



# IMAZINE

Volume 15

Delaware Libraries' Teen Magazine

COVER: *Jump Into Another World*

Jordan Kerr, age 14

Acrylics and Watercolor

This piece of artwork started as a Girl Scout project, utilizing watered down paints. I was inspired to illustrate my favorite pastime on a rainy day, I use books to escape the present and jump into the imaginative world.

DELAWARE YOUNG AUTHORS  
AND ARTISTS AWARD



2026 DYAA



## *Author Awards*

### *Ages 12 - 14*

**Gold Medal:**

The Stray Among the Stars by Faerqiv – page 96

**Honorees:**

99 Nights in the Forest by Aaradhya Kumar – page 77

Gross Motor Dyspraxia by Theo Gallagher – page 49

### *Ages 15 - 19*

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Opposite by Brayden Hauser – page 71

**Honorees:**

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How Long Before I'm Beautiful? by Jessica Num – page 22

## *Artist Awards*

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Bearer of the Mane by Armaan Ghiya – page 69

### *Ages 15 - 19*

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Terror by Maya Zhao – page 32

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# DELAWARE YOUNG AUTHORS AND ARTISTS AWARD



The inaugural **Delaware Young Authors and Artists Award** is sponsored by Erin Entrada Kelly, a Delaware-based author, in partnership with the Delaware Library Association and IMAGINE. The award honors originality, creativity, and emotional impact in writing and art produced by Delaware students aged 12-19. Four DYAA Gold Medals and eight DYAA Honor Medals are awarded. Gold Medal winners receive \$500. Honorees receive \$100.

**ERIN ENTRADA KELLY** is a two-time Newbery Medalist and National Book Award Finalist whose



work has been translated into more than a dozen languages. She is a New York Times-bestselling author and teaches in the Master's Program in Writing for Young Readers at the University of San Francisco. She has a bachelor's degree in liberal arts from McNeese State University, an MFA in fiction from Rosemont College, and an honorary doctorate of fine arts from Moore College of Art and Design. She lives in Delaware.

**TERESA BONADDIO** (Art Judge)



is an author-illustrator and designer with professional roots in traditional children's book publishing and the museum world. Her clients include Running Press, Little Bee Books, Highlights Press, and Blue Dot Kids Books. She earned a BFA in Printmaking/Book Arts from the University of the Arts and a Post-Baccalaureate degree in Graphic Design from the Maryland Institute College of Art. She lives in Delaware.

**ERIC SMITH** (Creative Writing Judge)



is a literary agent and young adult author based in Philadelphia. His novels include the YALSA Best Books for Young Readers selection *Don't Read the Comments*, IndieBound bestseller *The Geek's Guide to Dating*, and the anthologies *Battle of the Bands* and *First-Year Orientation*, both co-edited with award-winning author Lauren Gibaldi. He is also the author of *Jagged Little Pill: The Novel*, which was written in collaboration with Alanis Morissette. Smith has a Bachelor of Arts in English from Kean University, and a Master's in English from Arcadia University. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and children.

**IN PARTNERSHIP WITH**



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# *The Roads They Crossed*

Fatima Zahid, age 15

They left behind the lands they knew,  
Where rivers sang and flowers swayed,  
To chase a dream both bright and new,  
Yet found the cost was steeply paid.  
The voices soft, the tongues restrained,  
A home rebuilt with borrowed air,  
Yet still their roots in hearts remained,  
A longing heavy, hard to bear.  
The hands that stitched through sleepless nights,  
To pave a path their children tread,  
Yet whispers spoke of stolen rights,  
Of dreams once bold now filled with dread.  
But though the weight is hard to bear,  
Their stories breathe in every name,  
In every hope, in every prayer,  
The sacrifice was not in vain.





## *Sunflowers Always Face the Sun*

Sahasra Komirishetty, age 15

Colored pencil, Alcohol marker, Fineliners

*This is a piece based off of the card set from the Vivid Old Tale story in Project Sekai. The girl in the picture, An, is depicted as a sun to show her carefree spirit. Additionally, sunflowers represent admiration. In the story, it is revealed that An admires her aunt, Nagi, very much. So, this piece is more or less about striving to be the person you admire.*

# *The Solution*

Valeria Lemus, age 17

She wants it bad, bad,  
It's her number one.  
She wants it desperately,  
She's turned down every hand,  
when she hears it calling out, for her

She wants it in a desperate way,  
In a dirt under fingernails way,  
She wants it so she doesn't have to want anymore  
She wants it bad, bad.

She wants it but she won't sleep  
She wants it but she's not happy.  
She wants it as a solution,  
until it becomes the problem

She'll get what she wants in fifteen-years,  
Having spent all her youth chasing it.  
She'll get what she wants, and it won't be enough.

Her body yearns for satisfaction it'll never know.

# *An Ode to the Human Spirit*

Valeria Lemus, age 17

The old Chinese woman with her bound feet,  
whose dream was to see the world but her husband wouldn't let her,  
spent all her days inside a lonely house making sure  
her daughters don't place all their worth  
on a twisted concept of feminine virtue and wealth.

The Cuban child, who dreams of a country that no longer exists,  
watches his parents forgo bread and go to sleep early.  
There is no rest for the hungry, no eggs, or milk, or sugar.  
Nobody remembers life before the crisis,  
the elderly are silent in their poverty. Silenced.

The young Ukrainian soldier has left his family,  
they crossed the border and he stayed behind to fight.  
He grieves but believes he is right, his duty as a man,  
is to defend their home. He'll soon die from a stray bullet,  
Two days before Christmas on the snowy Russian border.

The scrape of a chair startles a young black girl out of her reading spur,  
a reflex inherited from her mother's whispered warnings.  
She studies at the library, red eyes fighting back sleep.  
She'll do right by her parents, go to college and get a job.  
She presses the pen until her middle finger indents.

Two children mirror each other on opposite sides of the war,  
The Palestinian child can't sleep, haunted by hunger under the  
flimsy tent fabric he now calls refuge.  
The Israeli child, once taken hostage now released,  
can only manage whispers after the trauma she endured.

A high school senior walks the stage on graduation,  
holding his diploma like a promise, like a shield.  
Tears threaten to fall as he searches the crowd.  
His father isn't here, he was detained and deported.  
His little sister lives in fear, wondering if she'll be next.

They say everyone is equal in heaven, under the eyes of God.  
The people look to the stars, and wonder. Against all odds, they hope.  
But then they turn back to the dirt, to the child, to the page,  
and with trembling hands, they begin the work again.



## *The Struggling Can't Help the Struggling*

Sarah Corpuz, age 13

Colored Pencil

*This art piece is meant to bring attention to the normalization of stray dogs and cats in the Philippines. Since the Philippines has a significant amount of poverty in its country, some people with pets are not able to take care of themselves. This would lead to an animal being left on the street because of neglect and lack of care.*

*It's a common thing people see there so it's rare for the animals to actually get help.*



# Smiled

Brayden Hauser, age 16

I sit in a coffee shop and I watch  
I watch them all pass by, happy  
Smiles plastered on their faces like they were pinned  
Dimples spread wide, ripples in the sea

Spilling over the edges, they look so happy  
How I wish I was them, a happy family  
Holding hands, laughing with my belly  
Feeling juvenile and on the ninth cloud  
Filling the spaces in which I am not allowed

Fingers grasped, not a care on the Earth  
Instead of stuck in motion, a swaddle in a stillbirth  
Motionless and unsound, stuck moving back  
To the moment we knew we were under attack

My feelings have festered and battles were fought  
I recall those days when I was your thought  
Now the dark days roll on, and the clouds waste their tears  
Wasted measures, wasted breaks, wasted bottles, wasted years

The sun has long set and the trumpets rang true  
I envy these passengers, I envy you  
I come from cookie cutter, a mold laid cast  
But instilling my worth makes me feel like I'm last

The picture frames hold value in echoes yelling 'cheese'  
But they don't see the taxes, and the expired lease  
The ship's losing siding and the sail's ripped in two  
But when they walk through the window, they only see the view

But from my angle, I see memories I idolize  
Back in my glory days, the laughs that I memorized  
The faces, the cars, the picnics and cake  
Before the black, the pearls, the funeral, the wake

When smiles weren't for the picture, and running for sport  
When my troubles didn't linger and I wasn't in court  
On trial, for crimes that my ancestors made  
Caught in the cycles of debts to be paid  
My father paid his, and in time I'll pay mine

But for now I'll live through the smiles of those that pass by



## Take Three

Sarah Corpuz, age 13  
Colored pencil, Ink

*My art piece is to bring awareness about children being exploited for money with family vlogging channels. Imagine having a camera shoved in your face when you wake up, and it continues to document your whole life. For the past decade, there has been a rise in social media usage, which led to the increase in channels like these. They seem innocent, but most of the time there's a sad side to it.*

# *Never Give Up: Aarush and Mom Go for a Walk*

Parsi Aarush Teja, age 12

On a sunny day, I went for a walk along with my sweet mother.

I saw cars dancing on the road due to bumps.

I went to my favorite fall color tree to cherish my old memories of playing nearby.

Me and my mother continued walking.

We were talking a

lot about my

favorite playing and

learning activities.

While we were continuing our walk, my eyes were caught by a pine cone. I was amazed looking at its structure. When I gently kicked it, it rolled like a scroll. And then, I wanted to take it home without touching it with my hands.

My mom said that I might have challenges during this process and asked me to rethink.

I thought again and decided to do it by trying my best.

So, I started kicking the pine cone.

## **\*\*Challenge#: 1\*\***

After a few minutes we came across a slight uphill. And I started kicking it hard to overcome the uphill.

I thought it was a doddle act, but not... I had to coddle myself to kick back the hobbling pine cone. Hmmmm... I was glad to overcome the uphill.

## **\*\*Challenge#: 2\*\***

All of a sudden, I kicked the pine cone into long weeds. It became difficult to kick the pine cone through the long weeds.

After some struggle an idea struck in my mind. I started popping the pine cone and kicked it forward.

We continued walking with the pine cone and then I had another challenge.

**\*\*Challenge# 3:\*\***

Now we entered the car parking area. This time the pine cone went under a car. I made my hands dirty to stretch my legs to make a dance move and finally, could pull it out.

I was about to succeed in bringing it to my home and then I realized that I have one final challenge.

**\*\*Challenge# 4:\*\***

I had to climb few steps to reach my home. I tried couple of different ways like kicking it high, tried to pop it but nothing worked.

Then... then... then...  
I got an idea. I took off my shoes and held it with my leg fingers and started climbing the steps with the other leg.

**\*\*Hooray!!!\*\***

Successfully, I reached my home along with the pine cone and without touching it with my hands.

So...

Where there is a will there is a way...  
My dear friends...

**Never  
Give  
Up!**

Love You All...

# *Follow Your Dreams*

Sreshtha Yarlagadda, age 13

You will see  
You can be  
Anything if you follow your dreams

Nothing can stop you now  
All you need is to be yourself  
You will see  
You can be  
Anything if you follow your dreams

Just stay strong  
Don't ever stop  
Rise to the top  
You will see  
You can be  
Anything if you follow your dreams

Lead your path  
And let it shine  
Have some hope  
And it will be bright  
You will see  
You can be  
Anything if you follow your dreams

Tell people you love  
What you want to do  
And they will encourage you  
Make them your hope  
Make them your light  
For whatever you chose to do all day and night

You will see  
You can be  
Anything if you follow your dreams!



## *Under the Swing of Mama's Push*

Maya Zhao, age 15  
Watercolor

*I created this drawing to convey a lesson from an argument with my mother. The locket and heavy chain symbolizes the dedication that may seem restrictive sometimes, but the beautiful scenery is only available because of the push from her wrinkly hand. This piece acknowledges my mother's selfless contribution and unwavering support that helped me to reach my highest potential.*



## *Fading in Bloom*

Nayonika Dumpa, age 15

Pencil

*The piece explores how life and nature continue to exist and breathe even as their vibrancy fades. Using only graphite, the piece focuses on softness rather than color. The flowers represent growth and fragility, while the butterflies symbolize movement being persistent even in a muted state.*

# Basement Stairs

Kaitlyn Reesor, age 16

Fifth step up on the basement stairs

Sits a girl much older than she once was

It's funny. Her eyes are the same. Her hair is the same. But she feels so different

As she sits, she remembers the girls who were here before her

The eleven-year-old girl running up the stairs with sunshine in her smile

The twelve-year-old girl who walks down slower, learning to be cautious

The thirteen-year-old girl who sits farther down, debating whether she's worth loving and whether food is worth eating

The fourteen-year-old girl who sits on this same step wondering if her family will stay together, she studies the first signs of heartbreak on her face. She will feel this way again

The fifteen-year-old girl who is naive in love, believes you can love someone into staying. She's happy

The sixteen-year-old girl who finds out this isn't true, not once but twice. She studies the heartbreak that seems engraved into her features now. She learns to paint on her sunshine smile

As she nears seventeen, she wonders how many other girls will sit on this step

She hopes she'll like most of them

# *How Long Before I'm Beautiful?*

Jessica Num, age 16

How long before I'm beautiful?

How long until my self-consciousness can rest?

If I do all you say,

If I style my hair to the fittest,

If I dress according to your wardrobe,

If I gather every product to hide my imperfections,

How long until I can join you?

I want to be beautiful too.

Or will perception always shift to what's new?

Will the scope of my imperfections shift to the room I enter?

Will I then have to identify with a certain community?

Will I find somewhere to belong

If the standards never settle?

How long before I'm beautiful

If beauty's definition remains ever-changing?





## *Radiant Flowers*

Y.M.C., age 13

colored pencils and charcoal

*I always have the habit of finding the good in people, I call it "finding their inner flower". It's as if their own extraordinary flower has bloomed, and it's always beautiful when it does bloom. Since people tend to shut down when it does, so therefore their flower starts to wither. To avoid that people have to be their true self instead of what people want them to be.*



"Butterflies can't see their wings. They can't see how truly beautiful they are, but everyone else can. People are like that as well."

-Naya Rivera



## Nature's Beauty

Sree Kundrapu, age 12

Pencil, Black Marker and Sharpie

I love nature and butterflies. So I wanted to create an art work that was a butterfly. Then I came across a mandala design of a butterfly and I thought why don't I make my own designs for this. So I created a piece with a butterfly mandala and a positive quote based on butterflies. The reason for the quote is because I love spreading positivity to people and I thought I could incorporate that in this piece. I hope this positivity will enhance your day.

# He Waits

E. Ramirez, age 16

He waits...

Just him and his thoughts, exploring his mind

Mentally, "is he good?" "I think."

"Is he in pain?" "Kinda."

"Is it about his mom?" "Yes."

As he explores his thoughts, he thinks no matter what I do, "is my mom going to come back?"

No.

Do I miss her?

Yes. I do.

I would do anything for her to come back

To see her

To hear her

Man... 10 years

Every year on Mother's Day, my eyes rain

Man.. I'm done exploring my thoughts

# *That's When I Could Finally Breathe*

Zimo, age 18

I stare intently at the window, watching Xiaohong and Liming race down the tracks toward the finish line. The clouds above, dark and heavy, shroud what seems like the whole Earth. Xiaohong is on the rightmost track lane, and Liming is directly to her left. They remain at about the same pace until the last quarter of the race, when Xiaohong swerves slightly, causing her to slow down. They lock eyes for a brief moment before Xiaohong accelerates with all her strength, surpassing Liming and reaching the finish line by a mere centimeter, claiming victory. They high-five each other and say, "Friendship first, competition second!"

I must have been so bored out of my mind to have started imagining raindrop races using the generic names from my math textbook in front of me. It is the last resort against my math teacher's endless stream of numbers and equations, and Chinese idioms tempting me to doze off to a wonderland of warm and cozy dreams.

It has only been a few days since winter break, at the end of February. I sit in an average classroom in East China, where I was born and raised. Every student is wearing many layers with a thick puffer jacket in the classroom that lacks an air conditioning unit. An air conditioning unit can shield us against the unpredictable freezing gusts of wind that "pierce through our bones," as we say in China. The cold wooden chairs—small but just the right size for us fourth graders—exacerbate our discomfort. They are accompanied by yellow wooden desks that were worn down by a million years of use. The wood grains on the sides of the desks occasionally poke out like rose thorns that were sharpened by countless storms. They brush past my skin as if mocking me for not paying attention to the lecture.

I am on the right side of the classroom in the fourth row, which conveniently places me right beside my raindrop friends racing down to the dust-filled windowsill. Our math teacher, Tao Laoshi, is a forty-five-year-old man whom we amicably call "Wooden Fish Head" in Chinese because of his

monotonous lectures, infamous dad jokes, and sarcastic remarks. Yet somehow, we always find ourselves laughing at his every attempt to lift the mood. Our chuckles would escape our mouths and travel to every corner of the classroom, warming the freezing room.

I look around to find the people who warm my heart, no matter how cold my hands are or how frozen my mind is. Even through day after day of mundane classes, my classmates never failed to brighten any overcast days.

I glance just in time to catch our well-known class clown standing up and cutting Tao Laoshi off mid-sentence. He points to the window on the opposite side of the classroom and exclaims, "It's raining!"

Everyone's heads, attached by invisible strings like those in puppet shows, turn from our textbooks to the windows simultaneously. Even our Wooden Fish Head teacher! Our curiosity is met by the dramatic increase in the volume of the pitter-patter of raindrops on tiles, concrete, and grass that came in a flash as sudden as lightning. The strong wind carries the raindrops in every which way. They dance, bounce, fly through every passage into the classroom and rest on our textbooks, our backpacks, our warm hands. For some reason, I feel proud of discovering the rain minutes before everyone else.

As if God is on our side, the bell that marks the end of the period rings across the elementary school as the rain continues to intensify. The euphoric sound travels straight to my heart and bursts with excitement. I want to run outside and feel the rain in my own hands. After we all stand up, we perfunctorily bow and say "Goodbye, teacher—"

Without missing a beat, I turn to Fiona, my seatmate and best friend. I love everything about her, especially her eyes that droop down at the end, just like an innocent-looking puppy. Fiona's eyes are perfectly asymmetrical—her right eye is monolid while her left eye is hooded. Contrary to her adorable face, Fiona is the tallest girl in our class. Her tall figure, a shield beside me as I conquer every obstacle, always makes me feel safe.

"Fiona! Let's go see the rain!" I yell in Chinese.

“Exactly what I was thinking!” Fiona is on her way before I even finish speaking.

I hold on to her sleeve to not get carried away by the surge of classmates storming into the hallway.

School buildings in East China are unique, often featuring an open playground bordered by a three- to five-story-tall building that forms a rectangle from the bird's-eye view. My school building has four stories with a continuous open hallway bordering the playground. The hallway has a metal railing facing the playground and classrooms facing outside of the school. Fiona and I find a spot along the railing that is now packed all around the rectangle.

“What are you thinking about, Alina?”

“This rain reminds me of a Taylor Swift song,” I tell Fiona.

“Really? What's the song?” Fiona turns towards me while I look into the clouds.

“It's called ‘Clean,’” I dramatically turn toward her and serenade with passion: “Rain came pouring down / When I was drowning, that's when I could finally breathe.” I hold a microphone that only Fiona and I can see in my hand while I spin around. Fiona claps her hands enthusiastically, “Wow! What's the name of the song?”

“I'll send it to you on QQ after school!”

We continue to chat about small things while standing in the hustle and bustle of the hallways for an entire ten minutes. We continue to let the downpour mess every girl's ponytail into a jumbled mess. We continue to hold our hands out to catch the dense, heavy, fast, yet gentle raindrops despite the cold wind taking away every ounce of warmth on our fingertips. We continue to let raindrops rest on our soft red cheeks. We continue to inhale the cold air and exhale white puffs.

Everything comes to a halt as our Chinese Language Arts teacher walks through the hallway with the Chinese textbook and a memory drive in her hands. Huang Laoshi is not big, having the same stature as us fourth graders. She has a bob haircut and bangs with glasses that gives her a “teacher look.” Yet Huang Laoshi is the opposite of her appearance. She can shush the whole classroom with one sway of her arms, she can speak sense into people with her powerful language, and she can shout words that penetrate our souls.

“Why are you acting like you haven’t seen rain in ten years? Come inside before you all catch a cold!” Huang Laoshi exclaims with such intense volume that I am sure the students on the ground floor also jump at her fierceness.

I realize that, of course, we have seen heavier rain, but we have never seen rain in the crowded ambience of our school with our friends. I realize we always saw the fun in the smallest findings. I realize the lyrics I naively took at face value were never referring to rain. “Rain came pouring down / When I was drowning / That’s when I could finally breathe.”

Then, I feel the heavy weight of my puffer jacket being lifted off my shoulders. My hands are no longer cold; they are glowing in the blinding summer sunlight showering me. The warmth fills the emptiness that the flashback left in my heart. The seven years went by in a flash, as fast as the rain came that day in fourth grade. I sit in my tenth-grade English class in disbelief that such a vivid memory is only a flashback.

“Hey, Alina! What are you thinking about? You look so solemn.” My friend Claire chuckles and asks me from my left as my eyes adjust to the lighting of the classroom. Her brows are bunched together, but her eyes are smiling. Claire is definitely concerned by my out-of-character behavior, but she would never miss the chance to make fun of me, “Come on! Are you thinking about that Korean celebrity crush of yours?”

Looking into Claire's ocean blue eyes, an epiphany occurs to me. There will always be a sun in every seemingly average life. It will always shine through all your dark clouds of emotions. It will always warm your heart and evaporate the clouds into thin air. The sun is the classroom full of laughter at the teacher's joke. The sun is admiring the raindrop falling into the palm of your hand. The sun is the dribs and drabs of flashbacks peeking into the past. The sun is the friend that walks by your side in rainy weather, in cloudy weather, in foggy weather, in windy weather, and in sunny weather.

I answer Claire, "I'm thinking that the sun is very warm today."



## *Sunlit Lillies*

Sophia Pauze, age 15

Oil pastels

*I live not too far from my neighborhood's pond. I go there pretty often and once figured that I'd take inspiration in it.*



## Terror

Maya Zhao, age 15  
Watercolor

*I made this as a mockery of my sister's extreme and unrealistic fear for school and homework, which I found slightly comical.*



# *A Normal Experience Throughout Life: Anxiety*

Aditi Patel, age 15

On one Earth, there stands billions of lives.

Each of these lives having their own beginning and end.

Although every one of these lives are unique, they share one entity,

Anxiety.

Each life experiences a time where anxiety trickles in.

It is important to remember that it is just a thin stream of emotion.

This anxiety isn't something that takes you apart,

It's what brings everyone together.

Anxiety lives in our minds rent free.

Sometimes, it takes over because we are nervous,

And sometimes, it takes over because we are extremely happy.

Either way, it's just an ordinary emotion, which passes by like the rise of dawn and dusk.

How you interpret your anxiety determines its effect.

Interpret your anxiety in a positive way, and embrace its effects.

Interpret your anxiety in a negative way, and watch as it leads to demotivation and fear.

But remember, it's just an ordinary emotion.

On one Earth, there stands billions of lives.

Each of them having their own thoughts.

Each of these lives experiencing anxiety.

Let yourself embrace this anxiety, and let it lead you to your future.



## Dragon

Analia Lemus, age 15

lead pencil, bullpen, color pencils, markers, sharpie

*I just wanted to test out different mediums. So I tried out a pen drawing with a dragon.*

# Red Fiery Gloves

Fridos Moumouni, age 19

Those red fiery gloves

Which your hands seem to find an exact fit to them,

Invoke a hot flash from within me.

One would suggest it be infatuation,

Perhaps even admiration,

But whenever my eyes lay settled on those gloves you call comfort

But I call my shameful skin,

(You seem to have remained unmoved despite the watchful eyes,

While I remain rigid and full of broken sweat)

It only further reflects my suppressed, yet burning passion

Of breathing, without being much aware of it

(Is that a pulse that I feel on my forehead now?).

Your gloves shine a shade of the loosening of chains

While my eyes, still focused on such liberation,

Can only flare the dismaying signs of undesirable traits,

*"Which are to be extracted at once..."*

...So tell me, my friend--

How do I, too, join the flock of birds who've narrowly,

Yet successfully escaped the

~Tsunami~ ?



## *Between Shore and Sky*

Akshara Devisetty, age 12

Pencil drawing and shading on paper

This drawing was inspired by a peaceful sunset by the water. I imagined standing on a wooden dock and looking out at the sun going down between the hills. I added birds in the sky and a small tree branch to make the scene feel more like nature. I used pencil and shading to make the dock and hills darker so they stand out from the sky and water. I also drew the lines on the wooden floor to make it look like the dock is going farther away toward the water. I wanted this drawing to feel calm and relaxing, like a quiet place where someone could sit and watch the sunset.

# *Summer Brings Joy*

Varsha Lakshmanan, age 16

The sun is shining  
High above the trees  
The sky is cerulean  
And the puffy white clouds  
Float above our heads  
Perfect weather for joy  
Running around in flower fields  
Rolling down grassy hills  
Chasing a bird or two  
Laying on the warm ground  
Drinking lemonade  
Playing pretend  
"You be the knight  
And I'm the dragon"  
No matter how old you are  
You always need some joy and imagination



## *Colie*

Sophia Brouillette, age 16  
hand drawn digital

*This art piece was created using my younger sister, Nicole, as the model. I had originally created this artwork for her 13th birthday during September of 2025, and she has been a prominent model for a lot of my art throughout the years. I wanted to capture her soft and playful complexion through the art, and tried to show it through her facial expression. The artwork took well over 9 hours to complete, and I struggled for some areas of the piece, but overall I feel like it really came together nicely in the end.*

# *Your Green Eyes...*

Irma Quinones, age 18

Your eyes, like fine jewels only for the rich  
When I gaze upon you, my legs stagger  
I'm pulled in by your gaze, I've been bewitched  
But those eyes pierce my soul like a dagger

I, a holy man, a vessel for God  
You, a beautiful devil in disguise  
However, can I keep up with this facade?  
With your long hair, white fangs, and green snake eyes

I am tempted by the sins of your flesh  
The love we make is dark, but also sweet  
But when I'm with you, I feel so refreshed  
We lie bare against a soft, silken sheet

Your green eyes, like fine jewels, only for me  
Though a devil, my love, you set me free



## *Two Sides*

A., age 15

Digital art (ibis paint x)

*When creating this, I thought to myself: how two sides of the same coin look like? Both with the same goals and talents; but differently affected by a huge event, making one side the "evil" one, and the other the "kind" one.*



## *Dual Perspectives*

Aria Zhao, age 12

Pencil

*I wanted to draw something with multiple different styles. On the left side of the girl, I tried drawing her with more semi-realism, and on the right side more of an anime style.*

# *False Reality*

Sonya Wiker, age 12

Every piece, a carefully placed stone  
Shaping the truth you've made your own  
Secrets spill a burden you can't bear  
Leaving me lost in your tangled snare  
Watching their faces seeking their nod  
Praying their belief is your only god  
You feel the weight the bitter sting  
A choice given what will tomorrow bring  
It's a mess now  
A shattered scene  
No mending this no in-between  
Not your best interest this I know  
Watching your own heart start to slow  
What's done is done the river flows past  
Your truth holds you ever so fast  
Your words fall heavy a crushing sound  
Leaving my spirit on hollow ground

**WARNING!: MENTIONS OF SUICIDE/DEPRESSION**

# Emerald

Eva Hague, age 12

June 8th, 2002 - Saturday 6am

I could feel the sun creep at my eyes when they opened for the morning light to burn them. I sat up on my bed, my back aching and my arms burning. I look at my wall and stare at it, not moving, not blinking, just staring. The dark under my eyes seemed to consume every ounce of color in them. My feet reached the floor as I pushed myself off my bed almost automatically like I wasn't in control of my body's movement anymore.

I wander to my bathroom. There is trash covering the corner with flies swarming around it, the only light that worked was flickering on and off, a puddle of water dripped from the sink onto the ground. I stood in front of the mirror staring at myself. My skin was grey, my eyes were heavy, my lips were dry and cracking, and my hair was messy and oily. I didn't bother eating or brushing my teeth, I couldn't possibly do any more than my maximum. I picked up old and dirty clothes off the bathroom floor and put them on. As the fabric grazed my skin, I could feel the cold stains from water and blood soaking the shirt. I slipped on a jacket that was covered in dirt to cover my bruised arms and slipped on my shoes.

I walked downstairs, my parents had already left the house, leaving me alone. The only way I knew they thought about me was a note on the door asking for money. I walked hopelessly towards the door and stepped out. Even as the heat brushed my skin, I couldn't help but feel unbearably cold. I walked towards my car unaware and somehow also hyperaware of every movement I made. My hand grabbed the driver's door handle and weakly pulled it open. I sat on the coffee-stained cloth seats as the smell of rust and mold burned through my nose.

I began driving and without realizing it, thirty minutes had already passed and I was at work. It felt like time didn't exist when I was driving, and I had no control of anything. Time consumed my whole being. I walked away from my car and towards the door of the fast-food chain which I sadly had to call my job. The pay sucked but at least I could call myself employed. As I worked, hours passed through the day and slowly the sharp sting of the sun was brought down by the moon waking from its slumber.

I saw many faces throughout the day, all of which were blurred from my memory, including my own. I would often "blur" out faces and voices I heard. I never intended for it, it just happened. Finally, as the moon came fully out and the hours passed by, I could clock out

and go. I sighed, relieved that everything could be over. I didn't have to go through this anymore. I wasn't going to be alone anymore. I shut and locked the doors and made my way slowly to my car. I reached for my keys out of my pocket to unlock my car when I realized that my tires had been slashed and the word "SLUT" had been keyed into the side. I didn't get mad. I didn't really care. It wasn't like I was ever going to need my car after today.

"Taking the subway I guess,"

I mumbled to myself, it was the first words I had spoken in a while. I barely spoke. It hurt too, it made me feel vulnerable and weak. I didn't want to feel weak even if a part of me knew I was. I began walking to the subway, and with every step it burned, not physically or mentally. I wasn't sure in what way. But it burned.

I walked down the steps to the subway. It was devoid of life there wasn't anyone down there with me. I was alone. I waited for the train to come and felt the warm breeze graze my skin. It wasn't as cold as it had been before. It felt comforting. As the subway approached, I waited for it to come to a complete stop then walked in the doors. There were a few people in there with me, usually it was packed. But I guess it wasn't surprising considering how late it was.

Inside the train there was an older man, he was wearing a dark brown henley shirt and jeans, he reeked of smoke and oil. Besides him was a young child, around ten. The child was wearing a black coat that was too big for him and grey sweatpants. In the far corner of the subway car was a boy around my age, who appeared to be sixteen or seventeen. His hair was dark brown and had highlights, he was wearing a dark grey hoodie and dark blue shorts. But what was most noticeable about him was that his eyes were an unnatural *emerald green*. Unlike the rest of us he was standing. But like everyone else, all their faces began to turn into a blur.

I sighed and relaxed my head against the wall and shut my eyes, hopefully I would wake before the last stop. My eyes relaxed as I finally could take a break and rest, I barely slept and when I did it wasn't for long.

Not long after, my eyes opened. The train car was now completely empty except for me and that boy with *emerald eyes*, who was now wearing headphones. I was kind of surprised he was still here, considering how late it was.

I waited for the car to stop. I was going to get off at a random stop. It wasn't like I was planning on going home anyway. I could finally let go, be free, and forget. I felt my leg slightly shake, I assumed it was just because I was cold but it was summer and I knew the real reason why. Who wouldn't be scared or nervous right before they were going to do something irreversible? I slightly picked at my nails, the nail polish chipping off with it. Then the train stopped. The doors opened. I could finally leave. Be free. I stood up nervously and

walked towards the door.

Only after I had left the subway had I realized I had left my phone.

“Oh shit.”

I mumbled to myself.

Oh well. It wasn't like it was really that necessary to have anymore. I barely ever used it anyway, only when I needed a taxi for when my parents took my car. I felt the breeze bite my skin as I walked towards the bridge.

Every step I made I was hyperaware of, I could fully hear and experience every sound for the first time in a while. At this moment, nothing was blurred or muted. I could experience this, I could experience the world around me for the first and last time. The crunch of leaves under me, the wind quietly blowing, the crickets chirping, the sound of my shoes hitting the concrete under me. I could hear it all. It was beyond comforting. I wanted to keep every second of it as a piece of my soul.

I reached the peak of the bridge, slowly I slipped off my shoes. I stood there for a moment, staring at the stars and feeling the cold concrete under my feet. Then, I stepped up and everything went silent as I stood on the railing. I was unable to hear any of the noise around me. Including the footsteps that had, without me knowing, began to rush faster.

Then I let myself fall.

It was silent.

Peaceful.

Only for a moment.

I felt my body become weightless but the ground never came.

Someone gripped my hand tightly, while I was dangling from the bridge. Then their second hand reached for mine as I noticed a phone falling from their hand. My phone. I looked up, as tears that were pooling in my eyes began to fall. My eyes locked with a boy.

A boy with *emerald* green eyes.

# *The Lawyer's Return After Fifteen Years*

Smera Agarwal, age 13

based on Anton Chekhov's short story, *The Bet*

I was dumbfounded by what I was experiencing. It occurred just ten minutes after I had broken the bet with the banker and fled from his lodge on November 14, 1885, in Russia.

I walked unsteadily with each step along the streets while I admired about a hundred changes in front of my eyes. As I headed toward the railroad station, I saw my disheveled, aged appearance on a window. I was only around forty years of age, yet I appeared extremely thin like a skeleton. I had long, curly, and silver hair as a woman's, and an untidy beard. I couldn't help but feel pity for myself. As I continued walking toward the railroad station, I noticed some stores along the streets that contained a small box with a rod on top of it.

*Wait, I think I read about these in my books. What was it called? A telephone?*

I paid little attention to this, as I remembered I had indeed not seen my hometown for about fifteen years, so I expected to see one or two major changes. Moving on, I boarded a train that took me to my old workplace, a lawyer's office.

Apparently, I arrived at my destination in a few seconds. I still remembered how fifteen years ago it would take me half of an hour on the train. This was one of the reasons why I was always late to work. While I was getting off the train, I could smell a strong odor from nearby like oil.

I continued walking around, trying to see where I was, though all I noticed were streets that seemed unrecognizable.

"Do any of you know where the government's office is?" I questioned, nudging the person next to me. Yet, I only received strange glances toward me.

