

**Central & Southern
Indiana Scholastic
Art & Writing Awards**

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Also, thanks to our judges (see separate list), as well as volunteers who helped with art judging and at the regional ceremony!



Dedication

This year's anthology is dedicated to ***Dr. Steve Fox, Emeritus Director***, whose leadership shaped its foundation. His belief in writing as discovery fostered spaces for educators and students to improve their craft, clarify ideas, and confidently share stories. Dr. Fox's commitment continues to influence the Hoosier Writing Project and its classrooms. We are grateful for his lasting impact and example.

About the Awards



Started in 1923 by Scholastic founder Maurice R. Robinson, the Awards have grown to become the nation's highest honor and largest source of scholarships for creative teenagers. All students in grades 7-12, whether public, private, or home schooled, are encouraged to apply. Through a nationwide network of more than 100 visual arts and literary arts organizations across the country, the Awards receive more than 300,000 submissions from over 100,000 teens in 28 categories of art and writing.

Across the decades, some young Scholastic winners have included names you might recognize: Stephen King, Robert Redford, Andy Warhol, Sylvia Plath, Truman Capote, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, Bernard Malamud, Ken Burns, Marc Brown, Kay Walkingstick, Robert Indiana, Alan Arkin, Lena Dunham, Richard Linklater, and Amanda Gorman, who read a poem at the 2021 U.S. Presidential inauguration. Most alumni are less famous but no less important, for creativity, imagination, and risk-taking are hallmarks of being fully human.

The Hoosier Writing Project at IU Indianapolis, with support from community volunteers, recognizes regional winners with Gold Key, Silver Key, and Honorable Mention certificates. For the 2026 award year, our region received over 1,600 submissions and gave over 580 awards. Gold Key writing is published in this annual anthology, illustrated with selected Gold Key art.

For more about the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, visit www.artandwriting.org.

Introduction



Once again, it's time to share this anthology of Gold Key Writing Award winners from the Central and Southern Indiana region. The 2026 volume brings together powerful student writing alongside a select group of Gold Key-winning artworks, including this year's cover.

The pieces in these pages were selected using the same criteria that have guided Scholastic throughout its history: technical skill, originality, and the emergence of a distinct personal voice. In a moment when much feels uncertain, these young writers and artists are doing what artists have always done. They are paying attention. They are asking difficult questions. They are capturing joy, tension, memory, and possibility. Their work reflects not only strong craft, but clear perspective.

The commitment represented here does not develop in isolation. It is nurtured by teachers who create space for risk-taking, mentors who offer thoughtful guidance, and families and friends who encourage young people to trust their ideas. We are equally grateful to our volunteer judges, many of them writers and artists themselves, who gave their time and expertise to this process.

Once again, this anthology was co-edited by *genesis* Literary & Art Magazine, under the guidance of Prof. Sarah Layden. This year's Managing Editors are IU Indianapolis seniors Sophia Foster and Savanna Williams. This is their first year constructing and co-editing the anthology. They devoted many hours to designing and compiling this volume, supported by the *genesis* senior editorial team.

In complex times, the act of creating remains deeply human and necessary. These students remind us that when young people are given space to develop their craft, they contribute meaningfully to the broader cultural conversation. May we continue to listen, encourage, and make room for the voices and visions that shape what comes next.



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Joined by Mary Ann Cohen, Donna Rund, and James Cramer of the
Central and Southern Indiana affiliate, Scholastic Art and Writing
Awards



Intruders

Josie Seymor
Drawing
11th Grade
Independently Working



Critical Essay

A Coping Person's Guide to Grieving

Madeleine Adams

Death. We all experience it at some point, whether someone close to us passes or if it's someone we barely knew, but the big question is: *how do we cope?* Do we treat death like a bad wound? Do we write about it in our journals, trying to make sense of something so nonsensical? Perhaps the hardest question, though, is how do we let, or rather *make*, ourselves face such a harsh reality? The novel *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds strives to answer this question by following the story of Will, a 15 year old boy whose brother, Shawn, has recently been fatally shot, and who now must navigate the next steps to avenging his brother's death. The entire novel takes place during Will's elevator ride down from his apartment, as he prepares to murder his brother's suspected killer. Reynolds uses characters and other literary devices to demonstrate that grieving is not an easy or linear process. The novel portrays healing as a complicated process, and shows that how we respond to the responsibility and pain that follows largely shapes how life plays out.

One way to see the theme that Reynolds portrays is through each of the deceased characters that enter the elevator as apparitions on Will's journey down, most remarkably his dad Mikey Holloman, his Uncle Mark, and Shawn. Mikey left the family when Will and Shawn were younger, and was shot to death after wrongfully murdering the man he suspected of killing his own brother. Mikey never got the opportunity to see his sons again before his death, despite desperately wanting to. However, Will still feels strongly connected to him despite their previous distance (Reynolds 2017a, 198). Mikey loves more strongly and cares more deeply than what he may show on the outside, and Will looks up to him in the same way. Even when Mikey reveals that he had killed the wrong man, the two still hug. However, in a paternal act of teaching he never got to give to Will while he was alive, Mikey pulls out a gun and puts it to Will's head (Reynolds 2017a, 224). He never actually pulls the trigger, but the experience taught Will what it would be like to be a wrongly accused victim with his life on the line, giving him a new perspective.

Uncle Mark, stoic but incredibly feeling, teaches Will a similar lesson. He makes Will act out a “script” where he describes what he’s about to do. They get most of the way through the script where Will finally verbalizes *why* he’s angry and *why* he’s seeking revenge. As Will narrates in the hypothetical events that lead to the avenging of Shawn’s death, he says “He continues for nine blocks, gets to Riggs’s house, sees Riggs, pulls the gun out, and...” but can’t bring himself to say “*shoots*” (Reynolds 2017a, 176-180). He chokes on the words, almost seeming like it physically makes him uncomfortable to say them, even with Uncle Mark urging him to say them out loud. This demonstrates to both Will and the reader that no matter how brave he feels in the moment, he isn’t ready to shoot, much less *kill* anyone. Jason Reynolds spoke out about a similar internal conflict in the interview following his reading of *Long Way Down* where he mentions how a quick minute of anger can cost you decades of your life in prison. This illustration that Reynolds offers emphasizes that no matter how big of an emotion you feel in the moment, you never have to immediately jump to extreme measures. For Will, this would demonstrate that even though he feels brave in the heat of the moment, he does not have to shoot someone out of impulsive rage.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, there’s Shawn, Will’s role model and older brother. Shawn taught Will *The Rules* when they were younger, and they form part of the reason that Will is currently in the elevator. *The Rules* are passed down to the men and boys in families, telling them to (1) NEVER cry, (2) NEVER snitch, and (3) ALWAYS get revenge. He steps into the elevator and greets everybody, but doesn’t say a word to Will, even while looking directly at him. It’s an uneasy and slightly disturbing silence, one where something needs to be said but shouldn’t dare to be uttered. But then Shawn breaks down, *breaks The Rules*, and cries. This leads to Will questioning *The Rules*: did the rules ever actually benefit anyone? Are there any *actual* consequences of breaking them? Will, by allowing himself to question *The Rules* and through seeing his big brother, his *role model*, cry, finally allows *himself* to cry. Shawn crying allows Will to realize that expressing his humanity and allowing himself to experience emotions fully is more important than *The Rules*. It allows him to see that *The Rules* are more traumatic than actually helpful to anyone, they’re a dangerous form of toxic mascu-

linity, and they're *hurting* him.

The trauma that follows gun violence and the loss of someone close to you is further illustrated through the poetic elements Reynolds uses, specifically imagery, onomatopoeia, and the word layout. The three work together to display truly how bizarre death is, especially in Will's situation of not only having it happen to a close family member but also being fairly young when it took place. Imagery most accurately portrays this surrealism of experiencing someone's death. For example, when Will compares Shawn's blood-soaked shirt to chocolate syrup (Reynolds 2017a, 23), he knows that blood isn't anything like chocolate syrup, but it's easier to make unusual comparisons rather than trying to explain something that doesn't make sense. Onomatopoeia also contributes to how Will attempts to distance himself from the harsh reality through a comic book style approach to the violence. One example of this technique that happens throughout the book is when Will uses the word "*POP!*" to mimic the sound of a gun firing (Reynolds 2017a, 213). Much like imagery, the word "pop" is usually used in innocent instances like bubblegum or a balloon, so the juxtaposition of something so lighthearted being used in a darker manner gives the whole scene a new impact. Similarly, Reynolds uses a kind of clever word layout to graphically illustrate the tragic actions and emotions of his characters. When Will stumbles while attempting to narrate the shooting of his brother's killer, Reynolds inserts a single page with only the words "I GOT STUCK," forcing the reader, like Will, to stop before the most important words. Later, Reynolds uses the same device to portray the impact that experiencing the deaths of multiple close friends/family members has on Will's impressionable mind, and this is best shown when Reynolds dedicates an entire page to the words "and killed" when talking about Shawn's death (Reynolds 2017a, 3-4). This detail illustrates graphically and realistically how people think and process things like tragedy: not as a band-aid being torn off, not by *never* speaking of it, but by taking the time to feel its full impact. As readers make their way through the novel, it's very easy to forget that Will is only 15 years old during the events of the story. In other words, little hints like this that are laid through these literary devices pulls us back to the fact that Will is a young (and most likely traumatized) child who has experienced things that most adults haven't.

So, how *does* Jason Reynolds attempt to answer the age-old question of how grief and coping works? Despite this question being one that has been heavily debated and attempted to answer in the past, Reynolds uses his characters and his elements of writing to convey the idea that dealing with grief isn't easy, and virtually always hurts no matter how many times we experience it. Not only this, but it's almost never a "one size fits all" situation; some people prefer to make the best of the situation, some attempt to heal by acting out in erratic ways, and some, like Will, prefer to swallow it down and appear unbothered. However, when Will copes this way and attempts to keep following *The Rules* by planning the murder of Shawn's killer and not letting himself cry, it ends up hurting more later on. His pent up resentment and anger and sadness all together led to a dramatic and sudden breakdown and ended up making for a harder healing process. Death is surreal, it's genuinely one of the *hardest* things someone can deal with, and while it's meant to be handled delicately and with care, sometimes the best thing we can do to handle it is to break the rules, let ourselves feel everything, and simply just cry.

Never Averting One's Eyes: How Cinema Teaches Students

Garrison Dowling

In Greenwood, Indiana, squeezed between the stank of Planet Fitness sweat and the sizzling sounds of Kabutos Steakhouse, lay a dark, damp, dusty cavern. In the sprawling depths of this cavern, one may find horrific monsters, hopeful heroes, or gunslinging cowboys. They may be transported to wherever and whenever they want: the past, the present, or the future. Guarding the entrance is a modern-day Charon, cloaked in black, requiring a drachma in the form of a paper ticket for entrance. The cavern is named Cinemark and was the birthplace of my love for cinema.

In the theater, I could ask questions not just about myself, but also about the world as a whole. A major influence of this was one of my favorite directors, Akira Kurosawa. Kurosawa is one of the most acclaimed directors of all time, and what I loved about him was his commitment to addressing themes that others would not. Kurosawa professed this commitment during his honorary Oscar acceptance speech at the 62nd annual Academy Awards, claiming that “to be an artist means to never avert one’s eyes” (Kurosawa). When I first heard this quote, I immediately identified with it—I was an artist, someone who does not make art just for the sake of it, or to fulfill themselves, but someone who creates art because it is the only way to make sense of the world. I felt as if I had found a home in the cinema, and often frequented the theater as a way to escape the stress and the pressure of homework, tests, and grades.

Eventually, my passion expanded from consuming film to producing film, and I began the process of actually making a film. However, during a period of my Children’s Literature class in which we were studying how the visuals of a picture book could have an impact on children, I had an epiphany: my school studies were not just connected to my craft; they were the actual structure of my art. Filmmaking is a collision point between these two foreign worlds: part artistry, part philosophy. In combination, these two worlds can form a symbiotic relationship, each informing and growing off the other. Film studies—an academic discipline that analyzes cinema

through historical, theoretical, and critical approaches—is among the world’s most revolutionary learning tools and should be a required course in schools’ English curricula because it teaches visual and media literacy, builds cross-cultural empathy, and increases student engagement and inclusivity.

Beyond defense, film can be a catalyst for social movements, spurring public attention and creative solutions. In his article “How We Can Use Film to Create Social Change,” author Luiza Paiva expresses that if the protagonist of a narrative is a member of a suffering community, the film will be effective in bringing change: “[Communities] are able to use these resources to report what is going on in their own territories and bring to our attention how audiences can play an active role in engaging with and contributing to these narratives of change” (Paiva). Frequently, in communities that endure hardship, the issue is not that they can not solve the problem, but rather that they do not have the resources necessary. By presenting the problems of a small or unknown community to a global audience, filmmakers can generate the necessary aid to help said communities. Moreover, film can spur ideas to solve social problems. In her article “Impact of Films: Changes in Young People’s Attitudes After Watching a Movie,” author Tina Kubrak details the impact of dystopian future films, which “clearly show what we can expect in the near future, and offers ways to think about what can be done to avoid the darkest predictions” (3). By showing a reality in which not everything works out, filmmakers invite viewers to brainstorm. The resulting innovative environment churns out solutions, not only preparing humanity to overcome problems but also perpetuating a society in which creativity and critical thinking are encouraged.

Even while students focus on analyzing a film’s message, they are still pulled into the film, being placed into the perspective of characters, resulting in an increased empathy for others. In authors Lillian Wichinsky and Barbara Thomlison’s article “Advancing Global Social Policy Knowledge and Practice Through the Use of Films,” they document students’ opinions who “clearly state that the use of film engages them in a way that other approaches to teaching often do not and allows them to experience the problem more personally” (16). Through the lens of the protagonist, film enables

students to experience a variety of challenges and oppositions that they would not likely face otherwise. As a result of their expanded understanding of the difficulties that plague others, students can empathize with peers who actually face those tribulations and better support them. On the other hand, film can help these peers confront their problems. As Wichinsky and Thomlison note, “[f]ilms enable the viewer to also learn from the experiences that the characters they are observing are confronted by” (6). Students who are experiencing the problems presented in films can identify with the protagonist, and, in concurrence with them, learn how to overcome the trials they face. Introducing solutions to struggling students presents them with not only ways to overcome their obstacles but also hope.

Similarly, film can help students to visualize other situations not just on a community scale, but also on a global scale. Wichinsky and Thomlison relay students’ beliefs that “the most remarkable achievement was not just the development of knowledge but also a perceived growth of self-confidence in terms of intercultural competence, a deeper understanding, interest and motivation to undertake interventions for social change” (15). Frequently, people see others who look different from them and automatically assume that they are different from them. However, film allows students to see the similarities between themselves and the people represented on the screen. By placing themselves into the situation of other cultures and nations, students can relate and connect to others. Moreover, Wichinsky and Thomlison suggest that with the new-found understanding and connection between people worldwide, it can shift the perspective of social problems: “Using feature films is a methodological contribution in the use of the arts as a reflective tool so as to concretize social and global problems that social work direct practice or policy concentrations independently cannot offer” (4). If the problems presented in the fictional world of the film reflect an ongoing issue, it can cast a new light on the topic, making it easier to explore possible solutions. For example, because the film *Star Wars* had such an adventurous and otherworldly setting, it was able to reflect real-world problems such as political corruption and totalitarianism in a hopeful and entertaining light. Furthermore, viewers experiencing the problem through the encapsulating senses of sight and sound can have their views and opinions on

the topic radically shifted. For example, *Nickel Boys*, a film about black teenagers experiencing racism in the 1960s that was shot using a strict first-person perspective, forced viewers to see through the protagonist's eyes. Because viewers, especially those who have discriminated against others, are now, through the screen, able to grasp the idea of what it is like to be racially discriminated against, they are likely to have a revelation or new viewpoint on how racism affects individuals. Film bridges the gap between individuals, allowing them to see as the other sees, think what the other thinks, and feel what the other feels.

Similarly, through immersing viewers in others' lives, film can help students to overcome language barriers and learn about the cultures of others, equipping them with skills to communicate globally. In their article "The Use of Films in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language: a Systematic Literature Review," *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* notes that the body language shown in film can improve the foreign language learning process: "The paralinguistic information displayed in films, namely the actors' facial expressions, gestures, and postures, helps [...] learners to better comprehend what they hear, understand complex grammar patterns, guess the meaning of new lexical items, and even identify pragmatic rules in real-world social encounters" (Sánchez et al. 2). If an individual were to go to a foreign country, without the knowledge of that country's language, they would primarily communicate with signs and expressions as they become adjusted to the language. Film operates in the same way in that it provides students with the opportunity to pair universal body language with the words and expressions of a country's language before they ever actually visit the country. Consequently, students who are introduced to a language through film are better prepared for interactions with those who speak that language than those who have not studied the language through film. Not only can film help students to tackle the language barrier in another country, but also the culture shock. As the article explains, film can simulate a country's environment to "represent [...] lifestyle, whether habits and values, behavioral or legal systems, housing, clothing, food, history...This allows [...] students to come into contact with essential features of the foreign language which cannot be fully illustrated in coursebooks" (Sánchez et al. 3). By being immersed in the culture of

the country, students can further relate to the natives' circumstances and daily lives, preparing them so that when they come across the culture, they can be respectful and informed. In the present day, in which different cultures and nations are more divided than ever before, the new generation of academic learners must be able to co-exist and give others the grace that they would like to be given. However, this division is irreparable if students are not shown the diversity of situations and experiences, and, indeed, as Wichinsky and Thomlison claim, "[m]any students have not been exposed to an ethnically or culturally diverse population while growing up or in their current lives" (2). However, through the implementation of film in the classroom, students are exposed to the lives of others—the unfortunate, the powerful, the rich, the poor, and all the diversity that humanity has cultivated across the Earth. When students can relate to others across the globe whom they have never met, it pushes a hopeful outlook of the world—one in which cultures can recognize the inherently humanistic similarities between them while respecting the practices, customs, and traditions of others.

Since students are actively engaged in the lesson at hand, they are more prone to sharing their opinions and asking questions. Wichinsky and Thomlison point out that "[s]tudents can vary in their reaction to films thus generating great discussions" (16). If a student has a negative reaction to what a film is saying, while another student has a positive reaction to what that film is saying, their ensuing discussion will not only result in a further understanding of the topic by both students but also drive the two to compromise. By being able to understand and respect opposite viewpoints, students can practice critical relational skills that will be beneficial throughout their lives. Furthermore, bold and unique scenes can leave lasting impressions on students, helping them to consciously recall important information. In author David-Alexandre Wagner's article "Teachers Use of Film in the History Classroom: A Survey of 19 High School Teachers in Norway," a teacher details the impact of film on his students and their reaction to the films used in class: I think that the entertainment value of film is important for students' motivation and drive. [...] I think it's the fact that they see it themselves, combined with the fact that I select striking scenes that play on their emotions. Discussions and reflection go together. When I nail it, it's a bull's eye. Compared to reading textbooks and doing

exercises, they are different worlds. (qtd. In Wagner 33).

Unlike lectures or reading, which only concern the individual, film's encouragement of discussion stirs students to take an active and collaborative role in the classroom. As a result, not only are students given a distinct voice within the classroom, but also given the chance to listen to others. The variety of viewpoints brings forth an array of diversity into the classroom, and a better understanding of one's peers. As Wichinsky and Thomlison explain, "[film] provide[s] a learning situation in which students, speakers, and discussions provide a picture of different social and global problems that [are] new and meaningful" (15). Discussion between students promotes classroom communication, helps students to process information collaboratively, and, most importantly, provides a picture of differing views on topics.

While film has been shown to help students' academic skills, many people argue that film is too fast-paced for some students to have meaningful reflection or analysis. In fact, Thurn reinforces the long-standing belief that literature is the superior medium in teaching: "Unlike printed text, which offers students time to scrutinize the language of a particular passage, film moves quickly, and language structures that are difficult for students in written text may not even be comprehended in a visual text due to the rapid flow of speech" (26). Film in the classroom could propose a challenging situation for students who are not able to comprehend as fast as their peers, resulting in them falling behind. Accelerated learning comprehension may further isolate students who already feel insufficient compared to their classmates, causing them to develop feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and inadequacy. Furthermore, film can be hard to process due to the several ways information can present itself within the medium. Thurn supports this claim, detailing the effect film can have on the brain: "Film also has multiple semiotic systems functioning at the same time, which has the potential to confuse learners whose focus is suddenly torn between audio and visual information" (26). Students with learning disabilities related to focus, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder or slow-processing disorder, might be directly put at a disadvantage in a classroom that uses film. The speed of film, as well as the overload of information within film, can impede some students' abilities

to comprehend what is being presented to them and lead to educational inequality within classrooms.

The fear that film disadvantages slow learners seems plausible enough; however, upon further review, research determines the opposite: there are several easy fixes to the feared problems that foster inclusion and collaboration. For example, subtitles, pausing throughout the film to discuss, freeze-frames, and transcripts are simple solutions teachers can implement to help slow learners acclimate to the new environment. Furthermore, Wichinsky and Thomson explain that “[s]tudents come to the classroom with different learning styles, while some can integrate knowledge from readings or hearing the instructor lecture, others require a visual approach to learning” (16). If a student is forced into an environment in which their learning style is not present, it can lead to issues with self-esteem, isolation, and envy of peers whose learning style is present. These students are not inferior, as their grades and scores would seem to claim; they are, however, not supported. Unlike literature, which is only textual, film incorporates visual as well as auditory information, fostering an environment where a student of any learning style can learn efficiently. In addition, *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* describes how an audible and textual combined approach can help students: “[S]tudents may develop their linguistic competence when working on films since they hone their listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills at the same time as they learn English grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics” (Sánchez et al. 2). By providing three ways to learn, film creates a bridge between students, allowing them to grow as learners and as peers. For example, a student who is a visual learner can analyze the visuals of a film, while a student who is an auditory learner can analyze the audio of the film. Together, the students could share ideas and evidence they got from the film, resulting in not only an expanded knowledge of the topic but also a strengthened partnership between peers. Instead of viewing the abundance of information in film as a negative, schools must instead utilize its multimodal pedagogy to ensure no student is left behind.

