazel dela Paz, 17

Stardust

when i saw you,
you were the balm of a summer night.
hair like lace,
hands like twilight.

i realized, from your eyes
bearing secrets untold,
that i was the rainbow,
and you, the crock of gold.

you make it look easy;
easy grins and breathing.
i know i can't want you, but i can't stop.
god, i'm *bleeding*—

for you.
you are vastness, you are disparity.
you are what's right,
you are tranquility.

the peace i don't deserve,
the rage i desire.
i'm a cigarette between your lips.
and i'm alight with your fire.

you kiss me
but you taste of molson, of pain.
no, you don't kiss me.
you kiss obliteration.

he hurt you
he did. i know it's true.
i wouldn't. i couldn't.
because i fucking love you

lose him and you're *mine*—
freedom you can't fathom,
ours and ours and ours alone
in our little queendom.

you're the warrior.
you go for the princes—
the arrogant, conceited ones.
the queen in me winces.

what are we?
friends? i want to cry.
but you'd hate me if you knew
and i'd rather fucking die.

we are stardust.
we are we.
i am you.
but are you me?

you're not. you're not me.
you're not mine and you never will be.

Arja Sunil, 16

The Monster Under the Bed

Nightfall had come, and there was not a soul to be seen. The tire swings swished gracefully under the command of a cool summer breeze as it waltzed through the air and rustled the leaves of the great big oak that stood in the Roy family's front yard. There was a colourful bloom of flowers right underneath the oak; red, blue, yellow, lavender and even a crisp, clean white. It was evident the grass had been recently trimmed, and the bushes recently groomed. A neon pink bicycle was tucked away at the front of the driveway, just beside the sleek and shiny black Mercedes. The winds grew stronger and the wind chimes on the front porch clanked and banged energetically. Thunder could be heard in the distance, and not long after, a strike of lightning illuminated the neighbourhood. There was not a soul to be seen, and a good thing too, because a storm was coming.

The calm in the room had been disturbed. She lay on the bed, with her eyes wide open and her body tucked under the reassuring comfort of her blanket. Something had awakened Tia; she wasn't sure who, or what, but something had. She had tried counting sheep to go back to sleep, but to no avail. She thought, perhaps she could go down and turn on the TV, maybe if Peppa Pig was on, she would have no trouble passing time. There was only one problem, however. Tia knew if she laid a foot down, the monster under the bed would grab it and take her with it, and she certainly didn't want that to happen.

The soft pitter-patter on the window had caught her attention. It had started to rain outside. Oh, how she loved the rain so much. Watching the raindrops hit the glass and erratically slide down a unique path every time momentarily distracted Tia from her sleeplessness. She had almost begun drowsing off, when she thought she heard Mommy's voice. And then Daddy's. Was it coming from the kitchen? Or the living room perhaps? They definitely weren't in bed, and Tia wondered why. Maybe they had trouble going to sleep too. Then a thought popped into Tia's head; if Daddy was awake, then he could take her out to play in the rain like he always does! The thought excited Tia, but she still didn't want to climb down from her bed, but she knew if she called for Mommy or Daddy upstairs, they would put her back to bed without even listening. No, there was no other way, she thought, she had to make her way downstairs, by herself.

After thinking long and hard, and formulating the perfect plan, Tia was ready to get down from bed. She sat up right in her bed, took her pillow, threw it down as bait for the monster and then waited. Then she threw another pillow a little farther away from the bed. She grabbed her long plastic doll, which she referred to as Rosie, and made a jump from her bed to the second pillow. The landing was a bit rough, but she had made it. She got up, composed herself, and started making her way toward the door, as she held out Rosie in front of her, ready to hit anything that came in her way. She was sure to be quiet, so Mommy and Daddy wouldn't find out she was awake just yet. As she closed the door to her bedroom behind her, she let out a big breath of relief, and started to make her way down the hallway, and it sure did help that the lights were on.

The long metal railing felt cold to the touch as she tried to hold on to make her way down. Grasping Rosie in one hand and the railing in the other, little Tia, step by step, eventually made her way down the stairs. She decided to look into the kitchen first, because she heard lot of pots and pans banging, and she even thought she heard glass breaking. Mommy's and Daddy's voices were much clearer now. They were talking very loud, or at least Daddy was, she could not make out Mommy's voice in all the commotion.

Her little head peeped in the kitchen, but surprisingly, there was no one there. The kitchen was a mess though, the dishes were still undone and dinner was still on the table. There were more bottles of that funny looking apple juice out on the counter though. Maybe Daddy got thirsty and decided to get a midnight snack. She saw Daddy drinking the apple juice almost all of the time. He really liked it. Tia wanted to try it too, but mommy said no, so Tia understood, because she was a good girl.

Tia decided to check the living room next, but this time she hurried; she didn't want the rain to stop. As she peeked in the living room, she saw Mommy and Daddy, but they were acting funny. Daddy was being silly and walking wiggly. He couldn't talk properly, and was very loud. It reminded her of some of the cartoon characters on TV. He was throwing everything around and making a mess, which was not fair because whenever Tia made a mess, Mommy got very upset with her. Mommy was cleaning up Daddy's mess, and Tia thought she saw Mommy cry. As Mommy's back turned, Tia could see Mommy had a boo-boo on her eye.

"Are you ok, Mommy?" she asked.

Tia's mommy was surprised to see Tia out of bed, but Daddy hadn't even noticed. Mommy quickly got up and took Tia away and back into bed. As Tia's mommy carried her, she could see that Mommy was bleeding and had black marks on her face.

"Mommy, you have a boo-boo" she said.

"We have to fix your boo-boo, Mommy."

Hitisha Solanki, 17

Alone On a Battlefield

Me
against
the world
The battleground
stained
with my
tears and
blood
My comrades
went home
with no one
to fight for
They forgot
me
No one to catch me
when I fall
So I raise my arm
For
One
Last
Charge

Viola Wang, 12

I Got My Fire Back

Today I lit a fire
in the base of my heart.
I threw coals at the embers,
Willing it to start.

The flying flames roared and
lapped up the air.
Dancing and drifting,
Rising with passion and flair.

Sparkling, smoky smog,
Giving life to exciting dreams.
Floating, twisting, spiralling.
Nothing is ever as it seems.

Today I gave life to my heart,
I let it beat full and clear.
Finally letting the fire start,
I won't let the embers disappear.