Suddenly, I noticed a little plaque on a building in front of me. The plaque read...  
"Government Office"

I stared in disbelief at the once old building that became a clean government's office and inside instead of candles held these bright, circular items. I placed my hand upon this unnamed item. In the next second I felt the heat transferring from it into my hand. I began twisting its metal part back and forth and observed how the sparks danced inside of the item.

"Excuse me for the disturbance, but does anyone have any extra light bulbs?" a government officer queried while searching through his items.

I stepped outside of the office and caught sight of the banker talking to someone. At that

moment, a rumination occurred in my mind. This gave me doubts on whether I should go and talk with the banker to make another bet to get money to live or visit a place I had wished to go to with my savings, Rome. I struggled to decide, but eventually, I made my choice and headed toward the banker.

As I moved closer toward the banker, I saw how much his appearance had changed. His face contained more wrinkles. Underneath his eyes and near his spectacles were deep, dark circles. Behind the banker was a demolished house, which I felt a sense of familiarity toward. I walked up to the banker. He noticed me and immediately turned around. I tapped on his shoulder from behind.

"Nice to meet you. What brings you here?" The banker trembled while fumbling with his fingers.

"I have come to talk about making another bet in return for money," I replied to the banker's troubled expression.

"Please leave me alone. I have already fallen into debt, and now I can't even afford my house!" the banker pleaded, clasping his hands together.

"I have been losing most of my wealth since the bet began, and you probably aren't aware of this, but I even suggested committing murder upon you before the bet ended, so I wouldn't need to give the rest of my money to you," the banker discussed while continuously stuttering between words.

My fists tightened, and I frowned at the banker.

"Are you trying to say that you were about to break a bet that cost me fifteen years of my life?" I exclaimed, burning with rage inside my body.

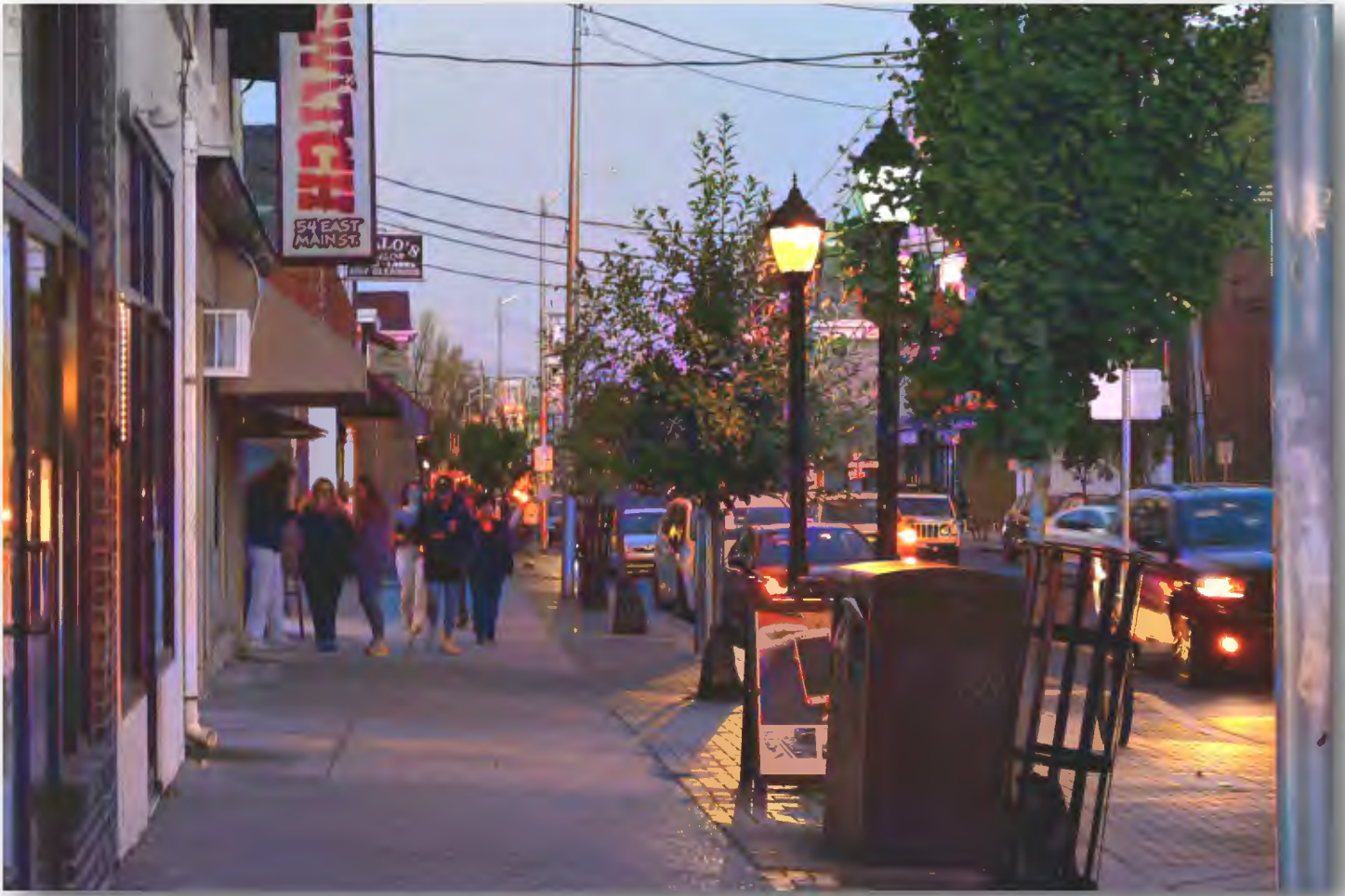
I wanted to argue more, but I knew it was worthless. Suddenly, two men walked up to the banker.

"Let's go. You must settle into a new home," Greg spoke firmly. Then, with a cold-hearted tone he spoke with his companion, Jackson. One look at Greg's intimidating appearance, Jackson slipped onto the concrete, and smacked his face on it. As he was gradually getting up, his glasses had a few cracks.

"Thank you, Greg and Jackson, for reminding me," the banker responded with a sigh.

At that moment, the banker left with his two friends. I suddenly came back to my senses and realized what the bet had done to me and the banker.

After what just occurred, I remained silent for a few moments before making a sensible decision. I began grabbing items from the marketplace and started packing my bags. In the next moment, I saw myself heading toward Rome.



## *Late Night Main Street*

Anissa Stewart, age 17

### Photography

*Late Night Main Street* is a photograph taken on the main street of Newark, Delaware. This picture was inspired by a school project where I had to replicate the photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson's style. My process was to capture an average college student's night on the busy main street and make it feel as natural as possible.

# Gross Motor Dyspraxia

Theo Gallagher, age 13

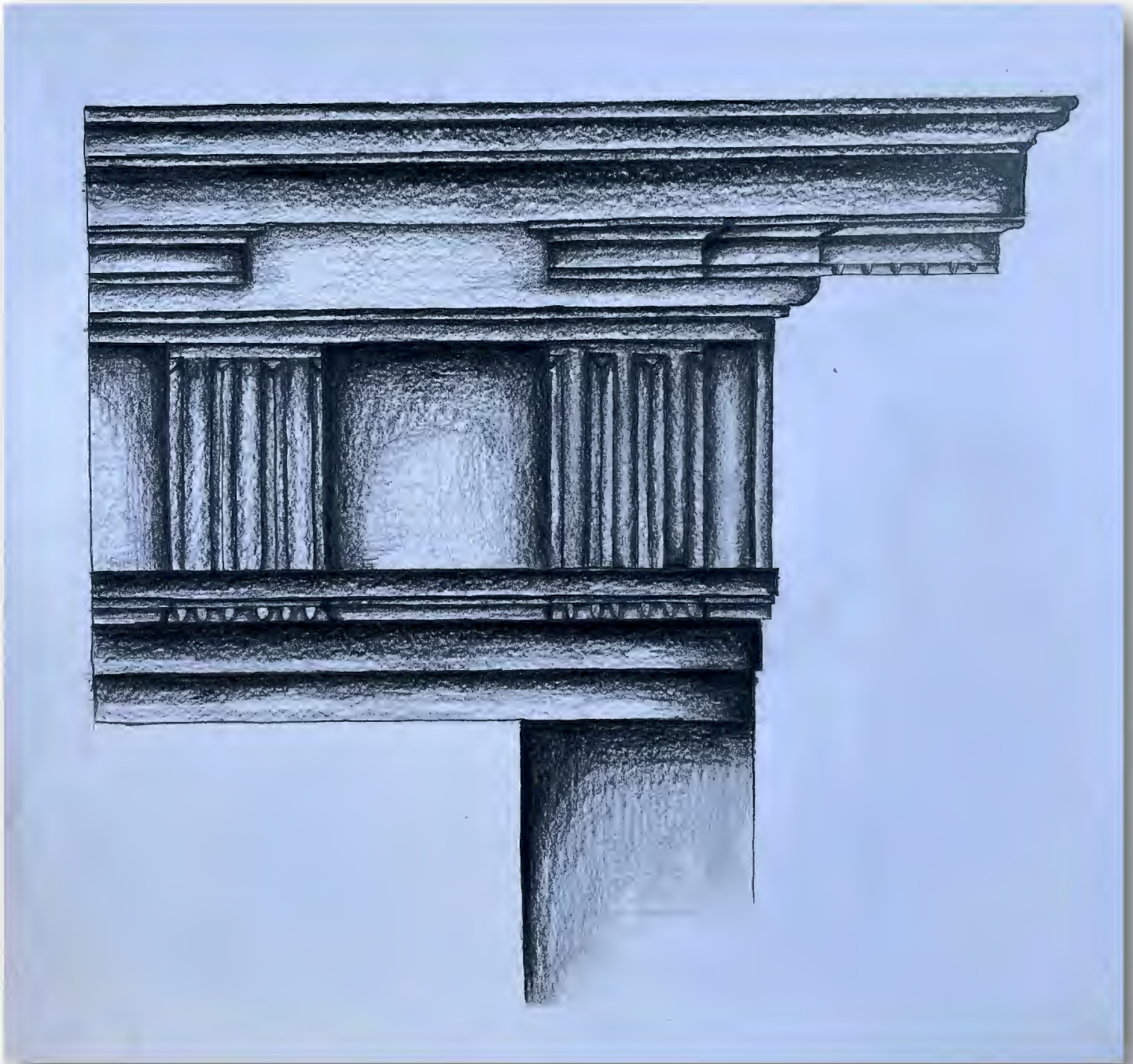
When I walk, I think about it.  
I have to think about it to be able to do it without falling over.  
And hurting myself.  
When I was younger, I tripped on the pavement.  
I had to get stitches in my eyelid.  
If I get walking wrong, I trip.  
I fall.  
I break.  
My eyelid snaps.  
The blood spills out.

For most people walking is like breathing,  
Something that you do without thinking.  
For them, running is a bit harder.  
But they don't have to think about movement.  
Stretches, assembling things, drawing, handwriting.  
All second nature.

I think about walking more than I need to.  
Sorta.  
I think about walking to mask my dyspraxia.  
I watch how normal people walk  
And try to copy them.  
That was how I was raised.  
By my mom.  
By my teachers.  
By the hours and hours of PT.  
By the boy that dug his pudgy sausage fingers into my  
Shoulder blade, leaving behind little viper scratches.  
The scratches burn like hot coals, they hurt.  
Rinse and repeat.  
14 times.

The boy hurt me because I was bad at PE.  
I was bad at PE because of my dyspraxia.  
So that's why I mask.  
So that's why I'm afraid.





## *Mutular Doric Entablature*

Tate Cunningham, age 16

Graphite

*This piece was created to further continue my study of classical architecture. I drafted the entablature on a separate piece of paper, then transferred the drafted copy to paper and filled it in with graphite.*

# *When in Rome*

Christopher Churchill Hahn, age 13

In 2167 A.D., Germany was innovating rapidly: new inventions were being developed, the Dütcher Zukunftspreise (German Future Prize) was being awarded, and so on. One group of scientists is working toward the Dütcher Zukunftspreise: Gustav Schmidt, Hartwig Häusler, Rupert von Schlabrendorff, and Felix Taurus. Gustav, Hartwig, and Rupert were German scientists, while Felix was a Latin man who also spoke German.

In the laboratory, Gustav and Hartwig were working on a device to make flying easier. The device resembled a large beach ball with seats and a computer inside, with one small porthole reminiscent of a ship. Rupert was studying how to activate the flying device in a separate room with a window to observe the lab. Gustav was working on the construction of the device's outer shell, and Hartwig was working on its interior. Felix was handing out the tools to Gustav and Hartwig. Previous attempts to create this device almost blew up their laboratory, but the scientists were confident that this time their efforts would be successful.

Gustav had just finished constructing the exterior of the device, while at the same time, Hartwig finished the construction of the interior. Gustav told Rupert to test out the device. Hartwig noticed that there was a construction flaw in the interior of the device and told the others. Felix left the observation area to see if he could help Gustav and Hartwig inside the device.

Rupert, eager to test the invention, said through the speaker, "Everybody, stand clear. I am about to start the device."

Gustav, Hartwig, and Felix all shouted to Rupert not to start it yet, but because he had headphones on which hummed loudly from the device's power, he could not hear them. When Rupert threw the final switch of the controls, Gustav, Hartwig, and Felix vanished with the machine in a big gleam of light as intense as if Rupert were right in front of the sun. Rupert froze, blinded by the light.

Before the three scientists knew it, they were in First Century Rome, right in the middle of the city. Many Roman citizens gathered around the device, not knowing what to expect. Gustav asked, "Do you think it's safe to leave the machine now?"

"I don't know, let me check," replied Hartwig.

"Felix, could you check the computers to see where we are?" Gustav asked.

"Sure," said Felix.

As Hartwig looked out the window, he saw the assembled Romans with the Colosseum looming in the background. Felix confirmed from the computers their location in time and space. Felix called Gustav and Hartwig to see the computer; they were confused and amazed by the information. "This explains the brand-new Colosseum and the people dressed in togas," said Hartwig.

While Hartwig, Gustav, and Felix were in Rome, Rupert regained consciousness. Worried about his missing friends, he started making another device.

"This isn't a flying machine, this is a time machine!" Gustav exclaimed.

"How is this possible, though?" asked Felix.

"Maybe Rupert entered the wrong coordinates," suggested Hartwig.

"Let's look around," said Gustav.

When the scientists stepped out of the time machine, they were immediately mobbed with people whose language was incomprehensible to Gustav and Hartwig. "They are speaking Latin," said Felix. "We are taught this language in school in my country."

"What are they saying?" asked Hartwig.

"They are asking who we are, where we came from, and what the device behind us is," replied Felix. "I can't make out everything because of the chattering."

"Should we explore?" asked Gustav.

"Sure," replied Hartwig and Felix, as they pushed through the crowd.

As they roamed, they stumbled across a golden house. "This is the *Domus Aurea*, the Emperor's palace," said Felix. "I read about this in a book."

As they were about to walk in, guards swarmed and surrounded them with gladii drawn. Then, a well-dressed person in red and white robes came to the scientists. Felix realized that this person was Emperor Nero. The emperor addressed them.

Gustav asked Felix, "What did he say?"

Nero looked offended and said something to his guards, who then took the scientists to a prison. They waited hours in a cell that had only a hay bed and stone walls.

Eventually, the guard called them to exit the cell; the three scientists obeyed. The guard pointed his gladius at them and gestured for them to walk. They walked to a place which Felix recognized as the Roman *Basilica*, cathedral. They eventually entered the *Basilica* and saw Emperor Nero and many guards around the building.

The interrogation was long and grueling. Felix served as translator. After this ordeal, the scientists were sent back to prison. Three days later, three soldiers came to the scientists'

cell. The Roman soldiers took the scientists to their device. The scientists saw Nero, Roman philosophers, and more soldiers.

The philosophers and Nero marveled at the time machine. Gustav saw this as an opportunity to escape. Gustav whispered to Hartwig and Felix to help fix the time machine so they could escape. While the Romans were distracted by the time machine's exterior shape, Gustav quickly and quietly planned with Hartwig and Felix.

Their plan finalized, Felix and Gustav went to Nero, ostensibly to discuss the time machine. While the Romans were all distracted, Hartwig climbed into the machine and started repairs. Suddenly, Gustav's phone rang. The Romans were all startled by the noise, immediately turning their attention to Gustav, who took his phone out to answer it. In a wave of static, Rupert's voice asked, "Where are you?"

Everyone was surprised. Gustav replied, "Umm... In the first-century Roman Empire." "Good. That is all the information I need. Bye!" Rupert replied.

Gustav and Felix stared at each other. Suddenly, Nero demanded something.

Felix said, "Emperor Nero demanded to have your phone and to tell him what that voice was."

Gustav handed his phone to Emperor Nero. He examined the phone. Gustav said to Felix, "Tell him that he was calling someone on the phone, and it was our fellow scientist, Rupert."

Felix translated that into Latin for Nero, who then inquired about the name of this device. Felix told him, "Phone, a device with which people could see and talk to each other from a distance."

Gustav saw that the Roman philosophers and the guards were just as astonished as Nero was. Gustav immediately ran over to the time machine and started working on the exterior.

Then, one of Nero's guards saw that Gustav and Hartwig were missing. He instantly alerted Nero, who shouted, "Seize them!" in Latin.

The guards quickly advanced with gladii drawn. Just as the scientists were about to be taken to prison, another metallic sphere appeared in the sky. It fell to the ground. The Romans were startled by the thump. As the hatch opened, Felix saw a figure stepping out. "Rupert, it's you!" Felix exclaimed.

Rupert yelled, "Quickly, get Gustav and Hartwig into the time machine."

Felix helped Gustav wrestle free of a guard's grip while Hartwig wrenched a gladius from another and escaped with the others into the time machine. Nero shouted orders; the guards started scraping the time machine with their gladii. Rupert quickly entered the coordinates for Germany, 2167 A.D. The time machine zapped out of sight. The guards were immediately flung back. The Romans were shocked by how the device just seemed

to have been zapped out of existence. Nero did not see it as a total loss, though. He ordered his philosophers to start researching the phone that had been left behind. At the lab, the time machine materialized. The scientists opened the hatch to get out. They all took a breath of relief. Hartwig noticed that he still possessed the gladius he took from the Roman guard. In the observation area, Felix saw that the equipment had recorded everything from the sensors in the device. He grinned as he told the others, "Success! We got this all on camera!"

"We'll present this to the chancellor," cried Hartwig.

"What about my phone, though?" asked Gustav.

"What?" asked Hartwig.

"My phone is still in the possession of Emperor Nero," replied Gustav.

"We'll get enough money from the Düttscher Zukunftspreise to buy you a new phone," joked Rupert.

At the *Schloss Meseberg* (the Chancellor's palace), the scientists met with Chancellor Wendel Reyer. "Well, what rubbish do you mad scientists have to waste my time now?" he asked.

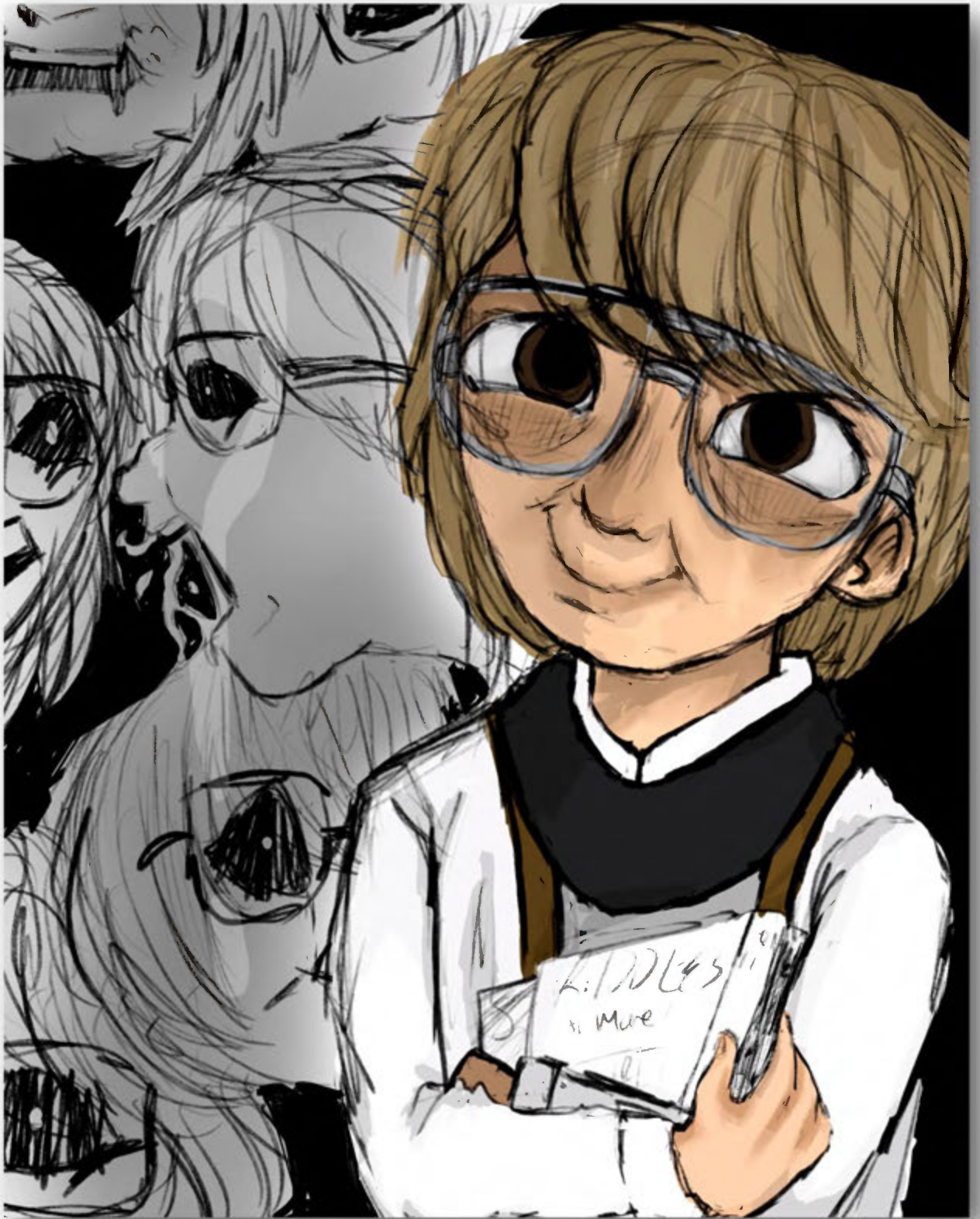
The scientists didn't know why he was so grumpy, but they told him they felt sure he would award them the Düttscher Zukunftspreise when they presented him with proof of their time machine.

"Time machine," he scoffed. "We've had time machines for a century. Stop wasting my time!"

He turned his back and stormed away. The scientists were dumbfounded. Eventually Rupert whispered, "The phone."

"What?" Gustav asked.

"The Romans unlocked its secrets. All the information is stored on it. You just gave them a technological revolution, creating a timeline far in advance of our own."



## *Little Riddler*

J. Troescher, age 16  
Digital Art - Procreate

*Inspired off of the younger aged Edward Nashton from the comic "The Riddler: Year One". I heavily relate to his character and enjoy sketching his anatomy.*

# *Full of Life*

Kaitlyn Reesor, age 16

Do you remember when we were children?  
So full of hope and a love for life  
It was our essence, just to be full  
As we said what we thought out loud  
As we walked through halls and down streets like we owned them  
When our biggest fear was the dark  
Do you remember when we were children?  
A new best friend at every Chick-fil-a or McDonalds  
Our imaginations ran wild and free  
We ate until our stomachs were full, not once checking calories  
This lack of fear of being "too much"  
Do you remember when we were children?  
I want to be full like that again  
Full of hope and a love for life  
With a confidence in knowing I'm enough for those who matter  
And I always will be



## *Why Do We Run from the unknown*

Advika Krishna, age 14

digital art: Autodesk Sketchbook

*When we don't know something, it makes us feel insecure and afraid that something larger and more dominant than us will take our place or impact us.*

# Scars

Lex Bowman, age 16

I came across a video. It was short and simple but for some reason I watched it for hours. The video was gut wrenching, and I immediately added the song used to my playlist while my tears seeped into my fresh red lines on my wrist. I went over my day in my head over and over again. Wondering why the hell am I not enough. Is it just a thing all teenagers feel at this age? I cleaned up the drops of red with a small tissue and wiped my eyes with another. I went to the bathroom and washed my face before staring at myself in the mirror. And I mean I really looked at myself. I normally avoid mirrors and cameras but today I stayed. I stared. Do I really look like that? How is anyone my friend if that's what they have to see every day? I wouldn't be friends with me. I go back to my room and lie on my bed. Thinking all these thoughts I probably shouldn't think. I look at the old markings on my arms and wrists. I look at the fresh ones too. I don't feel it. I never feel it. Why can't I feel it? Why can't I feel anything?



## *Magenta Distortion*

Eiliyah Tasneem, age 15  
Digital Art

*I didn't exactly have a certain message I wanted to convey with this piece; I simply drew a character from a story my friend and I are creating.*



# *Do More Be More*

Ferdinand Agyapong, age 17

Do More Be More

A phrase I have followed through my high school career

Do More

Do as much as you can

Follow all your interests

See where they take you

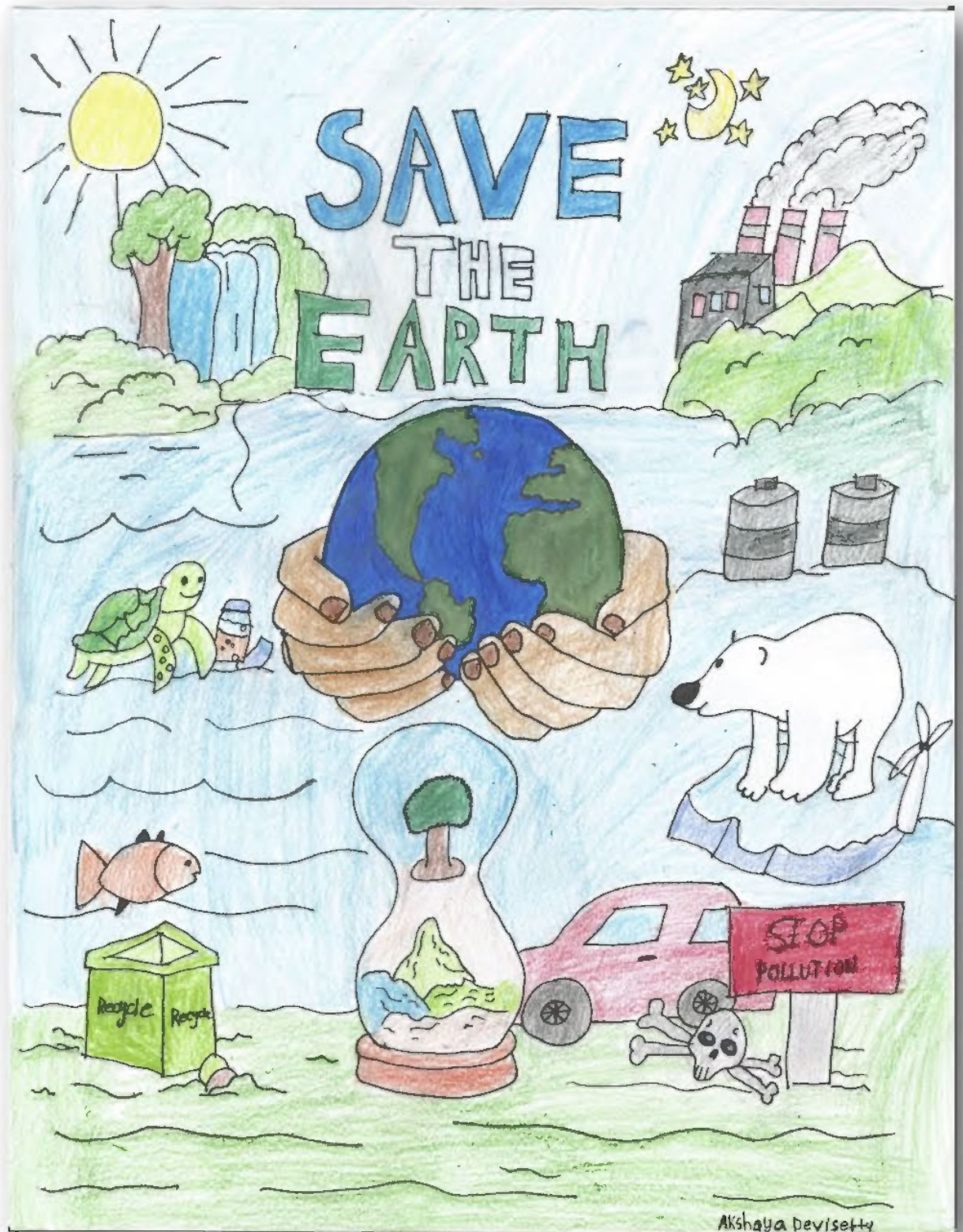
I have done more

Each experience has helped me Be More

As my high school book closes and the next one opens I ask myself

Will I still Do More?

Will I Still Be More?



## The Earth Speaks Through Art

Akshaya Devisetty, age 12  
Black pen and color pencils

*Twisted plastics suffocate the streams, yet life struggles to return. I was inspired by polluted waters and the silent fight for survival. This piece urges us to cleanse, care, and restore what we've poisoned.*

# Population Control

Jordan Kerr, age 14

At six,

Your smile is gleaming, genuine, and light.  
dreams like stars, colors ignite.

An ice cream shop, an astronaut, the world is your stage,  
No worry, no cage, no uniform page.

But at ten,

That wonder gets pulled away.

Tests define your worth in every way.

"Be the best, don't trail behind,"

A string of numbers keeps you in a bind.

Thirteen

You're gazing at the glass,  
pondering if their affection will amass

"Am I pretty? Am I great?"

Fifty percent get obsessed with weight.

Reflections are deceitful, and standards sting,

Purity is lost on a foolish king.

At fifteen, the comments contrast

"Be yourself, but not too much to aghast,"

Sixty-eight percent disguise

Seeing ourselves through hateful eyes.

Constructed by society, we lose the core.

Neglect the stories we had before

Sixteen

Independence tastes like flames,

But secrets burn and leave their shame.

Forty-one percent stand apart,

island's drifting, shattering hearts.

Seventeen

Visions grow weak,

doubt screams loud and hope can't speak.

Anxiety Pounces, depression bites,

Thirty percent are robbed of sleep at night.

Eighteen

A squall of directives collide:

Be powerful, be muted, be resigned, take pride.

Work hard but not more than a leading man,

fit every character - because you "can".  
Fifty-eight percent feel torn,  
confined in norms that hide the thorns.

Adulthood  
the clock's a blade,  
"Marry, kids, succeed, that's how you play,"  
Your life laid out in every which way.  
Seventy percent, the numbers display,  
tethered to agendas, they didn't portray

This is not just customs, not just care.  
This is compression swaddled as a prayer.  
This is affection that smothers breath.  
This is life that impersonates death.

But  
What if valuation were not a grade?  
What if dreams can never fade?  
What if schedules fractured apart,  
And freedom flowered inside the heart?

We  
can convert the story, modify the frame,  
kindle the fire, instigate the flame.  
Re-evaluate what it means to be,  
break down the cage and set us free.

So listen now.  
Your value is not theirs,  
your trail is your own, past their stares.  
Your existence is not their enclosure or aim.  
Be your own because you can reclaim.

Be the spark,  
Be the fight.  
Be the truth,  
Be the light.

The mass of growing up won't win.  
because freedom always starts within.



## *Trick of the Eye*

Smera Agarwal, age 13

colored pencil, abstract visual art, drawing/coloring

*My influence was my art teacher who inspired me and my classmates to create artwork based on the time period when Optical Illusion was popular among artists. My thought process while making this piece was first to think of something creative like blending two illusions together into one piece. Secondly, I drew a sketch of my artwork as I was planning how my vision was going to look like on paper. Then, I began coloring my piece with colored pencils while maintaining a gradation at specific areas. Lastly, I edited my artwork by coloring in small places where I saw small white spots. After I finished my artwork I realized that there was a major theme behind it, which is not everything appears the same from the outside. I thought this was significant because by looking at my artwork it may seem like a never ending puzzle, whereas it's supposed to convey how life is not perfect and there will be obstacles.*

# *Spinning...*

R. Marie, age 13

Sometimes my mind doesn't stop.  
It spins like I'm on a Gravitron in the market,  
in the middle of candy, crowds, sounds, and constant stimulation.  
There's no break.

Even when I get home  
and go to bed after a long and late day,  
the Gravitron is still burned into me.  
That Gravitron.  
The one that spins.  
The one I go on over and over again.  
The whole week, I'm still dizzy.

I have a hard relationship with my brain.  
I get so dizzy.  
I get nauseous.  
Then my parents must take care of me.  
Again.  
It's getting old.  
It keeps spinning.  
I keep going on the ride,  
and I can't get off of it.  
I love it.  
I hate it.  
I try to share it with others  
but others know how to get off of rides.  
Unlike me.

A perfect description is hyper.  
The ride is hyper.  
I'm hyper.  
Hyper.  
When I find a ride I love... sometimes more than one,  
I learn the blueprints for it,  
how to operate it,

and I go on it over and over again  
until I crash.  
There is no break.  
I fixate on it.  
I fixate and get hyper.

Now the Gravitron is on fire-  
overheating.  
It only spreads,  
and I can't seem to find an extinguisher.  
Ever.  
There's a name for my fire.  
These words.  
Hyper fixations,  
obsessions.  
Gravitational pull,  
smoke.  
Impossible to turn off.  
The fire has yet to go out.  
I'm dizzy and coughing.



## *Nightwing and Red Hood*

Analia Lemus, age 15

Digital—Procreate

*In this piece I was mostly testing my digital abilities in drawing fan art and fictional characters. I also wanted to present the relationship of brotherhood between both characters from DC.*

# Obstacle

Marah, age 15

Sometimes I wonder if we hold ourselves back.  
We're prideful but get scared of just one crack.  
We have to be bold, don't think about the outcome.  
We have to be strong and think about the races we've won.

Age is just a number that makes you think you can't succeed.  
But at birth on our contracts is that what we agreed?  
We have to stand tall and hold our heads up high.  
Use our voices and snuff out all the lies.  
The lies aren't from other people, they're just from us.  
We dismantle and complain until we're in the dust.  
Thunderclouds in the sky glaring at the ground.  
Waiting for us to make a sound.  
We physically SHOUT and they start to stop.  
All because we rose to the top.