Buzzing with new ideas and a diverse set of perspectives from films they viewed in a classroom, young students now flock to the cavern, joining me in experiencing the wonders of cinema.

The cavern no longer echoes, but is now filled with noises: gasps of shock, crunching of popcorn, discussion during credits, fizzing of soda, creaks in the recliner chairs, and the tangible joy felt in laughter resound throughout the entire theater. What was once an empty home for me to enjoy alone has become a gathering place for discovery—a place where the screen is no longer an escape, but a mirror and a compass. Here, students can take what they have learned in the classroom—how film begins movements, raises questions, and empathizes with others—and apply it to all films they see. Film studies is not an elective art to be brushed aside, but rather a vital language of the world, one that teaches students to read images as critically as text and to see difference not as division, but as an opportunity to understand. In an era where media defines reality just as much as it reflects, students must, as Kurosawa urges, “never avert one’s eyes” (Kurosawa). As the theater lights dim, the chatter between friends and family is quiet, and the projector lights crawl over the audience’s heads to meet the screen, the cinema reclaims its purpose: not to separate dreamers from reality, but to unite them in the act of seeing.

Redefining Love and Power in Glück's Hades and Mitchell's Hadestown

Lucia Moxey

Can devotion coexist with freedom? Or is love that silences always a form of possession? Both *A Myth of Devotion* by Louise Glück and Anaïs Mitchell's *Hadestown* revisit the ancient myth of Hades and Persephone, but they do so in ways that reshape how we view love, power, and vulnerability. Glück presents a version of Hades who cloaks control in the language of care: his "devotion" masks manipulation. Conversely, Mitchell portrays Hades to be emotionally complex. He is shown as a leader driven by loneliness and fear in addition to his power. Both authors use these characterizations to illustrate how mythology can be used to examine the impact of love on an individual's sense of control. The myth of Hades becomes not just a story of abduction or marriage, but a means of exploring how easily affection can become possession—how the voice of the beloved too often disappears in the shadow of power. Although both portrayals explore how power distorts love, they differ in how they humanize Hades: Glück's Hades is strategic and unemotional, while Mitchell's is emotionally broken and afraid. This difference reveals two interpretations of the same myth— one as a warning about fantasy erasing agency, the other as a tragedy of failed vulnerability— and suggests that myth is not frozen in time but is a tool for examining how affection, when shaped by fear or control, can become a form of erasure.

In Glück's telling, Hades does not fall in love with Persephone; rather, he meticulously fabricates an entire world to ensnare her. He builds a "duplicate of Earth / except there was no summer," and then adds "a bed" (Glück, lines 2 and 4). What might seem at first like an act of provision and care is actually one of entrapment and control. He doesn't invite Persephone into his world; he rewrites the world around her. The absence of seasons— and the eerie addition of a bed— hints that Hades wants Persephone not as she is, but as someone remade to suit his fantasy. The environment itself becomes a tool of psychological pressure. Like a film director, Hades stages the scene, adjusting the lighting and furniture: "First he covered the windows with thick cloth. / Then he removed the mirrors" (Glück, lines 11–12). Keeping Persephone in the dark about

her environment and even herself is a calculated part of his staging. The effect here is a quiet kind of erasure— one in which Persephone isn't shouted over, but is also not allowed to speak. Glück's attention-grabbing, declarative remarks reflect Hades's total control. The reader's insight into Persephone's perspective is being taken away, and the only thing being displayed is Hades's singular will instead. What makes this version of Hades chilling is not just his actions but how he justifies them. "Doesn't everyone want love?" he asks (Glück, line 15), and later he claims, "the beloved body, compass, polestar" (Glück, line 23). He universalizes his desires, as if love must always look like possession. In doing so, he leaves no space for Persephone's wants. She becomes a symbol, not a person— a "polestar" that only reflects his gaze. Even the line "You're dead, nothing can hurt you" (Glück, line 46) feels like an attempt to silence any resistance. He frames death as protection, but what he's really offering is obedience. Glück gives us no window into Persephone's thoughts, yet her silence is revelatory: Hades's love depends on her submission to the point of absence. Thus, we see that supposed devotion can constitute a complete ownership of the beloved's very existence.

Mitchell's Hades, by contrast, is just as controlling, but he is much more afraid. In Hadestown, his underworld is a factory of routine and surveillance, but the man at its center is breaking. When Persephone returns to him, he doesn't command her. He just says, "I missed you" (Mitchell 33). It's a line that doesn't mask longing. Unlike Glück's Hades, who hides his intentions behind logic and order, Mitchell's version is transparent: he's lonely. This makes his control all the more tragic. He doesn't seek domination for its own sake, but because he doesn't know how else to hold on to what he loves. A moment where this emotional complexity is shown is when Hades confesses, "I was lonesome / So I built a foundry / In the ground beneath your feet" (Mitchell 38). It's a startling admission: his entire world was built from loneliness. His internal emptiness manifests in the foundry, a symbol of fire, control and also labor. He insists, "Think of it as my desire for you" (Mitchell 38). Mitchell employs this raw confession, delivered in song, exposing Hades's wretched vulnerability. This contrasts with Glück's colder, abstracted presentation of control. His world is not just a prison— it's a love letter no one asked for. Where Glück's Hades constructs

illusions to trap Persephone, Mitchell's Hades is more vulnerable: confessing, pleading, and ultimately failing to let go. Mitchell does not use Hades's loneliness to excuse his behavior. His choices still cost others their freedom. In one of the most revealing scenes, Persephone compares Orpheus's love for Eurydice to the one she and Hades used to share: "He has the kind of love for her / That you and I once had" (Mitchell 79). The line stings. It holds a mirror to what their relationship has become— something transactional and rigid, built on what once was real tenderness. Hades is shaken by Orpheus's song, yet he clings to rules, issuing the impossible condition: "If you turn around... she goes back to Hadestown" (Mitchell 98). Though delivered through Hermes, the law is Hades's own— a last defense against vulnerability. Like Glück's Hades, he clings to control, but here, the motivation is fear, not fantasy. Mitchell also explores how power manipulates under the guise of kindness. In "Hey, Little Songbird," Hades tempts Eurydice with a dangerous kind of safety: "Always a pity for one so pretty and young / When poverty comes to clip your wings" (Mitchell 45). He doesn't threaten her; he seduces her. But it's still a coercive proposition. Eurydice doesn't choose freely— she is compelled under external pressure, with frankly no good options. Still, the choice exists. In Glück's version, Persephone has no choices at all. Her will is overwritten and overshadowed in a literal sense, blanketed in darkness. Mitchell allows Eurydice and Persephone more agency to speak, to resist, even if their resistance doesn't change their fate.

This difference matters. It changes the emphasis from complete control and total domination to a form of limited autonomy. Glück's poem becomes a warning that what looks like devotion can be a mask for possession. Hades's world is neat, sterile, and silent because it's designed to have no conflict— no voice but his own. Mitchell, however, views love not as an absolute certainty but as a negotiation: one influenced by fear and emotional wounds. Her Hades is still a tyrant, but he's also a god who is portrayed profoundly human. He mourns what he's lost and craves connection, revealing his vulnerabilities, which blur what it means to be a god and what it means to be a man. His utterly anthropomorphized grief and longing don't excuse his actions, but they exacerbate its tragedy. He controls not because he's cruel by nature, but because he's scared of being left behind. Both pieces are connected by their use of my-

thology to ask challenging questions regarding love and authority. Glück employs a close, internal viewpoint to illustrate how effortlessly control can masquerade as concern. Mitchell, through the stage and various voices, reveals the narrative to demonstrate that even strength derived from suffering continues to inflict damage. Her Hades is more understanding, yet equally accountable. He has feelings— but that doesn't mean his actions don't matter.

By comparing these two versions of Hades, we are left with no simple answers. Is love that silences and manipulates still love? Can longing and desire ever justify control? Glück's poem says no— her Hades is a warning about fantasy becoming a tool for subjugation. Mitchell's version is more ambivalent, asking us to see the human behind the god without excusing him. What both works agree on is that uneven power dynamics in relationships— whether they are established through fear or illusion— can twist love into something entrapping and dangerous when the one exerting the power denies the beloved their voice and agency. As myths continue to be retold, they adapt to the needs of the moment. Glück's Hades is molded by self-deception. Mitchell displays one framed by vulnerability and remorse. The different versions of love portrayed aren't straightforward, and that's the point. When love is influenced by power, it provokes scrutiny and truthfulness. The gods may remain constant, yet the manner in which we narrate their tales forms the way we mortals bond and discover genuine emotional ties, satisfaction, and liberation.

From Battlefield to Broken Promises: Native Americans in World War I

Lucia Moxey

Native American contributions to World War I were undeniably significant, with thousands serving in the United States military even though they were not U.S. citizens. Many joined to honor warrior customs, display their loyalty to the United States, and earn better treatment and full recognition by the government as well as society. They saw their sacrifice as a pathway to acceptance. However, when they returned from war-torn Europe, their dreams went unrealized when it came to citizenship and land rights. Their lands were still controlled by the government, and they were forced to assimilate. Also, American society promoted stereotypes that dehumanized Native Americans, which made it challenging for them to be seen as people deserving of rights. Although Native Americans bravely served in numbers that—viewed proportionally—were greater than other ethnicities, they returned to a country that still denied them basic rights; hence, their crucial participation exposed the contradiction between their loyalty and the nation’s broken promises.

In order to understand the injustice and ingratitude toward Native American World War I veterans, we must understand the context in which they were raised. Before World War I, most Native Americans were “wards of the state,” denied both political rights and authority over their own property (Lipnick). They were not allowed to vote or manage their land, with their assets mostly being held in financial trusts administered by government agencies. This arrangement was an unfortunate product of the long-standing belief that Indigenous communities were “incapable of self-governance,” rendering them politically dependent (Lipnick). Most Native families were disconnected economically and were “poor, even extremely poor” (*Meriam Report*). Without political power or economic independence, they remained under restrictive supervision of the U.S. government, without much hope of autonomy and what many call the American dream. Therefore, you would think that military service during wartime would be a reasonable means for pulling oneself and one’s community out of poverty.

Political efforts to alleviate the economic plight of Native peoples backfired, continuing to take away opportunities other than military service, such as farming. The Dawes Act of 1887 divided tribal lands into individual plots. Although the intention was to encourage farming and integration, in practice it led to widespread land loss. By 1932, two-thirds of the 138 million acres originally held by various tribes were gone. The law was passed “without consent or even input from Indian tribes or Indian leaders,” and its effects replaced community-based systems with unfamiliar structures, creating a “pauperizing effect” (Treuer 145). Without their own land to farm and develop, Indigenous people succumbed to a cycle of dependency, so those who served in World War I often had few alternatives. The U.S. government did not stop with taking away land through unjust policies; it also eroded Native cultural values, which aided military recruitment. The government pursued forced assimilation, targeting youth. Children were sent away to Indian Boarding Schools. For example, the Carlisle Indian School was designed to “prep Native Americans for the ‘real world,’” teaching patriotic values while discouraging traditional culture (Lipnick). Carlisle alone reported 224 students serving in WWI (Department of the Interior). These schools became one of the major pathways funneling Native youth into the military.

Native Americans who decided to serve were met with intolerance. During this time, American ideas about Native peoples were shaped by false long-held beliefs. One common image was the “noble savage,” which romanticized Native people as mythical figures “rapidly passing away” (Camurat). This made Native Americans seem like relics of the past instead of contemporary people deserving rights. Assimilationist policies were reinforced by such stereotypes. For example, a 1914 political cartoon, *The Great Spirit*, depicted the “vanishing Indian” wary of modern progress symbolized by an airplane (Keppler). The illustration portrayed Native Americans as resistant to change. Similarly, *The American Indian: Past. Present.* contrasted a ceremonial dance with a football game featuring a Carlisle banner (Levering). It suggested that “progress” required abandoning traditional practices for American culture. Society therefore viewed assimilation as benevolent rather than coercive.

From these difficult economic and cultural conditions, Native Americans nonetheless rose up and served their country. Native American military service was notable: approximately 2,846 served in WWI, with 2,315 in the Army (Krouse 36). Their contribution was disproportionate—only 33% of Native men aged 21–31 were citizens, yet 20–30% of all Indigenous adult men served, compared to 15% of American men (Voigt). They enlisted for many reasons—upholding warrior traditions, pressure from boarding schools, or protecting their lands. Many earned distinction. Joseph Oklahombi captured 171 Germans and received the Croix de Guerre. Indigenous code talkers used Native languages as codes that German intelligence could not decipher (Voigt). These actions led many to believe they had proven their right to “social and political equality” (Lipnick). Congress then passed the 1919 Citizenship Act for Native veterans and the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 for all Native Americans. Still, these changes did not produce real equality.

The Indian Citizenship Act granted citizenship, but it was not enforced: many Native Americans still could not vote, blocked by residency clauses, tax rules, or state laws. Battlefield experiences often led to “alienation and marginalization” after the war, and some viewed the Act as “a further attempt by the U.S. government to establish greater controls over the race” (Lipnick). High enlistment “did not translate into greater participation in U.S. society,” resulting in “disappointments and frustrations” (Krouse 176). Some tribes, including the Iroquois, feared that citizenship threatened their sovereignty. Tuscarora veteran Chief Clinton Rickard called the law an attempt to “absorb us and destroy our customs and our government” (Camurat).

The Citizenship Act did not dismantle the federal trust relationship over Native lands. Even after gaining citizenship, many Native veterans had little or no control over their property. More than a third still considered themselves “wards of the government, without full rights, especially over their individual allotments” (Krouse 156). *The 1928 Meriam Report* documented deep poverty on reservations and linked these problems to economic restrictions and massive land loss. Native soldiers continued to face land threats because of how federal policy was designed. Being “perpetually casted... at the bottom of the totem pole” brought “no real political

advancement” (Lipnick). The report emphasized that “the economic basis of the primitive culture of the Indians has been largely destroyed by the encroachment of white civilization” (*Meriam Report*), revealing a system that created dependency.

After the war, legal disputes over land fraud persisted. In 1931, the federal government brought a lawsuit challenging the Osage tribe’s rights to oil and gas reserves, attempting to seize \$50 million in assets (“White Men Are After Indian Oil”). White guardians and lawyers exploited a guardianship system that labeled many Osage people legally incompetent. The case showed the government’s ongoing failure to protect Native wealth. Land remained at the center of their struggle.

Stereotypes continued shaping public perception, making equality more difficult to achieve. Biases justified assimilationist policies by framing Native Americans as “primitive” and in need of “civilizing.” The “born-warrior” stereotype was ironically used to support assimilation by suggesting that military service made Native people more “civilized.” This paradox allowed society to praise Native military skill while simultaneously treating Indigenous identity as a barrier to acceptance.

Native American soldiers returned home to a country that had broken its promises. Government policies continued to erase their cultures, and stereotypes reduced their contributions to tools for assimilation. Citizenship was granted but not honored; many could not vote, and the government still controlled Native lands. Cases such as the Osage oil dispute showed that Native wealth and freedom remained vulnerable. These realities revealed how little had changed in post-war America. For many veterans, military service became a turning point—sparking later fights for legal and cultural recognition. Their legacy lives on.

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CRISPR: The Future of Gene Editing

William Liao

The ability to edit human DNA was once a dream. Now, CRISPR has made it a reality. Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats, or CRISPR, allows scientists to cut, replace, or add genes with extraordinary accuracy. This technology is transforming medicine, agriculture, and biological research. Its power lies not only in its ability to cure disease but also its potential to create new biological possibilities that were once deemed impossible. Yet, with such power comes significant ethical and social responsibility. Every use of CRISPR carries consequences that can influence individual lives, entire communities, and even future generations. The same tool that can cure disease can also alter the human germline, modify the genes that get passed down, and raise questions about ethics and inequality. Despite these concerns, when used responsibly and under firm regulation, the benefits of CRISPR outweigh its negatives and mark it as one of the most important scientific advancements of the 21st century.

So how does CRISPR work? The system uses a guide RNA to locate a DNA sequence and the Cas9 enzyme to cut it, functioning like molecular scissors that can rewrite the code itself. Scientists use CRISPR in two main ways: somatic editing that affects only one individual and germline editing that changes the DNA passed to future generations.

Somatic editing targets the non-reproductive cells of the body. Because the edits occur in tissues that do not contribute to reproduction, the changes only affect the treated individual, not their children. Scientists have already used CRISPR-based somatic editing to correct the mutation responsible for sickle cell anemia in blood cells and to explore treatments for muscular dystrophy and certain cancers. This somatic approach carries lower ethical concerns as the modifications stop with the patient. A 2020 study found that “[t]herapeutic genome editing in somatic cells generally does not cause significant concerns when assessing the risk/benefit balance and the use of informed consent” (Ayanoglu et al.). Individual patients agree to treatment, and society is charged with monitoring

outcomes and with taking future steps, should the need arise. Somatic editing demonstrates how gene editing can be safe, targeted, and ethical when properly supervised. Somatic editing shows that CRISPR can offer hope without passing unknown consequences to future descendants.

Operating at a much deeper level, germline editing alters the DNA of reproductive cells or early embryos, meaning that every cell in the resulting organism and in those of its descendants will carry the change. Researchers have explored removing genes responsible for hereditary diseases, such as cystic fibrosis or Huntington's disease, in embryos. In theory, this could permanently eliminate illnesses from a family line. Yet, germline editing can be used for purposes beyond the treatment of illness and disease. It could potentially be used to enhance traits like vision, strength, or even intelligence. That possibility makes the technology both powerful and dangerous: “[s]ome of the ethical dilemmas of genome editing in the germline arise from the fact that changes in the genome can be transferred to the next generations” (Ayanoglu et al.). Future individuals cannot consent to these alterations, yet they will live with the results forever. Germline editing also blurs the line between healing and enhancement, raising fears about eugenics and unequal access to genetic advantages. While it holds enormous potential to prevent disease, germline editing also demands global regulation to prevent misuse. Without careful oversight, the same tool that could cure suffering might redefine humanity itself.

As you can see, CRISPR carries substantial ethical, scientific, and social risks. One of the most serious is unintended DNA damage. While CRISPR is designed for precision, it sometimes cuts at the wrong site, introducing harmful mutations. Alexander Han, a researcher at the University of Toronto, notes that “CRISPR-Cas gRNAs may tolerate small DNA mismatches and cause DNA cleavage and thus INDELS at off-target sites” (qtd. in Murray). In simplified terms, this means that CRISPR does not always cut exactly where it is supposed to. In fact, CRISPR might still make a cut in a sequence even if the guide RNA is slightly mismatched with the target DNA. When this happens, it can create INDELS, which are small insertions or deletions in the DNA. These off-target effects could disrupt healthy genes and even cause new diseases. In somatic cells,

such damage affects only the treated person. However, in germline cells, these mistakes would pass to future generations, potentially permanently altering the human genome.

Ethical concerns extend beyond science. Editing germline DNA involves individuals who cannot consent – future children and their descendants. CRISPR therefore raises profound moral questions about autonomy and responsibility. Another major fear is the creation of “designer babies.” Once gene editing can remove disease, it might also be used to enhance desirable traits.

According to an article in the National Library of Medicine, “The ethical critiques can be grouped into 4 common themes: eugenics, risks to children, failure of self-regulation and the chilling effect on scientific research” (Knoppers). If left unregulated, CRISPR could transform reproduction into genetic selection, deepening social divides and reviving ideas of biological superiority.

Inequality is another danger. CRISPR-based treatments are expensive and are likely to remain so for years. Wealthy families and individuals could gain genetic advantages while others can’t. If this occurs, CRISPR could increase global inequality rather than fulfill its goal of developing new treatments to reduce human suffering. CRISPR also challenges cultural and religious beliefs. According to Larry G. Locke, a researcher at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, “CRISPR allows bioscientists to ‘play God,’ particularly when it comes to potentially editing the human germline.” For many, human life should not be engineered, regardless of intent.

The potential drawbacks related to CRISPR’s use are serious and complex. The risks of unintended mutations, unequal access, consent violations, and moral controversy cannot be ignored. However, these challenges are not reasons to abandon the technology. Instead, they are reasons to use it carefully under established standards that protect human dignity and scientific progress.

There are a multitude of reasons why scientists would want to use CRISPR in their work. In medicine, CRISPR offers the possibility to correct genetic disorders at their source. In agriculture, it enables the development of crops that resist drought, pests, and

disease – helping secure food supplies even in changing conditions. In laboratories, it accelerates the study of genes, giving scientists the ability to understand life better at the molecular level.

CRISPR's potential to cure genetic diseases is its most powerful advantage. By cutting and repairing faulty DNA sequences, it offers a direct path to treating conditions once thought incurable. According to Clara Rodríguez Fernández, a science journalist and former bioengineer at Imperial College, London, "CRISPR technology offers the promise to cure human genetic diseases with gene editing" (Labiotech). This promise is already becoming a reality in clinical trials that target disorders like sickle cell anemia and cystic fibrosis. Unlike conventional drugs that manage symptoms, CRISPR targets the genetic root of illness.