Ella May Keyes, 17

Nightmares

The dreams that kept me up all night,
Caused me to stay away from the light.
The memories from my past are threatening,
For they have left me trembling.

For I have struggled to remember more,
It prevented me from opening many doors.
As I bury my worries underneath this cold earth,
It makes me feel every moment of silence as its worth.

The fears that haunt follow my thoughts,
And those who taunt can never untie my knots.
The screams and noises that I hear,
Tend to be the ones I always rehear.

Even though I rise after horrifying nights,
My muffled cries can never unsee sights.
As familiar as the screams sound,
It seems to be the ones I can't dare to bound.

But all of this may not be as they seem,
As for this pain I'm going through may be a dream,
I can't wake up from this nightmare,
Since it is something that I can never tend to bear.

Kate Dasanayaka, 15

Moon Dance

Trace the lines of my calloused hands,
Eyes blinking with saltwater tears,
Hair weaved through the cracks and bends of
 sycamore branches,
My mud-caked heels,
Beating against the bare earth,
Listen for the lapping of blue ocean waves,
Caressing my toes,
The moon flickering like a candle,
As it floats behind a haze of clouds,
Midnight stars painting the sky,
Dance with me under the barren field
Of a thousand suns.

Antonia Eckley, 15



Don't Let Fear Get You Down

Christina Yoon, 15

Dust

Dust was rolled into the Technology classroom, inside a pile of boxes neatly stacked on an automated trolley.

“During our previous classes, I have spoken about Dust.” Ms. Harroway, their eagle-eyed teacher, paced across the front of the room. She waved her hand, and the trolley distributed the boxes onto the students’ desks. “Would anyone like to remind us what it is?”

Alex looked around at his classmates. As usual, only one hand went up.

“Yes, Felix?”

Felix, a freckled boy wearing a crisp white uniform and a boastful grin, lowered his hand. “Dust is a nanobot with phase transformative properties and a direct neural control interface. It is used everywhere in our society, from construction to entertainment.”

Alex frowned. He hadn’t understood a word of what Felix had said.

The teacher winked, and Felix beamed.

“Simply put, due to the control chips injected into our necks after birth, Dust can be anything we want it to be.”

Suddenly, her desk fell into a cloud of Dust, then swirled to form a giant teddy bear. The class gawked, amazed.

Ms. Harroway shrugged, and the teddy bear turned back into a desk.

Just then, the lunch bell rang. “You may take your boxes. They will be yours for the rest of the year. Remember how to activate them.” She waved her hand. “Dismissed.”

The class trickled out of the room in a raucous river to the schoolyard. Alex spotted a chubby, tired boy sitting in a solitary corner. Felix and his friends passed by, snickering and pointing at him. Alex clenched his fists, and quickly found a seat at an empty neighbouring bench.

The Dust box opened with a touch. Alex skimmed his hand over the Dust, as Ms. Harroway had taught. A few moments later, a beanstalk sprouted out of the box. Alex grinned.

“Ah!”

Alex wheeled around. A tiny dragon had landed in front of the chubby boy, sparks leaping out of its mouth. The boy stared cross-eyed at the beast, terrified. Beside him was a pile of Dust, dead on the ground.

On the other side of the yard, Felix’s friends threw sneers at the boy. Felix, eyes narrowed in concentration, wore a sharp smile.

“So, Mike. Can’t control your Dust, eh?” The dragon cackled. “Ever thought about not sleeping in class, you fat sausage?”

A white-hot ball burst from its mouth. Mike stumbled back; the tips of his hair were singed.

“No!” Alex cried.

Suddenly, a beanstalk slammed into the dragon. The creature roared angrily, melting into a whirling shuriken that sliced through the plant.

Alex scowled. The beanstalk fused into a cage, trapping the blade inside. Alex flicked his hand, and the cage shot across the yard, shattering into blue sparks at Felix’s feet. Alex waved his hand, and his Dust flew back to his hand, coalescing into a metal ball.

Felix and his friends stormed up to the bench. Anger blazed in Felix’s eyes.

“I’ll get you back, one day,” he hissed.

“Good luck with that.” The ball in Alex’s hand grew spikes.

Felix stomped away, his friends trailing behind him.

Faint sobs suddenly rose to Alex’s ears. *Mike.*

He turned to Mike. The boy sat in a ball, head clasped in his hands.

“Mike.” Alex walked toward him. “I can help you.”

“I can’t.” Mike skimmed his hand through the pile of Dust, frowning in concentration. Nothing happened. “See?”

“Clear your mind,” Alex murmured. “Calm yourself. Let the Dust be what you feel it should be.”

Mike nodded and closed his eyes. All of a sudden, the ghost of a smile fluttered across his face. The Dust leapt out of the box, merging into a glowing silver star.

“I love stars,” Mike mumbled tiredly. “I wish there were more in the world.” He sighed heavily. The star collapsed back into the box. “But this isn’t a star, Alex. It might glow, but it’s still just dust.”

Alex glanced at the street. By a corner, a man sat hunched in a wretched bundle of cloth, holding out his hand. A passerby sneered in disgust, and waved. A pillar of Dust slammed into the man, knocking him and his meager collection of coins onto the pavement. The passerby hurried away.

Alex looked away. “Yeah. It’s still just dust.”

Andrei Li, 14



V

Christa Huang, 14

The Impossible Prodigy

Sit down you two boys, let me tell you about a hero named Richard.

He was young, once, a little cute thing just like you were at seven. Still holding on to a bit of baby cheeks because his mom couldn't bear to stop giving him dinner, and the lad stayed healthy while two older sisters grew thin and lanky.

This was Rigel in the Second Wave, not quite regal yet. We came from there too, from the mines, the soot stained sky; me and your grandma – Sol bless her – got out of that dump. I grew up in the dirt. They say it's like breathing 20 cartridges of e-cig a day. But Richard, he had it even worse.

His dad was crushed in the mines before he was born. An older brother got the lung rot after he lost his right arm twice – one flesh, one prosthetic. Things like that don't happen anymore. We have good air, clean water, we're richer. Yet still lazy and disrespectful, huh? Sai, look in my eyes when grandad's talking. Give me a "yessir." Good boy.

Living on a backwater world of dirt, this Richard grew like a weed, soaked in whatever knowledge he could find. He licked his bowl clean, knowing the sacrifices his family made. After reading through the local library twice, a kind man loaned him a computer – suddenly, the entire internet was at his fingertips. He was seven, mind you.