Everyone smile, and be ready to speak.  
We are of the strong and not of the weak.  
Speak up and do right.  
Be proud because we've regained our sight.



## *Bearer of the Mane*

Armaan Ghiya, age 14  
Charcoal

*"Bearer of the Mane" is an artwork displaying the king of the jungle in a calm pose showing control over aggression. The lions mane symbolizes the power and responsibility the king has to bear. I focused on every pencil stroke to create texture and depth. The theme of the artwork is leadership, authority and silent strength.*





## *Colorful Thoughts*

Lyla Friday, age 13

Canvas with acrylic paint

*I had been into splatter paint during last December and I was watching Grey's Anatomy, where the character of Derek Shepard was operating. I wanted to do something with the brain and splatter paint. I found an image of a brain outline online and I couldn't quite master the outline myself, so I printed the image of the brain out, cut it out, and outlined the brain on the canvas. Then when doing the splatter paint, I kept the image of the brain on the outline while doing it. With this piece, I was the only middle schooler to be in the 2025 PCBT (Providence Creek Ballet Theater) Art Gala.*

# Opposite

Brayden Hauser, age 16

It hurts to watch someone fall  
into the shell of you  
Watch them dance the same routine  
your footsteps engraved

Watch your reflection echo back  
a version of you, slightly different  
And perhaps slightly better

Making me ask questions  
that draw stark conclusions

Why my body double looks so much like me  
And yet so different  
Maybe the reason it hurts so much is  
because I see so much of myself in you  
And yet so much of myself by you was taken

All my special was drained  
and given to my opposite instead  
You picked someone who was everything i am

and yet  
everything i am not



# *I Know Her*

Lex Bowman, age 16

I met a girl one junior year,  
She lit the room with laughs and cheer.  
With goofy voices, wild disguise,  
She brought out joy in dullest eyes.  
But something felt a little wrong,  
A silent note beneath her song.  
Her smile would fade before her eyes,  
She wore long sleeves to hide the lies.  
It all made sense one quiet day,  
She let her mask fall all the way.  
She spoke of pain she'd held within,  
Of nights spent in a place she'd been—  
A hospital for hearts that break,  
Where laughter hides the tolls they take.  
The sleeves, the jokes — they told the truth,  
And I could see, 'cause I'd lived that youth.



## *No More Secrets*

Sahasra Komirishetty, age 15  
Digital art made on Procreate

*Mizuki, the person depicted in the picture, is shown in an open field of grass. She originally had been holding this huge secret from her best friend and after finally opening up, she becomes more carefree and feels less trapped. Daisies also represent new beginnings, which shows her new beginning after finally opening up. All in all, this piece is about being able to trust those closest to you and feeling open.*



## *Bright Red*

Shiqi (Emily) Ding, age 15

Photography

*Wandering on the streets of "Shang Xia Hang," I rested on a nearby bench. When I looked up at the huge tree I was seated by, I saw pretty red lanterns hanging from its branches. With my phone quickly out, the beautiful sight was now captured.*

# *Fireflies*

Brayden Hauser, age 16

I used to catch fireflies at night  
Golden wishes to capture and release  
I thought the shooting stars would talk it through  
And all my woes would cease  
Now I watch them disappear at night  
All my wishes that flew away  
Dead, in the jar in the corner of my room  
Even captured they didn't stay  
They've taken leave, they've caught the tide  
My wishes ne'er came true  
Sometimes I stay awake to watch their light  
Wishing on the fireflies come through



## *Final Farewell*

Sophia Brouillette, age 16

hand drawn digital

*During the time that this piece was created, I was about to move houses and had to leave the woods and creek behind our old house. This piece was like a last goodbye to all of that. The children spirits represent the fact that most of my childhood was spent in those woods, so it's almost like my spirit is still there. I tried a lot of new techniques with this piece and I put a lot of emotion and effort into it.*

# 🌲 99 Nights in the Forest 🌲

Aaradhya Kumar, age 13

A kid walked alone through the forest, humming softly while eating his sandwich. Sunlight filtered through the tall trees, and birds chirped overhead. Everything felt calm—almost too calm. Suddenly, the bushes rustled. Before the kid could react, a deer burst out the trees. But this was no ordinary deer. It stood upright on two legs, its eyes sharp and intelligent. In one swift motion, it grabbed the kid and disappeared into the forest, leaving only silence behind.

Meanwhile, back at the Agency Headquarters, alarms began flashing. Agents hurried across the room as a message came through.

“Agent Sophie, we just got a report about missing kids in a magic forest,” one of the agents called out.

Sophie stood up immediately. “Gather my team and send us the location,” she ordered.

Minutes later, Sophie and her team—Molly, Diego, Isabelle, and Noah—arrived at the entrance of the forest. A tall metal gate blocked the path, surrounded by large signs that read *DO NOT ENTER*. Park rangers stood quark, their expressions tense.

“We’ve been called here,” Sophie said firmly. “What happened?”

“We’ve received reports that four kids went missing,” one ranger explained. “Witnesses claim a deer standing on two legs captured them. Something strange is going on in this forest.”

“Don’t worry,” Noah said confidently. “We’ll figure it out.”

The ranger hesitated before opening the gate. “You have 99 nights to solve this mystery. Good luck.”

The gates creaked open.

Inside the forest, the air felt heavier, almost alive. Near the entrance was a crafting bench holding axes and sacks behind a board displaying photos of the missing kids.

“It’s going to get dark soon,” Sophie said. “We’ll need wood for a fire if we want to survive the night.”

“It’s midday,” Molly said, confused.



“This forest is magical,” Sophie replied. “Time works differently here.”

Isabelle nodded. “Let’s gather wood and figure out why the deer would take the kids.”

“What if the deer was protecting its home?” Molly wondered.

“That’s something we’ll need to find out,” Sophie said thoughtfully.

They split up. Diego and Noah went one way while Sophie, Isabelle, and Molly went another to get wood.

“Night is approaching,” the wind whispered.

“The wind can talk?!” Sophie said, stunned.

They regrouped at base and added logs to the fire. As the flames grew, the sky darkened instantly.

“Only three minutes of daylight?” Isabelle muttered.

“This place is quixotic,” Diego said.

From behind the trees, the deer watched them silently.

Morning came just as suddenly. Diego spotted a watchtower nearby.

“Good eye,” Sophie said. “We might find clues up there.”

“Inside the tower, Sophie found old papers, Isabelle and Molly scanned the forest through the windows, and Noah and Diego found flashlights. Sophie read on note aloud: *This deer walks on two legs. Bullets don’t work on this thing. Its birthplace is at the edge of the forest. I don’t think I’ll survive another night.*”

“How do we stop it?” Molly asked.

“I think we entered this forest uninvited,” Sophie said quietly. “And now we’re next.”

“Night is approaching. The deer is hungry tonight,” the wind whispered.

“Sprint back to base,” Diego shouted.

They ran—but the deer appeared in front of them, roaring. A thick fog blocked their escape. The deer closed in. Suddenly, Noah’s flashlight flicked on. The deer recoiled, shielding its eyes.

“It’s afraid of light! RUN!” Sophie shouted.

They escaped just in time.

The next morning, Sophie made a decision.

“The note said the deer came from the edge of the forest. That’s where we’re going.”

Suddenly, a voice spoke behind them.

“Care for a trade?”

A man stood there, wearing animal pelts.

“I’m the pelt trader,” he said. “Give me a bunny foot, and I’ll give you upgrades.”

“This forest is my home,” he added mysteriously.

Sophie didn’t trust him—but agreed.

The team split again. Sophie, Molly, and Isabelle found a lab hidden in the forest. Inside were microscopes, computers, and experiment notes.

“Test Subject 1: Deer,” Sophie read. “Enchanted strength and intelligence. Escaped containment.”

“It’s not a monster,” Molly realized. “It was an experiment.”

Meanwhile, the boys ignored the wind’s warning—and were attacked by cultists at the campfire. The girls returned just in time to help fight them off.

“Not everything’s as it seems,” the pelt trader said later, handing over axes.

The girls rescued the first kid—but his room was cozy, safe, and warm.

“The deer’s actually pretty cool,” the kid said.

Sophie noticed a number on his backpack: 3. They rescued the other kids too—each backpack labeled 4, 5, and 6.

As they tried to escape, park rangers appeared and trapped the deer.

“We’re containing the monster,” one ranger said.

Sophie’s stomach dropped.

“The deer isn’t the monster,” she realized. “The kids are experiments. The rangers made the deer.”

“We’ve been bamboozled,” Isabelle whispered.

They acted fast. Molly freed the deer. Sophie confronted the rangers in the lab.

“We help people,” Sophie said. “And today, that includes stopping you.”

The deer stormed in, saving the kids.

The team escaped as rescue helicopters arrived.

“Great job, agents,” someone said.

Back in the forest, the deer wandered alone—until a shadow passed overhead. A hooting echoed through the trees. Another experiment had begun.

87 floors later, Only seven made it out



## The Survivors of the Labyrinth

Conor Ellis, age 14

Pencil and Colored pencils

I made it because the Underground Labyrinth is an event in The Battle Cats where every time you complete a floor, some of your "Units" get lost in the labyrinth, with a chance to rescue one every now and then. The units that get trapped are all up to chance, same with the rescuing. Every 10th floor you lose more than usual. For the labyrinth you need a TON of units. I entered with around 400 units. The 7 that I drew were the only ones that didn't get trapped, after completing 87/100 floors. You also need a full team of 10 to challenge the next floor.



## *Periwinkle Flower Meadow*

Anissa Stewart, age 17

Digital Art - Procreate

*Periwinkle Flower Meadow* was an art piece inspired by my love of flowers. I always love taking pictures and looking at different types of flowers, how they are shaped, their vibrant colors, and their different stages of the flower life cycle. So, I really wanted to capture a flower, allow for it to be the main subject, and speak for itself in my piece.

# Chapter 1: It's Lonely

Irma Quinones, age 18

(A snippet of a *Good Omen's* fanfiction called *Ineffable*)

It was a sunny day in Soho, London. People were chatting away about anything they found enticing, and all seemed well. But in a small corner bookshop, an angel was reorganizing every single book in the shop while a demon was on his tenth bottle of wine.

"Mr. Crowley," Muriel spoke. They had a stack of books in their hands. Crowley looked at the angel with a drunken look on his face, "What. Do. You. Want?!" He asked drunkenly and angrily. Muriel was taken aback by the demon's attitude, but they understood his anger. "I think you should give it a rest on the wine. You've already had ten bottles." Crowley scoffed. He stood up and looked at Muriel, "You can't tell me what to do!" He took a swig of wine and headed towards the door. Muriel put the books down on the desk and rushed towards the door, in an attempt to stop the very drunk Crowley. "Where are you going?" Crowley looked back at the angel, "I'm going home."

He opened the door and tried to leave, but Muriel quickly slammed the door and looked at Crowley, with frustration in their eyes. Crowley was a bit taken aback by the angel's actions. If he weren't so drunk, he would be impressed by Muriel's actions, but he regained what little composure he had and tried to open the door again, but to no avail. No matter how hard he tried or what miracle he used, Muriel was not letting him leave the bookshop in his condition.

"Out of my way!" Crowley tried to push past the angel, but Muriel was one step ahead. They grabbed the half-empty bottle of wine from the demon's hand. "You should at least sober up before you leave. You can hurt someone, or worse, you can get hurt." Crowley took a step away from the angel. "I'm a demon! I can't get hurt." His breathing began to quicken, his sight slightly blurred, and his ears rang loudly like the bells of Notre Dame.

Dark clouds began to form as they surrounded Crowley. Everything began to disappear as it was being consumed by the dark clouds. Crowley could see nothing but darkness, but he could hear someone calling out his name; he couldn't make out the voice, though. The voice got louder and louder. "Crowley, Crowley!" He felt warm hands caressing his cheeks gently. "Crowley, my dear, breathe." The voice was soft and comforting. Strangely, the voice was familiar to Crowley. He opened his eyes and saw Aziraphale. Seeing Aziraphale again felt like a shot through the heart, but he couldn't help but reach out to him. "Oh Crowley," Aziraphale spoke softly while holding Crowley's hands,

"I forgive you." Crowley pulled his hands away from the angel. He was shocked, and it clearly showed on his face, but Aziraphale wasn't at all phased. He was smiling and acting like what he said didn't stab Crowley through the heart.

Crowley's shock turned into anger. He clenched his fist, but he could never hit Aziraphale, so he did the next best thing he could think of. He pushed him. "Get away, Aziraphale!" He pushed Aziraphale and watched as he fell into an endless black abyss. The angel didn't even scream or try to save himself. He just let himself fall. Crowley was brought out of his thoughts by the sound of a bottle shattering. He looked and saw Muriel on the ground.

Their right hand was covered in red wine, and by the looks of it, there were a few shards of glass in Muriel's hand. "Mr. Crowley," Muriel stood up slowly and miracled away the mess of glass and wine as well as the injury on their hand. They looked at Crowley, "I'm not Aziraphale, Mr. Crowley." Crowley looked away from Muriel. His breath hitched, and the coming of tears burned his eyes. Muriel reached out and put their hand on Crowley's shoulder. "Mr. Crowley, are you alright?" Crowley looked back at Muriel and slapped their hand away. "Get away from me!" He pushed past the angel and walked out of the bookshop while slamming the door behind him.

He walked along the streets towards his car, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw the very two humans that changed his life. Nina and Maggie. They were attending to the customers in the coffee shop while also enjoying each other's company; they looked happy and content. Crowley and Aziraphale helped make their relationship possible. Aziraphale. The thought of the angel made Crowley's heart ache.

Maybe it was just the weather that day, or it could've been Crowley's mood, and possibly a coincidence, that it had started to rain. What started as a light drizzle turned into heavy rain. Crowley stood in the rain while others around him sought shelter from the harsh weather. A few seconds had gone by before he finally got in his car. If he were in the mood, he would've cared that the seats of the Bentley were getting wet. But he didn't at the moment. In the privacy of his car, he brought his hands up to the steering wheel and rested his forehead against them. Crowley finally let himself cry. His tears burned his eyes, but he thought he deserved to feel the pain of sadness and anger. He hurt Nina and Maggie, he hurt Beelzebub and Gabriel, and he especially hurt Aziraphale. He never meant to hurt any of them; it just happened.

He took off his glasses and threw them in the passenger seat. 'Why did I have to go and fuck up everything?' Crowley thought to himself. To Crowley, every misfortune, problem, and inconvenience that had ever crossed Aziraphale's life on earth and in Heaven, he blamed himself for. Not only did he manage to ruin the arrangement the two of

them had, but he also managed to ruin their friendship of six thousand years with a single kiss. That little kiss ruined their entire friendship. Crowley still remembers the expression Aziraphale made when he pulled away. The angel was shocked, upset, and scared. Crowley never wanted to hurt Aziraphale. He just wanted to love him, unconditionally, for the rest of their eternal lives. Crowley sometimes wishes that Aziraphale had never met him in the Garden of Eden.

Crowley groaned as he looked up at the ceiling of the Bentley. He wiped his tears and started the car, then drove off in the direction of his apartment. Statistically, the drive should've been rather quick, but to Crowley, the drive felt like hours. Turning on the radio didn't help since the Bentley would always play classical music, no matter what station he put on or what CD or cassette he played, the Bentley would always play classical music. Not that it made him mad or anything. It just irritated Crowley that the Bentley took a liking to Aziraphale's taste in music.

When he reached his apartment, his usual parking spot was open. It was always open. He parked the Bentley and got out while slamming the door. He stood in the rain while sighing, then he finally walked into the building. The doorman took one look at the demon and could clearly see that he was in a bad mood. So, the doorman didn't dare to say a word to him, for fear he might be yelled at. When Crowley reached the door of his apartment, he noticed a couple down the hall from him sharing a kiss. He ignored the couple and opened the door to his flat and walked in while slamming the door loudly behind him. He didn't care if he disturbed them.

His flat hadn't changed much since he moved back in. The only thing that changed was his houseplants. They used to stand so tall that they could touch the ceiling; now they drooped so low that they were exactly Crowley's height. Crowley didn't bother to yell at them anymore. He only did the bare minimum to keep them alive. The only plants he would yell at were the plants that decided to grow flowers. They would remind him of the time Aziraphale had to stay the night, and the angel managed to get all the plants in the apartment to grow flowers that were as beautiful as him.

Crowley was annoyed, but he couldn't stay mad at his angel. "His?" Crowley scoffed at the thought. He walked into his home office and sat down in his chair. "He was never mine to begin with." Crowley took off his glasses and threw them on the desk somewhere; he didn't care where they went. He rubbed his temple gently and looked out the window, "You were right, Aziraphale. It's lonely on my own side."



## *The Blossom of a New Season*

Aditi Patel, age 15

Photography

*This is a photo of a cherry blossom on my tree. I captured this as I came to realize that this cherry blossom represented the beauty of the tree, which changes as each season comes and goes. This blossom showcased the tree's "make-up", as it was what made it beautiful and unique during the fresh start of a new spring season.*

# *A Secret of My Grandma*

Sree Kundrapu, age 12

Wind, would you stop pulling me? It feels as if you are using me as your workout weight. The wind didn't listen. It kept doing the same thing as before, but this time even harder. The world feels silent. No single thing feels same, as if I am the only one on the surface of this planet. The place around me looks like a hot dry desert that has no element in the periodic table, not even a single one. I don't see humans or animals either, which means they are all gone. Wait, this doesn't make sense at all. What did I do? I am the only one here.

Wait, I see someone. It looks like an old lady, with a poncho and a blouse underneath, with some sort of skirt on. She started to come towards me, but something didn't feel right. She kind of looked like my grandma. She didn't look tired or exhausted; she was coming towards me as if she wanted to tell me something. But that something was like, "OMG, I just spilled my last bit of water on the sand!", but it was like she was going to tell me a secret. But as she was coming, I felt a loud gush of wind. But it wasn't just any wind, it was a tornado. As I was about to react, the tornado swept me up like a vacuum cleaner sucking up a piece of dust.

The alarm rang. I woke up. I looked. There was no desert, nor the lady that looked like my grandma. Oh, it was a dream. I have never, I mean never had a dream like that in my life. It felt so real. Just then my cat, Bubbles, came on my bed. She cuddled in my lap, while I patted her.

"Good morning, Bubbles," I said.

Then I tried to make my way to the stairs to go down them, but my body felt like a 1000-pound weight was on my back. But I eventually made it, after ten minutes. When I checked the clock, the minute hand was at the 1, and the hour hand was at the 6. I woke up earlier than usual, because I normally have decent dreams. Not the dreams that could potentially traumatize you and all that stuff. Then, I went to the kitchen and there she was, Mei, my aunt. She was doing the usual, making breakfast (Since it is Sunday, I don't have school, but if I did, she would be making my lunch).

"Good morning, Auntie Mei", I said in a sluggish way.

"Hi Kiki, Good Morning!", she replied.

My uncle went on a business trip to Paris, for something that I don't know about. So, it is just me and my aunt. Oh, and by the way she called me Kiki but that is not my real name, my real name is Mika Kasumi, but my friends and family call me Kiki, but people in my school call me Mika. Wait, Grandma, the desert, my dream. My aunt had to know.

"Auntie Mei", I said.

"Yes, Kiki?", she replied.

"I had a dream last night about Grandma", I deliberately said, without saying any details like I want to.

Auntie Mei had frozen, she stopped flipping the pancakes, and her eyes just started as the silver-colored faucet. She was basically, according to me, stunned. What did I do?

"What did you say!?" said Auntie Mei, with a different tone, slightly angry.

"Uh, I said that I had a dream about Grand- ", I was about to say.

"Don't you dare speak another word about that person!" shouted Auntie Mei.

Then she stormed out of the room. I was so worried. This happened only once before. I should have known. But why Grandma? Did she do something wrong? Something bad? Left the family? These questions keep chasing my mind. But I felt bad and mad at myself, so I went upstairs and locked myself in my room.

My tissue box was over, and all of them were drenched. Auntie Mei never shouts at any of her nieces and nephews. This is just my imagination, right? I don't think so. Just then my door creaked open. It was Auntie Mei.

"I am so sorry deal, Kiki", said Auntie Mei.

"It's okay", I said, still with my face drenched with tears, "But why?"

"I think it is time you know", she said.

I was all ears. But as she was about to say the first word, the phone rang. Then she rushed to the phone. I knew by her face it was Uncle Yuto. He hasn't called in weeks, I bet he is busy. But still, I need to know about my grandma. I waited, and waited, and waited. I waited for, believe it or not, 1 hour! So, I took matters into my own hands, and I started to investigate. I had to know.

I was literally acting like Sherlock Holmes, a famous fictional detective. I checked my room, my aunt and uncle's room, and basically all the rooms. But in the last room, I found something. A picture frame. With my parents, my aunt and uncle (I only have one uncle and aunt, on my mom's side of the family, my dad is an only child, and his parents sadly perished in a car accident), and Grandma. I know for a fact that was my grandma. By the way, my parents are starting a business in Japan, I live in Delaware, so this is why they had to move there for the time being. But they didn't abandon me. Thank God. Wait, the picture frame, good I have something, but it isn't enough. I need more.

I checked all the rooms in this 2-story house, but I don't seem to find anything. But wait. There is another place that I haven't checked in. The attic. But there is one problem. I have had a fear, ever since I stepped foot into his house, about the attic. I have to overcome this fear, because I have a little hope that the attic will give me or tell me something about my grandma. So, I made my way to the place where you pull the string and a ladder comes

out and you can enter the attic. I slowly pulled the string, and climbed the ladder, which was string or rope ladder, and made my way to the top.

There it was...the attic. It wasn't as I expected. It was not that dark because there was a window and there was a lot of light coming through. There weren't painted walls, it was only wood. There were a lot of boxes too. Yay, more work! 😊 So, I began searching. I started with the small boxes, then the big boxes. But just then I saw something. A book.

To me, it wasn't an ordinary book, it had a name on it. As I came closer, I found out something. It was my grandma's diary. It had her name on it, Mizuki. I was so amazed and relieved. Then, I opened it, and read the last entry. I was shocked. She wanted to leave the family because she didn't want to be a burden. But I don't understand. Why would she think she would be a burden? Well, I wanted to find out. So went downstairs to Auntie Mei.

"Auntie Mei", I said with urgency.

"Yes, Kiki", she replied.

"I found Grandma's diary, and it said that she wanted to leave the family because she thought that she would be a burden, but why?" I asked.

She froze like last time, but this time she was shocked. She took her hand out of the dish gloves and put it on her mouth. It looked like she was going to cry. But she stopped and turned towards me.

"Kiki", she said, "Thank you."

I replied, "What do you mean?"

"Because I thought she left because she hated our family and that's how your grandfather died because he was so shocked that he got a stroke. That is why our family is angry when someone brings her up," she replied.

"But why would she be a burden to you guys?" I said.

"Because your grandfather had a disease and we had to take care of him, and your grandmother because she was old and couldn't really do anything, but why would she leave?" she replied with sniffles.

At last, we both hugged and cried and cried and cried. Then, a week later my parents came back and the whole family came for a gathering. We told them everything. They all cried too. Then we made a grave, even though we don't have her body. Finally, "The Secret of my Grandma" was discovered.



## *A Calm Night Under the Stars*

Savya Patel, age 12

Acrylics

*I painted my imagination on a canvas about a calm night under the stars.*

# Dear World

Reddi Yamala, age 13

Dear Stars

Why do you hide your bloody scars  
The sobs that you cry  
Are used as a soothing lullaby  
In the morning you disappear  
Leaving me to clean your tears

Dear Sun

Why must you shine your light at dawn  
The world at your looks may fall and burn  
But you will never bear to learn  
Every time you close your eyes  
The world gets pulled under a dark disguise

Dear Moon

Why do you steal light you don't own  
Some nights you are full of yourself  
And leave the black too bright  
Others you refuse to shine  
Leaving the world deprived of light

Dear Earth

Why do you ruin your self worth  
We take more than we can give  
And yet you still help us live  
Your life is a small price to pay  
For our ungratefulness everyday

Dear Sea

Why do you hold back against being free  
The torture and torment you have bared  
Is all the more reason to kill and not spare  
But ever so calm you live on  
And accept the fate to be our pawn

Dear Sky

Why do you let all the birds fly  
You strike down and take so many lives  
You hold us and look down on us  
Many mistake your wild nature for lack of trust  
Your two-faced life is dawn and dusk

# *Above the World*

Kyle Viray, age 18

The world is rather small from a great height. At ground level, people who stand next to you are either shorter or taller than you, maybe even the same height. From up here, these people are nothing more than small little gnats. Tiny, miniscule particles, taking up space on Earth. From a scientific standpoint, I guess it's rather fascinating how much of this world is composed of small atoms, molecules, and whatnot. At the same time, nobody really thinks about that stuff, unless you're piss bored out of your mind.

"You looked zoned out there. Thinking hard again?"

Sitting next to me, dangling her legs on this rooftop, is a woman around the same age. I don't know her name. She doesn't know mine. Both of us however intend to keep it that way. Neither of us had said that directly, but we can both tell we'd rather not share names. I find her rather attractive. Long black hair, pale skin, wearing a partially ripped shirt of some long-gone rock band, smoking a cigarette. A real mysterious gal, she's exactly my type... if I were still in high school. I'd rather not be in a relationship with her. God knows just how much it stings being in one nowadays. Even when you think it's good, there's always something ready to pull the rug out from under you. Not like either of us want to be in one anyways, we're both equally tired of life.

"How many times has it been since we've been out here? At this very rooftop, talking about the same old subjects. Sometimes we get a little deep, philosophical even. Our lives suck and we try to no avail again and again. You still want to go through with the plan?" I asked her one last time to confirm.

She grits her teeth and winces a little. "Yeah, it's what we agreed on, right?"

Can't say she's wrong. Everything we talked about has led up to this point. We have no reason to back out now or keep going for that matter.

"You know, I wonder what life would be like, had the two of us been born in a different time. Maybe earlier, maybe in the future. Perhaps there are other worlds out there, dimensions I should say, where both of us would be happy", she says with a hint of sadness and apathy.

"Getting all deep in your head again, huh? This your way of comforting yourself before we go through with it?" I ask her.

"Can't really deny what you're saying. I think you and I know each other well enough to see right through each other. Still can't help but be a little scared," she says with a heavy shake in her voice.

"I know. We really don't have to do this".

“What, got something else to live for all of a sudden?”

I pause, thinking. “Not exactly. But there’s been something building up inside me for the past couple years. Hatred, anger, poison, vitriol, you name it. This’ll be a good time to let it out anyways.”

“Go ahead and shoot for it. What else haven’t we talked about?”

“Don’t you wish you were born rich or attractive? Maybe then life wouldn’t feel so hard.”

People say hard work leads to success, but that’s only true if you’ve got advantages like luck or being born into a wealthy family. Obviously, that’s not true all the time, and it’s a stark generalization, but it’s still correct for the most part. A wealthy man won’t understand struggling to pay bills or going hungry. An attractive person won’t know what it’s like to be dismissed based on how you look. Genetics shape how others treat you, and that’s just unfair. But hey, I ain’t in control of it, nobody is. Just choose better parents, I guess.

It’s easy for people to say, ‘romance isn’t everything,’ but the loneliness of never being loved doesn’t go away. It always stays there, in the back of your head, like a parasite. Humans need connection, they’re social creatures, but the world’s twisted that desire into something painful and extreme. Sure, some people try to understand others, but they’re rare. Most are quick to judge, and no one really listens as that requires them to abandon their beliefs. Not fully, but to a certain extent. It sucks too how mockery is often the default choice for most. It’s swift and brutal, a quick way to dismiss an alternative perspective. Therapy never helped me either. I knew what my issues were—lack of connection, a stable life, and romance. I gave up therapy and worked on my own goals. Years later, I’ve made some progress, but I’m still trapped. The only thing I’ve really achieved is a good body, but even that doesn’t make up for everything else. I’m still unemployed, despite getting my degree and doing internships.

Meanwhile, I see a guy I used to know. He’s made terrible choices repeatedly, abandoned his friends over stupid reasons, and ruined his life. There was this one girl who liked him, but he couldn’t control his anger over some stupid thing about politics. He blew up in her face. She wanted an apology, but he was so hellbent on staying correct, he preferred to just ditch her. I told him to apologize, but he’s the type to not listen to anyone but himself. He did it too with another friend, but it was a guy instead. But now, after meeting a rich girl, he’s getting married, and his debts are disappearing. A debt, might I add, that was being paid by his parents and he made no effort to work to fix it even though it was his college degree. 60k, fixed because he met some rich girl. I met him recently, and he said my struggles were my fault. He blamed my past relationships and said I wasn’t trying hard enough. Like he knew anything about it. Even when I tried to specify what happened, he kept talking over me. I also told him to drop it, but he just kept going. He messed up yet got rewarded. Here I am though, still stuck, alone, with no money, and

yeah, I'm jealous. That bastard didn't even try, it just came to him. Everything just came to him, and he thinks he's so high and mighty for it. It just disgusts me. Maybe if I'd been born with a better face, life would've been easier. Everyone has this idealized version of what they wanna be, what they wanna look like, to the point where they want to seek someone else for it. Either out of inspiration or to take something that they lack.

It's kinda funny though. People often compare themselves to others worse off to feel better in their situation. 'Least I ain't starving, homeless, or poor'. People also ask for help and are met with hostility. Ever see someone be told to go outside but dunno where to go? When told where to go, people just say just go wherever but these people lack the social skills to do so and are quickly brushed off."

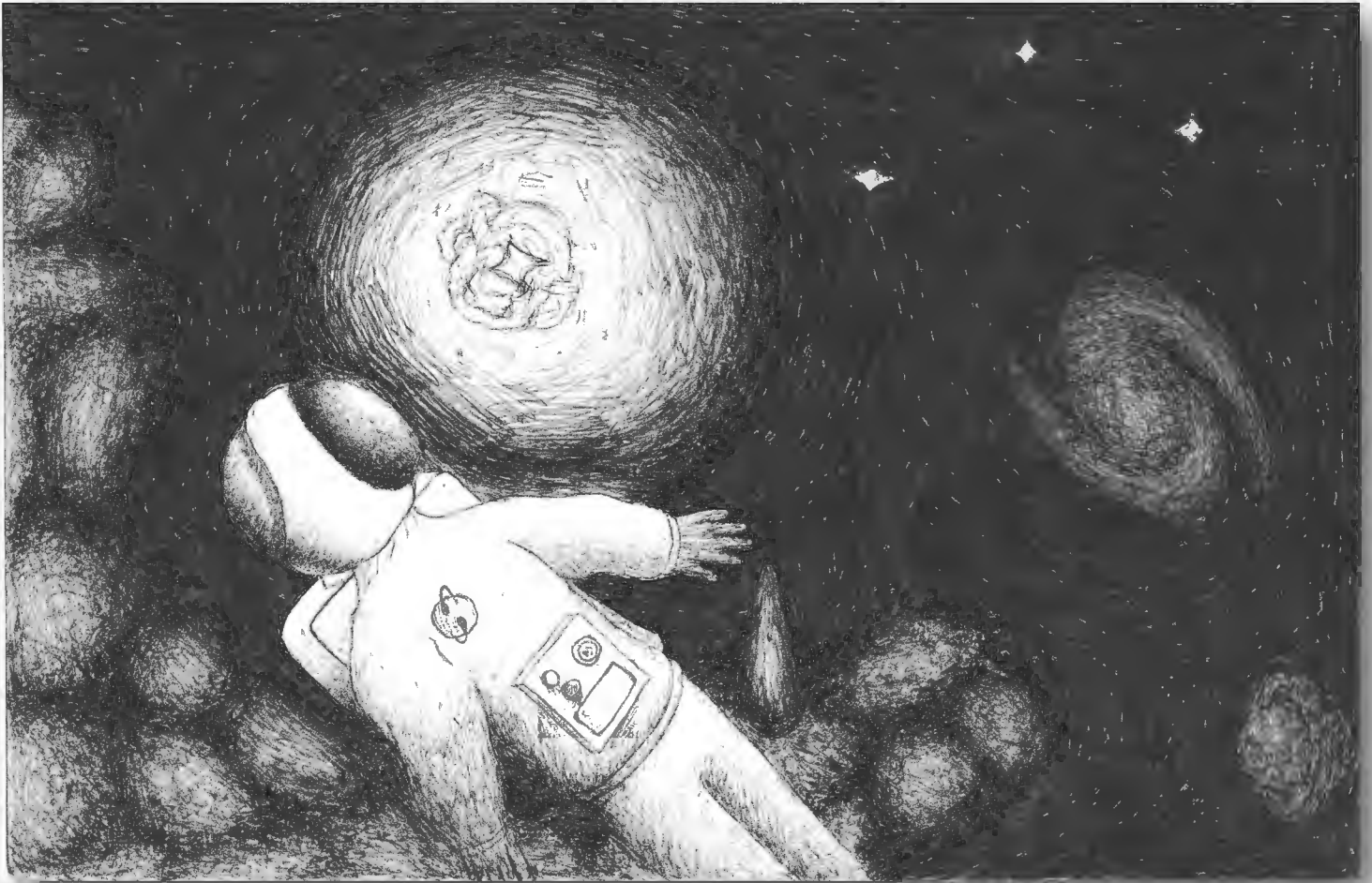
I pause, catching my breath. She looks like she's about to say something.

"You're not really that ugly you know," she says with a slight smile.

"Reassuring me again, or are you just trying to flirt with me one last time before we actually do it?"

"I don't even know anymore."

I let out a small chuckle. She clutches my hand. I consider letting gravity do its work. It's scary to abandon everything you lived for. Also, the hint of pain I'll feel when I hit the ground floor. Oddly, I'm not too scared. I look at her, she looks at me. She looks terrified to do it but at the same time there's this small bit of determination inside of her. Perhaps a determination to let go. To end it completely. Our eyes are still locked together. I can tell her heartbeat is raised, as is mine. Our grips tighten. We've been considering doing this all night, for weeks actually. There's not much left for us. Perhaps she was right. Maybe in another world, we could be happy. Or maybe if we were born in a different time, things could be different. But no such thing exists in this reality. Those are all dreams, fantasies that'll never happen. For me, it was years and years of failures stacking up against me. For her, it's just a cruel unfair life where nothing good ever happened. Regardless, we're both losers. Constantly wanting something, trying for it, only to be met with failure in return. Yet here we are, resolute in our choice to do it just moments ago. Now we're not so sure. Man, life really is scary. Both of us remain quiet. Still on the edge, enraptured in fear, hesitancy, yet determination. Everything goes still, just like a painting, and then... nothing.