Beyond direct treatment, CRISPR drives medical research. Scientists use it to investigate how genes function, to identify the origins of diseases, and to create accurate models for testing new therapies: "CRISPR has been used to create relevant disease models, identify pathogenic genes, in high-throughput screening, and [has] even [been used] as a diagnostic tool" (Biocompare). This technology allows researchers to discover cures faster and develop diagnostic methods that detect genetic abnormalities in early stages, improving outcomes and lowering costs.

CRISPR's benefits also extend to agriculture and the environment. It allows researchers to engineer crops that grow with fewer pesticides, resist drought, and adapt to climate stress. For example, "researchers used CRISPR genome editing to dramatically alter wild tomato and cherry species. Their goal was to make these crops more amenable to urban farming in cramped spaces. ... [T]hey were able to make the plants shorter and they increased fruit production" (Ford). Advances like these could strengthen food security and reduce environmental damage. Additionally, with effective regulation, CRISPR can be integrated responsibly. According to Sudipta Biswas, a senior scientist at CRISPR Therapeutics, "A major ethical concern surrounding CRISPR and its ability to integrate into society is the potential for it to exacerbate social inequality." However, this statement contains a keyword that is the solution to the posed dilemma: integrate. Careful governance of the integration process will

ensure progress without widening inequality. Through incremental implementation, CRISPR can transform medicine, agriculture, and science itself while remaining socially responsible.

As one of the most important scientific discoveries of the 21st century, CRISPR offers the ability to cure disease, protect food supplies, and advance biological understanding in ways that were once impossible. Yet it also carries risks that cannot be separated from its potential. The question is not if CRISPR should be used, but how. The future of CRISPR depends on choices made by scientists, lawmakers, and society as a whole. Strong regulation, transparent research, and global cooperation are a necessity to ensure CRISPR can serve as the tool it was meant to be. If countries commit to strict oversight, access is expanded fairly, and germline editing is limited to disease prevention rather than enhancement, CRISPR can reshape medicine and agriculture without sacrificing ethics or equality. Ultimately, the benefits do outweigh the negatives, but only when the technology is guided by responsibility, caution, and a commitment to using science for the good of all people.

Beyond the Grave: The Ethics and Promises of Digital Immortality

William Liao

For centuries, immortality was limited to myth, religion, and science fiction. Now, advances in artificial intelligence promise to remove those limits: Digital immortality is an emerging technology that seeks to preserve aspects of a person's identity – such as speech patterns, writing style, and personality traits – through AI avatars that can interact with the living long after the original person has passed away. While this is far from true “mind uploading”, these avatars can simulate behavior, creating an illusion of presence.

Companies such as Eternos and Replika are already using personal data, social media posts, and voice memos to create interactive griefbots and digital clones. These tools can offer comfort to people mourning loved ones, serve as memorials, and preserve stories for future generations. However, digitized humans are limited. They cannot and do not represent consciousness or the complexity of our human brains.

Digital immortality has the potential to redefine life and death. However, rushing its adoption risks deepening identity confusion, violating consent, compromising privacy, creating legal disputes, and disrupting social, cultural, and religious norms. Before moving forward without regulation, we must fully explore the ethical challenges raised by the technology and create safeguards so that we are protecting both the living and the dead.

Imagine a family in the year 2050 that has just lost its mother. One daughter spearheads a project to hire a company to use the mother's social media posts, emails, and recorded conversations to create an AI avatar that speaks and responds extremely similar to the lost mother. At first, the family finds comfort in “talking” to this model. However, conflicts quickly emerge. One daughter, who opposed the idea from the beginning, feels the avatar violates her mother's spirit and takes legal steps to challenge her siblings for using it without full consent. The daughter who put the project in motion fights to keep the avatar: she believes it is helping her to repair her strained relationships with the mother. The third sibling

sides with the project's initiator, finding the experience comforting despite knowing the avatar cannot truly replace their mother.

Money only complicates this tension. Before her death, the mother left money for her children to inherit, and at first, they agreed to use it to pay for the avatar service. The subscription is costly, with various tiers that grant different amounts of interaction time. Once the money runs out, disagreements arise. Two siblings want to continue paying to keep "mom" alive, but the third argues that the fee is too expensive and refuses to contribute. This raises questions about whether maintaining access to the avatar should be a shared financial responsibility or an individual choice. Even if all 3 siblings agreed on using the avatar, there are still problems: Does constant reliance on the mother's digital avatar hinder the grieving process? What if the company shuts down or repurposes her data? This family's struggles show how digital immortality, while emotionally powerful, creates practical, ethical, and financial challenges.

The compelling nature of the benefits of digital immortality cause many people to rush in as quickly as possible. For those mourning a loved one, AI avatars and griefbots can provide emotional relief by creating a sense of connection: "imagine being able to speak with your deceased relatives.... [T]his is perhaps the single most compelling (and marketable) aspect of the technology" (Atos). Even though a simulation is not truly conscious, it can be used as a tool to help someone who is grief-stricken process a loss and preserve memories of a loved one. Beyond satisfying people's desire for emotional and psychological comfort, digital immortality also has the potential to preserve legacies: The technology may "allow future generations to interact with a digital version of someone, keeping their knowledge, personality, and even quirks alive" (OrtMor Agency). Instead of fading into non-interactive videos, photos, texts, and voice recordings that have to be accessed through different platforms and modalities, digital immortality incorporates a person's voice, stories, personality, and creativity into a presence that has the power to remain vividly accessible to later generations. I constantly think about the great-grandpa and uncle that I never had the chance to meet and how meaningful it would be to learn their voices and humor in a personal way. In this aspect, digital immortality challenges the permanence of death – not by erasing it, but by

turning those who are no longer with us physically into companion presences that inspire, teach, and link people across time.

From this we can see that the ripple effect of digital immortality moves beyond a person's inner circle to become a powerful societal tool for cultural preservation. Future students will be able to "interact" with simulations of famous thinkers and artists, engaging with their works in ways that feel authentic and meaningful. While some virtual reality programming may already offer a basic ability to, for example, walk through Ancient Greece or hear an actor recite Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, a digital immortality version would go further by allowing learners to ask Aristotle questions or to personally interact with one of the audience members who heard Lincoln's speech at Soldier's National Cemetery. Instead of passively reading texts, learners may engage with knowledge through active conversation. This kind of education could make history, literature, and philosophy more accessible, while also ensuring that cultural contributions remain alive across generations. However, this shift also raises concerns: technology that makes historical figures seem alive and responsive also risks blurring the line between authenticity and fabrication. What begins as preservation may lead to distortion, revealing that the very qualities which make digital immortality valuable also cause it to be problematic.

Despite the potential benefits, digital immortality raises significant ethical, social and psychological concerns. One major problem is consent: many people never explicitly state that their data can be used after death, yet AI griefbots or digital clones can be created using their social media pages, emails, and recordings. A 2021 article collected in the NIH's National Library of Medicine notes that "The constant exposure of our lives on social media leaves our personality traits available forever We may leave, but our digital self remains" (Galvão et al.). This raises questions about ownership: "Who owns the data related to the deceased if he/she has not delegated an heir? Who is responsible for a bad behavior from a digital copy of the deceased?" (Galvão et al.). Beyond legal ramifications, digital immortality raises profound philosophical questions about "what the nature of being a human is" (Siddiqi). AI avatars mimic language patterns, voice, and behavior, but do not replicate consciousness: "If one's consciousness is uploaded, is it

really ‘you’, or is it just an advanced simulacrum?” (Siddiqa). This uncertainty – whether we are engaging with an authentic self or a convincing imitation – blurs the boundary between memory and illusion, shaping how people respond to loss.

The illusion of presence can twist emotional processes. Interacting with a digital copy of a loved one may hinder healthy grieving or create false closure, leaving people psychologically attached to an imitation rather than confronting the reality of loss. AI avatars can provide short-term comfort, but they also risk interfering with emotional closure. Usually, grieving involves accepting the reality of loss, but interacting with a digital clone blurs the line, which can leave loved ones psychologically bound to a replica. Instead of moving on, families could become emotionally dependent on the avatar, revisiting conversations and memories that only prolong the grief. In a 2024 article published in *The Atlantic* called “No One is Ready for Digital Immortality,” Kate Lindsay warns that AI clones could prevent people from “processing death as a finality,” creating a false sense of presence that delays acceptance. In some cases, reliance on digital avatars may deepen trauma rather than relieve it, especially if the AI avatar generates out-of-pocket responses. Additionally, if a subscription-based access was shut down, it introduces the idea of a “second loss,” re-opening or worsening existing wounds (Lindsay).

Social and economic issues will also arise, as access to digital immortality services is limited to the wealthy, creating inequities between those who have the privilege of preserving a legacy and those who do not. Moreover, religious and cultural norms may be disrupted if digital immortality becomes ubiquitous. Many religions hold death as a natural and sacred transition, and the digital resurrection of a decedent has the potential to violate these cultural norms. Lastly, the involvement of private companies raises concerns regarding data security and ownership. Digital legacies are stored and maintained by corporations, meaning families do not truly own or control these avatars. This leaves families vulnerable to corporate decisions, service shutdowns, or financial exploitation (Lindsay). While digital immortality promises emotional comfort and legacy preservation, it also has the potential to threaten privacy, consent, equality, and the social and moral frameworks that define life and death.

Digital immortality is no longer a question of *if* but *when*. With AI systems already capable of mimicking human language and personality, the need for ethical and legal safeguards has never been more urgent. Regulation is not simply a technical formality – it is essential to protecting both the living and the dead. Clear policies must define who controls personal data, how consent is granted or withdrawn, and what rights digital replicas possess after creation. Without such measures, the power to shape identity and memory may fall into the wrong hands. Through clear rules and ethical boundaries, society can guide digital immortality to serve as a meaningful extension of human legacy. Ultimately, digital immortality should not be dismissed, but carefully regulated. Only then can its promise – to preserve, to connect, and to educate – be realized without compromising the very values that define humanity.

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Bittersweet: The Gruesome Price for West Africa's Most Decadent Export

Aneequa Mohammed

Abou Traore's hands tremble with a combination of fear and exhaustion as he makes one swing after another with his machete, slashing at the shiny evergreen leaves. He has spent the last ten years cutting through the vast cocoa pods hovering above. He is fifteen, yet most boys on the farm are unsure of their age. The humble cocoa bean grown in the dense tropical climate of West African countries such as Ghana and the Ivory Coast—both of which supply 70% of the world's cocoa—is the primary ingredient in chocolate (“Slavery in the Chocolate Industry”). The childlike wonder associated with eating chocolate, as if all worries melt away with every bite, is violently juxtaposed by children thousands of miles away being kept in egregious conditions to produce its key ingredient. In the global north, chocolate serves as a delicacy; however, for children like Abou, the commodity of cocoa represents a life surrounded by the endless hacking of machetes and, as they sleep on the dirt in crowded sheds, dreams for a better future.

Cocoa is the main export for the Côte d’Ivoire. After being introduced by European companies, the desire for a cheaper cocoa has only risen with the rapidly expanding chocolate industry. Almost 40% of the population lives under the national poverty line (PIP 2022). Most cocoa farmers make less than \$1 per day, and lean toward child labor to match competitive prices within the industry (“Slavery in the Chocolate Industry”). Over 1.5 million children work on these farms in West Africa, where they carry sacks heavier than their bodies and are exposed to hazardous pesticides without protection as their legs cramp with fatigue (“Exposing Exploitation in Global Supply Chains Series”). Moreover, children on the cocoa farms lack proper nutrition and are sustained with the cheapest possible food (Braga). At night, most lay on wooden planks in windowless huts with nothing to wash down the grueling 14 hour workday but milky white water crawling with sediment and pesticides.

Neighboring the Ivory Coast, the country of Burkina Faso holds rich traditional dance and music, but also has one of the lowest recorded GDP per capita in the world. The impoverished

parents of Burkina send their children to the Ivory Coast in order to make money. For laborer Karim Bakary, his four years spent gutting cocoa pods proved beneficial with him able to send \$34 back home, a fraction of the average cost of living for a rural Burkinian family (Whoriskey et al.). The illusion of choice is a thin veil spread across Burkinians. Children are lured with bikes and sweets, or even false promises for a better life on the coast. A life with an education, food, and a liveliness they will hardly experience once brought to the farms.

Corporate responses highlight strides in certification labels and sustainability measures, yet neglect the root of the issue. Chocolate giants Nestle, Hershey, and Mars pledged to eliminate the “worst forms of child labor” in 2001 (Whoriskey et al.). However, exploitation is frequently bypassed with the prevalent loopholes within certification programs in regards to trafficked labor (Whoriskey et al.). The result is a cycle of well-publicized initiatives followed by little measurable progress as investigative reports expose the same children working on farms cocoa giants deny, and how ethical labels within the industry have little impact on the imposing issue (Whoriskey et al.).

A true paradox, the billion dollar industry that can track flavor notes to remote regions is supposedly unable to trace the labor used to harvest those same flavors. The price of this failure is borne by those whose names will go unknown. And while their labor is labeled as a cultural inevitability due to being impoverished, the corporations and governments responsible for their predicament go mostly unblamed.

Despite the loopholes and abuse of systems, West African governments have integrated potential reforms with the desired effect to curb child labor. Côte d’Ivoire has expanded its Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System, while both Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire have piloted farm-mapping and GPS traceability programs designed to follow cocoa from individual plots to exporters. Major brands advertise ethical farming and sustainability efforts. Yet independent evaluations show these measures reach only a fraction of the supply chain. According to the 2020 NORC report, even the most advanced Child Labor Monitoring Systems covered less than

half of the farmers supplying major companies, and certification audits often failed to detect trafficking or borrowed labor from non-certified farms. (As *The Washington Post* concluded after its 2019 investigation, despite nearly two decades of pledges, “major chocolate companies still cannot identify the farms where all their cocoa comes from”—a gap that renders even well-intentioned reforms largely symbolic (Whoriskey et al.).

These structural failures are most visible in the testimonies of the children the reforms are meant to protect. Former enslaved laborer Aly Diabate states “when you didn’t hurry, you were beaten” (“Slavery in the Chocolate Industry”). With each slash on their machetes to expose the cocoa beans means the risk of scarring their flesh and creating wounds that fester for days. For children hidden in remote cocoa forests, the distinctions between “certified” and “uncertified” chocolate — distinctions emphasized in corporate marketing — have no practical meaning. Their lived reality is measured not through audit results or supply-chain dashboards, but in scars, exhaustion, and the persistent fear of punishment.

Yet this system does not endure merely because West African governments struggle with enforcement or because companies lack oversight. It persists because the global market demands cheap cocoa — and consumers rarely question how chocolate can be sold so cheaply. Low prices depend on low farm incomes, and low farm incomes create the financial pressures that drive families to rely on child labor. As the Food Empowerment Project notes, the world’s chocolate supply chain is structured so that the true cost of production is hidden from the consumer (“Slavery in the Chocolate Industry”). Most shoppers will never witness the forest camps where boys sleep on dirt floors, never smell the pesticides that cling to their skin, never hear the sharp crack of a branch used as punishment. But every purchase reinforces the economic forces that send children like Abou Traoré into the fields each morning. An unfortunate truth, the machetes will keep swinging—their labor silently funding a luxury enjoyed far from the farms where their childhoods are lost.

Shame, Pride & Japan: A History of Revisionism Without Reparations

Emma Hu

To many, concepts of shame and pride exist oppositely. It is natural to consider the two feelings antithetical; definitionally speaking, shame is regarded as an antonym for pride. However, when considered at a more personal level, shame and pride are deeply intertwined.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology categorizes both pride and shame as self-conscious emotions, or “emotion(s) generated when events reflect on the worth or value of the self in one’s own or others’ eyes” (“Self-Conscious Emotion”, 2018). Shame is a “highly unpleasant” emotion that results from feeling as though one has contributed to something “dishonorable, inmodest, or indecorous” (“Shame”, 2018), while pride arises from achieving one’s goals and receiving recognition and approval upon reaching such an achievement (“Pride,” 2018). This classification of shame and pride as *self*-conscious emotions brings us to question why individuals should feel such emotions toward their nation’s history, given that such history is the result of the actions of past individuals, rather than their own.

To better understand national shame and pride, Salice and Sánchez (2016) introduce the notion of “hetero-induced” shame and pride, or feelings of shame and pride that arise from some kind of group identification. They focus on the “social self”, or an individual within the context of their identifying groups. Through the establishment of a social self, individuals can feel negative or positive *self*-conscious emotions prompted by other members of the same group.

However, as Ha (1995) notes, shame and pride are experienced differently across the globe, drawing the strongest contrast between the cultures of the West and those of East Asia. Asian cultures, she notes, encourage awareness and acceptance of shame, while Western cultures view shame as the “least socially acceptable emotion”. On the other hand, Furukawa et al. (2012) conclude that pride is more commonly felt and expressed in Western culture,

while Eastern cultures place more value on self-reflection and criticism. This essay will explore the nuances of feeling national shame and pride through the example of Japan—a nation whose history is uniquely riddled with extreme shame and pride due to cultural practices, governmental policy, and Western influence—to open a larger dialogue regarding the harms of each extreme and why a balance of national shame and pride must be sustained to shape the nation’s cultural and political future for the better.

Since the sixth century, Confucian ideals have shaped and influenced Japanese culture, undoubtedly paving the way for a later identified “culture of shame” within the nation (Benedict, 1946). Notably, shame is one of Confucianism’s major virtues. Furthermore, early Confucian philosophy placed a particular emphasis on self-criticism and reflection (Seok, 2017). For example, Holloway (2010, pp. 51–72) discusses the practice of *hansei*, or a process of thinking and reflecting on one’s actions critically, identifying one’s weaknesses, and using such a reflection to change one’s future pathways. Lewis (1995) reports that schools often practice *hansei* with students, laying a clear pathway for feelings of shame to manifest in children from a young age. Evidently, shame has long been ingrained into Japanese society. However, what makes Japanese shame so unique is its political impact. Despite centuries of cultural significance, when considering Japan’s postwar reconciliation with the rest of the world, shame takes on a different role.

During World War II, the Japanese committed war atrocities that much of the world was waiting to hear apologies for. Yasuaki (2002) looks to the far East, particularly the Chinese and Koreans, who felt that the Japanese ought to take staunch responsibility for their wartime actions. The ferocity of the Nanjing Massacre and the sexual enslavement of Korean “comfort women” were not easily forgotten by Japan’s geopolitical neighbors. Much of the population felt deep shame for such atrocities, aiding the rise of a “community of remorse”, formed by a number of intellectuals within the nation to reflect on the nation’s wartime actions (Lu, 2008). As guilt permeated the civilian population, the government issued a number of apologies in the following decades, military leaders were punished for their crimes, and compensation was given to both China and Korea. But even amidst such prominent, nationwide shame, the

Japanese attempt at reconciliation with its East Asian neighbors was, and remains, widely considered as insufficient (Yasuaki, 2002).

The insufficiency of this effort was in part due to the growing bitterness in response to how much blame Japan was expected to bear for the war. Shame, in effect, bred resentment. Among many, there was a growing “apology fatigue” in the nation, as well as the established government policy of facing guilt and responsibility with the simple passage of time. This opened the door for the *Tsukuru kai*—the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform—to begin rewriting history in the 1980s, intentionally distorting the more horrifying statistics and stories from the war.

For example, “historians” particularly take note of the nation’s criticisms of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, underreporting casualties during the Nanjing Massacre, demonstrating disdain toward the comfort women, and outrightly opposing any form of apology from Japan (Yasuaki, 2002). The *Tsukuru Kai*, alongside a number of right-wing politicians, sought to rid the nation of its immense shame and to rebuke the constant cycle of guilt (Schneider, 2008).

Simultaneously, government officials continued to alienate the Chinese and Koreans who were still in search of a stronger apology by enshrining and paying respects to war criminals at Yasukuni Shrine. The shrine, visited by a number of Japanese prime ministers over the years, has sparked considerable outrage from Chinese, Koreans, as well as Japanese leftists. These critics view the shrine as an homage to Japan’s militaristic cruelty and a symbol of Japan’s wartime imperialistic and feudalistic identity (Shibuichi, 2005). But it was hardly the Japanese alone who enabled the reluctance to meet Chinese and Korean indignation.

Following the war, Japan was almost immediately met with American occupation. Lu recounts American General Douglas MacArthur’s assessment of Japan following their 1945 surrender, in which MacArthur referred to Japan as a “fourth-rate country” (Lu, 2008). Japan, once a rising imperial superpower, had been reduced to a mere afterthought on the global stage. With the help of the Americans, Japan turned to economic development, a process

the Americans hoped would quell the nationalism that had enabled imperial Japan to play such an aggressive role during the war.

However, this brewed a *new* form of what Thorsten (2004) refers to as “economic nationalism”, in which the stirring of economic fervor supplanted the militaristic and imperialistic wartime fervor. But while the Americans greatly criticized Japan’s wartime nationalism, watching the economy develop was, in their opinion, vital to watching the new global order develop.