Well-fed and learned, young Richard Wang grew to be tall and strong yet kind and caring, poetry sprouting from his fingertips. His sisters stayed home as there was only one good pair of pants to go around the three of them, and fourteen-year-old Richard could earn a better wage. He was strong, yes, but the overseers worked him hard, sent him crawling through the smallest of cracks for any speck of minerals. He never saw the sun; he went to work before dawn and came home the dead of night, where his sisters washed his soot- and sweat-streaked face as he completed his online college diploma.

You're getting yourself a job, hear me? As soon as I convince your mother you'll go knocking doors. Don't give me that look.

Wang means emperor, loosely translated. King. Richard King. He survived the hardship, scored top ten out of six star systems, and got out. Sixteen-year-old Richard King on a starship, the first in generations of ancestors to leave the planet with nothing but fifty credits and a vial of dirt in his pockets, and sun-starved skin so pale he looked like a white man.

He arrived on Mars, center of the galaxy. He excelled in university, studying in transit from one odd job to another, and completed his undergrad in three years. He graduated just a fifth of a decimal behind the valedictorian, to everyone's dismay.

But don't let such a small setback define you, boys.

Unimpressed with academia, Richard rejected 15 offers of master's degrees and took a flight to Casini, a good city back then. He went in the first music store he saw, placed his little vial of brownish-blue dirt onto the counter, and told his story. Awe-struck, the shopkeep loaned him a cheap flute, to be paid for when he had the money. Richard found a crowded intersection and started playing.

Within a year Richard had amassed celebrity status. In two, he took over the store he bought his first instrument from and expanded it internationally. Richard hung around, passed the reins, then started a hologram company and sold it for the price of an iron asteroid. Now he put his polymath skills to good use; he invented and marketed a device that could pull water from dirt – more specifically, the dirt composition of his birthplace.

Rigel flourished. The most water-rich planet humankind has ever known, it became a regal paradise. Many inventions followed in that stead, and so Richard bootstrapped himself the Galilean Dream: he changed the mind of the world.

It's nice to dream, huh? If you're not getting it...

Seeing an epidemic strike a country he once visited, Richard finished med school and invented the cure in two months, preventing a multi-system spread of disease. He corrected the orbits of moons. He got a clown license for his sisters. He blew the whistle on a corrupt Premier and was elected by unanimous vote to sit in his place, creating the only time in recorded history where an election had 100% voter turnout. He ceded that spot for a female candidate, also creating history.

Well, anything to say, boys? What about, "Gee, granddaddy, I wonder what Richard's doing now?" Or, "Is this even a real person?" Who names a child after a dead British king anyway?

Yeah, Sai, I know you're ten. I'll cut you some slack, story time's over.

...When's the next night your mom works overtime? I've got my own stuff to do.

Look, San, those e-learning things you have – I never touched a computer at your age. We didn't have Li-Fi! Hahaha your jaw just hit the floor that was adorable. It's all garbage, you know. Five million students a class? Some JPEG that proclaims you graduated? You're in grade... Doesn't matter. Finish it up to the point where it starts costing you, because anything else isn't worth it. Trust me, I tried, and look where I ended up: the slums of Olympus with my own mountain of debt.

What'd you say? That story – well, Mars Uni is nice if you get the full scholarship, or work fourteen hours a day and go to class for twelve more. I'm not stopping anybody. Free will, eh?

Hm, I'll get the door.

Ah hello, Xiangyun.

Long day?

I know.

I'm done babysitting. Study hard, get a job, make me proud. Don't go staring at a screen all day, we can't afford glasses.

...You three, Rigel always had resorts, always had tourists. It also always had mines. Remember where you came from; just because we live on Mars doesn't mean we can forget the other side of my home planet, the good old dirt you have in you. Don't go dreaming of changing the world. Just be you. Hmph. Goodnight.

Lin Lune, 18

The Modern-Day Queen

I enter the world with a glass-shattering cry
You are the first face I see

I stumble and fall, but I finally stand
You are the first to praise me

I babble and bob my mouth until I say, “Ma”
You are the first to listen to me

I go off to school and come home with an award
You are the first to hug me

I break Dad’s treasured trophy playing football in the house
You are the first to reprimand me

I come home heartbroken after work
You are the first to console me and cry with me

I feel as if the world is against me
You are the first to fight for me

I shout and scream at everyone around me
You are the first to forgive me

Your unconditional love, unceasing support, and uncountable lectures
Make me who I am today

My best friend, my wonder woman, and my guardian angel

You put me first, you were there for me always, and you even gave up your last bite of your favourite cake

Your beautiful soul is now resting in eternal peace
I am the first to grieve you

Kyubin Kim, 14



Flower Bed

Trey Lee, 16

Antisemitism and Growing Up in the Greek Church

I wish I could look back on my days in Greek school as happy. I wish I could look back and say that those years were, at the very least, pleasant. But I can't. This is why.

The church basement was always cold, even in the springtime. The classes were harshly lit under fluorescent lighting and the sharp yet luminous eyes of Greek women. Rusted desks and chairs stood on broken floor tiles in rooms with holes in the drywall. This is where I spent my Saturdays. From the time I was old enough to understand that being Greek Orthodox means lighting candles, kissing icons, and drinking wine from a spoon in a priest's hand, I attended St. Nicholas Greek school.

It wasn't so bad in those first few years. I made friends with the other girls with long hair and even longer last names. I learned my alphabet. I learned how to say words like orange and mountain and fatherland. I learned how to sing the national anthem. I learned to dance around the room in a semicircle, although holding hands with the boys was uncomfortable. At that age, I could ignore the way my teachers mispronounced and misspelled my last name. I didn't understand why at the time, but it didn't matter. They adored me anyway.

It got worse as I got older. I began to notice things. Our class had outgrown the desks and our legs could no longer fit underneath them. Going upstairs for start-of-year mass in the church stopped being fun and became boring. I stopped putting silver quarters in the collection basket that got passed around. The price of tuition and books doubled for no reason in particular. No one ever came to repair the broken tiles or the holes in the drywall. I overheard my mother complaining about the shiny new Mercedes the priest parked in the parking lot. I resented waking up early on a Saturday to go to Greek school. All the girls in my class moved away and in their absence, some of the boys liked to tease me. The teachers never noticed this.