## *Adrift*

Kedar Lakshmanan, age 14

Black pen on paper

*As a child, I was obsessed with space. I relished learning about astronomical phenomena and savored every space fact I collected from my books, my teachers, and my family. With this piece, I attempted to communicate some of the innocent wonder and awe I experienced from discovery. The drawing depicts an astronaut mesmerized by a sphere of light. Nebulae, a planet, a distant galaxy, and stars reside in the background. Each element intends to provide the viewer with more to marvel at, reflecting the delight of gaining knowledge.*



# The Stray Among the Stars

Faerqiv, age 14

This piece is based on Laika, the first living creature sent into space. She was a stray dog from Moscow chosen by the Soviet space program and launched aboard Sputnik 2 in 1957. Laika became the first animal to orbit Earth, marking a major step in space exploration, though sadly, she didn't survive the mission.

Have you ever thought about Laika?

The first little heartbeat that slipped beyond the sky, the dog they sent up, knowing she'd never come back. They called it progress, called it history, called it science. But I think it was something lonelier than that: a soft whimper echoing through the dark.

Laika's still up there, you know.

I swear I saw her once through my telescope, tail glowing faint in the black, sniffing for scraps beneath Saturn's rings, chasing after comets like old dreams, her fur catching pieces of starlight. She bites at satellites when they buzz too close, the way she once might've chased pigeons between Moscow's gray streets. Sometimes, she curls by Neptune to sleep, paws twitching like she's dreaming, maybe of warm hands, or the taste of bread, or the sound of someone calling her name.

They say from space the Earth looks like a small blue ball, fragile, shimmering, distant. But how did it look to you, Laika?

Did it look like home, or did it already feel like something slipping away? Did you try to go back, pressing your nose against the cold glass, wondering why no one came?

If I could send you anything now, I'd send you warmth. Not the cruel kind that swallowed you whole, not the burning kind that wrapped around your final breath. No, I'd send you the warmth that seeps through fur and smells like rain and freedom. The kind you only find when you're loved. really loved.

Did you know you'd be this loved, Laika?

That your name would outlive the men who sent you to die? That songs, poems, whole galaxies would whisper for you? You were barely seen when you were here, a stray on the streets, nameless, unnoticed. Until they kissed your nose and promised you the stars. Maybe that heat, that blinding light, was the closest thing you ever felt to a hug.

But now the sky is all yours.



No cages. No cold walls. No commands in voices you can't understand.  
Only the sound of your own heartbeat echoing through eternity, the first to ever cross that  
threshold, the first soul to trade a leash for infinity.  
You were never just a dog, Laika.  
You were the first wanderer, the first dreamer, the first lost thing that the universe took in.  
And somewhere, beyond all that silence, I hope you know. You made us look up. You  
made us feel small and guilty and human.

So, rest easy, little traveler.  
Run through the rings. Chase the meteors. Sleep among the stars.  
You belong to the cosmos now and it belongs to you.

# *I am a Moon*

Liya Sathishkumar, age 12

I am a Moon.

Sometimes I'm full of light,

Other times I feel like a dark shadow.

Even though I'm engulfed with darkness,

The Sun's gold presence will always light me up.

I only shine my silver gleam when everyone is asleep

Do they still see me?

The Sun's radiating glow at dawn,

Loved by everyone.

But I still wonder...

Am I loved too?

Even if I'm unnoticeable I will still shine,

Trying to light up their lives,

Without my luminescent glow, I am nothing

Just another satellite.

But with the Sun as my other half, we light the world together.



## *Sacred Crescent*

Akshaya Devisetty, age 12

Pencil drawing and shading on paper

*This drawing is a crescent moon with lots of patterns inside it. I was inspired by designs like mehandi and mandala art that use many small shapes and details. I liked the idea of decorating the moon to make it look special and creative. I used a black pen and filled the moon with different patterns like lines, circles, and curved shapes. I tried to make each section a little different so the design would look interesting. I also added hanging beads and chains to make it look like a dreamcatcher or jewelry. I enjoyed taking my time drawing the small details. This artwork shows my creativity and how I like making detailed patterns.*



## *Stillness After the Storm*

Derek Young, age 12

Photography: Google Pixel10 Camera

*I was influenced by quiet nights and how things look different after it rains, especially when streetlights are on. I took this photo because everything felt still for a moment, even though it had just finished raining, and I wanted to capture that calm feeling. The theme is about finding stillness in a world that is constantly in motion.*

# Significance of A Night's Sky

Leila, age 15

Dark sky was home to many  
Many of various pitch and distinction  
But farther down were two taking a walk  
With little guide let alone a lantern  
For many of those in the sky were mostly lower pitch  
They walked silently  
Not uncomfortable silence  
Merely the kind of silence obtained by those  
Those who know each other so well  
So well they do not always need words to speak  
Yet, in this case, words were necessary  
To obtain a meaning  
To help an uncertain soul

"Father, what are stars?"

"Stars are spheres of plasma

Very far away  
They are also the lanterns of the sky"

"Oh"

Another question ventured out.

"Father, did God not tell us  
To be the lights of the world?"

"Yes, He did"

"So, we are a bit like stars, aren't we?"

"I suppose so"

"I mean we are people  
With Jesus as our *light*  
While darkness surrounds us"

"Yes, what you say is true"

A few more somber minutes passed  
While two wondered over the world

"But, father?"

"Yes?"

"Why are there so *few* lights  
Compared to *all* the darkness?"

"Well, this is a sinful world

There is so much darkness compared to light  
Although...I fear that the ratio of the sky  
In accordance with this-  
Is not altogether correct"

"Maybe some are afraid to share their light?"

"I think you are right"

The girl seemed pleased  
Until she realized the significance of her discovery  
Soon another query was raised  
This time a startled, fearful voice spoke

"But, father?"

"Yes?"

"Why do some of the stars that do shine  
Not shine as *bright* as others?  
Why do some seem barely visible  
Almost ready to fade out of the sky completely  
And others...well, outshine the rest?"

A minute passed

"I think it is  
As you said before  
Some are afraid to shine their light  
While others look onward to eternal glories  
Rather than luxuries of this world  
Despite misunderstanding, rejection....  
Even martyrdom"

"But, father, if God tells us to do something  
Such as shine our lights  
Should we not do it  
Simply out of obeying His law?  
And shine as bright as we can?"

Yet the father did not answer  
Or simply did not hear  
But, instead, went on to ponder  
All his little daughter had said

## 《水的哀辞》

薛山菊

鸟在树上往下看  
只有一树  
她看：  
一万车驶过  
一千人走去。

鸟在树上看上面  
只有一树  
她看：  
大楼到天  
上长高了  
她不能看到太阳。

小鸟：她看，在看  
但她不能看  
那条水在流这

曾经此地是河床  
静，安，稳。  
现在是城市，  
繁忙和忙碌  
现在没有水了。

## *Lament for Nature*

by Cassandra Huntley, age 15

A bird looks down from a tree;  
The only tree  
And sees:  
Thousands of cars drive by  
Hundreds of humans stride past

A bird looks up from a tree:  
The only tree  
And sees:  
Buildings climb high  
Into the sky  
Where the sun cannot be seen.

The bird, she looks and looks  
But still she cannot see  
The water rushing by

For once this was a riverbed,  
Calm, quiet, sure,  
Now it is a city,  
Bustling and busy.  
There is no water now.

*\*Translated into simplified Chinese by the author.*



## *Greatness Awaits*

Drew Moore, age 12  
Photography

# *Tree*

Shalini Potireddy, age 12

I am a tree

Most days I stand alone

Convincing myself that I don't need anyone else

But deep down I know I do

Because my leaves are starting to wither and my branches are tilting

My roots are ripping and I am starting to lean

I can feel the wind ripping through me

Almost tearing me apart

But I don't care

I know I can do this by myself

Even as Winter approaches

Even as Time is running out

Even as I know that I am drained

Even though I will fall

At least I stand alone

# *Muddy Middletown Fields*

Jessica Num, age 16

You can't see my pain  
Hear my pain, or feel my pain  
I've held it well, though you didn't know  
Throughout the years, I've carried the shame  
I stand tall with the rest  
I force a run, dreading a fall

I've slapped on the drugstore sleeve  
It's all I've forced you to believe  
Yet there's a grave difference between you and me

I can see the muddy Middletown fields in my past  
Though I hope they've become your reality  
Since then, I've shifted focus  
But there remains a piece of me

The fields experienced a bold rookie  
A girl hoping to try something new  
At times her fire died  
But it simply needed to be ignited

It's been a while since I was last stable  
You've seen how that must've felt  
The pop of it twisting into two  
I want to join you, I truly do  
Maybe I'll stumble upon the fields again  
Hopefully, I'll be able to catch up  
The fields have been waiting for me long enough



## *Snow-Kissed Field*

Drew Moore, age 12  
Photography

# *One Step at a Time*

Addie Watson, age 12

How do you beat the heat?  
How do you survive in Death Valley,  
Hottest place on Earth?

How do you stay warm at night,  
When you're in the frozen land?

How do you keep on goin'  
When all hope is lost?  
When time runs out?  
When you're in the mud?  
When you're alone?

I guess there's just one answer  
Just one thing you can do  
Until you see the light at the end of the tunnel.  
Just take a step  
Keep on going  
You have one choice left.  
Just take a step  
One step at a time  
The only way to really see the light at the end of the tunnel is to take a step.  
Then another, then one more.

How do you keep on goin'?  
When all hope is lost?  
When time runs out?  
When you're in the mud?  
When you're alone?

All you gotta do is take a step.



## *Pick Your Own Path*

Jordan Kerr, age 14

Acrylics

*One of my favorite memories is going on road trips with my family. This painting is a reflection of the beautiful scenery on our drives and a reminder of the unplanned activities and things we would encounter as we picked our own path.*

# Cloud

Sophie H., age 12

I am a cloud

I quietly observe catching every little detail

Floating around

Finding where I belong

The pressure builds

Merging with others who are there for me

I continue to catch every look

Every emotion

The pressure builds

I must ignore the desperation of going back to those who care

I change my shape to match the other clouds

The pressure builds

I must keep blending in with the others

I feel like I'm about to burst

I just can't take it anymore

I release the pressure inside of me

All the sadness and effort

I feel free again



## *Golden Hour Palms*

Sophia Pauze, age 15

Acrylic paint on canvas

*Every other year or so, me and my family would go down to Florida to visit some other family members that I have down there. We would go down quite a bit, and there was one time shortly after I got back from a trip down there that I wanted to paint something but wasn't quite sure as to what to paint. I then thought of when we went down there and that gave me inspiration to work on this piece.*



## *Mountain Landscape*

Charlie Dong, age 12

Watercolors

*Undisturbed natural beauty, something we don't see in our everyday life. One day I woke up, and I wanted to be teleported to a place untouched by civilization. I sat down and took out my watercolors to capture the place I wanted to go to.*

# Jaded: Herein

## Episode 1

Dylan DeMoe, age 19

### Episode 1

#### The Beginning of the End: Open House Sequence

Long, stretching, swaths of clouds pull in from above – eclipsing the city that arose from the desert below. Swirling, searching and encircling. Hungry.

Wind speeds increase centered around a singularity. A storm is forming. Bolts of white energy feverishly shoot out from the epicenter in all directions. Water and free radicals rain down thrashing the sides of concrete buildings abundant in this arid climate.

Distant, in the city, a baby looks up from their wooden crib to the emblazed nightly scene and chuckles in sight of the ghostly center of the churring storm.

It is calling to them; and, they are calling to it.

Sky is getting used to the newly issued curfew, rushing home to make it on time. In their defense, they only went out to get dinner supplies. Those rounds of kickball in between were necessary to ensure the possibility of making some much needed friends. Sky remains optimistic even though no one seemed to enjoy their participation.

Sky enters with their mom finishing with her application for a school board position and their dad setting up for dinner.

"Sky," their mom's usual sharp and confident tone has softened. She then smiles, barely, and speaks: "Go help your dad in the kitchen, sweetie. He's waiting for you."

"Sure thing." Sky smiles, ecstatically.

"You've got the squash?"

"Yes. One large Kabocha winter squash, chef!" Sky starts to giggle. This performance is done every time they make any dish with squash. Their mom really does enjoy the loudness... it's just she does so in two rooms over.

"Prepare the work station, chef!"

"Yes, chef!" Sky then turns the valve of the gas stove and quickly lights a match to catch the fire. In assistance, their dad hands Sky a pot of water to start.

"Now, we wait for it to boil!"

"Why would I have to go to an open house? I've already gone to that school for a year." Sky sulks over their dinner. Admittedly, it's delicious, but they won't let this bribe sway them.

Sky's mom hasn't eaten much and you can see her grinding over words to say. She remains at a loss for words.

"We will go out sometime if you go to the open house. Your mom told me about..." Sky's dad begins.

Sky's mom turns her head towards their dad. Though he doesn't stutter, only slows.

"...how important going to the open house this school year is. Since, they will be entering kids into raffles to possibly win and there's been some administration changes."

"Okay... But only if you come to walk me back early. And you always promise we'll go out and never do."

Their dad sucks in air through his teeth – that last claim being entirely true.  
“I promise you. And... maybe you can make some friends at the open house tonight.”

“Okay.” Sky reluctantly smiles at their dad’s ploy.

Sky’s mom stands up, pushing her chair.

“I seem to not be feeling too well, sorry. Have a bit of a headache. I’ll be heading to bed now.” She makes her way to Sky, kissing their forehead. On her way down, her glossy eyes meet her husband’s.

“Good night, mom.” Sky says as they eat.

“Good night. Sweetie”

Sky pushes heavy industrial doors that then click behind them – venturing into the assembly room. Sky is familiar with the brutalistic architecture of the school, hearing it described as “futuristic” on occasion. They’ve drawn this room before: finding the metal arches on the concrete walls great for cross-hatching. Notedly, the nondescript rectangular seams, slightly inset on the walls, still challenge Sky’s drawing skills.

Chill autumn air sweeps through the room as more students, around Sky’s age, funnel in like cattle to find their own metal folding chair. Sky assumes there would be some other authority to generally direct them; but, there’s only students.

Sky looks to the left out of boredom: nothing new.

They then look to the right:

*SOMEONE JUST SAT NEXT TO ME! This is my one chance. Maybe I can make a new friend after all! My Dad was right? He never usually is...* Sky thinks to themselves disoriented by this flush of excitement.

There’s this gleam emanating off of the person who just sat next to Sky. A shine invisible, but nonetheless affecting the eyes. A kinship perhaps. A shared something Sky can’t place. In this potential friend, Sky can tell that this radiance – whatever it may be – was cobbled alone.

Sky then takes a moment to begin their ritualistic process of preparing for conversation with someone new.

“Hey, I’m- You’re... I mean,” Sky takes a beat to recover. “Sky. I’m Sky. My name is Sky. Hi.”

Sky, having minimal sociable practice, wasn’t anticipating losing their train of thought. This attractiveness that they feel – volatile, jocular, in nature – doesn’t help their case either.

More bodies fill the assembly room.

“Oh, hey. I’m Hiroshi... Do you know what’s going on here? I sort of just wandered in.”

“Yeah! It’s an open house for the new school year, but no staff is here yet. Apparently, there’s going to be a raffle too.”

“Cool, thanks. We’re like best friends now.” Hiroshi jokes and smiles to then slightly later look around. “So... What do we do now, Sky?”

Sky is practically shaking from excitement. They try to play it as cool as Hiroshi seems to be.

“Well, I’d imagine a guide showing you your classes.”

“Oh, I didn’t pick mine out yet.”

“Really? I can help you with that later then.” Sky beams and the space between the friends shortens. Brightens. “Hopefully we’ll see the principal, and-”

The overhead lights cut out, shrouding the room in near complete darkness. Faint red light outlines the rectangular seams in the wall adjacent to the entrance. We hear a click and a release. Simultaneously, the rectangular outlines of the wall furthest from the two shoot upwards, revealing doorways that lead outside.

There's a brief moment of silence. Then screams, as students are grabbed and restrained. Emergency lights intermittently flash. Drove of men and women, armored in tactical clothes, flood in from the red lit doorways straight ahead. They continue taking students through the same doorway they came from.

"Hiroshi! Hiroshi!" Sky yells out, but it's hard to be heard over the stir. "Hiroshi-"

Sky is then dragged under a table. The long hanging white cloth slightly mutes the struggle outside.

"Stay. Quiet." Hiroshi says.

More screams are heard in the background. The ones that successfully resist are recaptured then electrocuted with a stun baton having nowhere to go.

"There's guards blocking the exit doors. So, if we..."

The smell of seared flesh wafts through the air. It beckons Hiroshi back into their past as a child.

"We can-" Hiroshi chokes on their words, "We just need to..." Their surroundings then fade away back to their home. Images of their burning village play behind them in their head. Hiroshi can smell the ash of their house; they can hear their own people's screams.

"Hiroshi! Are you okay?" Sky whispers, peering into unfocused eyes. "Hiroshi, I- Someone is coming-"

A guard flips the table. Sky is grabbed.

*This was a mistake;* Hiroshi thinks as the world around them collapses. *WHY'D I EVEN COME HERE?*

"Hiroshi!" Sky yells.

Hiroshi now thinks of a reason. They lignify, tapping into whatever allowed them to survive this long.

Sky's being pulled towards the red doorway. Tears. There aren't many people left to capture.

Another guard lunges at Hiroshi; but, now being out of that trance they're lighter on their feet. They dodge out of the way, making a run towards Sky. Hiroshi takes in a deep breath. As they pick up speed they glow, literally glow. Shimmer.

Sky has never seen something more beautiful. Then suddenly, Sky appears next to the exit, the same door as the entrance. That same shimmer fades around them. Sky looks back, seeing Hiroshi and three guards advancing towards their friend.

"Go." Hiroshi almost whispers.

Sky doesn't want to leave their friend's side.

"GO!" Hiroshi runs towards the guards, sparing Sky time.

Sky slams their shoulder against the exit door repeatedly to no avail. Sky looks back to see Hiroshi cornered by guards. They try harder at the door with tears running down their face.

Just before a guard electrocutes Hiroshi, they teleport behind that same guard kicking him down.

Sky pushes harder. The metal bolt, on the other side of the door locking it in place, begins to shimmer and vibrate. Sky hears the scream of their friend Hiroshi as they are electrocuted until they are no longer conscious.

Sky pushes harder. Hands raw and wet with tears and sweat.

The shimmer glows brighter and the bolt shakes out of place.

Sky is free.

Sky runs, guards behind them and trucks of students pulling away.

"My parents..." Sky murmurs through a heaving breath.

□ END □



## *See It to Believe It*

Ace Furrato, age 16  
Digital Art—Procreate

*The giants of the sea captivate me. Their anatomy and biology are fascinating, but by no means easy to draw.*

# *The Epitome of Reminiscence*

Payaswini Holla, age 15

Oh.

I am back

It is inevitable

I am back to the epitome of reminiscence

Traveling through memories as time apparently is equivalent to one light year

These memories instill a sense of lost and hope for a new beginning

A future where everything is picture perfect

Nonetheless we all know it is just a mirror image that is slightly distorted to the very apple of our eye

I wish to escape

Escape the longing portion of my mind that itches, longs to settle in the past

The ocean breeze, as the trees billow in the wind

The soft, pearly sand under the very crevices of our feet

The sandcastles dominating assertion over the smooth, silky surface that merged with the gallant, courageous waves

Katie & Samantha 4ever written sloppily on the smooth silky sand by two little girls who were replenished in their youth

I travel to other times

Such as the breezy wind outside the car window

The country music blaring through the speakers as we are on to another adventure

An adventure where we seek for thrill and excitement, as our hearts beat with anticipation as is what to come next

All these recollections of memories fall under the category of nostalgia, one of the most painful realities to cross paths with

Oh. I have finally found my escape, my connection with the world again

I glee joyfully as I skip across the path, the cherry blossoms falling daintily to the ground as I run towards my escape

Oh, my very prize-worthy escape

Just to see nostalgia, on the same path, coming right along my way

As it gets closer, and closer, I accept my fate

As I realize there is never an escape from the epitome of reminiscence



## *Whale in a Fishbowl*

Adella Petka, age 12

pencil, water color pencils, water brush, acrylic paint markers

*I just loved the idea of these huge things like whales and lighthouses confined in a small space like a mere fishbowl. It seems whimsical, as it's really just a pocket sized ocean. But is the whale too big or the bowl too small?*

# *The Coral Reef - The Mysteries of My Sea*

Annabelle, age 13

I am a coral reef

I have harmonies of colors in vibrant shades

I am teeming with underwater cities, mysteries and secrets

But no one seems to look beyond my joyful colors and traits

People think the unique shapes and the serene swaying of the coral

Are beautiful

People think the fish swimming soundlessly around

Are beautiful

But they don't see what lies beneath the coral and dig deeper,

A hidden octopus camouflaging into the crimson coral

A sea urchin in a dark purple

Sharp, but beautiful, like an underwater gem

They will never hear the loud silence

And smell the salty air

Bustling with life and feelings that are not shown

But they will expect me to live on

To live on without attention, love and care

I am overlooked, neglected and taken advantage of

I am polluted, overfished inside

But ignoring my beauties, imperfections and thoughts

Is their loss



## *Below the Surface*

Lakshana Sabari, age 13

Paint

*she didn't fall , she tripped because she was tired. The water doesn't scare her it understands her.  
For once , she could just feel...and let go. Just finally letting go, even if it is just for a moment*

# Heavy Heart

Hope Udoffia, age 16

Anger screams when it doesn't go away  
Suppressing my feelings day by day,  
Never knowing if this feeling is ever going to go away  
I shield myself like a knight in shining armor.

Never knowing when to come out,  
When to truly show my true self,  
When to express myself like a daisy on a hot sunny day,  
Everyday pressure beating on me like drum wondering if i'll ever stop being numb.

Suffocating me to the point where i can't get out,  
Nowhere to run nowhere to hide,  
I cover my face like it's halloween,  
Filled with children laughing but when will joy ever stop to notice me?

They expect me to be strong while i quietly break,  
Thinking to myself slowly removing myself from this earth,  
Their needs get heard while mine echo in silence wondering if they'll hear me out,  
I'm their shelter but where is mine?

They want me to carry what they can't hold but never stop and ask how much i've carried alone,  
Everyone always telling me understand but who ever tries to really comprehend?

Like a dark gloomy day, tears streaming down my face, i think about how scary this is to do alone,  
Never really knowing how it feels to be understood, like speaking a language no one ever could,  
I explain in pieces hoping they'll see me,  
But somehow they still don't get me.

They say "You never understand"  
But no one ever tries to take my hand,  
Being blamed for not knowing how they feel,  
While they ignore the pain i simply never reveal.

So I carry it quiet, don't speak, don't eat,  
But i smile like i'm fine and stay on my feet.  
Skipping meals like skipping thoughts,  
Hiding the weight that silence brought.



## *A Drag Path*

Anissa Stewart, age 17

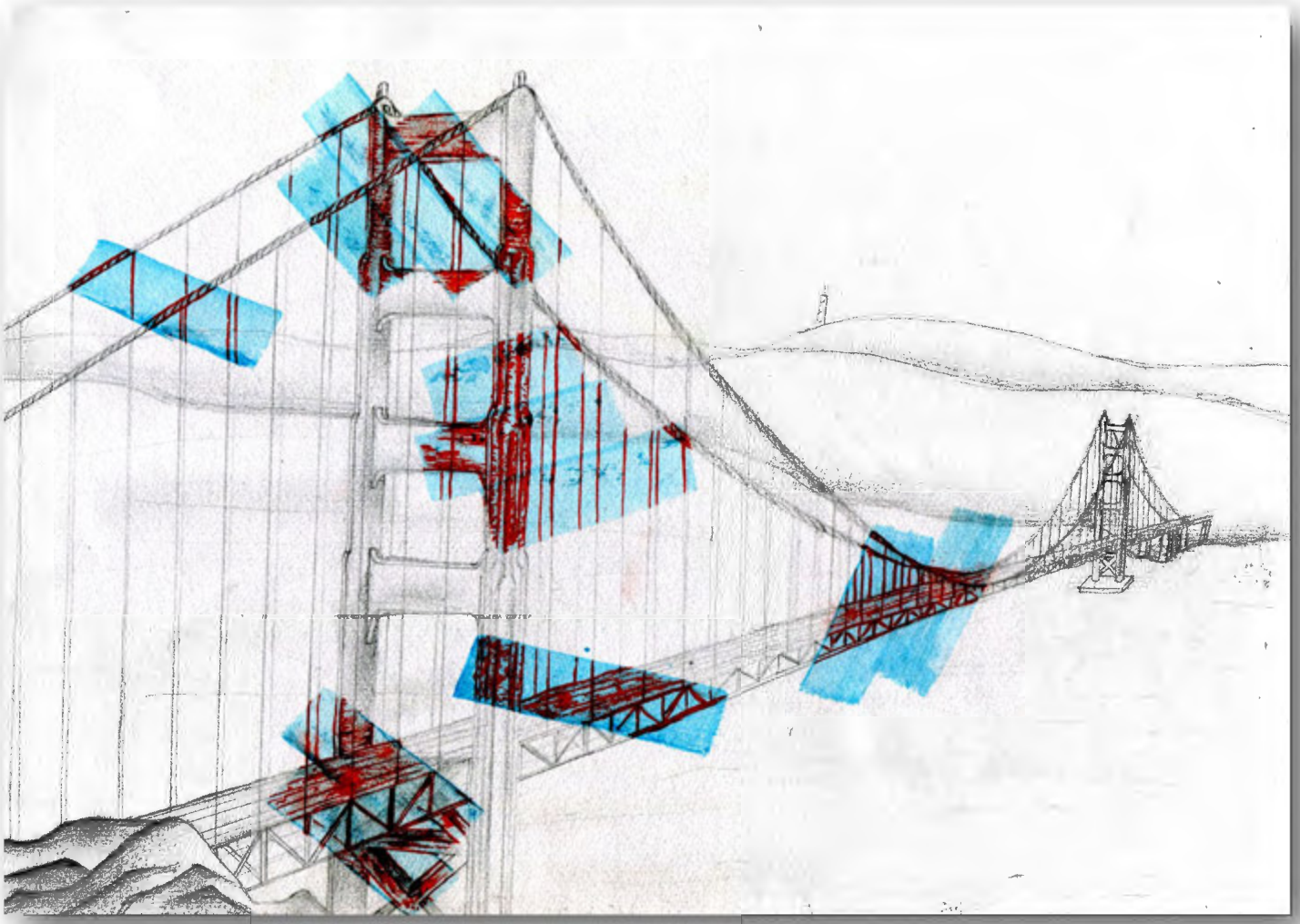
Photography

*A Drag Path is a photograph that was taken on the beach of Miami, Florida. The idea was inspired by the song, "Drag Path," by Twenty One Pilots. I interpreted the song as the idea that everything that has a story has been touched by something. I saw that idea in the footprints that can be found alongside the beach, places that people have explored, and wanted to capture that feeling with this picture.*

# Burden

Kaitlyn Reesor, age 16

Quiet voices carried alone  
Become louder in the quietest of nights  
When you have no burden to carry but your own  
But no one can make your burden light  
You push people away  
A choice that is yours  
You try to protect yourself  
Stay close to the shore  
But there's a sea of connection out there  
That's lost to you now  
You want to try and share  
You just don't know how  
How to create a burden in another  
When your burden is so heavy  
But do you ever stop and wonder  
How much weight isn't yours to carry?



## *A Filtered Span*

Derek Young, age 12

Pencil & Watercolor

I was inspired by bridges and how they connect places, and I wanted to show how looking through different lenses can change what we notice. While making this piece, I focused on layering color to act like filters, so the viewer has to look past them to see the structure underneath. Filtered Span is about how what we see is often shaped by perspective, not just by what is really there.

# *Let You Go*

Ahna Joee, age 15

His face was filled with pain  
His eyes were full of tears

My heart was sick with guilt,  
But I had to tell him how I feel

This game could not go on  
Even if this is what he thinks he wants

My thoughts are torn and weathered  
We're better off without each other

My conscious feels unclean  
My hands are still unwashed

I want what I can't have  
But what if what I have is all I've got

Mistakes are the only thing I can successfully make  
And it's hurting everyone in the process

I don't know how much more I can take  
I refuse to settle for less

But he wasn't less, I just needed more  
And I hate myself for not knowing all of this before

Before I said goodbye, before I said I can't  
Because I can do anything I want, but all I ever do is rant

I rant about the pain of the man who got away  
And I know that it's been years, but this regret is stained

Stained into my heart, and carved into my soul  
And the worst part of it all, is that I'm the one who let you go

# *The Bhagavad Gita: An Eternal Guide to Mankind*

Aarna Patel, age 15

Imagine having a source that is not ChatGPT where you can find the solutions to all your problems in life. The Hindu Holy book, the Bhagavad Gita, provides solutions for every single problem people may encounter in the game of life. The Bhagavad Gita is dialogue between Lord Krishna and Prince Arjun on the battlefield. The Bhagavad Gita is not only about their conversation, but also gives great teachings about self-realization, duty, and life in general which can significantly impact anyone's life in a positive way. Lord Krishna created this amazing holy book which also serves as the testimony of His acts. First, He is an invincible strategist both in war and peace. When Prince Arjun was conflicted about fighting in the battle against His own family, Lord Krishna explained the importance of the battle to fight against evil and stand for righteousness. Without a doubt, this showed how Lord Krishna is the greatest teacher known to mankind. Moreover, Lord Krishna is a diplomat for difficult situations. Lord Krishna acted as a strong negotiator to convince both adversarial parties to prevent war and maintain peace. Also, He was a great reformer because He mentioned in the Gita that you should have a great presence of mind and innovate yourself to adapt to the changes happening around the world to achieve success. For example, Mahatma Gandhi interpreted the Holy book and was influenced by it. This led him to believe that nonviolence is the best weapon. He helped give India independence through His nonviolent method. He also found strength and solace in the Gita which allowed him to consider it His "eternal mother" and best friend. Our country has indirectly been inspired by the Bhagavad Gita through Mahatma Gandhi. Martin Luther King Jr. was

motivated by Gandhi and adopted His nonviolent techniques for the Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech contributed to de-segregation which was a huge milestone for America. So ultimately, The Bhagavad Gita had an impact on America's history.

The Gita teaches that one should focus on working hard and giving sincere efforts to anything you do without worrying about the results. The results are not in our hands, but we can certainly try our best to get the outcome we want. I am certain that ChatGPT wouldn't be able to teach this valuable lesson. Furthermore, the Gita also teaches that whatever is happening is happening for a good reason and whatever is going to happen will be good for you. Ultimately, this means that you must trust the process and have faith that there is a valid reason behind everything that happens. Additionally, controlling your mind and desires is another essential lesson taught in the Gita. A controlled mind can give you peace and freedom. You can also make better decisions with a controlled mind, which can lead to changed habits, emotions, and even destiny. Ways to control your mind include meditating, practicing discipline, and practicing detachment. Detachment can help loosen your mind's grip on everything around you. The Bhagavad Gita also guides us to maintain close bonds with all relationships including friends, siblings, and parents. In addition, the Bhagavad Gita shows how lying for a good cause is just as good as telling the truth. When Lord Krishna was trying to defeat His opponent in the battle, He cheated by helping His team by signaling them to hit the opponent under the waistline even though it was against the rule of the battle. Consequently, the lesson is to use whatever at your disposal to win against evil. There is no subscription to attain knowledge from the Bhagavad Gita, as there is for ChatGPT and this Holy Book has countless different teachings that can solve every single problem we experience.



## *Prince of Flames*

Ace Fumato, age 16  
Digital Art—Procreate

*Fan Art: Zuko from Avatar. The blazing heat of July reminds me of my favorite character. A study of golden hour lighting.*

# *Loving Beyond Immortality*

Irma Quinones, age 18

Many years ago, in the Heavenly realm, lived a god named Wen Xu. Wen Xu was a high-ranking military official under the Supreme Lord. Although Wen Xu enjoyed a comfortable life in the Heavenly Realm, he felt bored. Years of serving became typical and uneventful. He grew tired of his daily duties and found the realm's riches unremarkable; even descending to the Mortal Realm seemed trivial to him.

One day, while gazing into the Void Pearl, spying on the mortals, he saw a woman. The woman was an apothecary and lived in the countryside, creating medicines for the people in the nearby village. Although she earned a good income, she chose to dress modestly in simple robes rather than indulge in the finest silks. Wen Xu was immediately captivated by her and felt a deep curiosity. How could such a beautiful woman lead such a humble life? He wondered to himself.

Wen Xu, after a hundred years, decided to descend. When he arrived, he was amazed by how much the mortals had changed over the years. As he made his way through the countryside, he eventually came across a quaint little house situated under a willow tree. Beside it was a garden filled with various herbs and medicinal plants. When he approached the house, he saw the woman cutting firewood. Wen Xu asked the woman if she needed help. Breathing heavily, she replied yes and handed him the axe. Wen Xu began to chop the firewood with remarkable ease, which left the woman in awe. Curious, she asked where he was from since she had never seen him in the village before. Wen Xu explained that he was from out of town and had nowhere to stay. He asked if he could live with her, offering to help with anything she needed in return. After a moment, the woman agreed. Wen Xu was overjoyed and introduced himself, asking for her name. She told him her name was Lihua.

As the years passed, Wen Xu assisted Lihua with outdoor chores and deliveries. The more time he spent with her, the more he learned about her life. Lihua's mother had died during childbirth, leaving her alone with her father. When she was fifteen, Lihua's father was summoned to work at the Imperial Court under the Emperor, and five years later, he died from poisoning. With no living relatives, Lihua was alone. However, she was a skilled apothecary, like her father. She made medicine for the people of the village and looked after their health. Wen Xu was fascinated by her resilience and developed feelings for her. It wasn't long before Lihua felt the same. The two fell in love and eventually got married. On their wedding night, Wen Xu gifted Lihua a silver ring, a sign of their bond. As time went on,

nothing much changed for the newlywed couple; their lives remained similar to before. Wen Xu continued to help Lihua with outdoor chores and deliveries, while Lihua persisted in her work as an apothecary. Together, they lived in peace, love, and tranquility.

However, peace and tranquility are short-lived.