The nation was thrown into rapid industrialization, producing electronics and automobiles *en masse* almost immediately. Simultaneously, the Japanese were directed to strip their economy of its more traditional practices; the *zaibatsu* (Japanese business conglomerates, similar to the monopolies of Gilded Age America), for example, was quickly dismantled and reformed to force the economy into its new, Western mold (Yamamura, 2020). The process was well received, and within a few decades, Japan had been entirely reinvented. As the economy continued to boom, the nation regained both its power and pride. Once considered harmful and destructive by Western standards, nationalism had redefined itself in Japan, and in fact, it had emboldened the nation to become America’s closest East Asian compatriot.

America’s eagerness to forgive Japan for its crimes and welcome it into the West alienated China and Korea even further (Lind, 2008). America formed this bond with Japan without truly condemning it for its crimes, allowing the Japanese to pass by with haphazard apologies and going as far as to help conceal the darker parts of the war. Notably, little was done by the Japanese government to atone for the abuse of the Korean comfort women, which the government attempted to describe as a continued “state-regulated enterprise”, until the establishment of the Asian Women’s Fund in 1995 as an avenue for delivering monetary reparations to surviving comfort women. Even this effort was halfhearted, as the government itself avoided funding the program directly, indicating a clear reluctance to take official accountability (Kim, 2013).

Furthermore, Hickey et. al (2017) recount the horrors of Unit 731, a team of Japanese Imperial Army researchers who con-

ducted a number of lethal human experiments on thousands of Chinese civilians. Alarmingly, Americans took an interest in the findings of these experiments and did not prosecute the experimenters.

Japan flourished, America assisted it. China and Korea continued to suffer, receiving little to no assistance from the West in their own reconstruction, and instead receiving neglect and moral disengagement (Teo, 2019, pp. 41–105). War crimes and imperialistic nationalism were slowly forgotten as Japan found its new footing in the global scene, boasting economic dominance, cultural reinvention (Sato (2009) looks to the rise of “cute culture”), and Western support.

Evidently, shame and pride have both had drastic impacts on Japan: international and domestic, economic and militaristic, social and political, beneficial and detrimental. But what conclusion does this case study highlight? Should anyone be ashamed of their nation’s history? Should anyone be proud of it?

Firstly, national shame is a necessary reaction. Feeling shame enables remorse, apology, and the mending of relationships. Japan demonstrated that the avoidance of shame, on the other hand, fractures political relations, alienates victim populations, and facilitates indifference to true atrocities. Conversely, extreme shaming and constant feelings of guilt do just the same. The shamed begins to feel alienated and isolated, leading to resentment of the shamers and the pursuit of other avenues of avoidance.

Secondly, we must consider the interconnectedness of national *pride* and shame. The rise of economic nationalism in Japan was the perfect conduit for the avoidance of the nation’s war crimes. As they found focus and pride in their economic robustness, Japan was able to divert the government and most of its international collaborators away from its sources of shame. However, as explored previously, boasting pride at the expense of those whom one has wronged fosters the same process of alienation and isolation, allowing conflict to continue long past its original timeframe. Nonetheless, it is unfair to characterize national pride as entirely deleterious. It is undeniable that Japan’s postwar recovery was a difficult yet admirable feat. The sheer physical, political, and social destruc-

tion after the war was enough to defeat many nations entirely, but Japan, in finding strength in its economic transformation, was able to rebuild itself into a force bigger and better than before.

Ultimately, individuals should feel both shame *and* pride for our nations' histories. However, one cannot be felt without feeling the other as well. Shame without pride closes off a nation's future, restricting it to exist within its faults. Alternatively, pride without shame creates an echo chamber of thought, with no accountability amid wrongdoing. In balancing each form of self-consciousness, we can hope to see a world in which atrocities are condemned, but not so that a nation having done wrong becomes aggrieved at its condemners. Similarly, nations may boast of their strength and exercise their influence without shunning their victims and those whom they may have wronged.

The Erasure of Southeast Asians in American Education

Joseph Shing

In a crowded high school classroom, I once asked my peers if they knew where Burma was. My question was met with blank stares and hesitant guesses. This confusion was not an isolated incident; it reflects a broader truth about American education. The rich tapestry of Southeast Asian history and culture is largely absent from U.S. school curricula, rendering it almost invisible to students. From world history courses that gloss over Southeast Asia's past to American history units that omit Asian-American contributions, a significant portion of the world—and of the American population—remains hidden in plain sight. The lack of Southeast Asian representation in the U.S. school system has profound effects: it breeds cultural ignorance and stereotypes in the general public, and it leaves Southeast Asian American students feeling invisible in their own classrooms. This critical essay will analyze how and why Southeast Asia is erased in our educational system and explore the consequences of that erasure on both society and students.

Erasure of Southeast Asia in the Curriculum

Walk into a typical U.S. history or social studies class, and you might never hear about Southeast Asia except in the brief context of a war involving the United States. Traditional K–12 curricula are overwhelmingly Eurocentric, often treating Asian cultures as peripheral “sidebars” rather than integral parts of history. When Asian topics do appear, they are frequently superficial: think of elementary classes that celebrate Lunar New Year with red envelopes and lion dances, yet never address the deeper histories or struggles of Asian peoples. In particular, the experiences of Southeast Asians are rarely explored in depth. As educator Linda Pheng observes, *“They may study the Vietnam War, but they never study Southeast Asian people themselves.”*

In other words, students learn about conflicts *in* Southeast Asia without ever learning about Southeast Asians: their cultures, perspectives, or the aftermath of those conflicts on real communities. The omission of Southeast Asian narratives isn't just anecdot-

al; it's borne out by research. A review of California's K–12 history curriculum by professor Christine Sleeter found that out of nearly 100 historical figures students are recommended to study, not one was Asian American. In effect, an entire continent's diaspora was erased from the story of America. When Asian Americans do appear in textbooks, the portrayal is often problematic. A 2016 analysis by scholar Nicholas Hartlep found that Asian Americans were “poorly represented at best, and subjected to racist caricatures at worst” in K–12 social studies materials. Textbooks relied on Orientalist tropes—dragons, chopsticks, “Oriental” fonts—rather than authentic narratives, and they overlooked the wide diversity of Asian Americans, scarcely mentioning South Asian or Pacific Islander groups. Given this pattern, it's no surprise that Southeast Asians who include Burmese, Vietnamese, Thai, Filipino, Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, and others are virtually invisible in the curriculum. Their stories, from the Khmer Rouge genocide to the Hmong experience in the United States, are relegated to the margins if mentioned at all. As Pheng notes, even when a Southeast Asian topic is included, it's often treated as an optional supplement: *“You might have a memoir about the Khmer Rouge as outside reading, but that's just extra to the official curriculum.”*

In short, the American school system has largely failed to integrate Southeast Asian voices and history into its official narrative.

Cultural Ignorance and Stereotypes

One effect of this curricular exclusion is a widespread ignorance about Southeast Asia among Americans. When students are never taught about a region or its people, it's unsurprising that they grow up with little knowledge of it. Studies on geographic literacy underscore this point. In a National Geographic survey, for example, 58% of young Americans could not locate Japan on a map: and Japan is a well-known East Asian nation. One can only imagine how few could find smaller Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar (Burma) or Laos. This knowledge gap isn't merely embarrassing; it has real consequences for how Americans perceive the world. Important events and cultures of Southeast Asia remain outside the average American's awareness. Many do not know about Burma's struggle for democracy, Indonesia's vast ethnic diversity, or the

historical significance of Cambodia's Angkor civilization. Crucially, Americans also miss out on understanding the U.S.'s own connections to Southeast Asia, such as the Vietnam War's legacy or the reasons why refugees from countries like Laos and Cambodia resettled in the United States. As one journalist lamented, "*They don't hear the narratives of how and why Southeast Asian refugees had to rebuild their lives here.*"

When history education omits the fall of Saigon or the Secret War in Laos from anything but an American military perspective, it leaves a void in students' understanding of how these events shaped real human lives and American communities. In the absence of real knowledge, stereotypes and misconceptions rush in to fill the void. The portrayals of Asians that *do* filter through in media or cursory textbook mentions are often one-dimensional. Textbooks and classroom materials, as noted, have historically resorted to Orientalist imagery or token holiday celebrations rather than substantive lessons. This superficial treatment can reinforce the idea of Asians as perpetual foreigners or exotic others, rather than as fellow Americans or complex societies in their own right. Furthermore, by lumping all Asians into a single monolithic category, the curriculum ignores crucial differences between, say, a Chinese American and a Vietnamese American student. Such oversimplification feeds into the "model minority" myth: the notion that all Asians are high-achieving, well-behaved, and thus do not face serious challenges. This myth is not only misleading but harmful. It masks the very real struggles of certain Asian American subgroups, especially many Southeast Asians who come from refugee backgrounds or disadvantaged communities. Southeast Asian American communities have been "replaced, overlooked, and masked behind the broader Asian American 'model minority' myth that all Asian Americans are thriving compared to other communities of color," one report observes. In reality, aggregate statistics about Asian Americans (such as higher-than-average household income or education levels) hide deep disparities. For instance, while about 31% of Asian American adults hold a bachelor's degree, only 15% of Burmese, Cambodian, or Laotian Americans do: a rate *less than half* the overall Asian average. When schools and policymakers fail to acknowledge such differences, assuming all Asians excel, it can lead to neglect. Southeast Asian students who do not fit the stereotype may feel abnormal

or even shameful, and they often don't get the academic support or English-language assistance they might need. In this way, the lack of representation in curriculum isn't just a passive omission—it actively contributes to misconceptions. Students (and teachers) may default to reductive views: Asians are foreigners; Asia is only China and Japan; or all Asians are good at math and don't need help. These false narratives, bred by educational invisibility, can stick in society's mind. *"The images are seared into your mind,"* as Professor Hartlep says of stereotypical textbook depictions. And when real-life people don't match those images, they often remain misunderstood. At its worst, ignorance and stereotypes can fuel prejudice and policy mistakes. History offers chilling examples. Because schools seldom teach the full scope of Asian American history, many Americans are unaware of past injustices like the Chinese Exclusion Act or the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II. A lack of understanding about these events has allowed some to repeat harmful rhetoric in the present. In fact, some people in the U.S. today have come to believe that the World War II internment of Japanese Americans was justified and even a "model" for dealing with modern threats, not realizing (or overlooking) that it was a racially driven injustice against 120,000 innocent people. This dangerous mindset is enabled by the vacuum left in our collective knowledge. When the stories of marginalized groups are not taught, society is apt to repeat its mistakes or fail to empathize with those groups. The surge in anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, fed off stereotypes and a poor understanding of Asian peoples' diversity. Americans who never learned about Asia beyond a few stereotypes found it easy to scapegoat anyone who looked East or Southeast Asian.

Impact on Southeast Asian American Students

For students of Southeast Asian descent, the costs of this educational erasure are deeply personal. Imagine spending your entire schooling never seeing your heritage represented in a positive light: or at all. This is the reality for many young Asian Americans. They navigate an education that either ignores their ancestors or mentions them only in contexts of war, poverty, or foreign exoticism. The message, though unspoken, is clear: *your story doesn't matter*. As a Chinese American student recalled, finding only one

page about Chinese immigrants in her school library, “*It seemed I didn’t [fit in]. The history books didn’t include Chinese Americans, or Asian Americans as a whole.*”

Such exclusion can alienate students from their own education. When you never encounter role models or narratives that reflect your background, school can feel like a place where you are “unseen, unheard and disregarded”. Many Asian American students, including those from Southeast Asian families, report feeling invisible in the classroom discussion, as if they and their community have been left out of the conversation. The effects on identity and engagement are profound. Education is not just about learning facts; it’s also about developing a sense of self and place in the world. For Southeast Asian American students, the lack of representation can create an identity crisis or a sense of inferiority. They may internalize the idea that their family’s history is not important to the American story, or that their culture is something to be hidden away. This invisibility also intersects with the model minority stereotype in damaging ways. If a Southeast Asian student struggles academically or faces language barriers (which is common for children of refugees and immigrants), teachers may not recognize their struggle due to the false assumption that “Asians don’t need help.” One Cambodian American student could be dealing with trauma or English as a second language, yet be overlooked because of the stereotype that all Asian students will manage on their own. A blog from the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center recounts how many Burmese refugee students, arriving with limited English, struggled to navigate American schools and faced cultural barriers – yet their hardships were compounded by a lack of school funding and support. These students often felt adrift, and their sense of belonging and even mental health suffered as a result. Without representation or understanding from educators, Southeast Asian American youth may feel that neither their classmates nor their teachers truly see them. Conversely, when students do see themselves reflected in the curriculum, the impact is powerfully positive. Research shows that students of color are more engaged and perform better academically when their cultures and histories are acknowledged in school. Even white students benefit from a more inclusive curriculum, as it broadens their perspectives and cultivates empathy. For a Lao American or Filipino American stu-

dent, learning about the Lao kingdoms or the Filipino farmworkers' movement in U.S. history could be transformative. It validates their identity and shows that their heritage is part of the American mosaic. Unfortunately, such moments are rare under the current system. Instead, Southeast Asian American students often must seek out their history on their own, if at all. Many, like myself, only learn the full story of our heritage in college ethnic studies classes or from family stories, having gone through childhood thinking our background was irrelevant to "real" history. This gap can leave lasting scars—feelings of marginalization, or anger at having been deprived of one's own story during formative years. It can also contribute to lower academic confidence. Imagine trying to write a history essay or engage in a class discussion when none of the topics resonate with what you know from home. Too often, Southeast Asian American students become disengaged, which can manifest as lower participation or achievement. In extreme cases, the alienation can push students to drop out. Indeed, data reveals that certain Southeast Asian American groups (such as Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian communities) have among the lowest high school and college graduation rates in the Asian American population. While there are multiple factors behind those statistics, educational relevance and support are certainly among them. By not providing curricula and resources that acknowledge these students' needs and histories, we have been failing an entire segment of American youth.

Toward Inclusion and Change

The first step to addressing a problem is acknowledging its existence. In recent years, a growing chorus of educators, students, and community leaders has been calling out the invisibility of Asian Americans in our curricula—and *pushing for change*. Their efforts suggest a path toward a more inclusive and accurate education. One critical recommendation, championed by scholars like Linda Pheng, is to disaggregate data and curricula concerning Asian Americans. Rather than treating the Asian American student population as a homogeneous bloc, schools and policymakers need to recognize the differences among East Asians, South Asians, Southeast Asians, and others. Each group has unique histories and challenges. Collecting detailed data (for example, tracking how Cambodian American students perform, rather than only "Asian" students in general) can

help schools identify where support is needed and allocate resources accordingly. When we see that only 15% of certain Southeast Asian American communities hold a bachelor's degree, it dispels the myth that "all Asians are doing fine" and highlights an educational equity issue that needs attention.

Data equity, in this sense, makes the invisible visible. Curriculum reform is the other side of the coin. If the stories of Southeast Asians and other underrepresented groups are not in our textbooks, then it's time to rewrite the textbooks (or choose better ones). A truly multicultural curriculum would integrate Asian American history, including Southeast Asian American experiences, into the standard narrative—not as an aside, but as a part of the main story. This means students should learn about *The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965* alongside the European immigration waves, understanding how it opened the door for Asian immigrants. They should discuss the Vietnam War not only as a Cold War episode but as the origin of a significant refugee diaspora that reshaped American communities from California to Minnesota. They should read literature by Southeast Asian American authors that speaks to war, displacement, and identity. Importantly, these topics should be taught with the same seriousness as any "core" subject, not just during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month or as a one-day cultural celebration. There are hopeful developments: several states and school districts have started to implement ethnic studies courses or requirements that include Asian American topics. California recently passed a law mandating ethnic studies in high schools, and cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland, and Chicago have introduced Asian American studies or ethnic studies classes in some schools.

As these programs grow, younger students may finally encounter a curriculum that says to them, "Your history matters." In fact, advocates argue that when we incorporate a truly multicultural curriculum, we send an important message to all students: *No matter your race or ethnicity, you matter. Your history matters. Your story matters.*

Another key aspect of change is supporting teachers. Many teachers themselves were never taught about Southeast Asia or

Asian America, leaving them ill-prepared to teach it now. Professional development and training in culturally responsive teaching can equip educators to handle these topics with confidence and sensitivity. Schools can also partner with community organizations to bring in voices that have long been silenced. For example, programs like the Pinoy Educational Partnerships in San Francisco connect students with Filipino American history and culture in after-school classes.

Similar initiatives could elevate Southeast Asian stories—perhaps local Cambodian or Vietnamese community leaders speaking in classrooms, or field trips to cultural museums and heritage centers. Southeast Asian American students themselves can be empowered to share their family histories as part of class projects, turning what was once a source of invisibility into a source of pride and learning for all. Ultimately, increasing Southeast Asian representation in the curriculum is about more than adding new facts to textbooks. It is about validation and belonging. It's about a young Burmese American not having to feel, as I did, that her country is a joke because no one has heard of it. It's about a Thai American student seeing that the history of Thai immigration, or the legacy of Thai cuisine in America, is worth discussing. It's about a Hmong American student learning in school about the Hmong soldiers who fought alongside Americans, so that his grandfather's story finally gets told in a classroom. When these stories are included, the narrative of American history and world history becomes richer and more truthful. We begin to see America for what it truly is: a tapestry woven from many threads, including those that came from the mountains of Laos, the islands of the Philippines, and the rice fields of Vietnam. In conclusion, the lack of Southeast Asian representation in U.S. education is a gap that we can no longer afford to ignore. Its effects ripple outward: it stunts our students' global knowledge, reinforces dangerous stereotypes, and leaves a generation of Southeast Asian Americans without a mirror in which to see themselves. A critical lens turned on our school system reveals that *erasing* any group's history diminishes the quality of education for everyone. The good news is that erasures can be corrected. By advocating for inclusive curricula, supporting teachers, and dispelling myths with data and truth, we can ensure that the next generation grows up knowing where Burma is, who the Hmong are, and how

Southeast Asians are an integral part of the American story. In doing so, we affirm to every student that their story truly *is* part of our shared human narrative, and that it deserves to be learned and remembered.

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Escaping the Rabbit Hole: The Disturbing Truth Behind the “Red Pill”

Kate Won

“You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes,” says Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) as he offers an elusive red pill to Neo (Keanu Reeves) in *The Matrix* 1999. Undeniably one of the most iconic scenes in cinematic history, no one could have predicted that this scene would become the catalyst for one of the internet’s most dangerous and influential movements, The Red Pill (TRP) Movement.

What is The Red Pill Movement?

The Red Pill Movement refers to a group of online communities that believe men are victims of a gynocentric “rabbit-hole”, or a society controlled by women. This ideology is often accompanied by extremely far-right ideals that push misogyny, racism, and homophobia. The Red Pill Movement first emerged several decades after *The Matrix*’s release and gained traction on forum websites such as Reddit. Propagators of this movement mask its hateful practices behind a facade of emotional vulnerability and self-growth. In fact, in an 2016 interview with *The Guardian*, the head moderator of Reddit’s The Red Pill, a man who calls himself Morpheus Manfred, says, “We wanted a place where men could discuss masculine topics without facing the same public shaming outcry that happens on social media sites,” adding that “there’s nowhere else for a man to blow off steam. But they stay, they learn, they vent, they get advice, they get back on the horse.”

While this doesn’t sound like a threat, the real issue arises when considering what Morpheus Manfred fails to mention, which is that venting and getting advice isn’t the only thing that happens in Red Pill forums.

Why is The Red Pill Movement a concern?

The Red Pill Movement targets insecurity often felt by teenagers, as well as their impressionability, to brainwash adolescents into falling for into these harmful cycles of thought marketed as

self-improvement. In this digital era, where online relationships have nearly taken the place of human connection, teenagers who long for connectedness within a digital community are vulnerable to be influenced by complete strangers online. Many times, teens are driven to online communities, such as The Red Pill Movement, by issues in their interpersonal relationships, and The Red Pill Movement is especially alluring to teens with low self-esteem because of its promises of self-growth (Botto & Gottzen 2022). However, rather than easing teens' internal turmoil, continual exposure to this manosphere only propagates insecurity and channels it into destructive paths of thinking. Redpillers take the basic insecurities felt by most teenagers, such as not being good enough; not being able to find a partner; or not being attractive, and amplify them by creating constructs that don't exist outside of the online manosphere of The Red-Pill Movement. When teens begin to adhere to the ideals presented by Redpillers, they get sucked into this echochamber promoting misogyny and paranoia against women (Simon 2023). An example of this is the weaponization of sexual market value (SMV), or men's sexual appeal to women. In The Red-Pill Movement, men with high SMV are considered "alpha males", or males that are dominant in social standing or status, while men with low SMV are considered "beta males", who are more submissive and, therefore, less desirable to women. Under these circumstances, not only must a teenager worry about not being liked by girls, but also about being denounced by peers because by this measure, he is less masculine.

These concepts of "alpha" and "beta" males and increasing ones "SMV" do not exist outside of the context of these Red Pill forums. However, to adolescents involved in these communities, conforming to these norms of masculinity can become an unhealthy obsession. Fueled by the fear of isolation, teenagers can feel coerced into being overly sexually assertive or aggressive (Botto & Gottzen 2022). This can lead to the continuation of rape-culture, which, according to Walker et al., is built on sexist and problematic language which is often observed in red-pill forums. An online community where many young teenage boys are exposed to ideas promoting the importance of dominance over women, specifically sexual dominance over women, teaches the rising generation that the very pillars upon which rape-culture is built are, not only acceptable, but normal.

How do we fix it?