It wasn't a big deal, though. The mild bullying didn't bother me, as I was proud and refused to let it get to me. I recognized how lucky I was to be going to Greek school and I was grateful to be learning my language and culture. I soaked up every note of music and every new word I possibly could. I read any Greek book I could get my hands on and practiced verb conjugations for hours. Yes, I suppose I was unhappy with the Greek school environment and my horrible classmates and the way the Greek bishop talked about intermarriage, but my graduation was coming, and I had to prepare. It would all be over soon.

My very last day is what changed everything. The school liked to put on a concert in mid-June, where all the parents and grandparents would crowd into the tiny church banquet hall to watch their children perform songs, dances, poems, plays and speeches. At the end, the teachers would present one child from each class with an academic award and give the graduates their certificates.

The festivities were in preparation. The parents hadn't arrived yet and the classes were taking turns rehearsing their performances. I was on stage with a couple of my classmates when it happened.

We had just finished practicing our dance and were gradually getting off stage. I'm not sure how the topic came up, but my classmates asked me about my father. I didn't normally discuss him with that crowd, but by then I was fourteen, in grade nine, and proud of my Jewish heritage. I had outgrown the shame and secrecy that somehow came with having a Jew for a father, so I didn't see any reason not to tell them the truth.

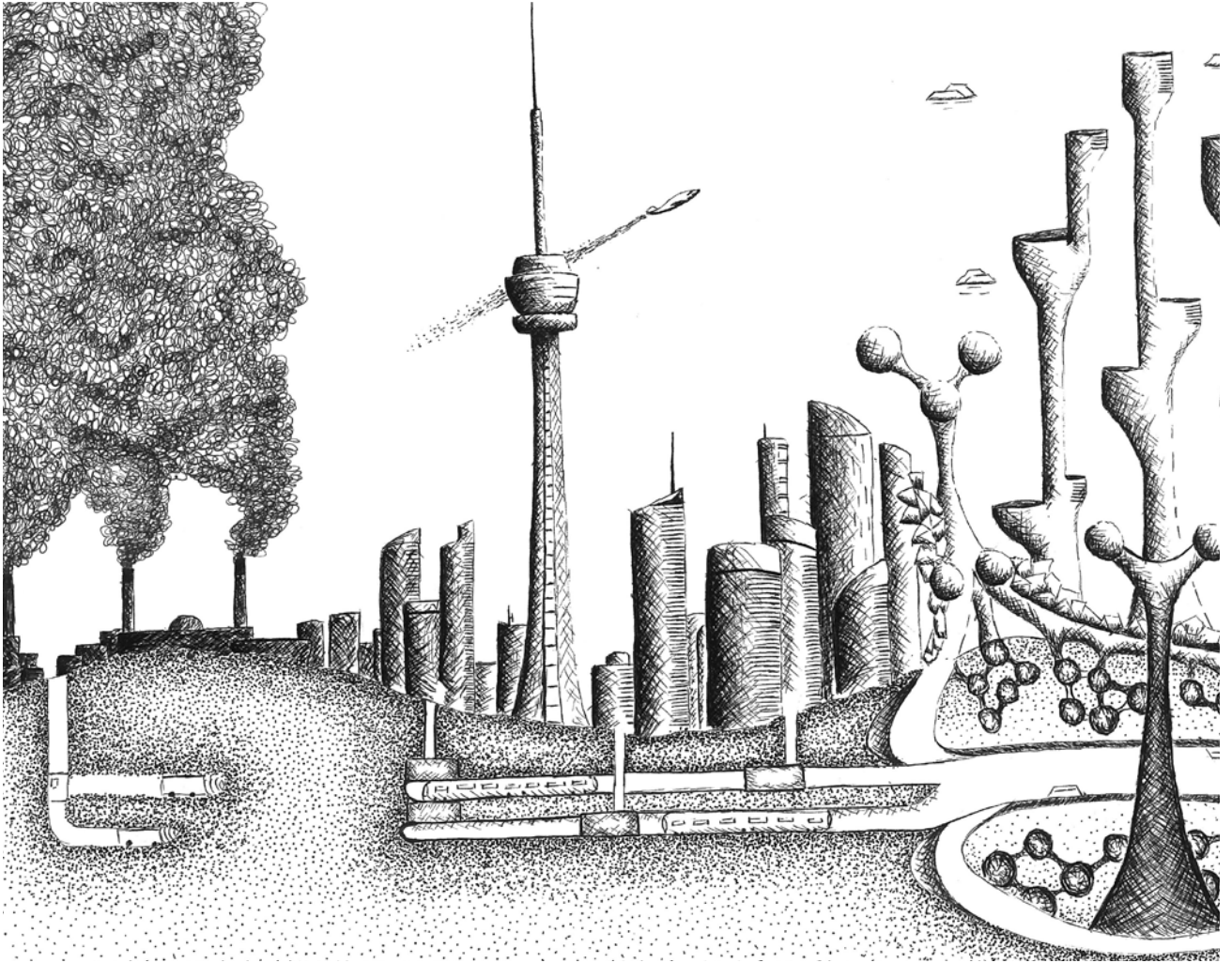
When we sat back down at our table with the rest of our class, they started. Back and forth to each other but within earshot of me, so they knew I could hear them. A rain shower of anti-Jew jokes. Jokes about stereotypes and overused tropes, the kind that comedians and television shows love to emphasize. Big noses and hunger for money and such. Jokes about real historical events. Mass genocide. Death. Their cold words cut me like a knife. I saw real satisfaction in their eyes when they saw how much their comments upset me. They made cheap humour of my people's suffering. They laughed loudly after each one, as if it was the funniest thing in the world, as if I'm not four generations removed from Nazis rounding us up and putting us in gas chambers, as if I'm not descended from victims of the Holocaust, as if the things they laugh about don't still bother me every day.

I didn't say anything to them. I sat there and tried to ignore them. In that moment, I felt like the drywall, peppered with holes and scratches and obscene words. In truth, my mind was reeling from shock. I had never experienced any kind of anti-Semitism before and I was not equipped to handle this kind of attack. I couldn't say anything, because I had just realized something. Even in the company of my peers, people who were part of the same ethnicity and religion as me, I was still seen as an other. My Jewish roots and last name meant that I could never truly fit in with the community I thought I belonged to. Shame reared its head after being buried for so long and anger followed. The anger was because I didn't tell them off or fight back. But then, the realization came. I didn't belong. It was a feeling I was used to by then, growing up in Catholic school, and one that I would come to get more acquainted with as time went on.