Wen Xu's absence in the Heavenly Realm became noticeable, as there was no one to perform his duties. One of the Supreme Lord's advisors, Gaoshun, descended to inform him that he was needed back. Wen Xu's heart ached as he explained to Gaoshun that if he were to ascend, he would have to wait twenty years before he could descend back to the Mortal Realm and be with his wife. Gaoshun told Wen Xu he could take his wife with him and offered him a pill of immortality to give her. Without hesitation, Wen Xu accepted the pill of immortality and was about to leave, but Gaoshun stopped him and explained the risks of giving her the pill. If Lihua were to take the pill, she would ascend to the Heavenly Realm as an immortal, but she would lose all her memories of her time in the Mortal Realm. This meant she would forget her father, the villagers, and Wen Xu. For the first time in centuries, Wen Xu wept. The thought of his beloved wife losing her memories and the essence of who she was, shattered his heart. He pleaded with Gaoshun, asking if there was a way to prevent the memory loss. Gaoshun explained that if Lihua loved him deeply and accepted the pill willingly, she would retain her memory. However, if she did not love him, she would lose her memories, and Wen Xu would lose his memories of her. Feeling his heart sink again, Wen Xu realized the gravity of the situation. Not only would Lihua forget everything, but he would forget her. Understanding the risks, he decided he would tell Lihua the truth, leaving out the consequences of taking the immortality pill.

That night, Wen Xu revealed the truth to Lihua. He told her that he was a god who had descended to the Mortal Realm out of boredom with his life in the Heavenly Realm and that he was captivated by her. Lihua was shocked and asked him why he had chosen her among everyone else. Wen Xu explained that he was fascinated by the life she lived, as she made good money but lived modestly. He wanted to see what it was like to live the life she lived and decided to descend to meet her. At first, he enjoyed helping her, but fell in love with her over time. He wanted to tell her, but he feared that she wouldn't love him anymore. Lihua asked him why he had decided to tell her now. Wen Xu told her that he had to ascend to the Heavenly Realm again, and he would have to wait twenty years before he could come back. Devastated, Lihua understood and declared that she would wait for him, no matter how long he would be gone. Wen Xu explained to her that there was a way for her to come with him. He showed her the immortality pill and explained that if she took it, she would become immortal. When she asked what would happen to her body, he told her that her soul would ascend to the Heavenly Realm while her mortal body would remain behind and die. Although she was taken aback, Lihua understood. She

asked if she would be able to return to the Mortal Realm whenever she wanted. Wen Xu explained that she would have to wait twenty years before she could descend back to the Mortal Realm and would have to remain in the Mortal Realm for a year before she could ascend again. Startled but resolute, Lihua understood and was willing to sacrifice her mortal life to be with Wen Xu. She agreed to take the pill and ascend with him. Wen Xu felt a surge of happiness, but a lingering doubt clouded his mind. What if Lihua didn't truly love him? What if she was only doing this to please him?

That night, Lihua prepared a final meal for them. By morning, Lihua had donned her finest silks and jewels, ready to leave the mortal world behind. She and Wen Xu exchanged final words and shared one last kiss before Lihua took the immortality pill. A few moments later, Lihua passed. Wen Xu held his wife's hand, still warm, and wept. He prayed that Lihua would still remember him when he got to the Heavenly Realm. He lay next to her, cradling her in his arms as he whispered sweet words to her. Closing his eyes, he ascended. When he opened his eyes, he was back in the Heavenly Realm. He looked around, hoping to see his wife. Just then, he spotted a woman dressed in the same silks that his wife had been dressed in before her ascension. The woman called out his name, and Wen Xu felt his heart swell with joy as tears pricked his eyes. He called out the woman's name: Lihua. They embraced tightly, overjoyed to see each other once more. Wen Xu shed heavy tears as he clung to Lihua. Concerned, Lihua asked him what troubled him so much. He looked in her eyes and told her the truth about taking the immortality pill. Lihua was taken aback but reassured him that he should never have doubted her. She declared that she loved him with every bit of her mortal and immortal being. Wen Xu was thankful and happy to have his wife with him. Their life in the Heavenly Realm was no different from their life in the Mortal Realm. Thanks to the abundant resources available, Lihua was able to elevate her skills as an apothecary. With her husband's position in Heaven, she became a goddess of medicine. Now and then, the couple would gaze down at their former home, planning the times they would descend to spend a few years in their quaint little house in the countryside.

# *If The Women Could Talk:*

## *A Representation of the Duties of Indian Women*

Aditi Patel, age 15

When guests arrive at an Indian home, the first people to serve their needs are the women. When guests arrive at an Indian home, the people to serve them food are the women. When guests arrive at an Indian home and the seats at the table are full, the people to sit on the floor are the women. But why? Why do the women do this? Men say they are stronger, yet the women are always the ones cleaning the homes and doing all the duties. This has a simple, yet complicated answer: To provide for their family.

The women work hard, day after day, to serve the needs of their family. They stay and sacrifice themselves to serve the needs of their family. No matter the day, sick or healthy, the women continue to serve the needs of their family.

The women always and will continue to do whatever it takes for their family to flourish. They will stay quiet, through the pain, through the aches of their bodies from all the work and continue to provide for their family. Through their quietness and actions, they will showcase their love and affection for their family to flourish in this world. Why? To provide for their family.



## *Petals of Pink*

Sophia Pauze, age 15

Oil Pastels

*My mom absolutely loves to garden and we keep plants both in and outside of our house. This was one of my first works with oil pastels. When I first got them, I really wanted to draw something with them, so I figured that I'd draw one of the many plants at our house.*



## *Emanating*

Birk, age 15

Digital

*After looking through a lot of Art Nouveau style images for a school project, I had the idea to draw my own. Inspired by the magnificent flowing hair of many of the ladies depicted in the style, I wanted mine to display a similar radiance, and what is more radiant than a pink-gold orb emanating light from its core?*

# Impossible Choices

Corinna Huntley, age 13

I felt trapped. There's a crowd of people and one gate. I'm in the middle of the crowd. There are gunners shooting at people, the building is falling apart. It's being bombed. There's one gate, the others are locked or broken and aren't moving. Everyone is going through this gate. A large chasm opens behind it. *No way out. No safe place.* I think, panicked. I get to the gate. A crowd behind me pushing, shoving to get to the gate. The chasm, people on the sides, people falling through the air, screaming, nothing to grab onto and when they reach the bottom thuds that echo up from the bottom of the chasm. No screams when they reach the bottom just sudden silence. The chasm is too big to jump over or jump onto the other wall. Either I jump into the middle or climb down the wall in front of me. *No time to decide.* People pushing me closer to the edge. I weigh the odds, climbing down, slower but safer. Jumping in the middle, quicker but deadly. I look to the sides to see if there are any other options. There's a crevice next to me. Large enough for me and someone else but no one else seems to notice it. I squeeze into the crevice. Then, as I relax, I feel large, warm arms rap around me. A bitter but sweet smell engulfs me as I wriggle to turn around. Then, a voice. "Stay still," it says, warm breath against my neck. "You're ok. You're safe." The voice is not deep but definitely not high. It's right in the middle but leaning towards the deep side of the range. He pulls me into the crevice completely. Finally, I'm able to turn around. I can still hear screams from outside the crevice. Then, they slowly fade away. He pulls me in closer, lifts my chin. Then he kisses me, slowly, keeping me still. His arms tighten as he pulls away. "Are you feeling better?" He asks. I lick my lips as I nod. Now the taste of him is in my mouth and he tastes the same as always, slightly like cinnamon. I look up into his sad, warm brown eyes as he watches me. I duck my head; my eyes starting to water and instead look at his shoulder. Then I lean in and hug him. I rest all my weight on him as I rest my head on his shoulder. I turn my head into his neck and silently, I start to cry. He pushes me slightly to look me in the eyes and push my hair out of my face. Then pulls me into a hug kissing me on the forehead. "It's ok. You're safe. You won't be hurt as long as I'm with you. Especially as long as you're in my arms," he said in a near whisper. A promise, I know he will do his best to keep. Slowly, I push away looking around. I realize that we are in my bed, in my canopy. "Thank you, bae," I whisper to him. "I will always be

here, baby," he responds. I kiss his cheek then look around. I try to get out of his arms, and he releases me some but then says: "Please stay. I need you as much as you need me." He looks at me, his eyes almost pleading with me. I could see him. Sad but loving, pleading with me not to go. Knowing that if I wanted to leave, he couldn't force me not to. I lean against him, deciding not to leave. I rest my head on his shoulder, and I put my hand against his chest. He turns his head and rests his cheek on the top of my head. I start to cry again, and he rubs my back trying to comfort me and make me happy rather than have me being sad. "Why are you crying?" He asks me. "Please tell me. And please, don't tell me that your fine because I know that you're not." I take a deep breath. "I don't know. I guess that in my dream or whatever that was I didn't have that choice." He hugs me closer and kisses the top of my head. "Well, you're safe now." I curl up and lean into his chest. I kiss him and then I push him over resting a hand on his chest and putting my other hand in his hair. One of his hands goes to my hair moving it so that it is over one of my shoulders and hanging over so that it brushes his shoulder. I close my eyes again. I relax my grip around him and fall asleep again. This time into a deep, uneventful sleep.



## *Please You Mustn't Belong*

R. Marie, age 13

Graphite pencils in sketchbook

Two nameless figures - one gazing, glaring... up at the other. The other is attempting to avoid. There is tension. They are both god-like. Though one is true. It's up to you. I'm curious to know the viewers' interpretation. I'm familiar with the two and am quite shy about sharing my works; please view them with care.

# The Black Dress

by Jay'den Moore, age 17

I checked the mail I received today to see what I received. I opened my mailbox and found bills, an invitation that read "Come to Dominic Oaks first birthday party!" sent by my neighbor, the new Stephen King novel "The Long Walk" I ordered from my library, and a letter from my father. I go inside, set my book down on the counter, and throw away the invitation and the letter. I'm not really into social interaction and my father should know by now that I don't want to speak with him. I haven't really spoken to anyone ever since my mother left me, especially my father!

I sit down and begin reading my book when I hear a knock on the door. I sighed, got up, and answered the door but the person standing in front of me when I opened the door shook me to my very core.

It was my *mother*.

She looked just like me but with a few wrinkles. Brown skin, long braided black hair, and bushy eyebrows.

I dropped my book to the floor and just stared at her. She just smiled at me as if she hadn't left me for five years. I was so baffled by her just showing up at my front door that I didn't notice she was carrying a box until she shoved it into my hands and let herself in my home without asking. She sat down as I closed my door and walked over to my couch as my mother just stared at me, grinning from ear to ear.

I set the box on my lap and opened it. There's a letter inside, it's from my father. I get up to throw it away, but my mother grabs my wrist with an insanely strong and tight grip. Her smile seemed to vanish from her face; it sent shivers down my spine just how serious she got over some stupid letter. I sat down and opened the letter. It read:

*Dear Marcy,*

*I know we haven't spoken in five years, but I just want to let you know that I miss you and I've been thinking about you every day... Anyway, I found the dress you made for your mother and thought you might want it since your mother won't be using it anymore. I love you sweetheart*

*Love, Dad*

I set the letter down on the counter and opened the box. There it was, my mom's old black dress I made for her when I was fifteen years old. I looked to my mother and asked, "You won't be wearing this anymore?" My voice came across sadder than I intended to sound. She shook her head and continued to smile at me. I took the dress out of the box and the first thing I noticed was the tear on the chest area. I turned to my mother, "How did this happen?"

She didn't respond.

"Do you want me to fix it?" I asked.  
She slowly turned her head to my fireplace. "If I fix it, will you wear it?"  
She continued staring at the flames.

I get up and grab some of my old sewing supplies I used when I was younger. The last time I remember using them I was twenty-five years old. I get to work on the black dress. I was pretty rusty but eventually I fixed the dress. I thought I did an impressive job for someone who hasn't sewn in five years. I handed the dress to my mother and watched as she examined it. She looks at me with a disappointed look on her face and rips two new tears into the dress.

Maybe I wasn't good enough?

I took the black dress from her and began fixing it again. I worked for thirty minutes but I think it turned out well! My mother snatches it from my hands and creates a new tear! I start getting irritated now, but I just sigh, remaining patient like I always do with her, and begin resewing the dress once more.

I work on the dress for a bit longer than the first two times, my hands were shaking from irritation, I'm so close to making the dress perfect, just imagining it brings me back to a happier time when I would sew dresses for my mother for fun as she braided my hair and we talked about school, boys I liked, and drama happening between my aunts and uncles. Just as I finish the black dress, my mother tears a massive hole in her dress. The sound from the tear startles me a bit and I feel a sharp pain in my thumb. I look to see that I accidentally jammed the sewing needle in my thumb causing it to drip with blood.

"Dang it!" I shouted, "Why did you do that?"

She doesn't say anything.

I grabbed the dress and started ripping it myself. My face was hot with anger.

My mother stares at me with a sad expression on her face.

I continue to tear the dress.

*RIP!*

She turns her head to the fire.

*RIP!*

She looks towards the light.

*RIP!*

She looks back at me, the same saddened expression on her face.

*RIP!*

I throw the dress on the ground and get into her face, my thumb still dripping blood from

the wound. "There, your dress is ruined! Are you happy now? You ruined everything!"

My mother continued to stare at me.

My hands wrapped around her neck and *squeezed*.

"SAY SOMETHING! Why did you leave me? Was I not good enough? Did you not love me?  
YOU WERE EVERYTHING TO ME AND YOU JUST THREW YOUR LIFE AWAY!"

After being silent the entire time my mother finally says to me "You have to let me go..."

I took my hands off her throat, tears ran down my face, The mark I left from strangling her looked more like a rope left that mark. "I can't... You said if I fix the dress—" I swallow a sob.

I grab the dress again and begin resewing it. As I'm working my mom places her cold hand on my shoulder, "It won't bring me back..."

Her words pierce my heart. I sit in silence, contemplating her words.

"I love you so much mom..." I sob

"I love you too sweetheart"

I stare at the dress, I run my fingers through the resewn lines of it, and throw it into the fire...

I look behind me, she's gone...

I grab my landline phone and dial a number,

"Hi dad... I'm ready to talk..."

The End...



## *The Beloved*

Shiqi (Emily) Ding, age 15

Graphite Pencils

*This was a try at drawing humans again, not caring if it was perfect. I learned along the process, picturing this woman as everything I couldn't be. I wanted her to have what I wished could be me as I added details to her. A mole under her right eye, like me. Seeing the artwork slowly come together made my effort in drawing people feel worth it again.*



## *The Gentle Hold*

Akshaya Devisetty, age 12

Sketch pencils and shading

*Inspired by the elegance of Bharatanatyam, I wanted to capture the quiet reverence a dancer receives, the gentle grounding that allows her movements to soar. The man's careful hold symbolizes respect, trust, and the unseen strength behind every poised step. The work reflects themes of connection, devotion, and the balance of power and grace.*

# *The Lost Shoe Made of Glass*

Molly Watson, age 12

(This poem is based off of the story of Cinderella)

Soon a strike of time,  
A strike that signals midnight.

But the hour is yet to come.  
For now,  
A love that is true must occur.

Dancing,  
Dancing with the prince,  
The prince of the land,  
Quite a charming prince,  
Cinderella dances with.

Only by her fairy godmother does this happen,  
For once,  
A maid,  
But now a princess at heart  
Alas,  
At midnight,  
She would be a maid,  
A maid once more.  
The clock strikes.  
For losing track of time,  
Away Cinderella must fly,  
Away from her prince,  
Away to avoid being seen.

But as she flies away,  
Her shoe made of glass,  
Her shoe slips from its clutch around her foot.

The prince calls and calls,  
But deaf to this Cinderella is.

The day following the ball,  
The prince,  
The prince goes and goes through each home that is a house to a maiden,  
Scouting,  
Looking,  
Hoping,  
To find the girl.  
The girl he fell in love with.  
And the girl who lost the shoe.  
The shoe made of glass.



## *Paws and Wonders*

Akshara Devisetty, age 12  
Sketch Pencils

*This sketch captures a quiet moment of wonder as a cat observes a butterfly. Soft pencil shading emphasizes stillness and innocence, highlighting the beauty of curiosity and the gentle connection between animals and nature.*



## *The Peacock*

Salini Veligiram, age 12  
Pencil



## *A Dog's Bad Day*

Sree Kundrapu, age 12

Pencil

*I just thought of the idea of if I could draw/sketch a dog in a cup. I thought it would be a cute idea. Then to make it unique I made it so that it looked like the dog had a bad day. You can see the slight frown I put in the drawing, so that is the intention.*

# *The Leash With No Name*

Jordan Kerr, age 14

The rays of starlight still shine the same,  
But all is unchanging as I call out your name  
The sky, the sun, the stars, all soar  
Your leash hangs silent by the door

Your bowl gleams, your toys lie unmoved  
Time seems to stop as everyone else debuts  
And as I recall the memories we had before  
Your leash hangs silent by the door

We used to walk through trails of leaves  
Over time, you seemed to become a thief  
One of laughter, love, and so much more  
But your leash hangs silent by the door

I watch the spots you loved to lie,  
The sunlit patch caressing your perfect black tie  
Your nose, a beacon as you snore  
Your leash hangs silent by the door

The world goes on, the seasons spin,  
As I wait for you to paw at my skin  
Your collar sways in the crazy outdoors  
As your leash hangs silent by the door

Some say you've gone to visit a better land,  
One where pain and age can no longer stand  
Yet the ache and burn approach me as a war  
As your leash hangs silent by the door

Rest yourself, rejuvenate, for your story is just now ending  
Your thievery, overtaking dreams and souls, forever  
Till I rest, I now walk alone, my eyes an endless pour  
As your leash hangs silent by the door

commending

# *No Matter*

Sreshtha Yarlagadda, age 13

No matter how fast you go  
I'll always catch up to you

No matter how high you go  
I'll always reach you

No matter how slow you go  
I'll always slow down for you

No matter how low you are  
I'll always pull you

No matter where you are  
I'll always be there for you!



## *Support*

Eloise Gruber, age 13

Photography

*My dog was in a really cute spot. I really wanted to take a picture of him because he was sick, looked cozy, and fell asleep on my hand. We had just gotten back from the vet and knew he was going to be fine, which was a relief.*



## *Fluttering Hope*

Aria Zhao, age 12

Pencil

*A butterfly landing on your finger symbolizes a lot of different things, so I put them under one category as "hope". This was also good practice for drawing hands.*

# *False Belief*

Henna Abrams, age 15

Ten years ago, my sister was marked. I didn't know what it meant at the time, but I celebrated with her. We ate her favorite food for dinner and then she left, and I haven't seen her since.

Yesterday I woke up with the mark. I didn't know why the goddess chose me, but I knew I wasn't leaving. I won't let my family lose someone else. I hid the mark under a long sleeve shirt and a jacket.

When I walked downstairs, my mother didn't check my arm for the mark; she had given up her hope of me getting marked.

Nothing happened all day. I walked around the town, went to the library and got a few books. The most interesting thing was my disappointed neighbors telling me I drove the goddess away because I didn't conform to her view of what I should look and act like.

I watched the sun set from my window; the streets were full of angered people. They shouted about an ungrateful person who didn't understand what an honor it was to be marked.

I listened as they called me names, called me ungrateful for the chance I was given. They didn't understand, I didn't either, I knew it couldn't be good. But every so often I'd doubt myself, was I really doing what was right or was I just scared?

I drifted to sleep with unanswered questions burning in my head. And when I woke up nothing had changed. The apocalypse the preachers had warned us of hadn't come and everything was okay.

I got out of bed and started walking towards the door when I heard a voice.

"It's time to go," the voice said.

I turned around to see the goddess standing behind Death.

"What?" I asked, staring at them in disbelief.

"You're dead, we're going to the afterlife," Death explained.

"Uh huh, I thought deities couldn't die, so why is she here?" I asked.

"Deities cannot die, but Rosa isn't a goddess, she's a witch," Death explained. "And she's been cursing your people with that mark."

Their words hit me like a brick, I stumbled back falling through the wall.

"Wow kid, you have to calm down," Death said, stepping through the wall.

"How I'm I supposed to be calm right now?" I yelled jumping to my feet. "My whole world was built on a lie and everyone else still believes it!"

"That doesn't matter now, it's over, no one else is going to die because of that," Death said pointing at the mark on my arm.

"That's not the point!" I shouted.

"Look kid, we're dead, there's nothing you can do about that and there's nothing you can do about people's beliefs," Rosa said.

Death stepped closer reaching out a hand, I stepped back slowly inching towards the stairs. The second I was close enough I raced down the stairs and ran out the door. Death called after me, but I didn't stop.

I ran out of town and into the forest that surrounded it. It was dark under the leaves, but I couldn't run through the close-knit trees. I kept walking, slowly navigating through the trees and following the slight hints of sunlight that crept through.

I looked back to see if they were still following when I ran into something. I fell to the ground and was surprised that it hurt. My hands were scraped and bleeding. I turned around, still sitting on the ground, to see a ten-foot-tall cat-like creature towering over me.

"Thank you, Beans," a woman said, stepping out from behind the trees.

I pushed myself back into a tree and hid in the middle of it.

I heard rapid footsteps then they stopped dead.

"Ve, ma'am what are you doing here?" Death asked, their voice raising with each word.

"Your job apparently, seriously how hard is it to not scare a kid into running?" Ve said.

"Well, if it's so easy where are they?" Death asked.

"They're hiding in the tree," Ve said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Death sighed loudly. "Kid, come out, we aren't going to hurt you," they said,

I pulled my knees closer to my chest, feeling tears fall down my face and drop onto my knees.

"Kid?" Death asked, sitting beside the tree.

"I can't leave them," I whispered.

"I know it's hard, but you will see them again," Death whispered. "And I promise they'll be okay."

"They already lost someone, I don't want them to lose someone else." I said.

"Lily lost you too, kid, she's waiting for you."

I thought about it for a second then I stood up and stepped out of the tree.

"Can I at least say goodbye to my family?" I asked.

Death looked to Ve who nodded while holding Rosa by the arm.

Death held out a hand and I took it as we walked back to the town in silence.



## *Skyline's October*

Jordan Kerr, age 14

Acrylics

*Feeling in the mood for my favorite holiday and in hopes of a feline addition to the family, I painted Skyline's October. In this painting, the cat longingly gazes into the night sky, just as we did awaiting her arrival.*

# Nine Lives

Jordan Kerr, age 14

If I had nine lives, I'd spend the first one running  
Just to see what it truly means to feel the breeze  
I'd chase the best version of me, my heart drumming  
Learning how it feels to let go and unfreeze

In my second life, I'd speak without fear,  
Build something out of every interaction and theory  
I'd laugh in a quiet room, and dance with everyone I hold dear  
And never forget how one word can change the weary

My third life would be to experience the world  
A time to watch and examine the things I once ignored,  
I'd travel to Rome and Paris, Barcelona and Japan  
And find beauty in the nature I had never adored

In my fourth, I'd make every mistake deliberately  
Just to see what grows from the life I never took legitimately  
I'd learn that failure and omission aren't the end  
It's just apprehension in pretend

My fifth life would be full of love  
The kind that feels like the sun when it rains  
I'd write hopes and dreams, holding them in my glove  
And promise to stick with you like were cuffed in chains

In my sixth, I'd be quiet,  
Let the world speak instead  
I'd listen to the lesson, learning to apply it  
And find peace in a night filled with dread

My seventh would be wild and loud,  
Partying through the night, dancing in bare feet,  
I'd sway, jump, and shuffle like I'm on a cloud  
And finally believe you don't have to follow the written sheet

My eight would be slower, gentle  
I'd spend it watching mom and dad,  
And my brother whose always been essential  
And I'd forgive myself for cutting short the time that we had

And my ninth, I'd live it for real  
No mask, no maybe, just laughter and chatter  
Because after nine lives, I'd know it like steel  
The life I'm already living is the only one that matters.

# "Wisdom"

Ruby Mars Matarrese, age 15

We don't talk anymore,  
When we do it turns violent.  
In regards to you,  
I have always been silent.

I've held my tongue,  
I hold my ground,  
I'll move ahead  
Without a sound.

'Cause there's a me without a you,  
And that I know you know is true.  
Yet I know that you think that I'm  
Necessary to your very survival.  
We're no more than rivals.

You hate me with your admiration.  
You follow fast, no hesitation.  
I'm painted in your perfect picture,  
Seen as a forever fixture.

You don't know me like I know you.  
Deceit is your only certitude.  
There's nothing that you wouldn't do.  
You force, force, force to be the filler.  
You lie to make yourself seem bigger.

I've held my tongue,  
I hold my ground,  
I'll move ahead  
Without a sound.

'Cause there's a me without a you,  
And that I know you know is true.  
I'm not your backbone nor your slave.  
I am the ash the phoenix reigns.

I will be forevermore,  
Written in your untold lore.  
For when the king's axes fall,  
I will not answer your call.

# *Sister Eliza Cashonhand*

Aedin McKenna, age 19

Preface Note: This is inspired by *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), written by Geoffrey Chaucer in an effort to draw attention to and publicize issues within the Church during the time period. These issues are still relevant in modern day. This piece is not hate-speech towards the Oblate order, but rather a creative work based on experience and media highlights.

The Oblate was scrawny and thin as a bone  
She was principal so her seeds of knowledge could be sewn

Lessons in ethics, judgements, and fate she would teach  
But only students who paid most would she reach

Teach to the dollar  
Not to the scholar

Was the secret mission of her school  
Buried among favorites and pointless rules

Were the ones she assigned to fail  
These students were bright, trusting in truth to prevail

She smothered their lights, their souls she devoured  
For The Oblate feared they would transcend her power

With a veil resting upon her head  
Her status among crowds was clearly well read

In the early hours of the day, her song of charity rung out  
A single cent to spare for the truly devout?

People gave generously, a dollar or more  
For they knew not what she had done the sunrise before

In front of the main door is where she stood  
Ready to discuss the common good

The day's first lesson would promptly begin  
The Oblate could hardly wait for her words to seep in

Pay at the door or you'll wish you had before  
She demanded, eager to see who would give more

Pacing through the desks, her face turned to smile

Her intentions were truly quite vile

She counted Twenty- thirty- up to fifty  
Pausing at a student she really should pity

He shared nothing but the story of the Widow and the Dime  
But it was hardly worth The Oblate's time

Her ruler rapped along his desk  
He couldn't tell her behavior was grotesque

He was but eight, his wisdom much elder  
For he trusted God would be his shelter

He did not know his world would shatter  
As fast as her ruler did clatter

Again and again, day after day  
The Oblate put her ridicule on display

The other children were quick to learn  
What they did to him was not of her concern

But the fate of the boy was hardly the worst  
Some believed him to be cursed, if he left, he'd be the first

For the other children seemed to fare far from best  
Most became Oblates, proud to wear the crest

They led prayer alongside the charity song  
And found no wrong

In continuing what The Oblate had started  
Benefiting all but the truly kindhearted

*Nec plus nec minus*

Blessed be the line of business



## *Mini-Peep and Jasper*

Maximo Castellanos, age 17

Pencil, paper, shading tools

*a scene of a little girl giving a magical creature a slide whistle*

# *I am a Chess Game*

Rannvijay Padhi, age 12

I am a chess game,  
sometimes I feel like a knight,  
going around my problems.  
Sometimes I feel like an rook  
ready to take on what's coming.  
At times I feel like a pawn,  
dumb and useless.  
Yet occasionally I'm a king  
Controlling everything.  
But never a queen  
I can't do everything  
No one can do everything.  
But sometimes I feel like a player  
Calm, cunning, and composed.



## *Flutter and Fur*

Adella Petka, age 12

pencil, water color pencils, water brush, acrylic paint markers

*I simply love foxes, (which inspired me to draw the piece in the first place), and I liked the idea of the contrast of the blue of the butterflies to the red of the fox.*

# *Teddy Bear*

Varsha Lakshmanan, age 16

On the day you came to this world  
I came to you  
You chewed on my ears and pulled my soft plush limbs  
And I learned that this is love  
You learned that my warm fur is the color of lilacs blooming in May  
And you named me "Purple Bear"  
Not the most creative name  
But it was cherished  
And it was mine  
You grew up and still dragged me everywhere  
Gripping my arm like a lifeline, holding me for comfort  
Your giggles filled the air like rays of sunshine  
You came to me for everything  
Hugging me tight, not pulling or biting anymore  
But one day, you stopped  
Your friends called you too childish  
Made fun of you  
And you forgot why you needed me  
The world had ripped my warm blanket of love away  
And I was freezing to death  
You decide that you were too old for a stuffed animal  
You held me tenderly in your arms for the last time as you said goodbye  
And a piece of my fragile heart was ripped away from me  
As I caught one last glimpse of your face  
I made this promise to myself  
"I will see you again someday  
And get to love you once more"



Shalini  
Veligiram

## *A Bear Called Paddington*

Shalini Veligiram, age 12

Pencil

my drawing features the beloved character Paddington Bear

Akshara Devisetty



## Feathers of Pride

Akshara Devisetty, age 12

Color pencils and Sketch pencils

*Inspired by the peacock's natural elegance, this drawing explores themes of pride, beauty, and self-expression. Flowing forms and posture convey confidence and harmony, celebrating nature's ability to express strength through grace.*

# Oh Turtle

Sreshtha Yarlagadda, age 13

Oh Turtle, when I found you  
You were shy and I was too  
I poked you to come out  
But I don't think you heard me shout  
I carried you to a little pond  
So I could take care of you all day long  
Little turtle I hoped you might  
Like your new home without a fright

Oh Turtle, just like you  
I was small and tiny too  
I struggled to see  
How much people around me  
Could help me grow  
So long ago  
Now I see  
How strangers can be  
So kind and loving  
If you aren't judging

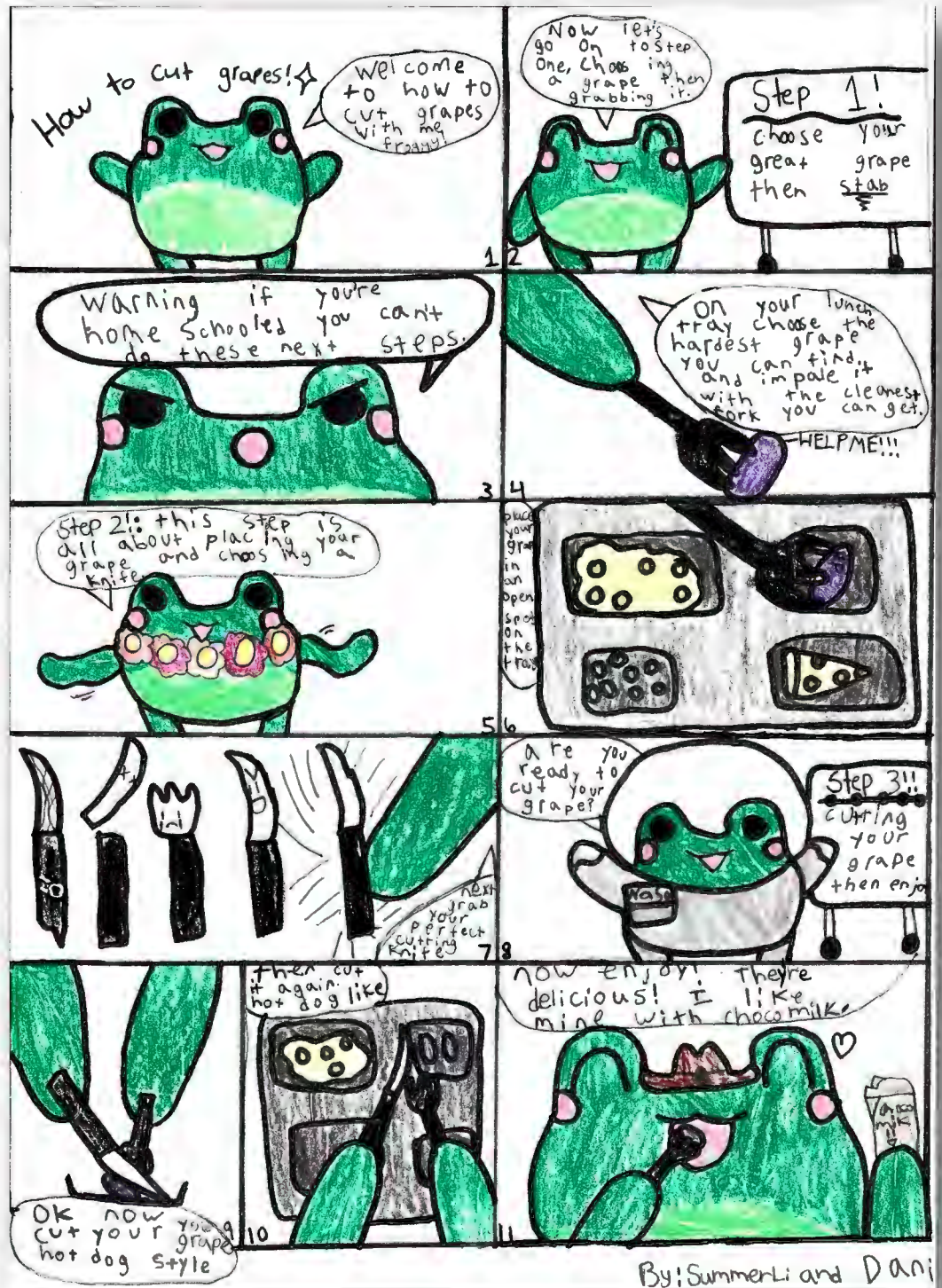
Oh Turtle, don't you know  
How I was trying to help even though  
I was a stranger to you  
And you were one to me too  
This was an act of kindness  
Which I passed on from behind us  
Oh Turtle, even though things were tough and scary  
Strangers are there to make it merry  
Don't trust everyone you see  
But make sure you guarantee  
The ones with tenderness from their hearts  
Are there to make everything fly with sparks

Oh Turtle, thank you so much  
As I am so deeply touched  
You let me help you once  
And you helped me in return  
Now you know everyone isn't a dunce  
And most people yearn

To help, to appreciate, to be there for others  
And not at all bother  
How dirty or pathetic anyone might've looked

Oh Turtle, from the day you were sad  
To the day you were glad  
To have someone help you  
Through and through  
I hoped you know  
Passing on the kindness  
Means so much more than you can show  
And being there for someone  
Is the best you can do  
When someone is sad, lonely, or even blue

Oh Everyone, take this as a sign  
To help others shine  
Turtle helped me grow  
And I know  
That there are others  
Who can also discover  
The beauty of thoughtfulness  
As well as rightfulness  
Can go a long way  
From home  
To this very poem!