While it is clear that The Red-Pill Movement is an issue, the solution to deradicalizing these young men is not clear. For one, there is a substantial lack of research about the process of “pilling”, or the spreading of The Red-Pill Movement. This stems from several reasons, but it is mainly because collecting any quantifiable research about members of The Red-Pill Movement is extremely difficult. Members of The Red-Pill Movement value their anonymity and are reluctant to engage with interviewers, and even the communities themselves are nearly impossible to track, as they often disband and re-form across several different platforms. Furthermore, hardly any information is known about how exactly individuals become involved in these communities (Ging & Murphy 2021). Because of this, it is difficult to know the true magnitude of the “pilling” issue and even more difficult to try to form a feasible solution.

However, one thing is clear; the issue of The Red-Pill Movement can only be addressed through addressing the deep rooted issues present in today’s society, such as toxic masculinity, which tells men they cannot be masculine if they express their emotions openly (Simon 2023). Rather than making young men feel as though there is nowhere else to turn to than these shady backroom forums, we, as a society, should emphasize the importance of validating adolescents who express vulnerability. There have already been several success stories from former Redpillers, who have reported feeling relieved and even liberated after leaving the movement’s harmful ideology behind.

One of these success stories follows a man who goes by the name James Lawrence. Lawrence, a socially awkward 17-year-old, was first introduced to The Red Pill Movement when he began to search for videos with tips regarding dating and women on YouTube. What started as genuine curiosity led him down what he calls the “red-pill pipeline”, until he full-heartedly believed the Redpillers’ ideology that men are blameless victims in a gynocentric society. Lawrence remembers that it felt like “a very appealing thing to be a victim” (“The Red Pill Pipeline Is ‘A Cult’ - Here’s How I Escaped” 00:00:51). However, as time went on, he began to notice several red flags about these Red Pill forums. He recalls that outsid-

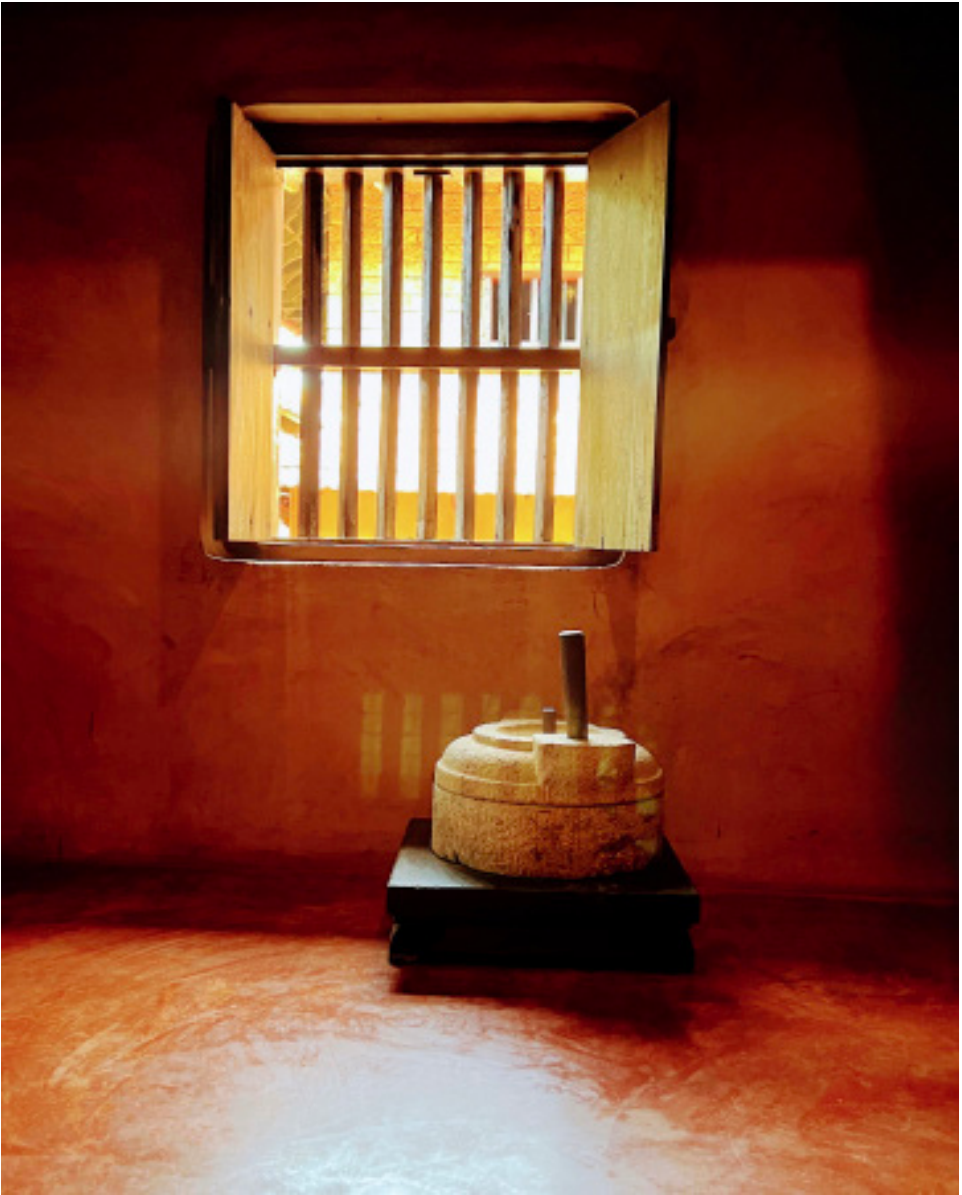
ers, especially men who did not believe in the toxic mindset pushed by Redpillers, were looked down upon and scorned and that comment sections in these forums used vile, dehumanizing language when talking about women.

Lawrence reached a turning point several years later when he expressed vulnerability to a female friend while he was going through a break-up. He says that, though he was to be ridiculed, she instead acted with compassion and kindness. This so directly contradicted what he had been told about women by Redpillers for numerous years that it forced him to reevaluate what Redpillers had taught him to believe about women. Soon, Lawrence was about to escape The Red Pill Movement, and he now describes these forums as a “cult” that “makes you feel right, but at the cost of your mental health” (“The Red Pill Pipeline Is ‘A Cult’ - Here’s How I Escaped”).

Lawrence’s story proves that the fault lies within the movement, not within the people in it. He points towards loneliness and isolation as factors that made him vulnerable to The Red Pill Movement, stating that he thinks “community is the solution for this [The Red Pill Movement]. Isolation is what’s leading down these rabbit holes” (“The Red Pill Pipeline Is ‘A Cult’ - Here’s How I Escaped” 00:02:49). The real “rabbit-hole” is not a society where women are malicious towards men as claimed by The Red-Pill Movement, but rather the real society that we are living in, which victimblames, objectifies women, and promotes rape culture by pushing toxic masculinity upon young men who do not yet understand how to be emotionally vulnerable.

The red pill we must all swallow to escape this “rabbit-hole” is the truth that we cannot fix a society fettered by hate. Society will remain in this constant state of struggle--Redpillers against feminists, men against women--until we sufficiently address the systemic faults that lie within it. Rather than remaining as a society complacent with The Red Pill Movement’s venomous tentacles poisoning future generations, we must eradicate its grip on our adolescents. Rather than allowing cycles of isolation and hostility to propagate, we must focus on creating community. Rather than shaming adolescents who have fallen victim to The Red Pill Movement, we must allow them to build from their mistakes and foster

growth. Until we achieve this standard, men and women, feminists and Redpillers alike are stuck in a far-worse rabbit hole.



Heritage in the Light

Meera Venugopal

Photography

11th Grade

Hamilton Southeastern High School

Teacher: Angela Fritz



Personal Essay & Memoir



Sakura and Kimono

Chloe Sigua
Photography
10th Grade
Park Tudor School
Teacher: Heather Teets

Dear My Lost Mechanical Pencil

Benjamin Lu

Dear My Lost Mechanical Pencil,

Although I do admit it feels odd addressing an object that sat rather unassumingly in my hand everyday, since you were such an integral part of so many chapters of my life it feels only fair to give you the proper recognition you deserve. You were there through the countless nights of studying past midnight, as stress filled my face and the dread of an upcoming test crept in; through the frantic scribbling on papers as I fought to solve the last problem in the chemistry competition; even as you were spun nervously in my fingers during a presentation. In so many moments, from absent-minded doodling to exams that perhaps determined my very future, it seems like you were always there with me, present to witness my times of both success and failure.

And yet, your design was so simple – a sleek black barrel ending in a pointy tip, a simple rubber grip that fit so comfortably in my hand, and a push button that emitted a satisfying ‘click’ when I pressed it. Despite this, what you meant to me was far beyond your basic function. You were there for me when I needed stability, a way of clearing my mind of scattered thoughts, or simply a method of writing out the words that I couldn’t otherwise express. In those moments, you were more than a piece of plastic and graphite; you were the bridge that facilitated connection between my mind and the page, allowed my thoughts to become structured, and manifested my emotions outside of myself.

I will admit, you were reliable. Still, what strikes me now that you are absent is your replaceability. As much as I leaned on you then, I realized that you were dependable, not unique. As attached as I was to you, I know that I could have simply walked into a store and bought another pencil that offered the same consistency that you did. As useful as you were in my hand, you were just as easily replaced by another. And yet, it is also your replaceability that makes your absence feel oddly significant. Sometimes, I reminisce about all the moments, big or small, that we shared together, and I realize

that it was these experiences that I miss, not you. Losing you made me aware of how we often assign meaning to objects because of the events they witness, not for what they are. Still, I find it strange that objects like you, so ordinary and expendable, can leave such a lasting impression on my memory.

In the future, I imagine other pencils will take the place you once held. Perhaps another pencil will accompany me through my college lectures, through a job, or as I write down my plans and to-do lists as an adult responsible for his own life. Maybe you'll even be replaced by a keyboard as I opt to type my words instead of writing. Or maybe I'll find you one day again, buried within a thick stack of notebooks and textbooks or sitting unnoticeably at the bottom of a drawer, merely another pencil whose appearance I've likely long forgotten. By then, what matters is not whether you stay by my side forever, but that you taught me a valuable lesson: even the most subtle, overlooked objects can shape our growth and habits, even if their impact on our lives often outlive their presence.

So, I'd like to thank you, my lost pencil, for being such a quiet yet influential witness to my life. Even through highs and lows, from rare moments of peace and tranquility to the rush of urgent deadlines, you offered me a sense of calm amidst the chaos, accompanying me through each task as a silent partner to not only my work but my struggles, growth, and perseverance. Although I may no longer carry you with me, the memories that we endured together will forever be imprinted in my life.

Thank you for everything,
A grateful companion

Don't Kill My Friends

Ja Seng Lahtaw

The streets were filled with the thunderous voices of an anguished crowd shouting for justice and democracy for the Kachin people. I was three, standing in a sea of protesters, overwhelmed by intense passion for freedom. I stood quietly at my father's side, raising a sign that insisted, "Don't kill my friends"—a symbol representing the silent cries of families killed in the sudden outbreak of war in 2011 in Kachin State, Myanmar.

Growing up in a house crammed with thirty people, I learned to protect myself from the threats around me. During the day, we hid from the Operasi policemen who arrested individuals without refugee documentation. At night, constant noise filled the house, keeping us awake. There was no peace. Yet, listening to people's tragic journeys of escaping their homeland opened my eyes to the hidden strength within every story.

In 2012, my family immigrated to the United States, settling in Washington State. For two years, we lived comfortably in a small apartment until water from the nearby laundry flooded our rooms. Struggling financially, we slept on drenched beds and inhaled the musty smell of the carpet. Was this the 'American Dream' we had sacrificed everything for?

One afternoon, I quietly snuck onto my father's computer, shook the mouse, and suddenly graphic pictures of the Kachin War appeared. The photos captured a young girl carrying a massive bamboo basket containing her family's belongings and a teenage boy carrying his grandfather on his back. I was devastated by the war, but I was curious to learn more. From that day, I began to unravel the stories of the war in my homeland—a spark ignited in my heart to help the children of Myanmar.

That night, I called my aunt in Myanmar to ask how I could help, and she explained that education was expensive. Soon, I began teaching my cousins English over nightly calls—bridging the gap between our worlds with one thread of language at a time. I realized

I wasn't just helping them build vocabulary; it was as if their hearts were lanterns, filled with joyful flames that burned their pain to ashes. Their joy fueled my determination to serve and uplift others, guiding them out of sorrow and planting seeds of renewed hope.

One night, the calls stopped. The villages of Kachin State awoke to gunfire—the military coup had struck. Hundreds of protesters rose, but violence from the military devoured them. My body was filled with fear, but I knew I had to stand against brutality.

Months later, I joined the Burmese community protesters gathered at Mount Rainier. We were there to be seen and to call for urgency. Standing with the crowd, I shouted, “Free the people of Myanmar! Stop violence against innocent citizens!” In that moment, I became an advocate—speaking and acting for those whose voices had been taken away.

From these moments, I realized the scarcity of peace in the world. Millions of people across the globe are fighting against oppression and the cruelty of their leaders. This perspective has shaped my views when facing challenges, reminding me that I am blessed with the freedom to make choices and a voice to speak out against injustice, fueling my resilience in times of uncertainty.

This shift in mindset compelled me to take action, leading me to assist with fundraisers supporting thousands of families in refugee camps. Through fundraising, I discovered that the power of small efforts can cultivate meaningful change. With my efforts, I strive to bring reassurance to distressed families, reminding them that they matter and that their voices are heard.

As I work alongside adults, I was curious and asked about their childhood dreams. A man who passed by said, “We grew up in a dreamless country,” laughing bittersweetly as he explained that the government had banned all the books to prevent educated youth from rebelling. This awakening perspective led me to understand that empowerment begins with education.

Driven to invest in youth education and serve as a guiding light, I have crafted free educational resources, mentored youth

members in my church with their studies, and advised them on career pathways. Through this mentorship, I have nurtured close relationships with all age groups and gained insight from their academic lens. This opportunity helped me discover my passion for inspiring others through mentorship and empowering them to uncover their hidden potential.

Ultimately, my aspiration is to make education accessible to underprivileged children, speak up for the silent cries of grieving families facing tragedy, and bring peace and harmony to this fragmented world. In the future, I won't be the little girl standing in an anguished crowd demanding justice; I will be the woman standing alongside my people, and saying, "Karai Kasang chye chyu hte awng dang! — Through God's grace, we achieve victory!"

Essay for the Abe Lincoln Scholarship - A Look Into a Student's Life

Leah Pugh

My dad passed away in January of 2024, but I can't remember the exact day. I feel guilty for not being able to remember the day, but I remember everything that happened throughout it. I don't like revisiting this day. Well, obviously no one would. But, I realize that the more I dwell on his death, the more I think about things I could have done differently. If I could have saved him.

My dad, brother, and I all lived with my Grandma inside her house in Brighton, Tennessee. My brother suffers from a traumatic brain injury caused by our stepfather when he was 2. This left him physically and mentally disabled. That was enough to make things chaotic for our family, since my brother required constant care that we weren't able to give him. My dad tried though, in the only way he really knew how—until he started to give up on trying.

I know my dad loved my siblings and I despite all the harsh words he threw at us. I loved him too, despite all the times I laid in the fetal position on my bed, crying after those words were thrown harshly at me. With my grandma becoming ill, my brother being disabled, and my dad suffering from untreated diabetes, I was the only one truly able to do anything related to cleaning or grocery shopping. As one would expect from a child, our house was never clean, despite how hard I tried. It was always disgusting, especially leading up to my dad's death. Our laundry room was piled to the ceiling with dirty clothes shoved into trash bags to be dealt with later. We had rats occupying our attic, a garage full of trash, and flies in every nook and crevice of the house. Moving into my aunt's house after my dad passed away was a huge wake up call. I don't think I had ever seen a house look so clean before in my life. I'm forever grateful to my aunt for taking my brother, grandma, and I in after dad passed away. I know it was a lot to take in, and I feel guilty for all the stress we are causing her, but I don't want to think about what my life could have turned out like if my brother and I were thrown into foster care.

I wish I could provide you with noble reasoning for why I

continued to do well in school despite my circumstances, but I can't. I focused on my studies because it was a distraction from home for me. I didn't have plans of bettering myself or becoming an asset to the world once I'm grown. I just wanted to be able to survive. School was the one place where I could meet my friends and feel valued for the hard work I put in. I loved seeing those papers come back with high scores on them, A's written in bright blue ink. That's the only reason I did so well. I didn't have plans for the future; I just did it because it made me feel valued and was the only saving grace for my mental health.

I also wish I could tell you that I've overcome these obstacles. I haven't. I don't believe that I will ever be able to move on from my dad's untimely death. I don't believe that I'll ever forgive my mother for continuing to stay married to the man who abused my brother. I don't believe that I'll ever stop saying "sorry" after every little mistake. But, I do believe that I will continue to be angry. I do believe that I will continue with good grades in school and into college. I do believe that I can achieve great things in life despite my circumstances-but it will be hard. It will always be hard. I am grateful for that, though. Having a hard life has taught me things that other kids wouldn't have learned at this age yet. I learned to be mature, to be appreciative of what I have, and to be independent and responsible. Those attributes will help me once I'm off into the world on my own. I may not have wanted to make anything of myself when I was younger, but I do now. I really do. I don't want to conform to all the horrible words my dad has said about me. I want to be able to help other people in the world who are suffering just as I am. I want my life to be better and for my future children to have a mother that is kind and understanding. I'm going to achieve a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Psychology (S) for this reason. I'm not entirely set on what career I will pursue with these degrees, but I know it will be good. I know I'll be able to make something good of myself and of other people.

Nobody

Angel Zou

I remember my Grandma crying at the airport. I did not understand why nor where I was going. It was not until the night I arrived in America that I realized Grandma and Grandpa are very, very far away. That was the first time I experienced loss, but there was no time for me to accept this reality. I was soon introduced to my parents, a sister, and a brother—people I didn't even know existed.

The life after was spent at the restaurant where my parents worked. That was the only way they could look after my siblings and I while they make a living for us. I was in a small room with my cousins. We spent the day rewatching our favorite drama that we downloaded the one time a month we had access to Wi-Fi. I learned to read Mandarin by reading the subtitles.

When we moved to another state, I was going into 7th grade. My parents started their own restaurant, and I left that tiny room. We could not afford to hire a server, so I took on the role. I didn't enjoy customer service—it felt awkward to talk to strangers—so I often complained. But my parents reminded me that I already had a life much better than theirs. I could not fit into their shoes, however. I thought they were just heartless and selfish.

From then on, I would go to the restaurant after school everyday. When the restaurant was not busy, I pulled out my homework to do. Everything went well in 7th grade because I only had to complete my homework, and I could do that easily. Things changed when I entered 8th grade, seeing my peers excelling in academic competitions and seeking “opportunities,” I felt anxious, so I followed them. Beside jumping ahead in math, I joined academic-based clubs like Science Olympiad and Academic Super Bowl, but I always felt like there was not enough time. I longed to pour more time into clubs, but the restaurant destroyed my wish. Knowing that few or none of my classmates have the same family condition as I do, I could not be content with my life in the restaurant anymore. Leaving 8th grade and going into 9th grade, I had many arguments

with my parents on topics ranging from joining Track and Field to applying for a summer camp. I knew they needed me in the restaurant, but I also wanted a life of my own. I have always thought my responsibility in the restaurant is hindering my potential. I thought my parents were the reason I couldn't be more. I questioned whether they loved me.

Thinking back, I don't want to beautify that experience, but I do believe it was then that I built the study habits that are taking me through the challenges I forcefully put on myself today; whether that is studying for seven AP exams at once or deciding to take the SAT over the summer to graduate early. I know my parents were proud when I got a 1520 on the SAT because that was a rare score among the relatives in my generation. A trending hashtag on Chinese social media is "Back then, both sides had their own difficulties." This hit me when I heard about the immigration stories of my parents. From that I learned how lucky I am to have US citizenship, and how heavy of a price they paid for it.

My mother's shoulders are firm and hard. I know they were toned by the weight she carried above my head. The roof that shields me from storms, the roof that is rusting. Working at the restaurant 10 hours a day for six days a week is hard, yet my parents continued for 20 years. As another Chinese saying says, "you cannot have youth and feelings for youth at the same time." I know that my teen hood is almost over because I started to understand things that my younger self couldn't.

An aunt from church who oversaw my change from childhood to teen hood told me that I was the "cornerstone of the house." That led to me reflecting on how my role in the restaurant is actually why I am who I am today. Without the restaurant, I would not be as strong mentally as I am today nor appreciate education as much as I do now nor be able to smile at an angry customer as I often have to. Although my childhood might not be the one everyone wants, it is what led me to become me. College is a place to continue growing--to carry on the goal of that little girl in the back room of the restaurant--and to live a meaningful life as that kid who grew up in the restaurant.

The Weight of Muscle Dysmorphia

Owen Stinger

I'm looking at myself in the mirror. As I stare at myself, I wonder if my parents are right. They're upset at the way I have been trying to change my body. I started lifting weights three years ago, and I'm now quite muscular for my age. I can bench-press 250 pounds and squat 320 pounds, but I still think I'm not big enough. I love going to the gym, challenging myself with heavier and heavier weights. I would go every day if I could, but my parents are seriously worried about my mental health. They think I might be suffering from Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), a condition in which sufferers are consumed by their perceived flaws concerning physical appearance. It is related to the eating disorder anorexia, in that it involves an obsessive compulsion with self-image, but one common type - muscle dysmorphia - is almost the opposite of anorexia, involving a fixation on the idea that your body is too thin or not strong enough. So here I am, staring at my body in the dimly lit mirror, wondering what they're seeing when they look at me through their eyes. Where did this compulsion come from? Am I really too big? Where do I go from here?