I ended up winning the academic award. I collected my certificate and left with my family, determined never to go back there for any reason. I never did. My memories of that place would forever be poisoned by that last day, however positive they were from the years before. I could never look back and remember anything other than that experience, where I was, for the first time in my life, the target of genuine hate. It took years before I was able to tell anyone about what happened that day because the shame of it felt like the lashes of a whip. Unpleasant as it was, I learned a valuable lesson. The sad reality of our society is that in order to be openly Jewish, you must develop thick skin. You cannot fall to pieces at every hateful word or offensive joke that comes your way. This may have been my first brush with anti-Semitism, but it certainly wasn't my last. In my case, I learned to take it in stride and not internalize it, because if I did, I would never be able to get out of bed in the morning.

Looking back, I saw how poor the school was in comparison to the church, how hateful the bishop was towards my parents' marriage, how the boys mistreated me, and the way my last name turned heads and not in a good way. It was a place of greed, guilt and hatred. I didn't belong there and maybe I wasn't meant to. I would spend a long time searching for where I did.

Victoria Schulman, 17



Time Changes

Jayden Dai, 13

Refugees

Envision our nation falling to darkness,
a deadly beast's lair.
Terror haunting our busy cities,
filling us with despair.
Fellow nations would care for our souls,
to lead us on the path.
Shine a spotlight, show our way,
away from the monster's wrath.
Yet scattered all across the globe,
these people do exist.
Hoping for a miracle,
chosen on that list.
Back at home they live in hell,
war dividing lives,
barriers constricting all their growth,
children, husbands, and wives.
They scaled these walls with all their strength,
their hope, desire unwound.
Yet when they all had reached the top,
they were thrown back to the ground.
Envision our nation falling to darkness,
Cities to a mound.
Fellow nations would care for our souls,
support us all around.
These men and women are the same as us,
smart, strong, and aware.
More than people in our grasp,
need some love and care.
Let us accept them, guide their lives,
lead them on their way.
Show them light and give them hope,
be joyful every day.

Jayden Dai, 13

Prompt: Write About Your Hometown

There's a house
at the end of my street,
that bleeds into an empty parking lot.

The curtains are drawn and
the door stays shut.
The parking lot has tire marks,
but never any cars.

Teens go there to smoke,
"Dude, this place is wicked cool."
And to get away from their parents.

Parents are skeptical,
"Seems strange that we never see who lives there."
And tell their kids to stay away.

Kids pretend to stay away,
"Let's explore, just this once!"
And secretly go when no one's looking.

There's a house
at the end of my street,
that bleeds into an empty parking lot.

The curtains protect untold stories and
the door guards a mystery.
The parking lot holds whispered thoughts and theories,
but never any answers.

Sabine Gaid, 17



0112

Oh No! (Oh Yes)

Tina Guo, 17

An Open Letter to the Privileged

No one seems to fully appreciate the validity of anger. Of bubbling rage. Of tears wept through obscenities and the way it feels when you dig your nails into your palm so deeply that they turn stark white. No one realizes what causes it and no one realizes that there are times when you should listen.

You don't listen, though. Anger is not worth the listen.

It's biased. It's a crutch. It's a blow to credibility. It makes you insane or fucking hysterical and maybe you should just clear your head. Maybe you should realize all that you have. Maybe you shouldn't blame society for your problems. Maybe you should just work hard and overcome centuries of misogyny, nationalism, racism and plain evil.

So it is all very polite. Bigotry is okay when it is properly cited and accompanied by an inoffensive face with symmetrical features.

We live in a world where no one calls me a feminazi anymore because the people who use that term have realized that they value actual Nazis. We live in a world where people can so easily tip-toe around their hate, and in a world where we listen at the feet of bigoted individuals while stepping on the voices of the marginalized, all because the calm smirk of a white brunette is less uncomfortable to see than the quivering lips of a black woman who is just *tired*.

And when it is a different voice, the few times that it is any sort of different, it's a grateful voice. It is a voice that has to constantly acknowledge how appreciative they are of the fact that someone, *anyone*, will listen. It is a thrice-edited opinion article with more good to acknowledge than evil to expose. It is quiet and respectful, and it tries desperately to show that it is deserving of your ears.

The thing is that you'll never know. There are just some things you will never know. And these are the things that make you see bright red, the things you can only fully describe loudly and obnoxiously. How do we think that you can sum up another xenophobic mass shooting in a half-hour broadcast followed up by an expose on the zoo's newest baby leopard? How do black and Indigenous communities suffer from dangerously unclean water supplies and the words are communicated exclusively through blonde-haired private school wonders? How is it that I have been told by middle-aged uncles since the age of five to cover up my legs, and I still have to be told by aging male politicians that it is more important to save the (non-existent) falsely accused than listen to the women who have been destroyed by a culture of rape apologists?

When someone tells me that they understand my community, when they say it doesn't matter that they went to a high school where tuition costs more than my parent's house, why do I have to bite my tongue and praise their empathy. Why is it that we have to sit here and listen to the privileged, and appease them and comfort them and make sure they know that they have done *nothing wrong*, before we are allowed to speak? Why is it that the chance is taken away as soon as I give a glimpse into the fact that I am fed up?

Well, I am fed up. I am angry and tired, and none of that means that I am ignorant or demanding or ungrateful. None of that means that I am wrong, and your calm aura paired with a blinding cloud of apathy does not mean that you are anywhere close to being right.

So I will be angry. Really god damn angry. I will scare you. I will fall into the stereotype of the angry feminist and the loud minority and the person that can't stop shouting, "I'm here and I'm queer and I deserve to exist." I will make you as uncomfortable as I want, because there is nothing you can gain from the illusion that life isn't uncomfortable. That life isn't unfair. That the world isn't mean to huge groups of people for being different. That you somehow don't benefit from this every day.

You do not get to run away from your guilt. You do not get to call yourself woke because you retweet Bell one day a year and have a black friend that you once timidly discussed affirmative action with. You do not get to hold on to the luxury of our silence.

You will feel a fraction of what we feel. You will realise that you have everything to gain from a society that tells me I don't deserve to exist in this skin with these breasts and these loud ideas. You will listen and you will feel the anger. And hopefully it will make you angry, too.