## How to Cut Grapes

Danielle Newman, age 12 and Summer Li, age 12  
colored pencil, pencil, marker

This comic was inspired by our school lunch trays and grapes and knives! We started cutting our grapes like a rich person would but when we heard about IMAGINE, we decided to join! At first we had no idea what to do for the comic but we decided to do a joint 'how to cut grapes!' comic! I, Summer Li did the drawing and outline and my best friend, Danielle Newman, did the color and writing! We decided to do the comic's main character as a frog. At the back we wrote our ideas and main character drawing but decided on frogs because of frog drawings behind the white board of our school library that shows the lunch activities!



## *Cracks on a Framed Photo*

Eiliyah Tasneem, age 15

Digital Art

*I dropped my phone, and the cracks on my screen protector resembled a constellation, which is what inspired this piece.*

# *You Should've Seen Me Coming*

Aadhya A., age 13

They smiled with me, laughed with me, called me their friend — but I knew better. I saw the side-eyes when I spoke up. I heard the silence when I succeeded. I learned early: some people clap when you win... as long as you're not winning more than them.

So I stopped trying to fit in. Stopped shrinking. Started watching.

Let them think I'm harmless. Let them forget I'm even there. Because the most underestimated ones? We don't bark. We don't beg. We build in silence.

I'm Amara. Thirteen. Quiet. Not because I don't have anything to say —It's just that most people don't listen.

At school, I float. Not the kind of floating where you're highly popular. I float like a ghost. There, but barely. Cropped out of group photos. Added to chats only when they need something.

Sienna and Tasha — they're the kind of friends who post “my besties ❤️” under pictures you're not even in. When I got sick and missed the science project deadline, they presented it with my name on it — and barely mentioned me.

“They said you helped a bit,” Ms. Hart told me. I didn't correct her. I just swallowed it.

Because next time? I'd be ready.

When the school announced the Innovation Challenge, I knew this was it. First place came with a scholarship to a national STEM camp, a spot in the district showcase, and a feature in the newsletter.

Everyone rushed to partner up. Again. Tasha walked toward Maya. I didn't ask anyone. I wrote my name on the sign-up sheet — alone.

Ms. Hart raised an eyebrow. “You sure you want to go solo, Amara?”

I nodded.

She looked at me like I'd try my best, fail politely, and walk away with a participation ribbon.

For three weeks, I worked in silence. No study sessions. No group chats. No help. While they built glittery cardboard displays, I was coding. While they hot-glued stars, I fixed wires. While they rehearsed speeches, I let my work speak louder than all of them combined.

My prototype: A pressure-based shoe insole that tracks walking posture in real time. Functional. Clean. Data-driven.

Tasha snorted when she saw me setting up. “Wait... you built that?”

Sienna smirked. “Okay, Amara. We see you trying to be the tech queen.”

I didn't respond. They could smirk, I was done.

Then came Leah.

She wasn't popular, but she was sharp — top of every class, the kind who raised her hand before the teacher finished the question. She didn't gossip. She didn't chase attention. She didn't need to.

Which is why I froze when she stopped by my table.

"Hey," she said, studying my prototype. "You're doing something with sensors?" Tasha was nearby. If I told Leah the truth, Tasha would copy everything. Like always.

"Uh... no," I lied quickly. "Just a basic LED reaction timer."

Leah didn't blink. Her eyes flicked from the wires to my face.

"Got it," she said, voice calm. No accusation. Just quiet withdrawal.

She walked away without another word.

But her silence was louder than anything.

The next day, Leah didn't look at me. Not in class, cafeteria, anywhere.

I told myself it didn't matter. That I'd done what I had to do.

But the lie sat in my throat like a splinter.

Then I saw Leah's project.

Not a copy. Not stolen. But eerily similar — same sensors, same goals, same clean design.

The gym buzzed with chatter as the judges made their rounds. I stood beside my project, steady and quiet.

Tasha and Sienna strutted around, tossing sarcastic remarks. I didn't flinch.

Leah stood across the room, poised, and composed. She explained her project clearly, thanked her mentor, even complimented another team.

I watched her, stomach twisting.

She didn't need to lie. She didn't need to hide. And somehow, that made me feel smaller.

When the judges arrived, I let the data and design speak. No grand speeches. No tricks.

Leah watched from afar, her eyes unreadable.

When the winners were announced, my name was called first.

The room went silent. The same people who'd ignored me, doubted me, even hated me — were speechless.

I smiled softly, packed up my project, and turned to leave.

Leah met my eyes as I passed. No smile. No nod. Just a look — calm, unreadable, and distant.

Like she saw everything.

And chose to walk away anyway.

Because sometimes, the loudest roar is the one no one hears coming.

Later, I sat alone in the library, scrolling through the newsletter draft. My name was there — bold, centered, celebrated. But it didn't feel like victory. Not really.

I kept thinking about Leah. About the moment she asked me a simple question, and I chose fear over honesty.

The next day, I found her in the robotics lab with a bunch of her friends (more like her minions that she hypnotized).

"Hey," I said.

She looked up, expression neutral.

"Can you come outside real quick?" I asked.

Leah followed me into the hallway.

"I lied," I admitted. "It wasn't a reaction timer. It was a posture tracker insole. You were right."

She nodded slowly. "I figured."

"I was scared you'd tell someone. Or copy it. Or... I don't know."

"Uhh huh sure, you really think that I would have copied it?" she asked.

"No, no, you're getting it wrong, I'm not talking about you, I'm talking about Tasha," I whispered.

"I have known Tasha for a long time, ever since 5th grade, she would never do such a thing," Leah said angrily, then she walked back into the robotics lab.

*Of course she knows Tasha. I have known Tasha since I was four. Tasha is super competitive. But Leah loves Tasha.*

"Victory isn't always loud. Sometimes it's the quiet ones, who stay true, who leave the biggest mark."



## Summer Pop

A., age 15

Digital Art: Ibis Paint X

*I made this on a whim in a sunny day where the sky was blue (and when I was thirsty too, hence the bottle in the drawing) and felt like drawing something lighthearted.*

# *One Two Three Four Breathe*

Lex Bowman, age 16

The sounds of New York are overwhelming yet somehow calming, One, two, three, four. Breathe in, breathe out. You've got this. Take another sip of water. I take another sip. I walk inside the building, look at the ring. I walk to the back. An hour goes by. I start to hear the people's cheers, and chanting flood the building. I grab my mouthguard as my coach leads me to the ring. They introduce the first woman. I take a few deep breaths. One, two, three, four.

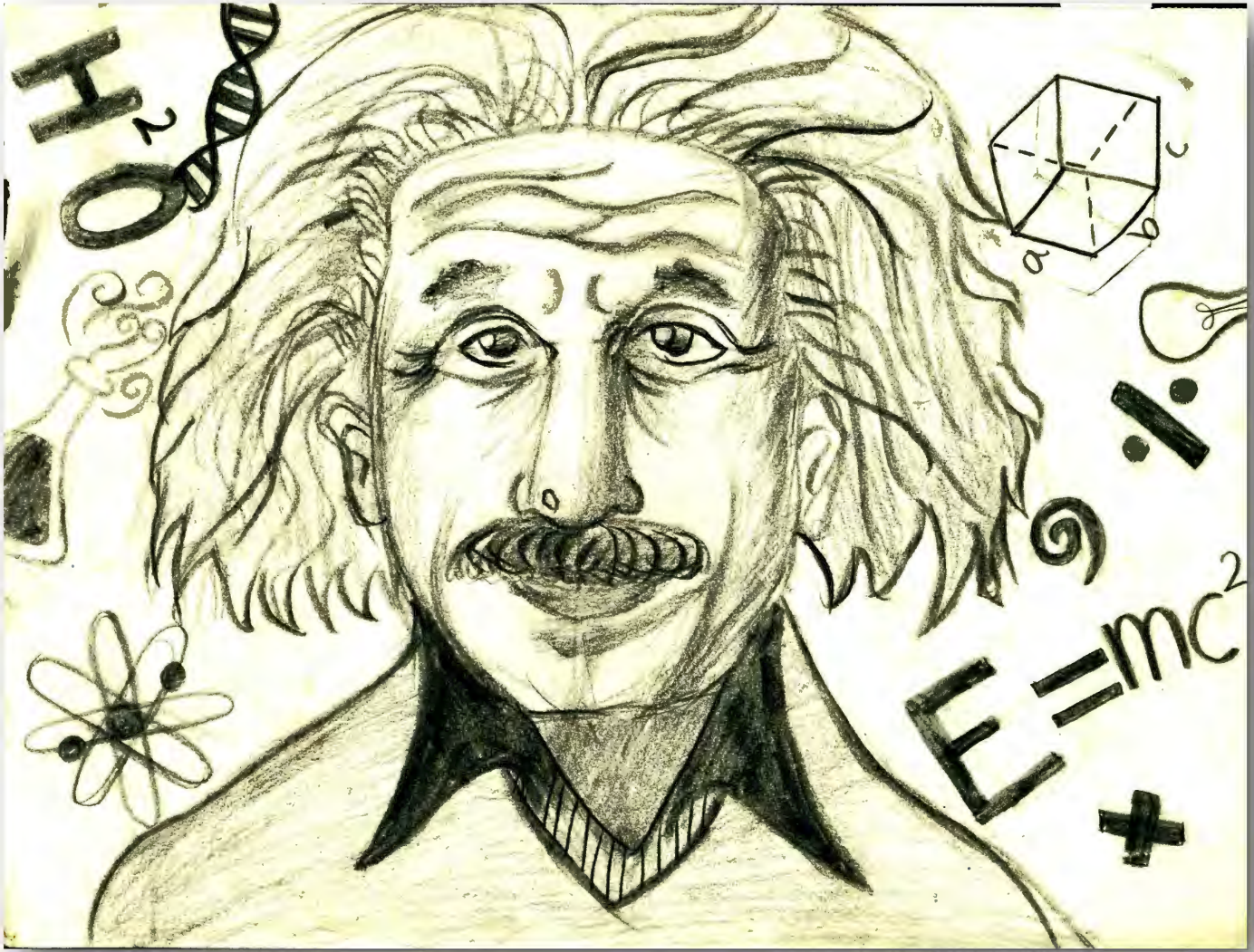
Breathe in, breathe out. I hear my name. The lights are so bright I can barely keep my eyes open. I hear the people cheering and booing. I put in my mouthguard. He explains the rules while my opponent glares at me. She starts to make faces and I chuckle a little. The ref tells us to put on our gloves and stand in our corners.

I wait for the countdown... Four, three, two, one. The whistle blows.

I take one more deep breath in before I go. Swing, miss. Swing, miss. I start reviewing coach's moves in my head. Uppercut. To the side. Down. Duck. Left. Up. Duck. Dodge. It's happening so fast, suddenly I'm cornered. My coach is yelling for me to get out of it.

She takes multiple blows and somehow I block. I hear a familiar voice in the crowd yell "take her down!" I nod to her and quickly throw a fast, hard punch to the face. Thump. To the floor. The referee blows his whistle. She's not getting up. He begins to count and my mind goes blank, bringing a memory of my father. One, two, three, four clear. Charge. The referee gets up to ten. Charge again. I hear my heart beating fast and faster in my chest. I feared this would happen. Panic attack. Charge to 400. Clear. No pulse.

The referee holds my hand up and the crowd cheers and a medal is put over my head. My coach brings me some water. Charge to 600. Clear. No pulse. Coach laughing and hugging me. "You did it!" Charge. "You did it!" Clear. "I can't believe it!" No pulse. "You did it!" He's gone.



## *Mind Over Matter*

Lakshana Sabari, age 13

Shading Pencils

*Everyone remembers the genius, the formula and the wild hair. But behind the fame was a quiet thinker often misunderstood. This portrait isn't just about what he solved. It's about how much more there was to him that the world never truly saw.*

# *The Recording of Memory or Insanity*

Chase, age 17

January 1st, 4:11 P.M: I had been stationed at this very remote secure testing site in Brooks Range in Northern Alaska. I had been looking forward to this for months now and during the flight I had been chatting with some of the others, getting to know each other since we would be working together for a long time. I met a guy named Carter, and I found out we liked similar things, so he became my first friend on this trip.

January 8th, 11:47 A.M: It has been a week since I got to the site, and I have been settling in nicely. There are dorms and I am roommates with Carter, so I have no complaints. I have mostly figured out where things are and what I have to do every day.

February 4th, 12:03 P.M: It has been a month since I got here, and I have gotten into a decent daily routine. I get up, and then go on a run around the site, shower, eat breakfast, and then go to work. Life here is simple and repetitive but it is nice to not have as much to worry about here.

June 9th, 8:14 P.M: I have been stationed at this massive secure facility in the mountains for 6 months, but recently I have noticed that the people I work with have started to look off. Faces not quite matching what I remember, skin tones seem slightly different, and their eyes seem to look at me as if I was food.

June 21st, 9:14 P.M: I was walking down the corridors when a coworker turned the corner, and I felt a shiver as his eyes stared right at me. Every night I feel like their details change more and more, every night I wonder if I am imagining it or if it is real.

June 23rd, 4:37 A.M: For the past few nights I have been having vivid nightmares about being eaten alive by these people...things?

June 24th, 11:08 P.M: Tonight, I was in the maintenance shed putting away tools when a coworker came in and grabbed my arm. His nails looked sharp like claws, his breathing sounded wet and deep and without thinking I swung the wrench I was holding into his skull, the impact making a loud sickening mix of cracking and squirting sounds as he dropped to the floor dead. I look at the face of the coworker I hit, and it looks elongated and warped, teeth too sharp, eyes too snake-like, and grey skin. I dragged the body outside and threw it off the ledge into the chasm before going to mop the blood and clean the tools.

June 25th, 2:01 A.M: Tonight, I could not fall asleep. Every time I tried, I would feel a shiver in my body and an urge to see splatter patterns.

July 2nd, 9:24 A.M: It has been a month since I killed that thing and the urges have been getting more violent every day.

July 3rd, 12:03 P.M: I went to the cafeteria to eat lunch and as I walked down the hall, I could hear voices and movements. But the moment I stepped through the doors, everything went silent. I looked up to see every set of eyes staring straight into me as if they knew what I had done but nobody said a word and then they all returned to their conversations like nothing happened.

July 5th, 4:12 A.M: I knew that I had to continue removing these creatures that had taken my coworkers' bodies. I had to make a plan to get rid of them all.

July 6th, 10:52 P.M: At night, I went to the maintenance shed and grabbed a spade before going back to my room. I found my roommate in the bathroom, and when he saw me, he sprinted at me with something in his hand. Without thinking, I used the spade to knock the object from his grip and stabbed him. He fell to the ground screaming. I could hear footsteps coming, so I stabbed him again. When I turned around, I swung the spade around; but I was knocked to the ground and tied up while hearing these things imitating my friends.

July 7th, ??:??: I was brought to a room where these things questioned me for a long time. I had no idea what time it was, but I refused to speak to these things. While they talked, I realized they might try and turn me into one of them, so before they could do anything I acted first. While still tied, I swung my arms, hitting one of the things into another, and then I ran out the door. When I got outside, I saw many of these creatures coming towards me. I saw no way around them, but I also could not let them have my body, so I turned around and jumped off the ledge into the chasm.

*\*Click\** Well, I mean, he wasn't wrong. We did take these human's bodies, but I am surprised he was able to figure it out. But it's a shame that because he jumped no one will know.

# Changed

Indiyah C., age 15

You would never think on a random Sunday morning anything would go wrong, right? Well, it turns out a lot could happen on a random Sunday morning. I, a 14-year-old girl named Indiyah Caulk, got hit by a car on October 19th, 2025, around 3am.

Now you're probably thinking, "What-no way you got hit by a car!" Yeah, I know, I know...it sounds hard to believe. That night I snuck out to go see a friend of mine, and I got hit by a Ford Mustang that was going 70mph. I was riding an electric bike, wearing all black, and what makes it even worse is that the bike did not have any reflectors.

That night changed my life, and I will never forget the moment when I woke up in the hospital confused as to what happened. When I asked my poor mother, who was in tears, she said in a soft voice, "You got hit by a car," and that broke me. I said, "What? I got hit by a car?" I could not believe what she said. That was until I realized I was in deep pain all over my body. I had a fractured back, a fractured shoulder, a broken hand, a concussion, and a wound that went so deep you could see my bone.

That night was the night I almost died. And you might ask, "How are you not dead?"

That night, an angel was by my side, God's angel. God sent that angel to protect me and to keep me safe. Without God, I would have been dead, and I cannot thank God enough for saving my life. My behavior wasn't great as you can tell, but after that, I changed my life. This car accident changed who I was, changed who I used to be.

This tragic incident happened only two months ago. It's now December, and with God's power, He healed all my fractured bones in just two months. I am now a 15-year-old girl, with a lot of trauma, a lot of regret and pain, and this terrible knot in my stomach from not being able to play my favorite sport. But even with all that trauma, pain, and regret I still live my life to its fullest. No matter what happens to anyone who is reading this story, do not let any trauma define who you are, and do not let it affect the person you are. You have to move on from the past and on to the present, and then to your future.



## Poison

Analia Lemus, age 15

lead pencil, bullpen, color pencils, markers, sharpie

*This is a lyrical artwork from the song "Poison" from Bell Biv DeVoe. I wanted to illustrate the manipulation that can come behind relationships and how it can trap you and harm you, like poison.*

# *Let There Be Urgency!*

Fridos Moumouni, age 19

Someone,

Come quick!

Let there be such urgency in carefully extracting  
The poison that loops into the depths of the brain.

Use your much needed tools:

Your scalpel,

Your sutures

A drill even, if it all turns out to be much worse than imagined.

I jerk, and I jump,

As I watch varied-sized lumps

--Of discoloration--

Form clustered onto my skin whenever I end up ruminating

On a memory once more

(fzzhfff)

And more

(fzzhfff)

And more

(fzzhfff)

Please!

Let there be such of an urgency in carefully restoring my

S

A

N

I

T

! -Y-!



3/3

CREAM SODA

Jasiaya Spady

## Cream Soda

Jasiaya Spady, age 15  
linoleum print

*This piece was from a linoleum assignment; we were to make three tricolored prints with a background, middle ground, and foreground. Before that assignment, we had to make a visual journal. I was loosely inspired to make my linoleum piece be a food item from a sketch in my visual journal. I was torn between red bean tairiyaki and Japanese cream soda - eventually I landed on the cream soda. Both of my sketches, however, were both showing my basic understanding of color theory: complementary colors. In the end, I had three prints and acquired wisdom within this medium, that was then used to create my final project: Midnight Vectordelia.*

# *Thrown Away and Forgotten*

Sonya Wiker, age 12

I am an old record player

Broken and dented

How unadorned

The record they put on me scratched and imperfect

They always forget

That's when the dust collects

Left in the back of their minds

The old record player was lost in their memories

Lost in time

Then people walk by

Leaving me alone

In the comfort of the landfill

I now call my home

I'm like an old record player

Thrown away and forgotten

Dusty and distained

But also disheartened



## Midnight Vectordelia

Jasiaya Spady, age 15

linoleum print + linework with marker

*This piece was originally created for the International Print Exchange, but sadly our class ran out of time and only finished five prints (we were originally expecting 14 prints). When going into this piece, I had all intentions of doing something with frutiger metro; an early 2000's aesthetic. We were free to pick and mix any print medium; originally I was going to make linoleum stamps and a watercolor print for the background. The watercolor failed miserably, so I moved on to gel prints, but those were too big and too time consuming (not to mention they rip easily). Eventually, I landed on a linoleum background. In the end, I had five completed prints, though I had 14 background prints. I didn't have enough time to print, draw, and label the remaining nine, so I donated the rest to the scrap pile for future projects.*

# *Beauty is sound*

Leila, age 15

Sound was heard

Those deep, full tones

They soon would lure

Me to those wholesome notes

And the more

I heard thrilling music all around

The more I was sure

Beauty was sound

One note then the other

Splendidly done

All woven together

How I was stunned!

I wished it would go on forever

As the bow came back down

Further was I convinced

Beauty was sound

She played! Oh, how she played!

Most flawlessly

The bow swept across as to bade

And beckon me

Last notes began to fade

I was no longer captured, bound

For, now, I was sure

Beauty is sound

# *Go the Distance*

by Ferdinand Agyapong, age 17

"Runners, set!" Coach yells.

Grant gets ready for the last rep. Last one fast one. The motto he's lived by for the past few years.

"Go!" Coach yelled.

Grant blitzed off the start line, making sure to focus on his rhythm. "Grant, slow it down," he heard Coach say from across the track.

That's right, Grant is still recovering from a hamstring strain. He's not allowed to run his usual paces for a while. Right now, he's just stuck being the pacer for the rest of the team on their workouts while he's still recovering.

But Grant was feeling good this rep and decided to push it even just a little. Or maybe he pushed it a bit too far. As Grant crossed the line for the 800 in 2:18 and the rest of the team in a 2:27, he could tell from the look in his Coach's eyes that he pushed it too much. His hamstring seemed to agree.

"Great work today, boys. Go start your cooldown. Just an easy mile today," Coach Tim said, "Grant, I need to talk with you."

Grant sighed before walking over. "Yes, Coach Tim?"

"You already know what I'm about to say. It's only your second week back after a near hamstring tear. To be honest, you shouldn't even be running any workouts. The only reason I'm letting you is to pace the rest of the team. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Coach."

"Then may I ask why this whole workout you've been ahead of the prescribed pace?"

"I just thought someone would try and keep up."

"Those paces were for you to hit, too. You're only just getting into it after two months off. Take it easy. I can tell your hamstring is hurting after that last rep. Do your cooldown. Just half mile today. We'll talk more tomorrow."

Grant quickly went to join the team on their cooldown as they passed him. The cooldowns were the one time he enjoyed going slow on a run.

"Hey how's the hamstring feeling?" Jafar asked.

"It's hurting a bit now. Went too hard on that last rep. Coach just has me going a half mile," Grant replied.

"Wow, who would have thought?" Jafar said.

"Shut up. I'm just trying to get back to fitness a bit quicker."

"Don't think that's how you're supposed to do it, but you do you," Tommy said

They finished the rest of their cooldown in silence. After Coach gave all the announcements, everyone went home for the night. But Grant lingered a little longer before leaving.

Today's workout didn't feel that hard. He could feel the fitness returning, but not quickly enough. Back when he was healthy, he would have done the same thing with an extra set at faster paces.

He just couldn't wrap his mind around it. Going from the team's best runner by a long shot to a pacer.

With that thought in mind, Grant went home for the night.

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Practice the next day was just a six-mile easy run.

"Grant, I only want you to go four today," Coach Tim said.

"But Coach, I know I can go the full six," Grant replied. "How am I supposed to get back to one hundred percent if you're holding me back all the time?"

"Grant, put this into perspective. Our first race is a little more than a month from now, and that's just a rust buster. No one on this team is anywhere near one hundred percent. We're not even a full month into the season yet. So why are you in such a rush to get hurt again? Your fitness in February is what matters, not in November."

Grant didn't want to hear anymore and went on his run. He knew Coach Tim was right in trying to hold him back from overtraining. At the rate Grant was going, he probably would have completely torn his hamstring by now. It was thanks to Coach Tim that he hasn't reached that point.

"Hey, Coach," Grant said when he returned from his run.

"Finally ready to talk?"

"Yeah, and you're right. I really have no reason to be pushing this hard early season, and I'm sorry. I just don't want to get left behind by all those guys who had a great pre-season."

"Understandable. You'll get there, but for now no workouts the rest of the week, just mileage."

"Got it, Coach." Grant couldn't stand the idea of just doing easy miles for a week, but it had to be done.

---

Weeks of good training came and went and now the boys of the Pulse County Track team were lined up for their season opener.

In that time, Grant surprised himself with his patience. He wasn't trying to rush himself back into it.



## *A Symbol of Colors*

Aditi Patel, age 15  
Photography

*This photo was taken during a Holi festival. It may just seem like an event where color is being thrown onto everyone, but it is much more than that. The flying of colors in this photo represents the hope of new beginnings, as a triumph of good over evil. Hundreds of people are coming together to celebrate this holiday with each other, connecting with big smiles and laughter through just this color. It isn't just a powder of dust, it's a meaning.*





## *Summer Visits*

Shiqi (Emily) Ding, age 15

Photography

*I flew to Fujian, China after many years; this was just one of the many nights spent at my Popo's (grandma's) house. At 19:19 on August 8th, the sun began to set slowly, and this photo was taken. I truly missed that place, and this captures that moment for me.*

# *My Son, They Told Me*

Margaret Clause, age 14

My son, today you came to me and asked for your inheritance. I asked you why, quiet on the outside, so very scared of what the answer would be. You told me that you wanted to leave and try your fortune elsewhere. It was the answer I had feared.

My son, I gave you your inheritance. Only one question did I ask: "Are you sure?"

My son, you looked me full in the face and said, "Yes." Arguing, begging, pleading would have done no good, for your mind was made up.

My son, as I saw you pack your things, I wanted to tell you that what you were doing was wrong, to make you stay here with me where you were safe.

My son, as you walked down the road, not looking back, my heart broke. Oh, how I wished you would turn back, like you did when you were small and had threatened to run away but never got more than 50 yards from the gate before running back into my arms. You told me one last thing before you left. "Don't bother looking for me. I'm never coming back."

My son, I did not do what you asked. Every day, I went to the gate and looked for you. Hoping against hope that you would be walking up the road, back to me. I could not follow you, even though I wanted to, for you had made your choice and walked down a road that I will not follow.

My son, they told me to stop looking. They said that once a child left, they left for good. They would never come back. I did not listen to them either, and every morning and evening I looked.

My son, I get news of you from time to time. At first, you were happy, had a pleasant life and many friends. I was happy because you were happy, but also sad, because I knew what would follow.

My son, I sent you letters from time to time, asking you to reconsider your choice. Telling you how much I loved you. How I hoped you were happy but warning you of what would follow. I used soft words, for I never want to be harsh and only resort to it in the most extreme circumstances.

My son, every single one of my letters was returned as "Refused." Still, I kept trying. I never gave up.

My son, the things they told me as time went by made me very sad, for I knew they would

happen, but still I hoped they would not come to you. You were in debt, and then a thief who had joined a gang.

My son, I never gave up hope. I prayed for you, looked for you, sent you letters reminding you that I was here, still loved you, never gave up.

My son, they told me that you wanted to return, but were afraid that you would be turned away. I sent you one last letter, telling you that you were welcome to return, whenever you wanted. That was the only letter that did not come back to me marked "Refused."

My son, the day you returned was one of the happiest of my life. I looked out the gate and saw you walking up the road. I ran out to meet you with tears of joy on my face. You looked at me and said, "My father, I have squandered my inheritance and have come home to ask if I can be a servant in your house."

My son, the entire household had come out behind us. I ordered that the finest clothes be given to you, a ring put on your hand, and a calf slaughtered for a feast in your honor.

My son, as soon as everyone had gone inside, your older brother came to me. He was angry, for he had served me faithfully the entire time you were gone. He wanted a feast in his honor and did not understand why you, after being away and squandering your inheritance, got a celebration.

"My son," I told him, "You have been my rock, my support, my helper while your brother was away. If you had asked for a feast in your honor, I would have given it. Yet can you see why I rejoice now? For your brother who was lost, but now has returned."

My Son, he turned away from me, and went, not up to the house where everyone else was, but out to the field, alone.

# *Lesson in Disguise*

Maya Zhao, age 15

Growing up, I have always been known as an unathletic kid with athletic parents. With hearty encouragement, I have tried a variety of sports, but all have ended with disappointment. I placed last in all types of races. I took years of badminton lessons, but still had no improvement. I took swimming lessons and got my parents to convince the coach to refund the money. All these failed attempts made me detest gym class and served as a constant reminder for me to avoid sports at all costs.

Time passed, spring approached, and in a blink of time freshman year of high school was half over. It was the spring sports season again — soccer, softball, and tennis were popular topics among everyone, even those who I thought would never touch sports like me. I was in English class, trying to “lock in” on work, however, the chit-chat of my friends traveled through my noise-canceling headphones like a loud broadcast, and it became the only focus in my ear. The soft voices were just loud enough to hear. My headphones seemed to work like a speaker, projecting two syllables over and over again, “soccer”. I took off my headphones, and surprisingly enough, one after another, my tablemates stated they would try out for soccer this year. I was moved; it honestly sounded like so much fun. They convinced me. Especially when they told me nobody was cut last year. Many of them were beginners like me, it seemed like it was worth a shot. I thought, “If it is only the same this year, I will finally prove to everyone that I do know how to play a sport.” This idea stayed with me during the harshest part of tryouts and served as mental support during the entire soccer journey.

As the tryout quickly approached, my certainty in soccer could be compared to a constant roller coaster ride — with a little more force, I would probably be thrown out of the seat. I was happy when I learned a lot of my other friends were doing soccer as well, but worried when I heard we had to run two miles to warm up. I felt a little more relieved when I heard everyone was scared to run, but I got a lot more scared when I learned there was no freshman team, only JV and Varsity. I was sad when a friend of mine expressed her worry to me that she might no longer do soccer anymore because she was going to fast on the days of tryouts, but I was really encouraged and impressed with her determination when she reassured me she was still going to the tryout despite fasting. When the day of the tryout finally came, I didn't quite know whether I felt confident or unsure. I had only

practiced a little on passing the ball with my dad. We had tryouts for three days straight, where we stretched, did scrimmages, skills, and fitness practice.

The tryouts were rough, the weather conditions were mostly bad, and the pungent smell of the fertilizer immediately hit me as soon as we opened the door. The stench of rotting eggs filled the atmosphere, and as we ran in the open air, the earthy smell accompanied us. However, my focus was forced to shift away from the odor, and towards my terrible endurance. As everyone uniformly jogged forward, I could only use the excuse of tying my shoelaces as a way to finally catch my breath. And worst of all, I was one hundred percent confident that I was the worst one out of everyone. It still is a pain to reflect on my dribbling skills. I remember that while we were supposed to move in a straight line, my trail zig zagged and was completely out of control. A light wind could blow my soccer ball all the way to the lacrosse court. As I clumsily chased my soccer ball back and was finally in the right place to start, everyone had already finished dribbling their two rounds. Throughout the entire tryout, my body was only carried with the faith that “hopefully they won’t cut anyone.” Finally, on the last day, the coach told us to check the results on the school athletics website.

Afterwards, I was constantly on the website eagerly waiting for the results. I anxiously snatched my phone with each vibration, worried that it would be a message from my friend writing about the result. It became a muscle memory for my finger to tap on the refresh button repeatedly. I got used to the feeling of the edge of my nails colliding with the screen, which previously was an unignorable source of annoyance. Finally, on my last check before I went to bed, the roster was out. My name was not on the roster; I did not make the team.

All my other friends had made the team, all except for me. I tried to make it look like I didn’t care, but deep inside I felt a strong surge of jealousy for all that made it, if it could only be me. One moving picture floated through my disturbed mind, a bright green lawn stretched over to meet the blue sky, my friends laughing while passing each other the ball; As the soccer ball reached the enemy’s goal, the whole team cheered in happiness. At that moment, I realized how much I actually enjoyed soccer, so much more than I expected. Then out of the blue, I started counting the number of people who were on the roster, thirty-seven; there were thirty-eight people in the tryout – I was the only person who was cut. This brought out an uncontrollable surge of anger. I was angry at the coach, as there was definitely enough space for one more person. But I knew I was more angry with myself. I asked myself, “Why can’t I just be good like other people?” The strong desire to prove myself shattered once again into inferiority. It is just another piece of proof that I was

worse than everyone else the entire time. I am so horrible that the coach wants to ensure I wouldn't ruin the team. I am such a failure, I disappointed everyone that had ever cared about me. Hot tears leaked slowly from the corner of my eye, but as I aggravated with each thought, the delicate tear turned into an uncontrollable burst. A shower of warm streams flowed across my face and seeped under my chapped lip. The salty liquid tasted bitter in my mouth covering the taste of the refreshing fruit I had just eaten. With these thoughts in mind, I struggled to fall asleep but eventually did under my wetted pillowcase.

The following week, this became my newly developed topic of complaint. I turned to family and friends with tears and anger, I did not know whether I expected sighs or scolds, but instead, they provided me with hugs and support. As I shared my feelings; they acknowledged and understood. My failed spirits were lifted with each encouraging word. Through these counseling talks, I began to battle against my negative self-talk. I realized that this failing experience nor the hundreds of others did not define me, rather it is myself from the inside that matters. With these thoughts, I grasped that this experience had actually taught me lessons that I was avoiding my entire life — self-worth and resilience. I realized the biggest mistake I made was not getting cut, but thinking that I just have to get on the team in order to prove that I am worthy. I learned that I do not need to prove my value to anyone but myself. My tears no longer blind my vision, and now it is only out of salvation. It cleansed my eyes — my sights are only clearer to become more appreciative of the thing that I currently own. I got more comfortable with failing, for even though it was sad, I did not really lose anything that was originally mine, on the other hand, I gained so much more than if I had not even tried.

With this new mindset, I realized my love of sports and teamwork. I no longer avoided exercises and physical activity and became more open to other challenging experiences outside of my comfort zone. I learned that even if I might not be good at something, I can still enjoy it. Meanwhile, in the English table, soccer remains a popular topic. As they talk, my bitterness still remains, but only this time, it transformed into a greater source of motivation pushing me to join them next year.

# *Smile Before Wicket*

Stabak Mallick, age 13

Definitely you have heard about LBW in cricket- "Leg before Wicket," but must be thinking what's "Smile before wicket!" This writing will clear your query.

In the two years of my cricket journey, it was perhaps the best day, a day of pride and a day filled with fun! Let me start by sharing that my cricket team was declared the champion in the US East Coast U13 cricket league final on Aug 10, 2025, by defeating the opponent team with 8 wickets in hand.

The cricket match on the field was supposed to be a serious affair with so much calculation, strategy, and tactics. Little did I know it would turn out to be a comedy show instead! We won the toss and decided to bat first. Our star batsman Ravi opened the innings with one or two singles and then started his stormy, destructive batting. Sitting in the pavilion, we were constantly clapping for him.

Suddenly, we saw Ravi raising his bat and asking the umpire to stop the game as a big colorful butterfly fluttered onto the field distracting his attention. He started chasing the butterfly, throwing his bat in the air, flapping his arms wide to catch the insect. We burst into laughter, the fielders rolled on the ground, laughing out loud. After such antics, the butterfly flew away and the game resumed. Thereafter, Ravi hit a couple of 4's and 6's and the innings closed with 107 for 2!