As a thirteen-year-old, I was small for my age. As I looked around, it seemed that all the boys I admired were bigger and stronger than me. My best friend was the fastest runner and the best swimmer at school; he was popular with both the boys and the girls. I hid my envy and kept my insecurities inside, but I wanted his status, his charisma, and, above all else, his muscular physique. Back then, I think my limited emotional intelligence led me to believe in a simple equation: bigger muscles = better friendships and attention from girls! However, these ideas were not simply born in my school. Many of my classmates were influenced by body images running through society in general, from superhero pop culture to social media. We read D.C. comics and watched Marvel movies. For a while, my favorite superhero was a lesser known character from the Batman universe called Nightwing. One day, I would have a muscular body just like him, save the day, and be a teenage hero. A darker influence came from personalities on YouTube and Snapchat. I was exposed to videos by people who promoted not just fitness but a more aggressive image of masculinity, hoping to profit from teenage insecurities.

One obvious question to ask is whether this pressure from society is somehow deeper, so I decided to do some research. How about the generations that came before me, before comic books, before the internet? Do all societies value brawny bodies? The first images of heroic male bodies that I was exposed to were probably in my treasured children's book about Ancient Greek myths: Theseus, Jason, Perseus, and of course Heracles (Coats & Lewis, 2002). The Ancient Greeks valued male muscularity as the cornerstone of human excellence. They believed in *kalokagathia*, simply defined as physical and mental beauty intertwined (Poddighe & Esu, 2020). However, it seems that Greek heroes have gotten bigger in the modern imagination. Original statues of Greek heroes look more like athletes than bodybuilders. Classical images of the male body did not convey brute strength, but an idea of harmony in proportions, which was supposed to be an outward expression of inner virtues (Clark, 1956; Golden, 1998). We can see these ideas re-explored during the Italian Renaissance in Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man", a figure shown in two physical positions whose body is defined within a perfect square, and perfect circle, and equilateral triangles (Isaacson, 2017). On seeing this thread through time, I thought that maybe some kind of muscular ideal might be universal, but this is not true. Many non-Western cultures do not especially value muscular bodies. In Ancient China, the male ideal was slender and graceful, with an emphasis on a scholarly mind, and traditional Polynesian culture associated high status and spiritual power (*mana*) with a large, well-fed body (Swami, 2015). Even in Western culture, the ideal male body image has changed over the years.

Here in America, we are currently surrounded by images of muscular men: wherever we turn, there are ads with abs and pics with pecs. But it wasn't always so. During the Gilded Age (late 1870s - late 1890s), being overweight was a desirable sign of social status, and there were even exclusive "Fat Men's Clubs" (Luciano, 2001). For most of the twentieth century, a slim yet toned figure was an ideal body for most men. According to Dr. Roberto Olivardia, in the 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam War, pop culture idols such as David Bowie were often very thin and more feminine because "to be muscular was to be defined as to be militaristic" (Kale, 2019). But starting in the Reagan years, a more warriorlike ideal took shape, famously embodied by Hollywood stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. This transition to bigger and bigger bodies in the world of images can be seen unmistakably

in children's toys marketed to boys. Take GI Joe: in 1964, if the original action figure was scaled to human size, his biceps would measure a regular 12 inches; in 1991, they had grown to 16 1/2 inches; by 1997, they were at 27 inches, bigger than any bodybuilder ever. Another character who fell victim to muscle madness was Luke Skywalker from Star Wars. As his toy-figure frame grew larger and larger while its waist grew smaller and smaller, actor Mark Hamill exclaimed, "Good god, they've put me on steroids!" (Pope, Phillips, & Olivarda, 2000).

Six months ago I tore my bicep. I was always very aware of safety issues, but at the same time, I was pushing myself to the limits: as they say, "No pain, no gain". This idea of the need to suffer to achieve an ideal form seems to be a part of many world cultures, and shows itself in different ways. For example, pain is paid as a price for beauty and respect in the Yakuza culture of Japan through large and intricate tattoos. These can take fifty to one hundred hours to complete, all without painkillers to ensure that they have been truly earned (Hallowell, 2023). Another form of suffering for beauty can be seen in scarification rituals in various Indigenous communities in Africa and Australia. Deliberate cuts are transformed into scars by pulling apart the opposite sides of the wound, creating intricate and permanent designs on the skin. These designs can serve multiple purposes: identification, ritualism, beauty, or symbols of endurance (Oyedokun, 2024a). One of the more extreme body modifications is skull elongation, once found in cultures in every part of the world, and still practiced today by Mangetu people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Oyedokun, 2024b). Mothers wrap the heads of babies tightly in cloth to alter the way the skull forms, creating a cone-shaped head which signals status, beauty, and intelligence. Bodybuilding may seem very different from all these cultural practices, but it shares with them the idea that suffering is necessary in the pursuit of beauty and respect.

These musings on motivations are not making my parents any happier. Time to look in the mirror again, metaphorically speaking, this time to think about health, on the inside and on the outside. I looked through some books on BDD, and found some tests that people can take that indicate whether they are suffering from the condition or not. These tests shed light not specifically on muscle dysmorphia, but on body dysmorphic disorder more generally. My parents and I all got personal scores using the Body Dysmorphic Disorder-Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale

(BDD-YBOCS) and the Body Disorder Disorder Questionnaire (BDDQ), both in the book *Understanding Body Dysmorphic Disorder* (Phillips, 2009). The results? I do have mild to moderate BDD, but surprisingly, this was nothing to do with the size of my muscles. My main source of insecurity is my height: I'm five feet eight inches, and I wish I was taller. The biggest twist was that my parents took these tests, they were the ones more dissatisfied with their own bodies. The truth of the matter is accepting ourselves for who we are is not just a problem for teenagers. A survey conducted by *Psychology Today* indicated that the percentage of men dissatisfied with their physiques is very similar across the age range, at around 45 percent, with the greatest numbers actually being in the age groups 30-39 and 50-59. In women, BDD is slightly more prevalent, with the same survey indicating around 56 percent of women dissatisfied with the way they looked (Pope, Phillips, & Olivarda, 2000). Many people of all ages have a complicated relationship with the mirror.

This realization is not a vindication, because I've come to understand that my parents' fears are real. When I think of how I can move forward, I need to be aware of the dangers as well as the benefits of weight lifting culture. An obsession with bodybuilding can lead some high school students to take anabolic steroids. These can increase muscle growth, but they have a range of terrible side effects: they can harm the heart, the liver and the skin; in boys, they can lead to erectile dysfunction and infertility; in girls, they can cause facial hair and irregular periods. Psychologically, a fixation on weight lifting can make bodybuilders have a distorted sense of what is attractive. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger, the most famous bodybuilder of all time, hated to look at himself. He confessed, "when I was in top physical shape, I'd look in the mirror after I won one Mr. Olympia after another and think, 'How did this pile of s*** win?'" (Fine, 2017). Interestingly, several studies have shown that the male ideal has become so distorted in the minds of men that they are chasing a body women don't even find attractive (Pope, Phillips, & Olivarda, 2000). At its worst, the online culture of the so-called "manosphere" can even promote violence and misogyny. YouTube videos by influencers such as Andrew Tate are filled with muscular men, fancy cars, and pretty women, and in June 2025, Tate had 10.7 million followers on X. Yet this is a person who pushes ideas of gender hierarchy and gender violence, and who has been accused of rape and human trafficking (Feltham, 2024). These various examples could make it seem that working out is just a gateway to self-hate and dangerous ideas.

However, the positive aspects of lifting weights for both women and men are celebrated everywhere from scientific articles to popular magazines, and include health benefits, mental well-being, and longevity. Most people who begin lifting are in search of improved physical health. According to dietitian Amy Goodson, resistance training can lead to a healthy metabolism, better bone density, and finer functional movement (Eshani, 2025). At my local YMCA gym, most people I see are not trying to achieve an ideal body form; they just want to be healthier and stronger. Lifting weights can also have cognitive benefits, in terms of emotional balance. One meta-analysis that examined the results of thirty-three clinical trials concluded that working out can lead to reduced depression (Gordon et al., 2018). I personally find that exercise always improves my mood. Many recent news reports have focused on the fact that weight lifting helps us live longer, as it reduces blood sugar, protects joints, and makes older people more resilient to falls. One common finding is that while doing weights is linked with increased longevity in both sexes, this effect is stronger for women than for men (Aubrey, 2024). In addition to benefits for physical and mental health over the lifespan, there is another positive aspect that is even more important to me. The social culture at my YMCA gym is one of the most enjoyable parts of my teenage life. Everyone wants the best for everyone else, and it's a welcoming place. I've befriended people of all ages and backgrounds, and they've lifted me up while opening my eyes to the kindness that rests within each and every person.

After looking in the mirror both physically and figuratively, do I push ahead with my passion or put down my dumbbells? It seems clear that many of the pressures from school and society are unhealthy: sports stars, superheroes, and even toys can create unrealistic expectations and a poor sense of self-image. Some influences are even more toxic, with online celebrities promoting male strength and misogyny in a single culture package. Yet it is just as clear that lifting weights can be a path to a healthy body, a healthy mind, and even a healthy community of supportive friends. It seems to be all about balance. In one article about the Zen of weight lifting, the writer Brad Stulburg argues that the middle path is the best way forward: between stress and rest, between highs and lows on the journey (Stulburg, 2021). There is a Zen saying: "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water". This neatly sums my own personal exploration. Before reflection, exercise; after reflection, exercise. My body is the same

but my mind is in a different place.

Complete Metamorphosis

Max Gregg

“Don’t freak out when I say this, but there’s a bug on you...” Time slows, my body tenses, eyes widen as a screech wells from my throat. Involuntarily, my arms rise in defense as I swat at the insect. I recoil in terror as the fiend scrambles up my leg; I swat it again, finally stripping the insect from my presence.

I spent my youth afraid of bugs. This fear made me avoid learning about them, assuming they were frightening and insignificant. But at thirteen, everything changed when I discovered a YouTuber who documented *Saturniidae*—or giant silkmoths. Their stunning colors, fluffy bodies, and massive sizes immediately captivated me. Mesmerized by their intricate patterns, I wanted to learn more. What began as fear became the foundation for my entomological passion sparking my curiosity for environmental interactions and inspiring me to raise insects myself.

Day and night, I studied moths. During daytime, I buried myself in taxonomy articles; at night, I’d explore the darkness in search of moths. *Actias luna*, the Luna moth, charmed me with its elegant green shadings and long spiral tails. With admiration, I began raising *saturniids* to put my learning into action.

Wonder carried me into my first independent research study on *Hyalophora euryalus* to observe how different environmental conditions affected their development. Forgetting to humidify their enclosure for two days, my heart dropped when I found half the caterpillars dead. The consequences were alarmingly clear when I discovered a shriveled caterpillar leaking hemolymph—or caterpillar blood—across its enclosure! It had been lagging in development, and with only six caterpillars left, I knew I had to save this one. Frustrated but determined, I knew its survival depended on me. I was determined to see their lifecycle thrive through my care.

Carefully dabbing the hemolymph away, I isolated the caterpillar with a singular leaf and proper humidity. It had likely torn its skin while shedding, something common with improper humidity. Hours later, I was stunned to find that it had regained three-fourths of its original size—I genuinely couldn’t believe it! Ultimately, my quick thinking led to its recovery and taught me how fragile envi-

ronmental conditions could be, inspiring me to dedicate my efforts to preserving ecosystems through Environmental Science.

Thereafter, I eagerly applied the scientific methods I'd learned to other species, expanding my knowledge by raising *Actias luna* this year to educate others about Indiana *saturniids*. Under proper environmental conditions, all twenty-eight moths reached adulthood. With adults came breeding—and nearly one thousand eggs—far more than I anticipated. As they hatched, I desperately contacted universities to donate them. Coincidentally, Indiana University's Barret Lab of Entomology was researching insect brain development, and needed Luna eggs. Gleefully donating my eggs, I was invited to present my previous research to the curious undergraduates.

As I shared my experience and answered questions about how I began raising moths, I realized I wasn't just contributing to research, but was leading others to consider a field they'd never explored. What began as an unusual hobby had grown into something larger: educating and inspiring others to do what I had once feared. At that moment, I proudly began thinking of myself as a scientist.

Learning to face my fear of insects not only changed how I viewed them, but transformed my life into a meaningful scientific journey. From my successes and failures while raising *Lepidoptera*, I've learned to value the priceless lessons of patience, perseverance, and observation that moths have taught me. Through my *Saturniidae* research, I overcame my fear of bugs.

Raising moths transformed me into a passionate scientist—one who carefully observes, perseveres despite setbacks, and shows compassion for even the smallest caterpillar. To contribute to Lepidopterology, I plan to pursue Environmental Science and become an entomologist focused on preserving ecosystems to promote biodiversity, documenting *Saturniidae*, and educating others about *Lepidoptera*. Bugs are no longer my enemies, but my teachers, inspiration, and my future.

on (A)mb(I)tion

Kenzie Mason

There was a time, not so long ago when you were cold.

There's a coldness in every child. Not harsh, not wet, not sopped with slush and burnt with puppy frost, eagerly licking and biting. Cold with absence. There isn't a bad thing about it. A cold of absence, of a fire that has not been lit quite yet.

And there was a time closer that you knew that you first started to warm. Up from your belly, sweltering in your chest and burning wax in your throat. Choked by the emotion the fire conveys. Injustice. We all whine, sometimes, especially when young. Grief is a big emotion, and children oh so cold are never taught that it's in everything. You grieve the dead and the missing, this is what we know, but you also grieve small things. You grieve your plans, a friendship you never had, a toppled sandcastle, a gas station plushie you felt you'd dreamt for all your life even though you'd just seen it today.

Grieving is normal, but the mourn and sorrow of your first real injustice is unforgettable. That is truly when a child starts to heat. A fire in the stomach like cheeks in august, lit with a hunger you didn't know you had and a fight like your watering eyes against the batting wind you didn't know you wanted to be in the ring for. The fire that was set to be lit in your chest, that kindling had been caressed into a warmth is a double edged sword.

When you are that warm child, there comes a time you may dream of things you know you may soon have to grieve. Your dreams are yarn, pulled tight against a skein, endless beguiling loops. Possibilities that seem so far and so dear. And when you are a child you see a spot in the thread, 18 or 21 feet a long and you think Yes. When I am at that part of the thread I will surely start to live then. Life will begin and there will be more yarn after and once I am done I will have a blanket or a scarf or a quilt and I will be happy.

And you believe in it. Because you wear the sweater of your grandmother on your back. The itchy neck line and the part just below the pectorals are tight and scratchy- a rough start and a rough middle. There are parts that are soft, parts of the sleeve you can

twist and rest on just right, the sugar sweet moments of those who came before. Your grandparents have sweaters and blankets. They have full articles, things that provide a good warmth, a warmth other to the one inside you.

Your parents have scarves. They teeter away with the clack clack of a stable needle and pins, one for a job and one for a house, a constant they understand more than anything. They have their tools and they can use them well. For some parts of the scarf they let you help. You finger crochet when you are young and vulnerable, you make your impression far through it. The scarf wasn't planned to be this way but for the lucky few the warps and change in colour and shape are a happy one. An impression that is found through it all and cherished.

And you. Beautiful, unique and new. You in your simmer and your yarn, yet to be unwound. But the people of now, the children of today doe'd and sweet in the eyes. They are the children of the future. And the future is on fire.

You are born into a world that hates you, implicit and final as that. You are handed your yarn and told you need to to start your project. But you can't because you've never been handed the tools, and there are these people. No.Machines.A race better than you at every skill but labor. They make blankets out of nothing at all, with far more precision and skill than humans can. And those of which know how to make blankets, know more than anyone what it takes to make something. They know a human touch is crucial to making a blanket worth having.

But the people who already have theirs, can make them at their own pace don't care. They see the end and not the process. The strife and the love doesn't stop it from warming their skin. Doesn't stop it from bringing them joy. But the heat comes blistering for the people without projects and tools. The ones starting to burn with injustice, harsher than before.

It is not fair that there are people who do not have to burn to provide warmth. It is not okay that they don't have to bubble and steam to create, and don't have to be lit up in a passionate fire. They bear no scars of their labor, they don't have feeling in their hands but not from the burn, because they don't have hands at all. They don't have the drive.

And knowing this makes you burn harder and worse than you did before, it makes you explode into flames. And you take your burning hands and you wrap them around your string and you pull. It doesn't matter now, the arbitrary numbers that make you a man or a woman. 16 18 21 25 and 30. None of those numbers matter. You just need to seize it now. You are forever plagued by the thought that when you pull something may pull back. That you're going to unravel without ever having gotten a chance to create.

Your hands start to burn as you pull, palms being drilled and flaked as it rips across your hands. You just want to hold onto it, but your burning is doing nothing to control it. It's disappearing, dwindling away into nothingness, and it is then that you start to ire like nothing else.

You combust brighter than a super nova, and nobody NOBODY takes you seriously. You're called too emotional, too irrational for wanting to protect the art pouring out from between your finger tips. You are called weak for wanting a life full of art and music and joy.

Called sensitive for wanting those who don't have an expiration date, who won't die to do the cooking and the cleaning and the working while you enjoy your life.

To the world you are emotional and oversensitive but to you you are bleeding. Your hands are pouring, and covered in fibers of thread, shimmering glimpses in your cuts of the life you could have. Your fire is being doused out by waves of water, you're barely sputtering. You keep yourself alive by watching others like you, young people who got their chance.

You find your solace on the internet. A curated experience of people who have made it, washing out the people like you who haven't. You stare in envy at those who get to light up.

And one more time you are told to ignore it. To ignore a source of your suffering.

To ignore the ai, pulling your string shorter and shorter and shorter.

And with that

You

Snuff

Right

Out.

The Story Book

Joseph Shing

The sink was small, chipped at the edges, and stained from years of scrubbing. My mother would stand there every night, her hands submerged in soapy water, the restaurant owner's angry voice echoing from the dining area. I stood beside her, drying plates, my feet aching from hours of standing on cold, cracked tiles. I was eight years old, and every night on our walk home at 11 p.m., I would ask her the same question:

“Why do I have to work when other kids are asleep?”

At first, my mother would try to explain, her voice soft and weary. “Because this is how we survive,” she'd say. But her words felt hollow to me. I was too young to understand what survival truly meant. To me, it felt unfair, almost cruel. Other children were tucked into warm beds, dreaming carefree dreams. I was spending my childhood washing dishes, walking home under the dim glow of streetlights, and wondering why life had chosen us for hardship.

It wasn't until years later, sitting on a creaky desk in my UNICEF-sponsored school in Malaysia, that I began to understand how different my life truly was. The school was a refuge, run by retired teachers who believed in giving children like me—refugees with no legal rights—a chance to learn. It was there that I picked up a storybook from the small library shelf.

The book told the story of a family in a warm, cozy house. I read about a boy whose mother tucked him into bed each night, reading him stories about faraway lands. I read about their laughter over family dinners, their weekend trips to the park, and the boy's carefree world of play and learning. For a moment, I was lost in that world, imagining the warmth of that house, the sound of laughter, and the feel of a soft bed beneath me.

But then reality came rushing back. I thought about our leaking house: the one we illegally rented because immigrants weren't allowed to own or rent property. I thought about the nights when

rainwater would seep through the cracks, soaking our blankets, and how my mother would stay awake, trying to keep us dry. I thought about the aggressive landlord who tolerated our presence only because he needed tenants willing to pay under the table.

That book wasn't just a story. It was a mirror that reflected the vast gulf between my world and the one I was reading about. For the first time, I truly saw how different my life was from others. I realised why my mother cried silently as she washed dishes or why my father worked long hours at jobs that barely kept us afloat. Immigrants like us were not allowed to work legally, rent homes, or access basic human rights. We were invisible, surviving on the fringes of society.

I stopped complaining after that. I began to understand that my mother's tears and my father's exhaustion were sacrifices they made to give me a chance at something better. If we were stuck in a life of hardship, I realised, education was the only way to escape.

Even though my school was small and underfunded, it became my sanctuary. The retired teachers who ran it gave me more than lessons; they gave me hope. I clung to every opportunity to learn, devouring science textbooks and marveling at how the universe operated with such precision. Science fascinated me because it was full of answers in a life that often felt full of unanswerable questions.

But the UNHCR-sponsored school only went up to the ninth grade. After that, survival demanded that I step in to help my family. I began working illegally at a gas station, balancing long shifts and the constant fear of being caught. Those were some of the hardest years of my life, but they also solidified my resolve.

When my family and I were resettled in the United States the summer of 2023 with the help of the United Nations, it felt like a second chance—a chance to live, to learn, and to dream without fear. For the first time, I could go to school without worrying about the law. I could focus entirely on my education, and I did so with a determination born from years of hardship.

Now, as I sit in classrooms where opportunity feels endless, I think about that storybook. I think about the warmth of the family it described, and I realise that I am building that warmth for myself and my family through education. My mother's tears at the sink, the long nights at the gas station, and the leaking roof of our rented house were all chapters in a story that shaped who I am today.

Education is not just my escape from poverty—it is my way of rewriting our story. It is the tool that allows me to dream of a life where my mother never has to cry again and where my father can rest. It is the promise that someday, I can create a world where every child has the chance to learn, to dream, and to thrive.

Because for me, education isn't just a path forward. It is the light that has always been waiting to guide me home.