Aysha Tabassum, 18

The Light When You Close Your Eyes

I met you in third grade, post braces, pre-Duluth. You wore a Hilary Duff t-shirt and a yellow scrunchie on your wrist. It was 2002, your first day. December. Angelika Friedrich, you introduced yourself as. You said you moved from Berlin. You had an accent. You sat next to me. I gave you my phone number.

We crystallized, and your mother invited me over for New Year's, and made Spritzgebäck. We ate them while watching a Hallmark movie on your father's bubble television. You told me, "I'm totally in love, Leigh," when the protagonist appeared on screen, pixel by pixel, boyish and un-cute to me. We turned nine together, and then ten, and then thirteen, and then eighteen. We made magic potions out of miniature bath bombs in your mom's bathroom and stained the countertops. We contacted the dead on a homemade Ouija board and played Bloody Mary. You didn't believe in it, but I did. I doodled a pentagram in my math notebook once and you said I'd have to face the Devil one day. I thought you were being funny.

For junior prom, we went to the Salvation Army because I was poor and you were sympathetic, and I bought an indigo mermaid dress that made me look like a pageant star, and you bought a sugarplum ball gown. You lied and said I looked beautiful. "You're a horrible liar," I said, because you were a horrible liar, and you laughed like that was funny even though it wasn't. Your mom took pictures of us on her Coolpix – me, pathetic and meek, looking twelve and not eighteen. Black hair box-dyed from its natural brown. Eyes smudged with carbon. You said they looked like ambers to you. You, with your hair orange like Cyndi Lauper's, just done by your mother's stylist. Your eyes liquid blue, like the Indian Ocean. We danced and drank tequila behind the school. You said you felt grown up.

We were going to move to California together and study metaphysics. You bailed the day before we were supposed to leave. You stopped returning my phone calls and moved to Minnesota, and changed your Facebook status to in a relationship. His name was Cristiano De Luca. Your mom forwarded me pictures from your wedding by accident. You got married in a church with stained glass windows, and an organ, and a choir. I wasn't invited.

I knew few things for certain: you were a liar, Cristiano De Luca was cheating on you with Maria from eleventh grade and I wanted you dead.

I collected you over the year. In the basmati rice bag I plucked from your bin. Your eyes, the pebbles you and I collected in a Walkers shortbread tin. Your lips, the nail polish you gave me when we turned fifteen – shimmery and magenta.

I stitched you from the thread from our sewing box, and you dilated under my palm, like a real human. I found your old rosary in my jewelry box. I wound it around your throat. I imagined you in your one-bedroom Duluth apartment, eating dinner by yourself after Cristiano De Luca left you. Vegan coq au vin, a glass of merlot. Holding your knife in your left hand. Watching PBS and crying. You'd feel it in your neck first. Pass it off as nothing, take another sip of your merlot. I tightened the rosary, and almost felt your breath in my palm. The rosary caught in the ridge of my fingernail, but I kept it going, and pictured you struggling to the living room, collapsing on the Thai cushion. You wouldn't think it was me doing this to you. You would think you'd just forgotten how to breathe.

I held you there, my little marionette, and counted to three. One. Your eyelids heavying, breath still caught in your throat, tasting like badly cooked tofu, tamari. Two. Your fingers loosening, jelly. Three. Seeing the white light, like you thought you would. Maybe even the hands of Jesus, pushing closer and closer. You were a good Christian. He would be merciful to you. Peter would let you through the gates.

It was on the fourth second that I eased up. I let the rosary go, and imagined your angel thrusting back into your chest. You'd never think it was me. The babble of the sitcom ringing in your ears. I'd rebirthed you. I stole your life and gave it back.

Rachel Lachmansingh, 17



Stargazing

Aileen Sun, 13

Free

Midnight nips at my toes, her thin, needle-sharp whiskers brushing the sides of my aching feet like swaying grass. Her eyes remain closed as she does this, closing her mind from any distractions. Suddenly, she stops, and her glassy blue eyes stare directly into mine, not daring to blink even once. I do the same, because this is our ritual, a game we play from time to time when we have only each other for company. She purrs tenderly, and I don't know if this is the cause, but I blink, and tears escape from the corners of my eyes. I have kept them open longer than I should have, so they've gone dry. This could be the reason I'm crying. It's likely not. I crinkle my nose as Midnight leaps into my lap, rubbing her small head against my grey sweater. It feels warm, the way she presses the fabric against my stomach. She purrs again, this time more insistently. I place my cold hand on her head. She flinches but doesn't recoil. Instead she lets my palm rest there, letting me take in the heat while she unwillingly draws in the coldness of my skin. It's an unfair trade, but she understands my grief and how I need her to stay with me for the remaining time we have left. I will mourn for days when this is over. She doesn't know this, nor will she witness it when it happens.

More tears run down my pale cheeks, past my chin and along my neck. I inhale with a stuttering breath and wipe away the drops of water with my free hand. When I bring it down, Midnight grazes my knuckles and licks the saltwater with her warm tongue. She enjoys it, finds it comforting just as I do.

I remember, when the morning sun had begun to sprout, I told her what today would hold for her, for the both of us, but of course she didn't understand. I recall kneeling on the floor in front of her, her head resting in my right hand, and gazing at her with watering eyes, choking back sobs. I wore a sad expression on my face, trying my hardest to explain that she won't be seeing me anymore. It broke my heart to do this, and I was quite grateful to know she still didn't realize what was happening. Maybe she did realize it, though, because she felt the pain more than anyone else, the pain building inside her, tearing at her skin and piercing her body like knives. Maybe she knew it was the end, that her days of chasing mice, playing with yarn and curling up with me in bed were over. Does she know that I'll miss her? Would it be harder for her if she did?

I manage a tense smile as I finally embrace her small form in my hands, raising her high into the air so that she can view the world clearly, so that her final moments would be spent like a queen, savouring life and its beauty.

When the time comes for me to lower her, I rest her in a makeshift bed of my arms and carry her across the hall, into the room with blinding yellow lights, and onto another bed laden with paper. Her last bed. I stand stoically beside her, wanting to hold her paw till the end, but I know I shouldn't because when I do, I won't be able to let go. I wait for what seems like a year, until the grizzled man before me grants a curt nod. I bend over and place a soft kiss on her forehead, between the two ears I would pinch whenever I greeted her.

The last thing I see is the fluttering of her eyelids lasting only for a second, and then her eyes slowly close. Her body relaxes and her tail curls, and the man covers her with a thin paper blanket. He pats my shoulder, though I barely feel it. My tears don't come this time. All I can do is stare at the snow-coloured cloak which conceals Midnight, as though she were sleeping beneath it. Maybe she is. And to keep this thought alive, I don't dare to check.