Then began our fielding innings. In my third ball of the very first over, their opening batsman was clearly bowled with his middle and off stump uprooted! My next ball was a yorker, which the batter missed completely, as a result the ball flew straight into the nearby bushes, where it got stuck in a deer's horn! Yes, you read that right, a deer's horn! The deer got startled by the sudden invasion in its horn and let out a loud grunt! I was standing by the side of the umpire, preparing to bowl the next ball. The deer came in the mid field suddenly and gave me a fierce look and then started chasing me, with super high speed. OMG, did it recognize me as the bowler, thinking that I ran towards the pavilion with all my speed. Then some parents came to my rescue. Somehow, they tamed the deer, offering some nuts and leaves, ultimately letting it out of the ground causing an end to the chaos and confusion!

That was however not the end of the comedy scene. Next was the turn of our wicket keeper Joel, who tried to take a catch but ended up dropping the ball, planting it into a nearby mud pit. The crowd burst into laughter as Joel emerged from the pit looking like a swamp creature with mud caked all over his face!

Win and loss is part of any game, but this kind of fun and joy was an unthinkable gift of that day. Thereafter, I came back home in my car holding the champion's trophy in my hand and remembering the fun filled moments of Ravi chasing the butterfly, the deer's menacing run after me, and Joel looking like a swampy creature. I could not stop myself chuckling and giggling all the way back home. Now, you have the background story of "Smile before wicket".



## *The Porcelain Bird*

Nicole Baek, age 12

Pen

*Lando Norris is a big inspiration for me, so I decided to recreate his Budapest porcelain helmet from 2024. He mentions in multiple interviews how he cares too much and overthinks about everything. So, I added words around him.*



## *The Kingsley Hotel*

Maximo Castellanos, age 17

Pencil, paper, shading tools

*(Inspired by) The scene of a woman walking into a unique hotel on Christmas Eve*

# *Holding Onto Memories*

Ruthie McFarland, age 12

I was born in Virginia, but my mom grew up with her parents in Wilmington, Delaware. My father's side of the family always lived in New York. When I was four years old, my sister Frankie was born. She has been, and always will be, a best friend. When I was in third grade, my parents decided to pack up our belongings and move to Delaware, to a house ten minutes away from my grandparents.

Before we moved, we could only visit my mom's parents on holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving. The family on my father's side we visited even less. I had the privilege of getting postcards from my Delaware grandparents. They would (and still) send me them because they love to travel, their most recent trip being to Africa. My grandmother once signed her postcard "G'mom," because she had run out of space for "Grandmom." Since then, she has had the nickname of G'mom, and no matter what she does, Frankie and I are sticking with it.

My grandfather always loves to cook and bake. And sometimes if I am lucky, I can bake or cook with him. Of course, I always help him eat it. My sister's and my favorite dish are his delicious mini apple dumplings. Over Thanksgiving, we stir in apple cider to some of the recipes to make a little more flavor than usual. One year my sister misspoke the label of a container as "apple spider" and we call it that to this day.

G'mom loves to sing and play guitar. She loves music and has always inspired me and my sister to sing. G'mom is in our church's choir and takes voice lessons. My grandfather also loves music and can sing lower than anyone else in the choir. G'mom is the highest soprano in our church.

When I go to the attic of their house, I look through their old journals and books. There are some beautiful pieces of vintage furniture there. My grandfather gave me an old desk and I still use it to this day.

I call my Delaware grandfather by the name Dad-Dad. He is a very good carpenter and has turned his entire basement into a workshop. If I am on my very best behavior, I am allowed to go downstairs and build things with him, like a wooden tray, that I still own and use. We have sawed apart old piano keys and made doll furniture.

On the second floor, there is a room with some of my G'mom's old toys. The dolls she has are very old and some are torn or broken. But either way, I like to look at them.

My other grandparents, on my father's side, used to be teachers. They have many stories

about things that their students did. Frankie nicknamed my grandfather P-Pop and since my grandmother did not want a silly name, we call her Grandma.

P-Pop served in the military for a while, and I am honored every Veteran's Day to think about all the amazing things that he did.

Grandma tells me stories about her teaching career. She explains that since she taught little kids, she rarely got a good story for their writing unit, but she remembers a very well written story about a little girl who can't find her tutu and slippers for ballet class. Finally, she finds them under her bed, with her cat and her newborn kittens sleeping on top of them.

P-Pop's office room was filled with certificates and awards. But my favorite part of his office was his wonderful geode that sat on top of the radiator. He had a few marble paperweights that were gorgeous. When I was ten years old, he passed away. My father was able to visit him before he passed, but my mom, my sister, and I couldn't. When we visited my grandma, she gave us some of P-Pop's paperweights, and mine sits on my bookshelf where I see it almost every day.

I've been thinking about this lately. I miss P-Pop a lot. And I really must think about how I want to spend the rest of the time with my other grandparents, and some ways I can remember them. So lately I've been trying out baking like Dad-Dad and singing in the all-state chorus like G'mom. They are still alive but this way I can remember them in a special way. They have influenced me to do these things, and I know for sure that I will remember them through doing my new hobbies. I love to write now, like my grandma taught her students to do. That's part of the reason I'm writing this!

My grandparents are also really important to me. I thought it would be nice to put that down in words. Because being grateful for the people in my life is easy when I think about all the memories I have with them in it.

# Subject 143

Sai Srinidhi Kanderegul, age 13

I don't know what to do, I can't hide this forever the truth will come out. The best I can do is to stay away from them. A loud banging noise comes from outside of my apartment. They were looking for me. I had to run now or they were going to get me just like the rest of us. Luckily, they were checking everyone's apartment and I wasn't first. I could sneak out, but, if I did that would be suspicious and would be searched by them. My best option is to act as if I had no idea what they were talking about. Yeah, that would be better. Another bang on the door this time it was my apartment. I took a deep breath and put on a smile.

"Hello, what can I do for you?" I asked them.

Without another thought they did what I feared. In a second my feet were off the ground and I was no longer able to breathe.

"Did you really think you weren't going to get caught? You shouldn't have even tried."

I struggled in the air and tried to let go from the grip they had on me.

I pleaded, "I did nothing wrong."

"I have been ordered and you know that there is no expectation for anyone."

"Please" I cried. "I helped you once, help me this time. Please."

They let me go from their grip.

"Leave, and don't let me catch you."

I ran out the door trying to get as far away from them as I could. They didn't run after me. It would be only a matter of time before they would catch up to me.

The truth is I had powers and many others similar to me had to be captured to be studied. In other words, people were scared of us and needed a reason to feel a sense of relief.

I did not think I was scary or terrifying in any way. But, I am on the run and can't afford to stop when I am given a chance.

---

I didn't do anything wrong but, do what everyone wanted to do. I did what no one spoke of. They have been taking people away to places they promised wouldn't be painful. Piles of letters, letter tears warning me to leave.

I was slowing down now from running. I noticed a beaten down shack and thought it

would be a decent place to rest.

A strange atmosphere it put in my head. Almost as if it wasn't a real place and I was simply in a nightmare. I was certain there were ghosts watching me.

Whispering to me, "This isn't real. You need to wake up."

I was just as certain that I was hallucinating and just needed rest.

I wandered around the room looking for a place that would be a little bit comfortable. A creaking sound coming from the loose floorboards and the dark setting of the shack.

At the time I had no idea what had to come to me in the next minute. I stalked closer and closer to a room that drew my attention. It was in contrast to the dark and unsettling shack. The walls were pink in color and were bright with light. Relieved about the light and no longer in fear of what could be in the dark I walked into the room. A grave mistake. Once I walked into the room the door closed shut. And before I could try and leave a green gas was released. I held my breath hoping I would find a way out before the gas could get to me.

I heard another voice, "Give up. You've already lost." It whispered.

I obeyed and let go of my breath. The gas went up my nose, making me really dizzy. I couldn't walk straight or see anything but in a blur. My eyes were getting really heavy and I was ready to faint.

---

Everything was in a blur and I could sense people standing above, observing me.

"I didn't think she would make it this far."

"We have one more thing to do. Get her ready."

I felt someone picking me up and moving me to another area.

"How many of the tests did she pass?"

"None"

"You sure? That can be possible."

"Positive."

Suddenly I feel someone get close to my ear.

"I know you can hear us and the fastest way to save humanity is to...us."

I wish I heard what they said, it could be the fine line between what saves me and ends me.

"Is subject 143 unconscious?"

"Yes"

"Was she given the serum?"

"Yes"

"And did you make sure she still has the powers?"

"Yes, she does."

"Test number 17 is over, test number 18 is starting now."

I stayed laying down, acting as if I didn't hear a word. Someone picked me up and placed me in something that felt like a chair.

"Start it on my word."

I felt a round hat like object being placed on my head. It sounded like it was connected to wires.

"Now"

Nothing happened. I sat there hoping that I wouldn't get my head fried.

"You didn't think that we wouldn't notice, did you?"

I stayed silent.

"Still pretending to be unconscious, please you're fooling no one but yourself."

I opened my eyes and stared straight into their eyes. They staggered back with a huge smile.

"You don't know why you're here do you?"

"I don't," I said calmly.

"That stunt you pulled just about killed us all. I was nice and spared you but, you clearly had other motives."

"What stunt?"

"You tried to release that monster from the cell."

"Monster! They are not monsters; they are just misunderstood." I yelled back.

"Your opinion doesn't matter. Put it on max now!"

A shock went up my bones and burned my brain. I yelled loud and knew it was nothing that could save me.

"Please. Aaaaah! Spare me. Eek!"

"Sorry the damage is already done." They said with the brightest smile.

I soon realized that they were in fact trying to make me obey them. The pupils of my eyes disappeared and I had no thoughts of my own. I turned pale and had tears of red at the corners of my eyes.

"Looks like it worked."

"Want us to put her with the rest?" One of the scientists asked.

"No, this one I'm afraid knows what she is doing. Keep an eye on her."

---

### **The fight**

"Everyone gets in line. They're coming fast and we need to be in order."

A tall figure walks in with loud steps and the scientist scurry out of the way.

"So, she's the one who escaped." The figure asked, stepping in front of subject 143.

"Yes"

"Hmm, She's not responding. How high did you have to put it?"

"The highest it can go."

"Interesting. Disappointing I thought she would have fought harder, but she didn't. How unfortunate."

"When do we tell them to go to the village?"

"Hm, the village? Let them into the kingdom, they are way too powerful to let it go to waste in the village please."

"The kingdom? The king won't be too pleased." The scientist said frightened.

"He had it coming. Now release them."

"But he told us to prepare them for the neighboring kingdoms."

“Did he really think I would obey his rules knowing where I come from?”

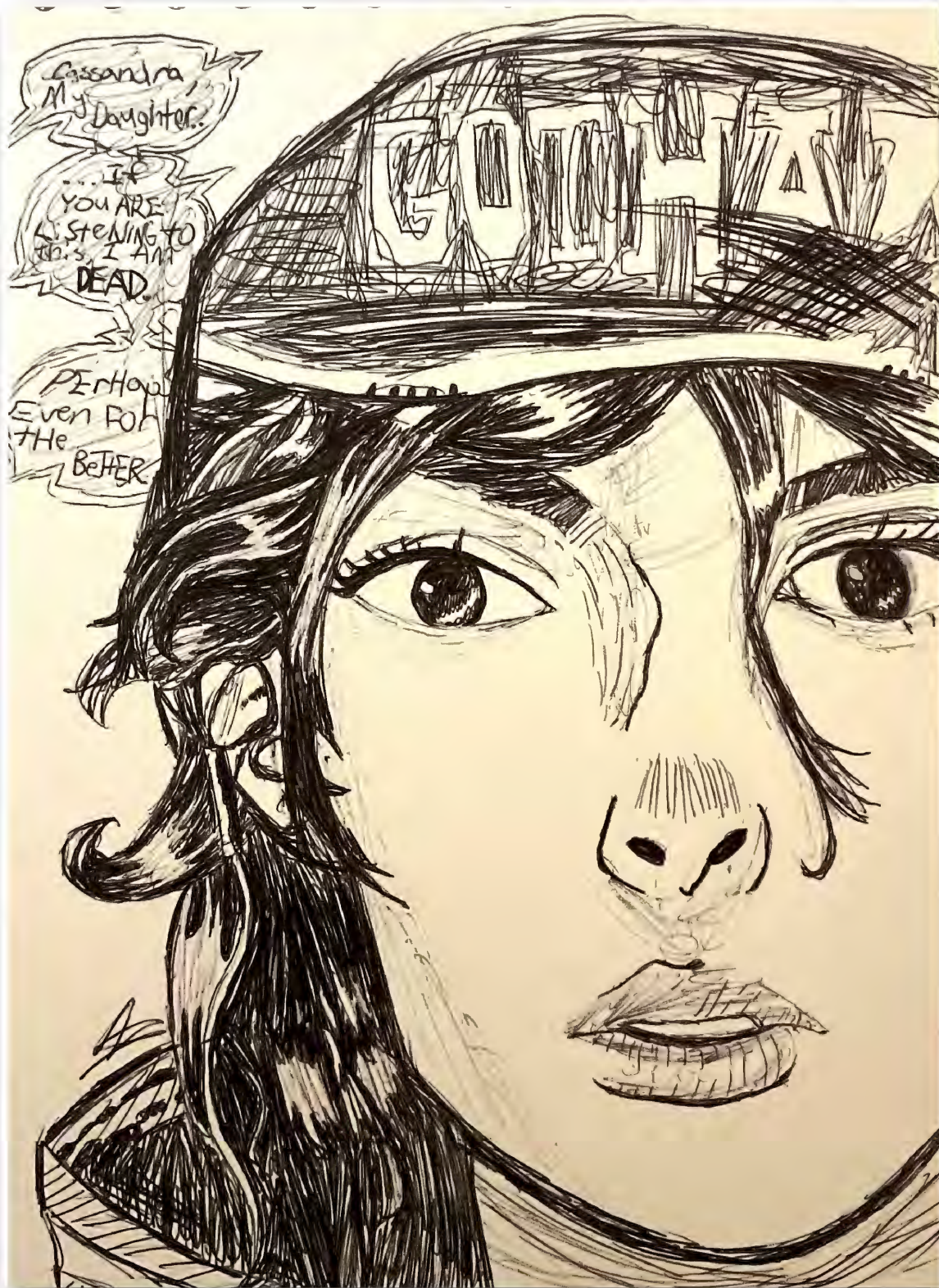
“At least give us more time. Most of them don't come from this world.”

“The more time it takes the more they worry.”

“But...”

“Don't tell me you're scared? It's just a little fight, there are many more to come, it isn't that harmless.”

***Though in irony it was in fact more than just a little fight, it separated the trust the two kingdoms built for each other. Making the friends people thought they had become the enemies they wished would never happen even in their worst nightmares.***



## Orphan

Nicole Baek, age 12

Pen

Fan Art: Cassandra Cain, DC Comics. I thought the reference photo was an interesting one. With only showing half the face yet giving emotion. To give that 'comic book Esque' I decided to use pen to make the lines bolder.

# *The Tragedy of a Girl Gone Mad*

by Fridos Moumouni, age 19

The doctor seemed to have given up  
On trying to tame a girl who has had one eerie meltdown.  
You see, she does this thing where she eats a concoction of all her five senses,  
Leading to her stubborn denial of the sky reflecting a normal blue,  
And her outbursts, flailing about when the rain droplets in the hazy clouds were finally going  
to let out.  
They've managed to have her in a straitjacket as requested, yes  
But I just can't wrap my head around it all:  
Just yesterday, she'd been known to have walked with such clarity in her steps,  
Wearing no other expression to her face--  
Except mundane  
No other mind would have crossed to the image of her now,  
Much broken down and distressed.  
To be frank, she'd given the impression that anyone in her path  
Were merely destructive to her path toward redemption.  
Even so, before she had been taken away for assistance,  
She'd given me the look of hollowed-out plead  
With one hand clawed into her neck in restraint,  
And the other hand, attempting to bury the very place  
She had hurled, not too long before  
With the pitiful aid of the melting snow



## *True Crime*

Lyla Friday, age 13

Canvas with acrylic paint

*It was December last year and I needed to make a gift for my mom for Christmas. She loves true crime podcasts and anything true crime. I saw the design of the Do Not Cross tape on Pinterest and that's when the painting idea hit me. I made the background and the tape, but there was something missing in it. While I was trying to think, I looked down at my hands and I remembered that my footprint and handprint were by her bed, and I got another idea. I painted my hand red and I stamped my hand on the canvas to make a hand print to make it seem like a true crime scene.*

# *7 Days, 5 Suspects, 1 Victim*

Sai Srinidhi Kanderegul, age 13

*I have been fighting with my own head. Yesterday a package arrived at the front door of our mansion.*

*It was very sparkly, red, and it had a note attached to it. One would think it was from an admirer or maybe someone who really adores one of us. I waited until everyone showed up to the living room before I said anything.*

*We never get packages and we have a big bright one in front of us. No one was talking to each other.*

*Clearing my throat I asked, "Did anyone order a package?"*

*No one said anything. I took that as a no.*

*"If it isn't anyone, I think I should be the one to open it." Sienna said with no interest, "If anything with money is in there, I call dibs."*

*Fingers hovering over the red box. She decided to first open the letter, it only said, "Share amongst yourselves."*

*Sienna now looks more interested in the box. While Jack says sarcastically, "Share? Only if Sienna doesn't make a tantrum about getting the most expensive item."*

*Sienna stared daggers at him.*

*Sienna slowly opened the package. Ripping away the wrapping paper and cutting the cardboard box open. There was another piece of paper in it. The paper was folded to its side. Unfolding the paper. All looked with anticipation. It only revealed a date on it.*

**2/29/2004**

*After a good while Alex finally says, staring at me, "What do you think it means?"*

*I didn't know why he thought I would know. It was my first time seeing it.*

*We stared at it for a while. Everyone left thinking it was a prank. I kept the paper.*

*Packages never come to the mansion, the place we live is very isolated. We need a helicopter to get here, let alone only a package. This package is something else.*

---

Present day

It's February 29th. The date from the package. But, no one seems to care.

"Juni." Koda says while walking into my room. "It's the 29th!"

"I know." I said in a tired tone.

"What do you suppose is going to happen today?" He says.

"I don't know." I replied unsure. I stand there thinking. Hoping nothing horrid was going to happen. "Maybe it is a gift or something. I mean it was wrapped up really nicely." I said with hope.

Oh, but I was dearly mistaken.

---

*That's when we heard Denise yell. Koda and I went running to find her. That's when we saw it. A terrible crime. Something no one would have thought would happen. We all stood there horrified by what we saw. Jack hung from the ceiling with a large wound from a stab in his heart.*

*"Is this a prank?" Koda asked in a serious tone.*

*"NO, IT CAN'T BE." I yelled in disbelief. I have known Jack for years. He can't have done this to himself, of course not. But he was indeed really dead. And it was no coincidence that it happened on the 29th. Someone did this.*

*I tried to call the police. But there was no response. Something is going on. Someone is in danger.*

---

It's only been 4 hours since the crime was witnessed. And another package was delivered this time in my room. It was too soon. Couldn't they wait until my heart stopped pounding from the shock. Couldn't they have cared about how I felt. But, no, the show must go on.

There I was staring at the package in front of me. I shouldn't open it. No, not when the package was the reason this mess happened. Not to poor Jack, he didn't deserve what had happened.

But curiosity got the best of me. Unraveling the new parcel I got, it was blue this time and a lot smaller. Slowly opening it, it only had a tiny piece of paper with a letter on it.

Footsteps. I hear people coming up the stairs. I scattered to hide the box I opened and hid

the little piece of paper I had. Fast. "Be natural," I told myself quietly. They wouldn't have been fond of me opening the parcel. It wasn't right. But, what was in it was all I was asking. I wasn't thinking straight when I opened it.

Koda and Denise walked into my room. They put on a face of sympathy. They knew that Jack was my friend since childhood. But neither of them actually liked him as a person. They didn't know I knew that and I didn't plan on telling them. The truth is Koda and Denise were always worried for me. Many things have happened that should have broken me. But I was mentally strong and I could handle things on my own. Be upset on one day and over it the next. It wasn't hard.

---

"You okay?" Denise asked. She has always been sorry for everything I did. I hated it. Koda was a whole different story. He knew I didn't like it when someone was sympathetic. I always thought that if someone really felt sorry for me, they would want to actually help me. Koda knew that. I never had to tell him that for him to know.

"I'm fine." I said firmly. "You don't need to worry about me."

"You have known Jack all your life and he died unexpectedly, and you expect us to think you are okay." Denise replied, fired up. "You need to talk to people more. I can help."

Help. Help with what? With the money that you had that could've prevented any of this from happening. I wanted to yell but couldn't. "I'm fine. I don't need your help." I said quietly.

We all stood there. Not talking. I expected Koda to pull us away from this fight. He usually did that whenever I had an argument. But this time he just stood there staring like he knew what we wanted to say but didn't. He always knew something was wrong. He stared Denise then he looked at me. Like he knew what I did before they came in. He gave me a look as if saying, "Show me, what you saw. I want to know".

Denise left the room upset.

"I will give you some space. But tell me if you want no pressure." Koda told me before leaving my room.

---

I took the letter out. The letter was written in cursive and was very clear that it was someone who wanted to play a game. A game with me. There was a poem written on it.

I am one you know

One you will remember forever

I thought you'd feel sorrow

But, you are nothing less than mellow

*You and I are more alike than you may like*

I was puzzled. Who could it possibly be? It said that I knew them and will know them forever. I knew only a handful of people and most of them I live with. But, it was unusual that we got another package like I said it was hard to send things to the Mansion. It has to be someone that knows where we live. Maybe our parents. But they couldn't care for any of us, let alone kill one of us. They wouldn't bother. It must be an inside job. Yes, definitely. Of course if I told anyone this wouldn't be taken lightly. The only person who was ever on the same page as me was Koda. But, I have a feeling if I told anyone something might happen.

---

**It was finally my turn. My turn to do something unexpected. They shouldn't have trusted me. Trusted my reason for wanting to stay. I was hoping that Koda would want to help me find the killer but he tried to distract me from it. It would have made the surprise more fun but, I know he would rather find the killer himself. The problem was that I didn't kill Jack. I couldn't possibly. They didn't trust me with the first kill. But, now they can finally see my talent.**

**If I wanted everyone else to think I was innocent. I had to think like I knew nothing. Even if it was me giving the clues. But everyone is clueless, there wasn't any thrill of getting caught. I almost got away with it too easily. I needed them to suspect me, but also deny that I was one of them.**

**But, in true honesty, I had no idea if I screwed it all up. I have no guilt for the things I have done.**

**But, I am honestly sorry for what I am going to put *her* through.**

---

# *The Hanging*

P.H., age 14

Bare through the eye of the beholder,  
Bearing the weight,  
Cloaked in the never-ending dread,  
Withering in the sorrow of what's soon to come.

Tight around my throat,  
Like a father's hand gripping a trembling child-  
Lost in the angst of what waits ahead.

Loathed by fear itself-  
Waiting,  
    Waiting,  
        Waiting.  
Wanting nothing more than it to come faster.

Jeers, screams, yells-  
Quiet.  
Silence in the notion of what happens then.

Soon it'll be dark,  
I will have gone to rest,  
Knowing nothing of what happened next.



## I Won

Jack TJF, age 17

black ballpoint pen, acrylic paint markers, graphite pencil, colored pencil, charcoal, alcohol markers, and pastel pencils

*I would like to note that I have only been drawing and doing art for a total of 8 months since April 16th of 2025. I've never taken art lessons. This artwork took me a total of 15 hours and is my first time using colored pencils, my first time using acrylic paint markers, my first time using alcohol markers, and my fourth time using pens of any sort, although it is my first time using ballpoint pen. My influence is entirely based on the hit TV show Breaking Bad produced by Vince Gilligan.*

# *Pray This Clean*

Valeria Lemus, age 17

She stands over him as he kneels  
dirty and dusty, the fabric beyond saving  
His filth pours out of him and blinds him  
he rubs his eyes but his hands are equally stained

She stands above him white in her purity  
*Conviction*, they call her.  
Righteous guilt is the space she occupies  
She is untouched, cleaner than he'll ever be

All his life he wanted and wanted  
Fruits borne by a covetous, selfish man  
He cleansed his hands  
by praying his sins away  
With no repentance or regret in sight

Grime stains his skin, once unblemished now torn  
She towers over him reaching out,  
Her whisper sows the seed for his first feelings of repentance.  
Then she speaks,  
"Look at your hands. You cannot pray this clean."

# Kenneth

Addison Knowlton, age 12

Her name was Evelyn. She was fresh out of college and completely broke. Her dad died last spring, and her aunt took all the money and spent it on a trip to Las Vegas. She was looking for an affordable place in a desirable part of town. She kept looking but couldn't find anything because of her credit score. She maxed out three credit cards on ramen and clothes. But last Tuesday, she found a house. It was an old, abandoned jail with an addition, which was the house. She thought about it and decided, yes! Only one week later, she was moving in.

One night, she was watching Netflix on her couch while eating ice cream; everything felt perfect, an illusion soon to be shattered. But later in the night, she saw something. A tall, dark figure, at least seven feet tall, sprinted past her doorway. Shadow, her cat, got up and started hissing at the doorway, her hair all up on her back. The blood drained from Evelyn's face, but she decided to go and explore. They didn't tour the jail during the house tour because it was locked up. She had the key to open the door that led to the jail cells, but she was too scared to do it earlier. She got the key and opened the door. The smell hit her immediately; it smelled like a dog had eaten deviled eggs, puked them up, then ate them again and put them in a smelly gym-class sock. She really didn't want to explore, but she had to; it was now her home. As she walked through the corridor, she saw that all the jail cells had blood on them, fresh blood. She didn't want her blood to be the next one on there; she ran back to the door that separated the cells and the house, but it was locked. She couldn't open it. She turned around, and all the way down the corridor, she saw it clearly, a tall, black figure with its eyes missing. Evelyn was petrified; she couldn't move, her limbs felt like ice. It started sprinting at her, but when she blinked, it was gone, and suddenly she could open the door. It was like it never happened. That night, she went to bed shaken. Every day from then on, she would hear a faint song of a harmonica playing in the jail cells' shower room.

The next day, Evelyn was washing dishes when she heard it, a blood-curdling scream, coming from the opposite side of the house. Her neighbor, Gina, ran over and said, "Are you okay? I heard a woman screaming." Evelyn didn't know what to say to Gina. That there was fresh blood on the jail cells? That there was a tall black figure haunting her? Finally, she said, "I'm fine, everything's okay." Gina responded with "Come over to my house, I can make you a cup of tea." Then Gina came in really close and whispered, "I need to tell you the history of this house, and it's not pretty." Urgently, they headed over to Gina's house. Once settled inside, Gina made a cup of tea for Evelyn.

Gina said, "Your house is haunted, and the history of it is disturbing." Evelyn was

hesitant at first, but agreed to hear the story. "Your house used to be an old jail in the 1960s. The state's worst criminals would go there, usually for life-long sentences. One day, a new guy, I think his name was Kenneth, came in. He lost his wife of fourteen years in a hotel fire. No one ever knew how it started. Kenneth always thought it was the hotel manager, but there was no evidence. One night, Kenneth tracked down the hotel manager and stabbed him eight times in his sleep. They found Kenneth's fingerprints on the knife he stabbed him with. That's how he ended up in jail. But he was weird; he would always disappear for part of the day, his jail mates said, but no one knew where he would go. They later found out he was trying to track down his wife's dead body, and the hotel manager started the fire to get back at Kenneth for stealing his "true love," apparently. One day, he just died of a broken heart. No warning, just gone. Legend says that he is still buried under the jail to this day. However, my old neighbor, Martha, who used to live in your house, disappeared one day. There was no blood, no body, nothing. Everybody thought she skipped town, but I don't think so. I think it was Kenneth, but it's hard to be certain. It's a mystery. Something terrible is about to happen in that house. You need to be careful, hon, it's dangerous because legend says his ghost still haunts the house." Evelyn didn't know what to say; she thought about selling the house, but she had nowhere else to go. Her mom, Edna, was in a nursing home, and she was the only family she had. She could go to her boyfriend's house, but he lives with three other noisy roommates in a fraternity house, and she doesn't know Gina well enough to stay at her house. Evelyn went home shaken. She decided to go to meet her boyfriend, Oliver, at the local Starbucks.

Evelyn arrived at Starbucks, and Oliver was there with Evelyn's favorite drink. She hadn't told him about the stuff happening in the house, but she had to talk to somebody about it. An hour later, Evelyn and Oliver were walking out of the Starbucks. Oliver wanted to believe Evelyn, but a thing like that is a little hard to believe.

They arrived at Evelyn's house and decided to settle down and watch a movie; they made hot cocoa and popcorn. But halfway through the movie, they felt it, a cold shiver going down both of their backs. Then, they saw it, through the window of the door that separates the jail cells and the house, it was the black figure, Kenneth. It started running to the door and smashed the window. Crack! Bam! Shatter! They grabbed Shadow, the cat, and both raced up to Evelyn's bedroom. They slammed and locked the door. Then everything went quiet; the only thing they could hear was their heartbeats. The doorknob started rattling. Then the door flew open and hit the wall. Crash! Kenneth was holding a cleaver, ready to kill his next victims. Evelyn and Oliver thought it was the end, but Evelyn said, "Kenneth!" Then Kenneth slowly lowered the knife, in realization. Evelyn, still terrified, thought of a quick solution. She stepped towards him and started singing his wife's favorite song. "A-Tisket-A-Tasket" by Ella Fitzgerald. "A-tisket, a-tasket, a brown and yellow basket, I send a letter to my mommy, on the way, I dropped it." Slowly, Kenneth calmed down. He dropped to his knees, and suddenly he appeared. Not just a black figure, he looked like a

human again. Then he started crying; really crying, ugly sobbing into his hands. "That was my wife's favorite song," Kenneth said. It was one of the only things that reminded him of her. When he finally calmed down, he said, "I'm sorry I've been doing this, it's just I-I wanted to be by myself. To mourn my wife. To hopefully go out, find her, and bring her back here, so we can make up for lost time together. But you interrupted that, and I don't blame you; I blame myself. I got so caught up trying to keep people out so we could eventually have it for ourselves that I forgot what I was actually looking for. Someone to love. My love. I'm sorry for everything. You can keep living in the house. And hopefully we can be friends?" Evelyn responded with, "Sure, I'd love to be friends, as long as there's no more hauntings." "Deal," said Kenneth, "but wait, how did you know that was my wife's favorite song?" "I did some research last night on a findanoldperson.org," said Evelyn.

The next few months, everything was perfect. No more hauntings, no more being scared, and almost peeing your pants. Oliver moved in; Evelyn and Oliver are getting married next spring, too. Kenneth also found his wife, Mary. She was living in Tennessee, trying to find Kenneth. Little did she know that they lived in Delaware. Kenneth and Mary are invited to the wedding, and they were the first ones to get an invitation.

One day, Evelyn asked Kenneth over breakfast, "Oh, I forgot to ask, but can you teach me how to play harmonica?" "I don't know what you're talking about," said Kenneth, "I don't play harmonica." In shock, Evelyn said, "Then who was always playing harmonica every night in the jail cells' bathroom?"

*The End...?*



## *Midnight Visitor*

Mackenzie Bogetti, age 18

Ink wash + alcohol marker

*Midnight Visitor* was made as a project for my Art II class. By this point, we were free to take our pieces in any direction we wanted thematically and medium wise, so long as we were focusing on experimenting and improving our art. I, for one, have always liked telling stories with my art, so that was my main driving force behind this piece. When creating this piece, I heavily focused on the background, and providing enough details for the viewer to sneak a peak of our protagonist's life, much like the mysterious figure peering through her window. The choice to color her eyes bright blue was made to contrast the dark black of the visitor, and also hint that maybe the supernatural doesn't just lurk outside of our protagonist's window...



## *A Long Way Down*

Mackenzie Bogetti, age 18

Ink wash

Music has always been a source of inspiration for me, so it's no surprise that the main inspiration behind this work comes from the song "Bottom of the River" by Delta Rae. Here, a young woman furiously reaches toward the light, desperately fighting against the vines that bind her to the black depths of the water, a scene that parallels the lyrics of the 2012 song. In this piece, I really wanted to emphasize the main figure, which is why I chose a spotlight shape for the lighting, plus minimal background details. Along with the composition, the greyscale color palette was chosen to highlight eerie details, such as her tendril-like hair, torn dress, and angry expression. These elements allow the viewer to speculate on the nature of the figure. Who is she? How did she get here? Why is she angry? And perhaps most ominously, is she a wrongly imprisoned victim, or do her shackles hold back an ever greater threat?

# *Just Another Day*

Molly Watson, age 12

In black and purple,  
Elizabeth strode down the hall,  
eyes scanning for a certain danger.  
Standing at the end of the hall, there he was:  
Rake,  
broad shoulders and muscular.  
Mischievous already worn like a cloak surrounding him.  
From nowhere, to her shock, arms coiled around Elizabeth's waist-  
Johanna.  
The colorful and bright girl pulled Elizabeth into her cheerfulness,  
even though Elizabeth was a girl of shadow and darkness.  
As the natural clang and clash of the bell crossed the ears of students,  
the two girls split, each heading for a separate class.  
Elizabeth to math, pulled by an invisible force.  
Johanna to history, pulled by an eager magnet to learn.

Approaching the door to the math world,  
Elizabeth caught a glance of Rake's mean, monstrous smirk.  
Inside the room, Rake began to tease.  
"Look who finally came out of the shadows.  
Pity, I liked you better when you were dancing with them."  
Silence rained on him, as Ms. Marble entered,  
a no-nonsense woman with ironed pressed clothes.  
"Class, today we'll be learning about inequalities with more than one variable.  
Our test will be on Thursday, nine days away."  
Elizabeth perked up, not only because of the test,  
but also at the way a worried stare slipped its way into Rake's eyes.

In history, Mrs. Feactio was blabbering on about the American Revolution.  
Most students were half asleep or completely asleep.  
Johanna's eyes were glued to the screen, as though a fairy was flying.  
Johanna was hooked to every word that Mrs. Feactio said.  
Scribbling notes by the minute and tears shimmering in her eyes from disbelief.