Marching through Madness: How the Unknown Shapes Sports

Emma Hu

Every March, millions of Americans tune in to watch March Madness unfold. For teenage boys and die-hard school fans everywhere, these 67 games are the most invigorating moments of the month. They fill out brackets, choosing what they see as the result of each game, trying their best to predict the results of the tournament. For the next three weeks, ears are flooded with questions of “Has your bracket been broken yet?” And “How’s your bracket doing?” Whether it’s in the workplace or in a Kindergarten classroom, everybody wants to know what will happen. March Madness is wholly unpredictable. It is entirely unknown.

As human beings, we want perfection. We want to know everything. Take the idea of a perfect bracket. That’s the entire goal of creating a bracket. To predict every single game outcome correctly. It doesn’t matter to Joe down the street that nobody’s ever had a perfect bracket (the day someone does, they will be the first out of 9.2 quintillion to finally do this); he’s going to be the first. At the end of the day, it’s no fault of the bracketeer to possibly be wrong about every single game. Because for everything that we *do* know about each game, we will never be able to know what happens until it has been played.

The Known

Behind every bracket is a set of facts: player stats, team seeds, coaching ability, and even aspects such as team funding. However, from a statistical standpoint, in the past, those with the most knowledge on such information often have the worst brackets. When people make their brackets, they look to these established ideas before making any decisions. With this knowledge, and in more recent years, the power of AI, many eager fans look to make the most mathematically sound choices. While these numbers can guide you in the right direction, there is nothing definitive about any of these facts. When the overall first-seed school is upset by the 16th-seed school, nobody expects it. A tiny school with meager funding and a subpar coaching staff might make it further than that

big school with a nationally renowned coach. The concept of bracketology is, thereby, completely hypothetical. Relying on statistical models, AI, mathematical equations truly may not get you further than the person who picked their bracket based on team mascots. Everything known is also, at its core, unknown.

The Unknown

So what throws such a wrench in the things we generally consider to be “known”? Perhaps it’s an injury, or a bad ref call, or just an off day, or maybe, a really good day. It’s impossible to know what will happen in the spur of the moment. The ball may slip, ever so slightly, but enough to tip the balance in a different direction. Maybe it’s the higher stakes that push that one team to perform better than ever. On the converse, those very stakes could make the best team perform worse, fighting to stay at their best even under such immense pressure. Even the most sophisticated models cannot predict these tiny discrepancies. The most knowledgeable sports analyst cannot foresee these impetuous occurrences. This is precisely what draws so many into participating in the hysteria of March Madness every year. The high of trying to know what is unknown stirs up such a frenzy. The Cinderella stories, the upsets you *swore* would happen, the last-minute lead fumble, the buzzer-beating shots—these are the games that draw us in and keep us watching. Whether it’s as simple as enjoying the bracket-making process, or watching upset after upset, or seeing brackets bust left and right after each game, March Madness presents such a unique paradox between the known and the unknown that we just can’t help but try to figure out.

There’s so much we don’t know. So much to find out. The unknown will always find its way into life. Be it competition results or a bracket, this is a reality we all must embrace. Until the day comes when we will be able to see into the future, the madness of the unknown will continue to march on, changing lives and how we view it.

Fish Bones in Yantai

Melody Fei

I woke up in Grandma's pink bedroom to the street vendors' voices shouting outside. For the past two weeks, their voices had become my deranged alarm clock. This morning, I sat up and remembered that my red-faced granduncle was taking everyone in the family out for a dumpling lunch this afternoon. I dreaded seeing my stout aunt and pale cousin, whose visits always left Mom with migraines. But still, I was happy to be here, a break from hay-fever in Indiana, not to mention all the geometry homework and tennis practice.

Though I hadn't been back for a couple of years, the familiar smell of cigarettes made me feel at home. The sounds of people speaking in Chinese on the streets outside my window made me grateful I spoke the language fairly fluently. If I didn't, it would mean losing my spoken connection to my crocheting and dumpling-making grandma.

I dragged myself out of bed in my wrinkled PJs, regretting what I'd packed. I hadn't considered that ripped jeans, faded t-shirts, and short shorts were great for an American summer, but definitely not for the conservative people in Yantai. Here, people didn't show skin, didn't willingly tan, and definitely didn't wear anything that looked already worn. My clothes made me look like a true "US kid," which people here thought sat in front of the TV, hugging an extra-large tub of fried KFC.

I came out of the bedroom wearing my ripped jeans and striped t-shirt while Grandma rushed to wash fruit for breakfast. I found a knife and began slicing cantaloupe. It had to be something like eighty degrees, yet Grandma was still drinking hot water, and the air conditioning was off. A knock came from the door. My cousin and aunt had arrived. As they changed into slippers, I recited my greeting like I'd practiced, showing politeness but minimal friendliness—my mom and aunt never liked each other, and I've always felt the need to show allegiance to my mother. "Hello, Aunt Wang and Ling, it's been a long time. How are you doing?"

My aunt and cousin stood in the doorway, dressed extravagantly in sundresses and shiny purses hanging from their bent arms. My grandmother exclaimed to Ling, "You seem to have lost weight!" I watched as my cousin smiled and replied exaggeratedly, "It's not much. Just a little dieting here and there." Ling seemed to flick glances at me, as if judging a knockoff designer bag. "Wow, that's a pretty American outfit," she said, her voice sweet but cold.

I shrugged. "Thanks."

My grandma ushered everyone to the table, where plates of fruit and crackers awaited us.

"Ling, don't you think your cousin's tall now?" Grandma said, pinching my arm, "She's even taller than me! Do you think it's the milk in America?"

Ling sighed, tracing the plastic logo on her bag in a way that begged for attention. "No, it's probably just the hours of sleep. If I had fewer classes, maybe I'd be tall like her."

"My two granddaughters are so alike, so pretty and smart," Grandma exclaimed.

Mom looked at my aunt coldly. Then it hit me. I remembered how Ling once shoved five-year-old me into a pond and called me "American."

We spent the next couple of hours playing mahjong. My grandmother and grandaunt gossiped about discount clothing prices while they chewed on strawberries, words and saliva spitting out of their mouths in fast Chinese. I sat there quietly with a blank smile, nodding occasionally.

After my mom won the game, Aunt interjected, "Ma, we're gonna be late to lunch."

"Right, right, we should get going," Grandma said, gathering her glasses and hat.

We squished into my aunt's old car and set out for the restaurant. Trending songs from the car speakers filled the crowded space. Ling occasionally pulled out her compact mirror and dabbed at her makeup.

"You probably don't understand these lyrics," Ling said, turning up the volume.

"Sort of," I said.

The narrow streets of Yantai were busy. Cars, electric bikes, and people squeezed past each other to get where they were going. Our car blared and honked in a manic symphony as we squeezed through traffic.

Vendors sat on the street and shooed flies away from the crates of cherries whose deep red skin glinted in the sun. Using old string or plastic, vendors had hung little speakers that brightly chattered recorded advertisements of their products. The open window of Aunt Wang's car let in the market's scent of salty fish and over-ripe fruits.

Ling asked, "Cousin, what do you like to do?"

"Uhm," I said, "I like to play violin and tennis."

She laughed, "Lucky you, that sounds nice."

"Well, you know your cousin has won multiple awards, right?" Grandma said to Ling.

My aunt rolled her eyes, "Ma, you always talk about her."

Ling retorted, "Anyways, you guys in America have what, four hours of school each day? I could be doing more activities if I had that kind of time."

"Eight hours," I said.

When we arrived at the restaurant and parked our car, sever-

al waitresses were already waiting for us. Dressed in dark red vests with hair tied in smooth buns, they greeted us with smiles, and we were taken to our lunchroom. Our voices bounced off the walls.

Unfortunately, I was seated next to Ling. As Mom and Granduncle went to order the food, we all sat and waited in awkward silence. Grandma and grandaunts discussed their favorite dish, zongzi, and how the chefs wrapped it. My cousin texted her friends while the rest of us fixed our eyes on the silent television. It played a series of slow-mo shots of vegetables thrown onto cutting boards and of full pig heads boiled in water, then covered in glistening sauces.

Soon, plates began to fill the table, a platter of fish covered with spices, plump little dumplings stuffed with chives and fish paste, and a great quantity more of delicious food.

Ling nudged me under the table and whispered, “Need us to get forks for you?”

I straightened up, face flushing.

“No, chopsticks are good,” I said, picking mine up to prove my point.

Ling complained, “I don’t know why we always eat fish and dumplings every time we have guests. Don’t you hate digging out the bones?”

“I think it’s fine,” I disagreed. To me, these dishes were more than food. The silky, sweet fish covered with shallots and hot sesame oil always reminded me of Grandma cooking after I came home from school.

She spoke again, “I bet they pick the bones out of the fish for you in America.”

“Why don’t you order something else?” I said.

Ling said something like “Oh, no, don’t worry about me. I

never want to cause trouble for you guys. You came all the way from America.”

Ling spoke, “You know, the fish is kinda like the bony ones Grandpa used to catch. I miss Grandpa now that he’s gone.”

“Yeah, but I don’t really remember much about him,” I said. “Didn’t he pass away when we were really young?”

Ling laughed, “Well, maybe you never really knew him. When he passed away, my mom and I were the ones who had to clean out his apartment. We had to burn his clothes in the alley.”

“I was never told when he passed away,” I argued.

“Of course you didn’t,” Ling scoffed, “All your mom did in sympathy was call us and send us bits of money.”

Then, Grandma spoke, “Eat quickly, girls, the food is getting cold.”

I spent the rest of lunch wishing Ling would vanish. I wished she could see the side of America that wasn’t all an “American Dream.” Lunch was a blur of fish, dumplings, and mushrooms. I had no clue what everyone else talked about. All I did was chew because I didn’t know what else to do. The fish wasn’t as good as I remembered: too soggy and dripping with oil.

After lunch, the streets were still loud and chaotic, vendors yelling, people smoking, and bikes honking in the same baked heat. Ling kept her eyes on her phone, my aunt marched ahead toward the car, and Grandma trailed behind, slower than usual.

When we got back to Grandma’s apartment, everyone retreated into different rooms to nap or scroll on their phones. I sat down at a desk and opened my chemistry textbook.

After a while, I heard a knock on the open door. It was my cousin. I put down my pencil.

She leaned against the door, hesitating.

“Where’d you get your bracelet?” she said.

I rubbed an eraser crumb between my fingers, “This one?” I pointed to my jade bracelet. “Oh, my mom got it for me a few years ago. It was on Amazon for a good deal.”

My cousin sat down on the bed. “Y’know, my mom sold her jade bracelet for your mom to go to America. It used to be their great-grandma’s. But your mom got a fancy scholarship and Grandma didn’t want to waste it.” She shrugged. “My mom’s always been kinda cranky ever since that.”

I toyed with my bracelet, “Dang. I never understood what they were saying, all that yelling and fast Chinese words. Honestly, they’re just like children.”

Ling nodded.

“Here,” I said. “Take my bracelet if you want.” I slipped off my bracelet and held it out.

Ling shook her head, “No, it’s okay. I wouldn’t take your stuff.”

I shrugged, “It’s the least I can do. Just take it.”

My cousin picked it up, “Well, thanks, I guess.” She gave a scoff of amusement, put the bracelet on her wrist, and left the room.

We left Yantai a week later. On the plane, Mom asked, “What happened to your bracelet?”

I smiled, “I gave it to Ling.”

Cadenza

Melody Fei

What's so terrifying about a recital, you may ask? It's not about the performance itself. It's the way the audience grabs their programs to find your name and check your age as well as every violin accomplishment you've racked up. You know if you stumble in the piece, they'll start counting the minutes until someone better can finally take your place. Every pair of eyes is measuring you, expecting the prodigy you're terrified you can't be.

Mistakes are allowed in practice. You can fumble shifts, play a scale flat, then scream "So pathetic," before counting yourself back in. But performances are different. Every cough and crumpled program cuts your concentration. You know the audience is all waiting for the flawless performer your awards say you are.

How do you ignore the cold prickle that creeps up your arms as the audience waits for you to strike that first E like Chloe Chua? You're the kid who played with the Wabash Symphony, pretending you didn't feel the blood hammering in your temples, the kid who led Indiana's All-State Orchestra, the smile on your face trembling at the edges. And with the name Melody, people assume you were destined for virtuosity. They don't consider the dreadful hours you practiced, slowly and rhythmically, strings left indents on your hands. But no, right now, your heart races, skipping beats and drumming frantically in a rhythm you can't keep up with. You can feel it beating so shakily that your head feels dizzy.

You used to win everything. You were there for Mathcounts, art shows, piano competitions, tennis tournaments, and school board meetings. Winning was the only time people really looked at you and said, "Not bad." Back then, trophies stacked up like proof that you were an okay person. That girl in fourth grade who called you "try-hard" didn't matter. Lately, though, you've been announced more "alternate" than winner.

You slowly walk up to the front of the school orchestra room. Everything feels cold: the linoleum, the high ceilings, even

the speakers. Your violin teacher sits on the piano bench, ready to accompany you. She smiles at you. You've gotten good at smiling back, at being the student everyone expects. You're the responsible one, the overprepared one, even if inside you're just trying not to let anyone down. If you did, you'd see the disappointment in your parents' eyes.

You still remember them telling their friends, "Ya, I spent all morning dusting trophies again. My daughter keeps me so busy."

Supposedly, you're smart, talented, and obedient. Your gradebook is all A+ all the way down. You're chair of more clubs than you can name. Every day you put on perfect, coordinated outfits.

No one sees the scared, people-pleasing side of you, the one that wants to fit in, not only with stylish clothes, but also behavior. Maybe for once, you'd like to gossip drama with your friends instead of studying all weekend.

You tell your legs to stop trembling, to let yourself take a deep breath. You exhale in a shaky sputter. Your nostrils are plugged with the varnished scent of the violin. Your violin feels heavier today. Its wood feels unforgiving and large, sharper at the edges. During warmup today, the strings felt thicker and clumsier. Your bow is also airy, not the deep, warm one you usually have. You rub your cold, sticky palms together, praying for warmth to return to you, hoping the violin won't capture the sound of your shaky self. How will you play fluidly? You could go wash your hands in warm water and avoid your dreadful performance, but then you'd have to leave the room, interrupt the program for everybody, and look like a freak.

You speak to the audience, informing them about the title of your solo piece, keeping in mind your dad's comment, "Project your voice, loud and clear."

You always try to follow instructions. You've trained yourself to. It's another action of proving you're the kind of girl who never messes up. Your voice scratches, thin and shaky, "Um, hi, I'm Melo-

dy. Melody Fei, uh, I go to the, the West Lafayette High School, and um I'm gonna be doing Allegro Brillante by this guy Ten Have."

Wow. You're supposed to be composed. "This guy"? That's so brilliant of you. Aren't you supposed to be one of those students who always have everything prepared, rehearsed, and polished?

You feel your body tightening like it does when Mom slams the brakes on the freeway to avoid crashing. Your teacher starts the accompanist intro, but you're not prepared. You throw your violin onto your shoulder and play the first few "sharp" notes. Your bow skips along the string. You wish it felt like last practice, when everything was crisp and clean. You feel a deep, gut terror and wonder why it's never hit you like this before. Why hadn't you crumbled at the Carmel Klavier International Piano Competition? What about the time you forgot to bring your violin to State Hoosier? You'd played on a violin you borrowed. You hadn't time to adjust to the different spacings on the violin and bow, but you still got a good second place.

It's all you can do to stare at the sheet music blankly and rely on the hours and months of practice at home to move your fingers to the notes. You try to flick away the terror, but it dances off, only to stick back on you like flesh-sucking mosquitoes.

You lift the bow and draw it across the strings. The first notes scratch out, sharper than they should be, whining where you wanted them to sing. Your fingers overshoot the shifts, barely catching the notes. The E string wails under your bow, angry at your failure. You try to smooth the motion, but the bow hairs jerk against your grip. Your mind floats outside of your body, watching as your fingers crumble and your legs go weightless. It observes the way you keep trying to meet every expectation at once, as if perfection could hold your whole world together.

Your parents sit in your mind like another audience. You owe them for every hour they sat through your lessons, every late night they spent driving you home. You feel like you have to be the kid your parents can point to and say, "That's my daughter." Your perfection feels less like a standard and more like a debt that fattens

every day.

You've reached the sweet, slow second theme where the deep G calls to the shifting E string. Your teacher told you, "This part's like a romantic play, where Romeo and Juliet call each other, wishing to be together." Except today it sounds like Romeo is killing Juliet instead of calling to her. Focus, focus, lock-in, don't let your head get to you.

The lights bore into you even when you close your eyes. You want to run, to find an exit, but every direction feels wrong. You're lost in your own head. There's no path, there's no map. You can't cry, you can't yell, you can't breathe.

The dark, heavy cloud in your mind finally loosens its grip as you scramble through the final cadenzas, a flurry of double-stop notes. You dig the bow hard into the string, forcing the sound to stay steady. A bow hair snaps, breaking the tension. The loose strand brushes against your wrist as you continue through the final chords. You smile for a second. You finally feel professional like Ray Chen. You're finally playing the way they play.

Oh, why couldn't you have gotten rid of the nerves at the start? The blinding light in your mind finally turned off, but it still leaves you partially lost. It'll take time for you to recover. You strike the last chord like a prodigy. The tension's gone, the judgment has passed, and a true smile spreads across your face.

You bask for a moment in the thundering sound of applause and bow before blindly ambling back towards your seat, twirling the broken bow hair in your sweaty hand. Maybe you did actually do well. You want to redo the performance now.

Back in the practice room, you pack up your violin. You wish you'd brushed that high B in the opening arpeggio a little softer, letting it bloom instead of bite. You could've dug a little deeper into the G on the shift in the second theme, giving it more weight and longing. But as you ease the bow back into its ribbon holder, tuck the cloth under the chinrest, and click the latches shut, you finally feel yourself relaxing. Already, you can imagine the warmth of the

car heater defrosting your still-cold hands. You can feel how Dad will come up and place his hand on your shoulder. “That was pretty good,” he’ll say. You’ll nod and go home, maybe even stopping for bubble tea along the way.

Fresh Kimchi

Jein Park

My umma makes her own kimchi. Like many foreign islanders of the isolating Midwest, my mother has preserved the culture of her home. Squatting over a stainless steel bowl large enough to sit in comfortably, she sprinkles flakes of sea salt, sugar, onion slices, and garlic into the crisp mountain of Korean napa cabbage. Not long after, flakes of chili pepper settle in, painting the paper-thin leaves in brilliant hues of red. The air in the kitchen smells of a sucker punch and kisses—a tangy, familiar aroma that leads to the sunroom door being flung open. A golden sheen splays across the kitchen counter, blissfully unaware of the garish overhead lighting. Across the street, a loose motorcycle rumbles away, and my umma and I share a knowing glance. On the reflective rim of the kimchi bowl, I see my reflection under the crimson sheen of chili and vinegar—I am the spitting image of my mother.

I don't like fresh kimchi. Not because I dislike what it represents, but because I prefer the way it changes—the slow, bubbling fermentation that transforms the sharp bite into something deeper, richer, more complex. Fresh kimchi crackles like a new language, bright and stinging on the tongue. Fermented kimchi speaks softer, in low tones of memory and patience. Both are alive, both are part of the same process. My mother loves it fresh; I wait for it to ripen. Somewhere between her taste and mine lies the space we share. When my mother eats, she hums—a quiet, contented sound that fills the kitchen with warmth. Her eyes close slightly, and I can see something sacred move through her expression: the echo of home, of market stalls, of her own mother's hands. I taste it differently, but we are eating the same story, told in two dialects of spice and salt.

The kitchen becomes a bridge between worlds. The counters lined with jars of fermenting cabbage burp faintly as the days pass, releasing small sighs into the air. Each one holds more than food—they hold language, migration, and memory. The bubbling glass jars speak a tongue that blends her Seoul and my Midwest, her fluent Korean and my careful pronunciation. Sometimes I can't understand her words, but I understand her flavors. When I was younger,

I used to complain about the smell.

“It’s too strong,” I’d say, waving my hand. My mother would laugh and answer, “That’s the smell of home.” I know now she was right—but home, for me, is both the punch of chili and the mellow sweetness of fermentation. It’s the process, not the product.

I still don’t like fresh kimchi as much as my mother does. But I love that it exists—that it changes, that we can share it even when our tongues crave different versions. In the glossy rim of the steel bowl, under the red reflection of chili and vinegar, I see not opposition, but balance. I am her reflection, yes—but also her continuation, slowly fermenting into my own flavor.



The Goodest Nobles

Jazira Hernandez-Stallworth

Painting

11th Grade

Wapahani High School

Teacher: Katelyn Wade



Journalism

The Downfall of an Informed Society

Olivia Rawe

Dirty chalkboards fill classrooms, desks are covered in graphite shavings, and the ground is littered with stray pencils, food wrappers, and scuffs from the soles of students' shoes. Every desk in the classroom is occupied, yet some classrooms remain empty. Bored students mindlessly scroll on their phones, waiting any second for the bell to ring, releasing them from this school that has become a prison.

This is what has become of our public school system in Indiana.

And the decline of our public schools is largely due to state budget cuts. All throughout Indiana, cuts have been made to funding, new laws and bills have been passed, and slowly, our education system is plummeting.

Monroe County Community School Corporation (MCCSC), the main school system in Bloomington, has lost more than \$17 million in state funding due to 2025 legislation alone, and they are still expected to be losing tens of millions more over the next eight years.

The ending cash balance for MCCSC in 2023 was \$24 million, but in 2028, the ending cash balance is projected to be at only \$9.2 million.