Liana Lyn, 15

Her

“You look old,” I chuckled, scratching my greying beard.

Instead of the usual quip, there was a momentary silence. I was not expecting it. I tried to undo the damage that I thought my silly joke had done.

“I mean, you look great, too.”

It was still quiet as we sat together on the grass. I was not sure as to what it was that made her look so lively. Perhaps, it was the bright colours she wore. They made her look much more vibrant than the last time I saw her. Nonetheless, what I had said was genuine, but, it did not seem to be the case when she finally broke her brief vow of silence.

“I feel so empty. So neglected.”

We watched the meandering river before us slowly flow, carrying both plastics and minnows in its muddied waters. The sun himself, peeking at us through the clouds, could not bring light to the river. It was a slightly gloomy sight in what was otherwise a beautiful Sunday afternoon. We breathed in the summer air.

“Sometimes,” she coughed. “I wonder why they treat me the way they do.”

I patted her gently on the back and sighed sadly, looking out at the river. A slender man in a grey suit interrupted my view as he strolled past us with his cell phone wedged between his ear and shoulder. Straining from carrying his heavy briefcase and bags, he set his belongings down on the bench nearby and sat down. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and continued talking loudly about numbers and profits.

“Maybe they will change,” I said with optimism. “It is only a matter of time before they truly understand how insignificant they are in the grand scheme of things.”

She whispered, “I hope so.”

I turned and looked at her, carefully taking in every detail. It was only now that I realized that her seemingly beautiful appearance cleverly concealed her pain. She was tall, radiant, and blossoming despite her old age, but it was all a mask. Beneath it, there was nothing but sadness and suffering. And I knew she would not be able to hide all that pain forever. It would begin to show. I wondered if they would at least change then. Yet, the same thing has happened to many others, and they remained the same. I shuddered at the thought, but knowing that there were exceptions even within them reassured me.

I decided to comfort her. “Listen,” I said. “They are not all bad. Some of them have figured out that without you, without your mother, they are no more.”

“Our mother,” she corrected me.

“Yes,” I hastily agreed. “Our mother. They have forgotten her.”

I shuffled around on the ground until my back was against hers. Placing my cane across my lap, I leaned back and looked at the clouds floating overhead. The sun was slowly disappearing. It was probably going to rain soon. I shifted my sight to the distant horizon, where skyscrapers were reaching towards the clouds and smoke was spewing from large pipes.

I couldn't help but smile. “It is simply a game for them. To be the highest. To be the richest. To be the best. But, I know that they will realize that the game is all just a big joke on themselves.”

“You think?” she asked.

I nodded. It was the only thing I hoped for.

I closed my eyes and opened them again, finally letting them settle on the man in the grey suit. With one last, “Yessir,” the man finished his call and, after gathering his bags and briefcase, started walking back slowly along the way he'd come. He stopped in front of us.

“It's a fine day, isn't it?” he asked me.

“Yes, it is,” I answered.

The man did not seem to be in a rush. I wondered if he had some time to spare. I hesitated before asking with a smile, “Would you care to join us in our conversation?”

The man looked around and nervously questioned me, “Our conversation?”

“Of course, she has probably grown bored of me talking to her all day,” I laughed while jokingly nudging her. “We could use a new voice.”

He asked me perhaps even more nervously, “Her? You mean the maple tree?”

I nodded enthusiastically, but the excitement was short-lived.

The man regained his composure and smiled professionally, “Unfortunately, I have an important business meeting to attend. But, thank you for the offer. And I do hope you enjoy your conversation.”

He bid me goodbye and walked away rather quickly. I was not shocked, but rather disappointed by his abrupt and obvious excuse. I clutched my cane with trembling fingers and sighed desperately. After I made sure that no one else could hear me, I murmured, “He thinks that I have gone mad.”

She laughed for a long while. And only after she tired, she said, “They merely use me, but you understand me. You are not mad simply because you shower me with love and recognition.”

I grinned as rain began to drizzle around us. “They do not know yet that they are the mad ones” I whispered back to her. “But, in time, exceptions will help them awaken from their trance.”

I rested my head against her back. I felt a drop of water drip from her branch and hit my open palm.

Rakshan Balachandran, 18



Home

Nadia Persaud, 16

Hook Seabar

The summer I turned nineteen, I took a job at a restaurant by the beach where I stood in front of ocean sunsets at the intersection of Davie and Denman, greeting guests and taking reservations. Each friend I told about my new job replied with some version of “Oh, so it’s all white people there, huh?” And I supposed they were right – only one or two other non-white employees worked there. Still, I didn’t really give it much thought. I made good tips there, and that was all that mattered.

Guests liked to compliment my tattoo, which I hurriedly slathered sunscreen onto before leaving the house for every shift. “Thanks, it’s from the show *Doctor Who*,” I’d reply through grinning teeth. Then I’d hurry back down the patio steps to the little wooden host stand where the crowd steadily grew under the watchful eyes of my managers.

The waiting list, a piece of printer paper now tattered soft at the edges and scarred with crossed-out names, began to dwindle down to just a handful of names by 8 o’clock. The sun hovered at just the right angle so its light glared straight into my eyes when I faced forward. Sweat beaded at my temples and clung to the insides of my denim shorts.

A family of blondes (save for the dad, who sported a mane of dark silver) strolled up the sidewalk and settled like a cloud around the space in front of my stand. The dad asked me about wait times, and started looking over the menu to the side with one of the kids. They had European accents, and wore touristy bucket hats with button-up shirts. The mom remained standing in front of me, with her functional black sunglasses and burnt-tan skin. She looked at me briefly before saying, “Do you serve Asian food?”

I looked at the sign that proclaimed our restaurant’s name – “Hook Seabar” – and at the western seafood menu her family perused, and finally at the suddenly overwhelming count of white patrons squeezed onto the coveted patio. “No,” I smiled, pulling out another menu and handing it to her. “We serve fresh seafood, burgers, that sort of thing.”