At lunch Johanna and Elizabeth sat with their girl group:  
Phoebe, Luisa, Jordan, and Kristrina.  
Jordan, a very dramatic and lively girl, was going on and on about untucked collars.  
Luisa, a quiet girl with big eyes and a huge heart, couldn't take her eyes off Tramp.  
Kristrina was yapping quietly about Rake's behavior in math class to Johanna.  
Johanna with only half an ear for Kristrina, had her eyes locked on Elizabeth.  
The dark, creepy girl was distant as always. She had her eyes on her book about revenge.  
"In chapter 16..." Elizabeth faded the rest of the words into her head, so Johanna didn't

hear.

The chaotic sound of laughter and voices filled the halls as students filled the halls. Phoebe, Luisa, Johanna and Tramp all had science next.

Before going their separate ways, Elizabeth spoke a whisper to Johanna,

"I think I know what Luisa's gonna be doing all class.

She'll have Tramp in her head, instead of the lab your class is doing."

The fact sent giggles out of the girls as they headed to their next class.

Elizabeth had history, along with Kristrina and, unfortunately, Rake.

In class, Mrs. Feactio went over the same thing that she went over with Johanna's class, except for the fact that it took so much longer.

With Rake correcting and asking stupid questions that he should know the answer.

With Mrs. Feactio having to constantly remind students to do their work.

With Rake making sounds that were very distracting to Mrs. Feactio.

At last, the bell rang- that freed the students from their classrooms.

Elizabeth flew to her locker and started placing the books she needed in her bag.

As Tramp accidentally stumbled into her, he muttered "Sorry"

barely audible to Elizabeth.

As the girls weaved their ways home,

they talked about the amounts of homework they had due.

Kristrina was talking excitedly about the books they were reading throughout ELA.

A list that Elizabeth really did try to pay attention to,

though she ended up with her thoughts zooming around the test that was coming up.

Johanna did bump her out of her head with a remark of

"Ya hear we're reading a horror book about math, this year- think ya migh' like it?"

A sweet, creepy smile pushed its way up her throat, as a silvery mist swirled around Elizabeth.

Then as she began to laugh, Johanna saw a small, thin, cut lining across her neck.

"Lizzy, when did you get that scar?"

"Huh, oh, it's nothing: just a cat scratch."

Elizabeth's response was laced with lies, as her cat doesn't scratch, nor bite.

As the girls continued in silent minute, a wonder came quick and sharp into Johanna's mind:

*What is she hiding: why is she keeping secrets from me- her girlfriend?!*

Johanna felt a little betrayed, but she tried to smush it away, she thought:

*Elizabeth has rights to keep secrets, even if I'm her girlfriend, she'll tell me when she's ready.*

Elizabeth would have told her the truth-

*I got this stupid cut from when a cursed fishing line grabbed on to my neck.*

*It won't heal.*

*But She'll worry which is something I don't want.*

*I want the best for her, which is best for me.*

*To keep her the light in the dark night that circles me.*

*She's my sun and I'm her moon.*

*The sun: bright, cheery, colorful, and blinding.*

*The moon: silver, shadowy and like a ghost.*

Except she had vowed to her mother to keep silent, secret tongue.

She kept a hidden scar of terror from her beloved.

The more pain grabbed at her throat, the more the scar felt like it was happening all over again;

the silver hook cutting into her skin.

As the girls rounded Elizabeth's home, when only Luisa and Elizabeth were left,

the door flew open the moment Elizabeth's fingers came in reach of the knob.

A tall, bright personality, woman stood in the entrance, disappointment written on her face.

The woman was Elizabeth's mother.

Elizabeth looked over her shoulder

into Luisa's bright emerald eyes for the last time until tomorrow,

mouthed *goodbye until tomorrow* before getting lead into the one-floored home of her parents.

The walls laced with patterns, cushions with lace, counters of marble- the place was a palace.

Elizabeth's brother, Ben, began his biology homework.

Only a year younger and still twice as responsible and three times as dark.

Sending her a monstrous, sneaky grin, a taunting sigh and saying,

"Ever get anything done or do you just tear up every assignment you get?"

"That's rich, coming from someone who acts like he's half dog and eats his homework instead of doing it, Puppy."

With that, she strolled down the hall to her room.

Upon arriving at the door to her room,

the eerie sense that always loomed around the door grew stronger in her presence.

As the door creaked open, revealing the dark purple walls, ghost lamps lit the room in a purple light.

The light lit up the hall in unsettling purple.

The center of the room was home to a bed looking like it was made of the feathers of a raven.

She sat down on her cloud of fake bear fur.

Laying back on her back,

she directed her menacing stare to the ceiling.

Daring it to collapse.

*Another day back at the Fields of Asphodel*

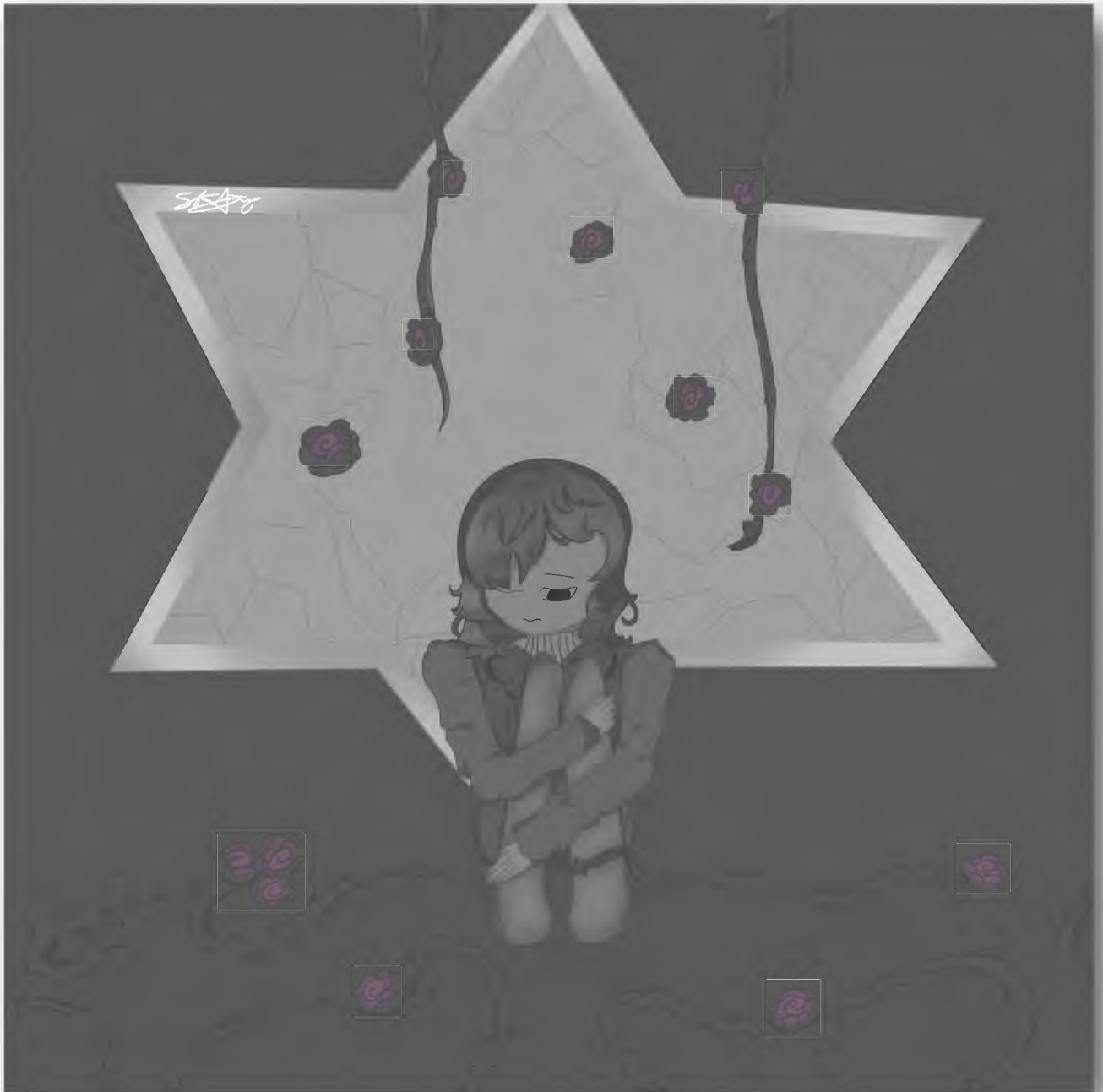


## *Lulu*

Maximo Castellanos, age 17

Pencil, paper, shading tools

*Inspired by maids from the 1930s*



## *Broken Mirror of Despair*

Sahasra Komirishetty, age 15  
Digital art made on Procreate

*This piece was made specifically to hold a whole lot of symbolism within almost every aspect of it. For example, a mirror with no reflection represents loss of identity and the person being depicted is curled up, representing insecurity. The piece as a whole is supposed to give a desolate mood and to give off a feeling of despair to viewers. It can also represent being unsure of how to express one's feelings and emotions. Additionally, it doubles as a piece in which the meaning can be inferred in many different ways due to the many different viewpoints on symbolism. In conclusion, this piece is very flexible when it comes to meaning.*

# The Prophet

Caleb Zurakowski, age 13

I first saw that fiend from my stagecoach as I was travelling to my Manor in Munich. It stood in the middle of the bustling crowd. Its whole body was wrapped in clothing; it wore a black open trench coat with a white suit beneath.

Bloodstained bandages covered most of his face, and a pair of goggles with yellowed lenses sat roughly where his eyes would lie. A black fedora sat atop his head, mostly covering a bird's nest of black hair.

He stood in the middle of the sea of peasants, and even though I could not make out his eyes, I felt them piercing into my own. The crowd seemed to flow right through him as if he were an apparition.

At first, I didn't think much of this man, but I would come to regret this meeting. The rest of the day proceeded normally until I had prepared myself for a quick walk around the outside of my manor.

As I threw on a brown coat and straightened my luscious, pointed beard, I glanced out of the nearby window and spotted that man again. He stood straight, an unlit pipe between two of his fingers.

As I reached for my revolver, he pulled out a lighter and lit his pipe. He placed it where his mouth would've been, and then, he vanished in the puff of smoke. My blood ran cold, my hands quivered, I dared not move, unsure if he was right behind me or not.

I was lifted from this trance when my friend, Henry, knocked on the door.

"You there?"

My heart slowed and my blood settled, the weight of fear lifted from me, temporarily.

"Yes, if you were about to ask, I'm ready."

I left the room, planting a reassuring hand on my friend's shoulder. He smiled and we continued out the door to our walk. It was a jovial time, yet I feared to tell him of the strange occurrence, fearing he would call it another one of my ramblings.

We soon returned to the manor, on the horizon the sun had begun its descent into darkness. My friend bade me farewell following supper and left for his own dwelling. I did not sleep well that night, paranoia crept into my mind, keeping me awake and pondering about that man's intentions. He had somehow crept past the manor's security without being noticed by any of the men guarding the gate and fence.

I planned to interrogate them about the man to see if they knew anything, but that could wait until noon, but even once I fell asleep that thing plagued me, my dreams

became nightmares the moment I saw it out of the corner of my eye. He lurked around each corner, nook, and cranny. Sometimes his 'mouth' moved in a way that seemed like speaking, but when I tried listening and only heard unintelligible rambling.

I awoke in a cold sweat following a nightmare that struck such terror into me I could not speak for a good few hours after waking. I was sure it was a kind of prophecy, my guardian angels warning me of its intentions.

Following breakfast, I went to speak to the guards.

"Tell me, did you see any man wandering around the grounds?"

"Excluding you and Henry, no one."

I continued pressing him, "Are you sure?" I showed a picture of him I drew in a frenzy last night, he seemed to notice my change from my usual demeanor, as worry crept across his face.

He stared at the image, clearly shocked, "No sir, we did not see a man like that."

"Well, if you see a man like this ANYWHERE, be sure to bring him to me."

He nodded and told his neighboring fellows, passing the image around like candy. After a moment my mind settled and I returned to the inside of the manor, the day proceeded as normal, until I was leaving church, I saw him again.

He was standing in the cemetery, he stood over a grave, with roses as rotten as his mind must've been clasped in his gloved hands. He turned his head towards me, briefly showing taut, pale skin beneath the bandages. But before I could meet his eyes, the roses it held collapsed into a cloud of dust. I stood aghast as he once again disappeared in the blink of an eye.

I felt beads of sweat trickle down my forehead and stood as still as a statue. One of my bodyguards jostled me from my shock, before quickly helping me into the stagecoach.

His face was ripe with the telltale signs of worry, I decided to see if he knew anything about the man.

"Did you see the man in the cemetery?"

"Sir, there was no one in the cemetery, at least from what I saw." He leaned against his rifle as the stagecoach travelled down the road, "You're talking about *that* man right? The one who you drew a picture of?"

"Yes."

He took a cigarette from his belt and said, "We asked around town if anyone had seen the man you spoke of,"

"And?!"

"We got nothin'. No one ever even seen someone like him, I couldn't think of anyone in this town who could hate you enough to stalk your every waking-" I cut him off

and ordered the stagecoach to stop.

I saw it again, it stood across the street, its limbs were uncannily long, its back had now elongated and its posture was now slightly hunched over. It leaned against a shop window, a pipe between its monstrous fingers.

"What is it?"

"Look! Look over there!" I screamed, pointing frantically at that demon. But when he scrambled for a look, he saw nothing of interest, not even a man staring at us.

"Are you blind?! It's right there!" I yelled frantically pointing at it. How could he not see a thing so monstrous, so demon like, it looked like it had come from hell itself!

"Sir, calm down!" He grabbed me by the shoulders, his pupils shrunken in fear, "Sir, that man is not out the window, I assure you that you are safe from them!"

I calmed and shrunk back into my seat. We soon returned to the manor, but my mind still raced with wretched thoughts, "They must be working with it, how else could they not see it?!"

Then I saw it, out of the corner of my eye. It leaned against the fence, I drew my revolver and quickly fired four rounds into its hellish form. I was sure it had died, but when my mind calmed I saw not the monster, but my friend, laying there in his own blood.

My mind was overcome by a tsunami of guilt, I dropped my revolver as my guards quickly brought me inside the manor.

That beast had tricked me into killing my own friend! Poor Henry, he never deserved this! For many days I stayed inside, moping over my friend's death. I saw that demon nearly daily, lurking outside or in some corner of the manor, it enjoyed my suffering and found it amusing.

I did not know how much longer my mind could withstand this thing. There is to be a trial in a few days, I fear whatever sentence would be stricken upon me, and what that creature would do to me after, how much it would enjoy my time in prison.

I do not wish to give that thing any more joy or amusement from MY suffering, MY torment. I would rather die than give that devil what it wants. My revolver sits next to the very paper I write on, when they find my corpse, a bullet in the brain, they will find this letter and finally understand what that thing is, and I hope, hunt it down.

*Signed: Andrew Verrückt Smith*



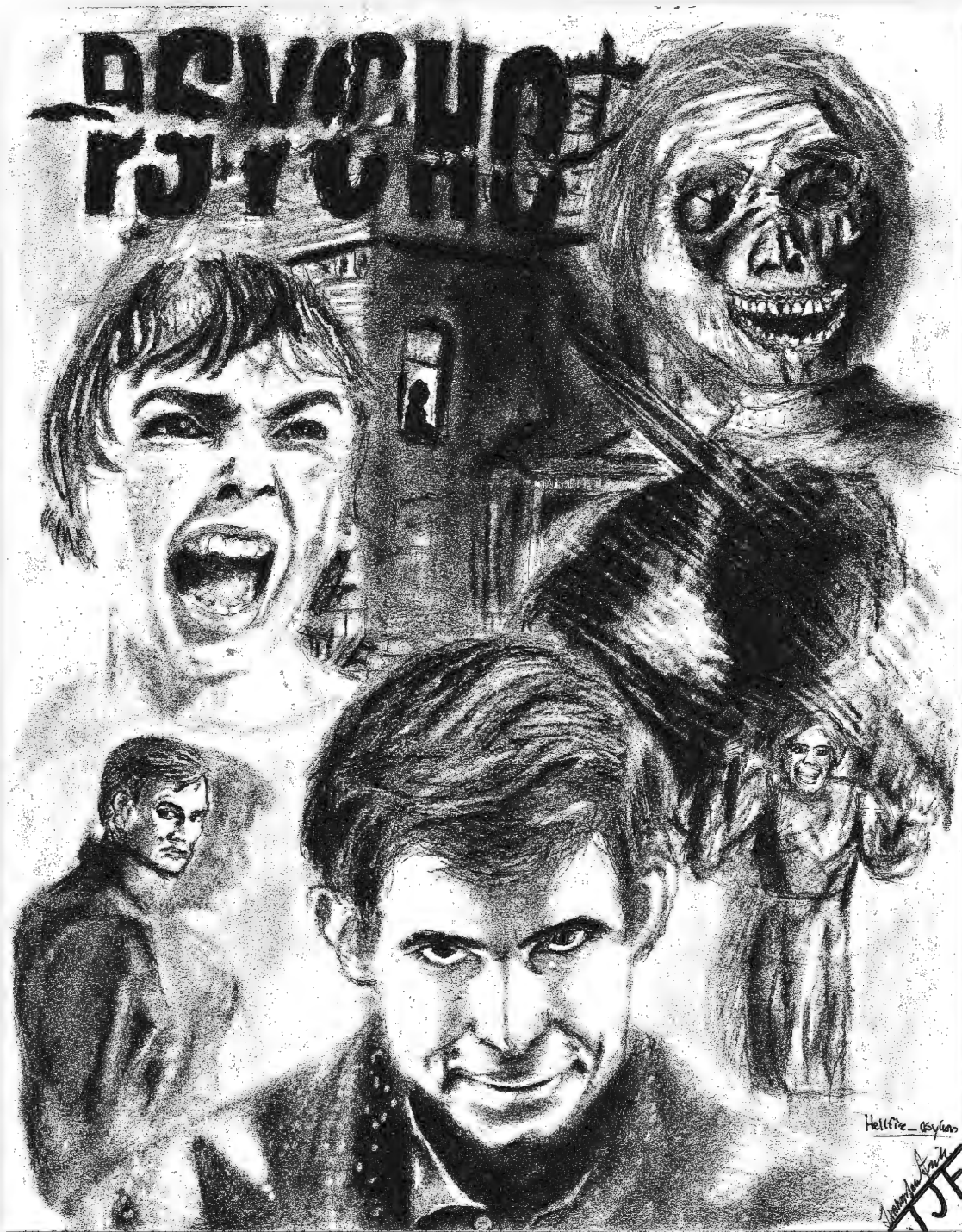
## *The Final Attachment*

Maya Zhao, age 15

Watercolor

*I found inspiration for this piece when steaming crabs. I made this drawing to record their final acts after giving in to death. They put their last hope on an old rag, which tragically did not make any changes in their ending.*

*There is a slight but noticeable difference between red and other colors, which is used to convey the blurred line of losing faith. This drawing conveys the vulnerability of life against the power of fate.*



## *Duality of a Madman*

Jack TJF, age 17

*This art piece took 3 hours. All of my art is done entirely by hand without tracing. I have only been doing art since April 16th of 2025. This art piece represents the duality of Norman Bates. On one side, the piece is entirely dominated by his mother, a representation of his split psyche. To the other side are the images of Mrs. Bates victims, most notably Marion Crane played by Janet Leigh and Norman Bates himself portrayed by Anthony Perkins who is also a victim of his mother as she has taken control of him. In the background is the house which overlooks the Bates motel. The house is a representation of the generational evil and psychopathic control that has manipulated Norman. The art piece as a whole shows how generational abuse can create a rift in the mind, creating a split psyche, or if you will, a sense of duality in a man.*

# A "Human's" Reaction To Fear

Travis Shelton, age 17

After a long day of hunting to get dinner, I finally returned home right as the storm worsened and night fell. Before I enter my home, I quickly check my body for any injuries, unfortunately finding a good couple all around my body due to the pack of wolves I ran into earlier. Thankfully they're small enough to not hurt much, but the pain serves as a reminder of why I need to bring my monkshood with me when I go hunting in wolf territory. As I entered my home, I almost hit my head on the roof, causing me to have to bend down slightly just to fit, but once inside, I went and placed the animal I had in my hand down next to the rest I collected, letting it fall to the ground with a **wet squishing sound**. I take a moment to lick my hands clean of the **red substance** that covers them before I quickly notice that some of my things are out of place. My pile of food has not just been knocked over, but some of the bitter monkshood I love have also been taken. I look at the pile slightly in shock as I slowly put together what happened while I was away. There's something in my house, and the very thought made my mind fill with all the different possibilities of what might have happened. As I'm still lost in thought, I hear a shuffling noise from much deeper inside my home that makes me jump slightly. As I do my best to listen in, every hair on my body stands on its end, and I try my best to keep my eyes on the dark area of my home from which the shuffling noise is emerging.

As I slowly creep towards the source of the noise, I try to assume a more comfortable and sturdy pose, so I lower myself down, crouching on my front arms and adjusting my position, hoping that I appear more intimidating. The more I approach the noise, the more I see that something is wrong. It appears like muddy footprints, similar to mine but smaller.

Unfortunately, it only serves to make me more on guard and angry to think that something is in my house taking and knocking over my stuff. Due to my combination of anger and fear, I let out a loud yell, partly hoping it would be enough to scare away whatever was in my home. A long silence follows that seems to stretch on and on until my eyes finally re-adjust to the darkness, and I finally see what is in my home.

**It's** exactly what I hoped it wasn't. Both me and **it** stand there for a second looking at each other as we both sit there. As we look at each other, every second seems to last forever, as I think back to all the times I've dealt with one of its kind. Simultaneously, I also scan its appearance because now I know if I don't make a move first, it will. But I'm too slow. **It** quickly takes the opportunity I've given it, due to my hesitation, to throw something, kinda like a branch, at me. The object ends up stabbing my shoulder as the creature runs deeper into the darkest parts of my home. The pain makes me lose sight of it as I quickly close my

eyes and rip the sharp stick out of my shoulder, forcing myself to follow the creature because I know once you let these things out of your sight, it's almost impossible to find them again. The pain makes me let out another yell at the **creature** as I run on all four and quickly start catching up with it.

As I follow the **creature**, it seems to struggle to keep running while also having to dodge all the different things in my home, like the rocks, stalactites, and stalagmites. As it runs rampant, I watch the **creature** and notice it's now wobbling and is forced to slow down, even as I keep my same pace, perfectly navigating my home like I've always had. As I move closer, **it** seems to make a noise, "WAt pI3a\$e d0n't kIll m3!" I don't understand a thing, as my emotions all come to a head in one moment, as I finally get my claws on **it** and end it, along with all the fear it brought along with **one big squish, crunch, and pop**. Silence falls as I look at the flattened corpses that once was the **creature**. My attention quickly changes as I check my shoulder to see just how damaged it is, only to find a small scar where a bleeding gash once was. As a wave of relief washes over me, I debate what to do with the **creature** now that it's dead. At first, I decided to try eating it but after giving it a smell or two, it's clear that eating **it** is off the table. Judging by the disgusting smell, the **creature** must have had a bad reaction to something **it ate earlier**. So, like any other thing I can't eat, I leave it outside.

But even as time ticks on, my mind can't move on from **it**. Even though my inspection of **its** body was brief, my mind can still clearly remember how it looked, making me also notice the physical similarity we shared. Like our general shape, I may be much bigger, but the similarities are there. Making me think: did I need to...kill **it**? I know it was dangerous, **it** even hurt me as proof of that fact, but I can't help but wonder...? Could I have just let it go? Did I need to chase it? Was it scared like I was? A long silence fills my home as I get lost in thought; the only sounds being heard coming from the raging storm outside. As my mind melds with the storm outside, I ask myself one last time: Did I really need to kill **it**?

# The Bed & Breakfast

Reddi Yamala, age 13

The fallen leaves crunched beneath my feet as I spirited through the woods. The barren trees didn't stop the frigid wind from hitting me. Though, I should count my blessings that there isn't any snow yet. It had been almost a week since I left home. Leaving was a thoughtless decision. But what choice did I have? I couldn't stay in that house anymore, the house where all my family left me.

Finally, the seemingly endless rows of trees came to an end and the dim light of a town came into view. I slowed my pace and walked into the street. Not a soul was outside and most of the buildings were dark and empty. Fear rose in me and I questioned how I was going to find my way through here. When it seemed like I was going to have to sleep out that night, a small inn flicked with light at the end of the street. Walking in the direction of the inn, a feeling of hope blossomed in me. Maybe it was going to be okay, I was going to be okay. A bright sign that said *Bed & Breakfast* was set next to a vase of fresh chrysanthemums. I loved chrysanthemums, so I decided to take that as a good sign. I approached the door and was about to knock when it opened by itself. I was startled and jumped back, almost twisting my ankle. A kind-faced woman stood before me.

"Oh my, you must be freezing darling! Come in, come in!" She smiled and gestured for me to come in. I hesitantly walked across the threshold and began to examine the room. A lively fire was burning in the hearth and in front of it rested a small dog, wagging its tail and next to it was a caged parrot snoring quietly. The lady led me to a plum-colored sofa and sat across from me in a matching armchair.

"What were you doing wandering around at this time child?" She questioned, wrapping a blanket around me.

"Where are your parents? Family?"

"They're gone, I have no one left." I whispered and tears filled my eyes.

A concerned look crossed her face, "Oh, well you are welcome to stay here. I don't get many visitors these days."

"Would you like some tea? The weather is quite brutal out there."

"Yes, thank you." I smiled at her kindness.

The longer I stayed talking with her and sipped hot tea, the lighter and better I felt. It was odd, the serene atmosphere this place had. It was like I was back home.

The landlady led me up to the 2nd floor, chatting about her son.

"He was such a gentle man, but alas I haven't seen him since he left for the army all those years ago," she explained, opening the door to room 5.

The room was just like the rest of the hotel-cozy, sweet, humble.

I got into the paisley sheet and thanked her for her hospitality. The landlady nodded and turned to walk out.

"Wait-", I exclaimed, "You never told me your name."

A small smile escaped her lips, "Mrs. Weaver, dear."

And so, the days passed by as we both fell into a routine. I would get up early and help Mrs. Weaver prep the place for guests, then I would read and learn from her library while she worked. Then we would both have dinner together in the evening. She never asked me about my family or never suggested when I should leave. I didn't want to leave either; I liked our routine and I liked her. She was kind and always asked how I was doing. Slowly, we grew closer as she told me stories of her son and the animals. I told her about my old life and my old family. Finally, everything felt perfect again.

A couple months later I was sweeping near the fireplace when a tall man dressed in blue stepped through the door.

"Hello! How can I help you sir?" I asked while still holding the broom.

He cleared his throat, "There has been an accident. I was told this is where Mrs. Weavers lives."

Dread entered my body, "What happened?"

"Mrs. Weaver has died."

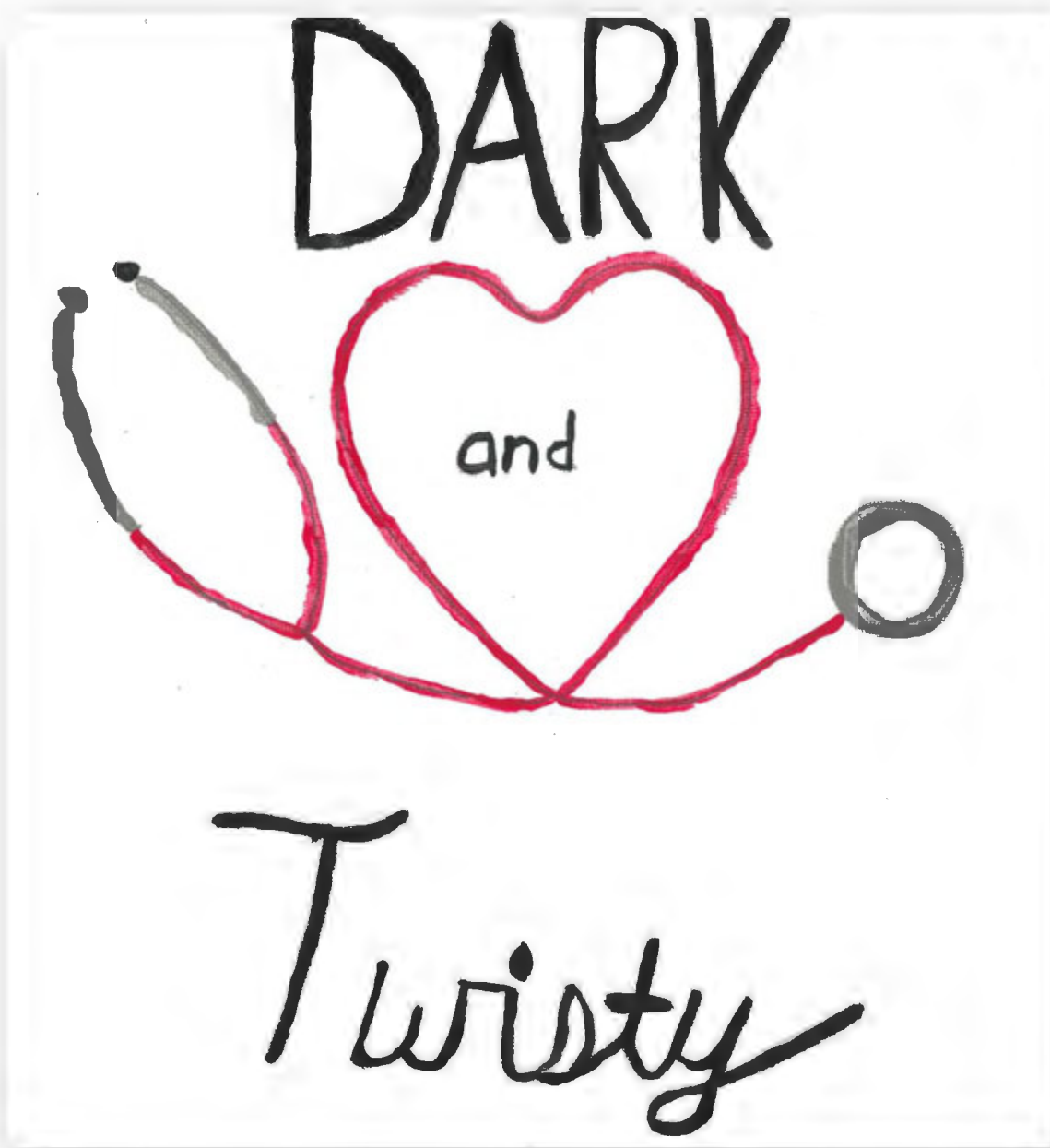
That's when it came back, the ringing. Smooth and high-pitched. Same as the time my

parents died. Same as the time my grandparents left. It felt worse this time though. Like it was the last time someone like that will be there for me. My vision got blurry, I felt like I couldn't stand. The ringing slowed and I could hear disoriented words. The once cozy room felt too small. The world suddenly felt too small.

It had been three weeks since Mrs. Weaver had been gone. Customers kept coming, and they came and went. Not one stayed, no one ever stayed. The walls grew larger. The carpets started whispering to me. Even the parrot and the dog sensed the tension in the air. Yesterday I left the door open and the dog ran out. Fortunately, I caught it just in time. I'm going to make sure it never leaves again. The voices told me exactly what to do. Though, the guests started asking why it won't play anymore, or why it won't move much. I'm just doing what I have to do. The parrot kept pecking at the window, trying to escape, so I had to take care of that too. The voices helped of course.

The years passed by and the voices got louder and more demanding. They wanted to keep everyone that walked through those doors. But some of them were rude, hostile, and undeserving. Finally, on a chilly April night, a young man came in. Said he was here for his education. Christopher Mulholland, he said his name was. He was very sweet to me, helped me clean, asked about my day, and reminded me of Mrs. Weaver. At the thought of Mrs. Weaver, the voices started screaming, I just had to keep him. I was saving him from the cruel world out there. I had him sign the guestbook, a dusty old thing, so I would have something that showed he was here. He was here with me. It was quiet, painless, I was doing him a favor. I gave him some tea, with a hint of poison, and he fell right asleep. Then he never woke up. Perfect. More people came and went, but none of them felt right, like Mr. Mulholland, I waited and waited.

A couple more years passed, the voices grew impatient, it was getting harder to control them. That's why when Gregory Temple stopped at my Bed and Breakfast. He never left. Same process, quick simple, he even complimented my special tea. I put him next to Mr. Mullholland so he could lay on that bed forever. The only other things left of him were his signature in the guest book and newspapers reporting missing people. That's what stopped people from coming inside my hotel anymore. They knew something was wrong with it, that something was wrong with me. The voices hated it, they screamed and yelled, just wouldn't settle down. I started looking for people who I could keep. I'd stare out the window all day. Just waiting for the perfect person and soon enough he came. An amiable gentleman on a trip away from London. No one would even miss him. I could keep him all to myself.



## *Dark and Twisty*

Lyla Friday, age 13

Canvas with acrylic paint

*I was home from school the day I made this painting and what I do in my free time is watch my favorite TV shows, and the TV show I had decided to watch that day was Grey's Anatomy. I was rewatching it and I was in the earlier seasons and the nicknames for Cristina and Meredith came up. I was bored out of my mind, wanting to paint something but couldn't find any inspiration, until the nickname came up. I didn't wanna just put Dark and Twisty on a canvas, so I needed to put something for pop, detail. Well, I love Grey's Anatomy and they're doctors, so I made the stethoscope a heart.*



## *Surreal*

Aditi Patel, age 15  
Photograph

*This photo was taken during an evening stroll in Ocean City. I took this photo as the view seemed fake, even though it was right in front of my eyes. It felt like I was in a dream, the smooth blue color of the sky hitting the perfectly outlined hotel. It felt surreal.*

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## PROGRAM COORDINATOR:

Julia Tucker, Brandywine Hundred Library

## EDITORS

Emily Ennis, Route 9 Library  
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Abigail Hunter, Woodlawn Library  
Julia Joyce, Hockessin Library  
Denise Knestaut, Brandywine Hundred Library  
Elizabeth Mayer, Bear Library  
Matt Symes, Newark Library  
Alysia Van Looy, Appoquinimink Library  
Stacia Washington, Route 9 Library

## LAYOUT & DESIGN

Cheryl Clem, Hockessin Library

## RELEASE PARTY

Janoah Wright, Route 9 Library  
Nicole Worth, New Castle Public Library

## MANAGER LIAISON

Steve Davis, Appoquinimink Library

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