I watched in silence as she joined the rest of her family in discussing the entrees. As the sun beat down on me, I couldn’t help but remember the summer I was fifteen and standing in front of a display of stuffed animals at Safeway with my three-year-old sister’s hand in mine. A middle-aged white man nearby said to his buddy in his big white-man voice, “Look, see, she has a daughter and she looks fourteen still, that’s what they’re like,” as if I couldn’t hear or understand him. I thought of those white boys who’d laughed at Aaron Liu’s stinky Asian food at lunch in Grade 2, and I thought of Andrea Cheung getting “compliments” from strange white men following her in a car as she walked home from high school.

The more I looked at the family standing, waiting in front me at the host stand, the more an inexplicable hatred in me burned for them. I felt ashamed for it – they’d done nothing wrong. Maybe it was more of a boiling irritation; maybe it was just the heat. Not that it mattered. I smiled sweetly, I led them to their table, and when they left, I wished them a wonderful evening before grabbing a tray for the empty wine glasses on their table.

Grace Kwan, 18



If You Can Hear My Prayer

Amanda Lin, 15



Between the Buses

Sana Hourani, 18

Young Voices: Get Published!

Submission Form

Deadline for the 2020 Magazine is April 7, 2020.

Released annually in October, Young Voices magazine is full of writing and art created and selected by Toronto youth age 12-19. Submissions are accepted year-round. Send us your art, photography, comics, stories, poems and writing.

Who can submit?

Youth age 12 to 19 who live, work or go to school in Toronto.

What can be submitted?

Up to two pieces each year: one piece of writing and one visual piece. Related pieces will be considered separately.

How do you submit?

Using our online submission form. Or attach this form to your work and drop it off at any Toronto Public Library.

Need Inspiration?

Read past issues of Young Voices Magazine online! You can also grab a copy of the most recent magazine from your local library branch. Or take a free hands-on workshop at the library.

Before you submit, please review the full submission details and guidelines at tpl.ca/youngvoices.

Please fill out this form fully and attach it to your submission. Submissions with incomplete forms may not be considered for publication. Please use a separate form for each piece.

Full Name _____

Home Address _____

Postal Code _____

Email _____

Phone Number _____

Age _____ **Today's date** _____

Name of library branch where you submitted

Title of your submission

Type of Submission

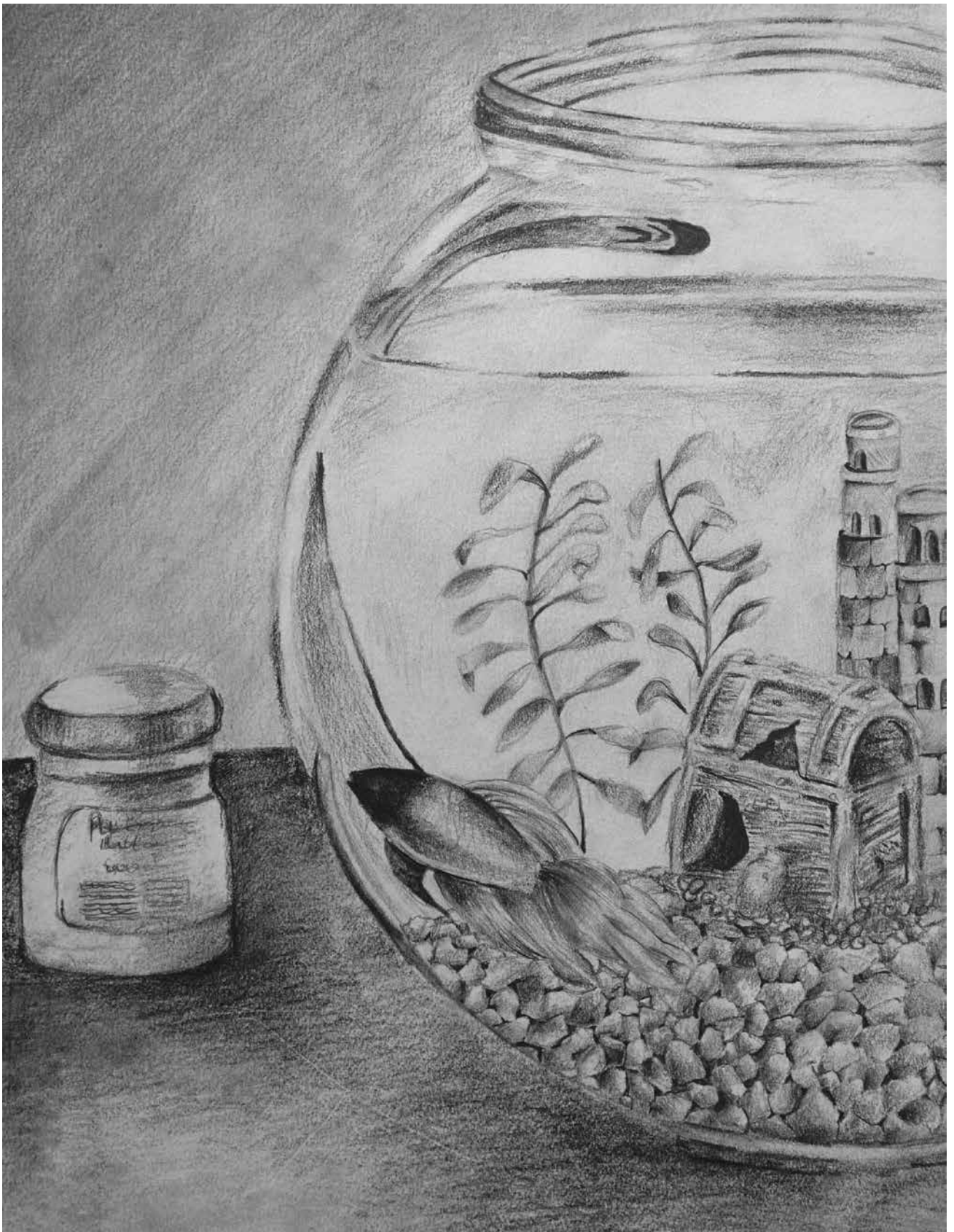
- Poem Fiction Rant
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 Digital Art Comic Other _____

How did you hear about Young Voices?

- Young Voices Sketchbook Library Website
 Young Voices Bookmark School
 Friends and family At the library
 Social Media I'm not sure
 Other (specify) _____

We're curious! Is this your first time submitting to Young Voices? Yes No

The Young Voices program is supported through the generosity of the **Daniels brothers** in honour of their mother, **Norine Rose**, and the **Friends of Toronto Public Library, South Chapter**.



A Small World
Ariya Chib, 13



Time
Miruna Cucu, 17