Furthermore, due to Senate Enrolled Act 1 (SEA1), public schools in Indiana will see a decrease in even more revenue. SEA1 allows the parents of students who pay state taxes for public schools to take that money to private schools and institutions.

SEA1 is seen as problematic by some people because of the differences in requirements that public schools and private schools are held to.

For example, public schools must accept all students, including those with disabilities. Students with disabilities may need extra help from staff, and those positions and resources can be expensive. On the other hand, private schools don't have to accept students

who might add more to their costs of operation.

Mrs. Wintin, an English language arts teacher at Bloomington High School South, shared her opinions on SEA1 and the topic of public and private school funding.

“It’s got to be one or the other,” said Wintin. “If you’re going to be getting public money, you should be held to the same standards that public schools are held to, or we shouldn’t be using public money for private schools.”

In addition to the subject of public and private school funding, there is no longer a clear separation between church and state if much-needed public money can be given to religious-based schools.

Additionally, this loss of money influences how many teachers and staff can be employed at MCCSC schools. Because of budget cuts, 198 projected resignations will occur in the next two years, and 61 non-teaching positions have already been eliminated throughout the district from departments such as health, custodial, and kitchen staff.

Furthermore, while there have been no teacher layoffs yet, 29 teachers in MCCSC have left, many due to low salaries, and it is anticipated for 46 teachers to resign in the next two years. Because of low funding, when these teachers leave, they are not being replaced.

Quinn O’Reilly, a ninth grader at BHSS, expressed her concerns with these salary cuts. Her dad was a science teacher at BHSS just last year, but had to leave due to the decrease in his salary.

“His pay was getting cut,” O’Reilly said, “so he decided to switch to a school that wasn’t cutting his pay.”

Because these teachers are leaving and not being replaced, there is a shortage of teachers, leaving classrooms very full. Wintin recalled the differences between class sizes this year and just last year.

“In freshman English classes, we usually tried to keep those classes to under 25 [students],” Wintin said, “and now on average they’re probably about 30 to 32.”

Winton continued to describe the effects of having larger classes, including difficulties with giving students quality feedback, timeliness of grading, and how much attention and help teachers can give to their individual students.

Kate Prince, an eighth grader at Jackson Creek Middle School, explained her experience with the many changes that have occurred at her school due to loss in state funding, specifically with these larger classes.

“The teachers are more focused on trying to get everybody back in line rather than teaching us,” Prince said, “and so on our last science quiz alone, the class average for the first two classes was under a 50%.”

When visiting JCMS, an entire hallway remains empty. It’s made up of vacant classrooms, stripped and bare from any liveliness, all due to their shortage of teachers.

According to Prince, at least five teachers have left JCMS in 2025, and classrooms contain between 30 and 40 students each. Prince also described how bigger classes and less focused attention is decreasing motivation in students.

“There’s less motivation to actually come to school,” Prince said, “and a lot of kids take up on that; they just don’t come anymore.”

These negative effects on learning and on attendance could have possibly major consequences to our future generations and their education, and some of these effects have already taken place.

Students throughout all of Indiana now have different diploma requirements in the past, and the majority of the changes have made it so that fewer credits in certain subject areas are necessary to graduate.

This includes required foreign language credits dropping from three to two, social studies credits dropping from six to five, and the complete removal of what was previously five required credits in elective courses, including fine arts and music.

Because of these changes in requirements, some high quality

or rigorous classes and extracurricular activities have been cut or neglected. Some people are worried that the new requirements may negatively impact students' abilities to become well-rounded students or meet the expectations of colleges.

BHSS ninth grader Vivian Harriss revealed her concerns about how this decrease in quality education may affect her future.

“I have a fear that because of the new schedules that are put in place for us,” Harriss said, “when colleges look at my transcript, they’re gonna go, ‘that’s enough to graduate, but that’s not enough for us.’ Because it’s setting this standard that isn’t actually applicable to the really good colleges that would get me to the place where I want to be Like, students who may not have the resources to know which classes to take to get into a good college, they won’t know.”

Already, nationwide data has shown that while current high school graduation rates are high, the amount of Gen Z Americans interested in attending college is significantly declining. Instead, our generation is opting for occupations in skilled trade that do not require a college degree.

In a Gallup poll, data shows that the amount of Americans with confidence in higher education has dropped from 57% in 2015 to 36% in 2023.

With the new diploma and new state cuts in funding combined with the already low interest in attending college, the pursuit of higher education among this generation may continue to drop, leaving a large number of Americans inadequately educated to be truly productive members of society.

“Some changes I’ve noticed this year and in the past couple years are ... just sort of a lack of understanding for what kids need to graduate and be successful and have these understandings of the world,” said Harriss. “Not even just like our doctors and our lawyers need to go to school for a lot, but people studying things like history, and people doing languages, and all those sorts of things that are also so beneficial to the world and how it’s developing today are being cut.”

Harriss worriedly continued to explain her concerns for her

future and the future of her peers.

This raises concerns about the future of our country. Many other red states, including but not limited to Alabama, Nebraska, and Ohio, will follow or already have followed in suit of Indiana's education budget cuts, and federal cuts have already been made as well.

For example, in January 2025, the Trump administration froze more than \$6 billion in federal education grants. Along with this, there have been proposed cuts for 2026, including the reduction of the U.S.'s public education budget by 15%.

It seems that until our nation can realize the true damage that this neglect of proper education is causing, this state of ignorance will only worsen. Without true focus on educating and informing our citizens, there is nowhere for our country to go but down.

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Lower the Age, Raise the Voice

William Liao

As cities across the United States began tallying results from the November 2025 elections, one trend stood out. Youth-led organizations intensified their calls to expand voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, arguing that teenagers are ready to participate and that states should modernize election laws. From climate marches to school walkouts on gun violence, teenagers have shown again and again that they are at the center of national political activism. Yet, most remain barred from the polls.

The debate over lowering the voting age has resurfaced in several states this year. Local advocacy groups in California and Massachusetts renewed pushes for municipal voting at 16. A number of cities, including Oakland and Boston, introduced proposals to expand early voting access for high school students in preparation for giving youth future suffrage. These efforts reflect a broader conversation about how to involve younger Americans more meaningfully in public life.

Proponents argue that the current age limit creates a disconnect between civic responsibility and civic power. Many 16- and 17-year-olds already work jobs, drive cars, and pay taxes but cannot weigh in on the policies that shape their schools, transportation, and environment. Election researchers say that delaying initial participation until 18 may unintentionally depress turnout long term. In a study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), “81% of surveyed youth who remembered student voice experiences in high school said they were extremely likely to vote in 2024, compared to 44% of those who did not recall those experiences”. Repeated exposure to the “voting” process makes people more likely to vote consistently.

Advocates say that the environment in which most 16-year-olds live also supports higher turnout. Teenagers are generally still connected to their local communities, attending school together and receiving civics instruction while surrounded by teachers and counselors who can guide them through the process. Here, at Bloomington High School South, for example, all seniors have to take government, while all juniors have to take US history. In contrast, 18-year-olds often face major transitions such as college or moving

out during their first eligible election season, a shift that can interrupt their ability to participate.

Supporters frequently cite Takoma Park, Maryland, the first U.S. city to lower its local voting age to 16. The city remains a key case study for policymakers. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, turnout among 16- and 17-year-olds surged to more than 42 percent in the first election after the 2013 change. By 2015, teen participation remained strong, significantly outpacing turnout among older voters. The League of Women Voters of Maine reviewed the Maryland reforms and reported that teenagers in Takoma Park attended voter forums and demonstrated sustained interest in local government, challenging assumptions that youth voters are unprepared or apathetic.

Arguments against lowering the voting age often focus on concerns about maturity. Critics point to neurological research showing that the development of executive decision-making continues into early adulthood. However, psychologists distinguish between impulsive decision-making and the slow, reasoned thinking required for voting. Studies show that by 16, adolescents can analyze civic issues at adult levels. Supporters note that emotional or uninformed voting is not limited to young people. Adults are never asked to prove maturity before casting a ballot.

In 2025, the debate has also been shaped by the broader question of voter access. Several states expanded early voting options this year, and youth organizers have argued that any expansion must account for the schedules of high school students. Some cities piloted mobile early voting units near schools as a test run for future policy changes. While students cannot vote in most jurisdictions, election officials say these pilot programs were designed to evaluate infrastructure should youth voting reforms advance.

In Indiana, the conversation has begun to surface more publicly as well. Youth groups in Bloomington and Indianapolis have urged lawmakers to study the long-term effects of lowering the voting age, pointing to Indiana's consistently low turnout among newly eligible 18- to 24-year-olds as evidence that earlier engagement could help. Some local school districts have expanded civic participation programs, including student advisory councils and government-focused internships, arguing that hands-on experience

strengthens the case for giving 16- and 17-year-olds a formal vote. Though no statewide proposal has advanced, several Hoosier legislators have said the issue is likely to reappear in upcoming sessions as students push for broader representation in state and local decisions.

Advocates for lowering the voting age say that the principle behind the reform is simple. Those who live under the law, pay taxes into public systems, and experience the consequences of political decisions should have a voice in choosing their representatives. As lawmakers continue debating the issue in city and state governments, youth groups hope the momentum seen in the 2025 election cycle signals a shift in how the country views civic responsibility and representation of young voters.

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Brunch, Festivals, and Rocks

Evelyn Rose

Every June, companies begin to don rainbows and much more colorful palettes because, in 1999, President Bill Clinton officially recognized the month as Gay Pride Month. However, people had been celebrating Pride long before it was officially recognized. New York's first Pride march was held on June 28, 1970, in honor of the Stonewall riots—a series of riots that occurred in response to police raiding a gay bar on June 28, 1969.

For Indiana, the history of Pride is more complicated. Until Indy Pride became an official organization in 1995, many citizens remained quiet about gay pride due to how unaccepted LGBTQIA+ members have historically been in society.

“There were no safe gay bars or places for the LGBTQ community in Indianapolis,” according to Indy Pride. “In 1981 the first Pride event was a dinner in a, now gone, Essex Hotel where many of the attendees wore masks upon entering the hotel to not be seen.”

In the early years for the Monument Circle event, Indy Pride events would see somewhere between 1,000–5,000 attendees. This year, for the 30-year anniversary of Indy Pride, around 60,000 people attended the Indianapolis parade. The Pride Fest was not limited to just one day; this year it expanded into a full two-day celebration.

“It was super fun,” junior Angel Schick said. “Everyone was bringing the vibe, and I had a great time walking downtown.”

Part of the weekend included a two-day series called “Word of Mouth”, featuring a stage for drag shows, national touring bands, and more. At Monument Circle, vendors sold Pride-themed merchandise such as shirts, umbrellas, and sunscreen, creating a lively and inclusive atmosphere.

Indy Pride is not the only group celebrating Pride across the state. Many other counties in Indiana celebrate in their own ways – some hold festivals, others organize picnics or casual meetups.

Last year, Fishers Pride officially formed, with their first

event being held Sept. 13 at the Holy Family Episcopal Church.

This year, Fishers Pride hosted their first-ever drag brunch on June 22, where drag performers danced through the room after guests enjoyed brunch. But their celebrations did not end in June; however, they also hosted their annual Pride festival on Sept. 13.

“It does tie in a little bit with my feelings about Pride that Pride can be experienced all year,” Ryan Davies with Fishers Pride said. “Stonewall happened in June so that is typically when it is celebrated, but we are in this region where we are rich for Pride celebrations.”

It is not just official organizations that get involved. Some citizens choose to host smaller, creative events simply for fun. For example, the community group Fishers Rocks! held a Pride-themed rock painting event, where anyone could stop by for two hours to paint designs such as Pride flags or messages of kindness.

From small towns to big cities, Hoosiers are finding meaningful and creative ways to celebrate Pride. These events, whether parades, picnics, or painted rocks, show that Pride is more than a month-long event. It is a growing movement full of visibility, connection and community.

“Pride to me means being who I am even if society and the government hates me for it,” sophomore Sage Keffaber said. “I find those like me, and we lift each other up as a community. We are in the fight together.”



Chinoiserie

Megan Xia

Painting

12th Grade

Carmel Senior High School

Teacher: Drew Murray



Flash Fiction

What the Sun Remembered

Evangeline Zhang

I found a photograph of us this morning.

It is tinted into a dull brown, hard and heavy from age. The edges have turned soft over time, the reddish ink now mostly faded. Folds and creases dip into the worn paper like ocean waves, some shallow, others more jagged. I gingerly push away the layer of dust coating. My fingers tremble from just the sight.

“Hawaiian Islands, 1980 Vacay.”

The sharpied-in date is scribbled at the top.

Me and him. He and I. Laughing and grinning and posing for the picture, bundled up together like a pair of socks, our arms hanging over each other’s shoulders. His tongue was stuck out in that cocky, rebellious way, showing off his audacious piercing. My face mimicked his pose, giving the camera a playful stink eye.

Ah, the good old days. The carefree times of our young adulthood, where we drank and laughed and partied until the crack of dawn. The days when we drove top speed across abandoned lots and blasted Metallica in our bright red Chevy. The days when we gambled away our dollar bills on lottery scratch tickets, cracked lips sipping from off-brand soda bottles.

He wore a crown of spikes. Sharp, brown locks that stuck up like a porcupine’s quills. I used to tease him about his look, but now, I miss it—much more than I would have realized back then.

His skin was painted a golden bronze, the rich color, the kind only statues wore. Friends would inquire about the source of his tan—what tanning bed he used—only to be met with his signature smirk: *“It’s natural, baby.”*

I lay my gaze back on the photograph. Memories come flooding towards me like a warm gust rolling in from the Pacific, thick with everything I thought I’d left behind. The dog days of Oahu, when the sun grinned down at the Earth and blinded us all half to death. The humid breeze had brought a certain comfort—warm and

snug, like one giant bear hug.

I can remember that afternoon as clear as crystal—a beach day at the Oahu docks. I remember the sun that kissed the ocean waves a neon blue and peeled away the white paint from the beach chairs. The *slap slap slap* chorus of sandals that echoed across the boardwalk, loud and obnoxious. The sweaty palms that chased a white volleyball across the sky, making a musical number of *thwacking*. The fathers, the mothers, the teenagers, the shrieking children—all blended together into one as they splashed around in the water.

I remember him there with me. We were lying together on the hot sand, basking in the sun's embrace.

He was smiling, of course. That impossibly wide grin was spread from ear to ear, so far-stretched that you'd think he'd just been told the greatest joke in the world. A dollop of vanilla ice cream had clung stubbornly to his nose all day. I had warned him beforehand that he looked ridiculous: that people were staring, and that he would mess up our couple's photo. He just laughed, dipped a finger into his wafer cone, and flicked a bit of dessert onto my nose.

"Ain't this amazing?" He had asked me.

"Look at us, everyone bundled together, enjoying the summer. No school, no work, no taxes. Just pure vacation!" His arm tightened slightly around my shoulder.

"You enjoyin' this too, baby?"

I giggled, gave him a peck on his hot, rosy cheeks, and hugged him, nuzzling my face into the crook of his neck.

"All this for me?" I chuckled, breathing in his scent—pine and oak, warm and grounding, a homely sweetness edged with quiet bitterness.

"Lords... this vacation must have cost you a kidney..."

He smirked up at me as his hands found the expanse of my back. The sunlight danced off his jawline in golden streaks, illuminating his features in a soft, ethereal glow. His hair, sweat-damp-

ened and messy, fell below his brow in tiny ringlets. It brushed my cheek as we embraced, a light tickle that made me smile.

“Yeah... hard to get anywhere in this economy.” He sighed, face drooping just the slightest.

“Ain’t always easy makin’ the dream with lousy part-time jobs.”

His grin returned as his fist found my hair, water-ridden fingers tangling through copper locks. The sun blazed overhead, setting the sand aflame around us while hysterics and shouted voices rolled through the air. The slapping of shoes on the boardwalk. The chorus of slaps on the volleyball. The laughing, the shrieking, the running, all the chaos that came from the beach. Heat shimmered at the edges of my vision.

“Buuuut... Y’know...” He started again.

Everything felt loud, bright, and alive.

“All of it was worth it for you, baby...”

Dry, warm, peachy lips brushed my cheekbone—
Nothing.

His voice lingers like an echo, thinning as the memory loosens its hold. I blink, the warmth gone, the moment dissolving back into now.

My hand rises to my hair, curling into it, fisting the strands the way he once had all those years ago. The same grip—or so I try to convince myself—the same force, the same sharp pull that used to steal the breath from my chest. My fingers dig into my scalp, desperate to recreate the memory of his touch.

But it is wrong. Entirely wrong. The feeling slips through me, hollow and unfamiliar. There is no warmth, no electricity—only the brittle drag of my own hand.

My gaze finds the dry, gray strands threaded through the dull brown taupe of my hair, lifeless and old.

Proof that time has moved on, even if I have not.

I knew it, of course—I wasn't ever going to relive that dream. It was just a distant memory from the past. Something only the sun could remember.

Grocery Shopping with Grief

Emma Hu

I made a new friend last week. The same day, Gracie died. My friend is named Grief. She is tall and agile—an expert at slipping into spaces where she’s unwanted. Slim and strong—capable of forcing her way in and taking over your mind.

She fills the empty seat next to me over breakfast. Her dark, round eyes bore into me, conjuring faint memories of laughter and blueberry pancakes.

She finds an empty shampoo bottle, hugged by strands of dark curls, and it summons her. She brings tears to my eyes and a sinking feeling in my gut.

Waxy crayon bits sunken into the dinner table. A half-opened box of corner protectors. The number three. “Blackbird” by The Beatles. The smell of cherry bath soap. The entire month of June. She has it all in a bag, pulling each one out like a magician, at just the right moment. She finds it amusing, I suppose. She thinks it’ll make me remember something, or believe in something. Something. Anything.

Most of all, she likes grocery shopping.

Wandering the cereal aisle at Kroger, she points out the Lucky Charms. “Her favorite, right?” She feigns obliviousness. My eyes fixate on the cartoon leprechaun; my hands trace each marshmallow’s edges. “Her favorite,” I whisper. Tearing my gaze away, I land on a box of store-brand cornflakes.

I peruse the cleaning supplies, loading laundry detergent and Swiffer pads into my cart. She slips a pack of baby wipes into my hands. I breathe in the muted floral tones, folding my fingers through each crease in the packaging. In the periphery, I see sticky, apple-juice fingers and rosy cheeks, with breadcrumbs like freckles.

I skip over snacks, completely. There is an unopened sleeve of Ritz crackers somewhere in the pantry, I’m sure. In the background, Grief rambles on and on, asking for Oreos and barbecue chips; tugging at my sleeve, pointing at pretzels and Goldfish. Plans

I had for packed lunches and birthday parties, gone, in one day.

We spend a lot longer looking at produce than usual. Grief wants baby carrots, but I can't cook baby carrots for dinner. She says broccoli is too mushy. Celery is too stiff. I meander towards the lettuce. Three-year-olds don't like lettuce. I don't know what I will do with my lettuce.

I decide on self-checkout—easier without a toddler on your hip, but not by much when Grief is by your side. She presses buttons on the keypad and idly sifts through the shelves of candy. When the receipt's been dispensed, I look around, waiting. I forgot they don't give mothers stickers.

The drive home is quiet. Cornflakes against cardboard replace the sound of Gracie's aimless rambling. There is a hole in my life, marked by an empty carseat in the backseat. Plastic and cloth made of memory. Half-English, half-gibberish conversations I will spend the rest of my life trying to recall.

Grocery shopping with Grief is funny. Her countless tricks and endless chatter churn the sadness in my stomach, but they also keep the light on in my heart. She won't leave me alone, and for some reason, I can't ask her to.

The Owl

Daphne Goldberg

She hid the fact that her parents lived in two different houses, didn't tell anyone the fact that half her clothes resided in her dad's house, and nobody knew that she would drive to the post office every week at 6:00 pm on Wednesday to be "transferred". She never disclosed the fact that she saw her parents try to make small talk, in the harshest of tones, in front of her for her own sake. She was used to being an owl, taking in a message from her mom and giving it to her dad. She would listen to her parents say things about the other, not knowing what was true or what was false. Maybe she would never know what was actually going on.

Her friends didn't know that when she was in the third grade, she would sneak downstairs and hide under the dining table, while listening to her parents argue she would fight back sobs rippling through her. She didn't understand what they were saying, but she didn't like how their voices were raised. She started saying "sorry" all the time, never wanting to upset someone so much that they had to raise their voice at her. She didn't understand why her father, who would read stories to her until she fell asleep, would leave in the middle of the night to go sleep on the couch. She didn't understand that her life was changing forever. She would never experience waking up late on Christmas morning, and running down the stairs to find her mother and her father sitting expectantly in the living room. They would all sit on the floor, chugging their hot chocolate not minding that it burned their mouths, opening gifts like the moment could last forever, but it never did.

She would never see them be happy together again. She went through her parents' old things, hoping to find any proof that they once loved each other. Sometimes she did find love letters with words she never heard them say to each other, and that was enough proof for her. She holds onto that deeply. She understood more now, she understood that her parents weren't right together, but she didn't want to accept it. She wanted to hold onto those memories forever, but when she looks back on them now she doesn't smile. She cries at what could have been. She tries to picture her parents and her in the present time; driving to her grandparents blasting music while singing along with the lyrics, not minding the burning sensation in their throats, eating dinner in front of the TV

every night watching their favorite reality TV show, screaming at the screen as if they could change the thoughts of the cast members. She just tries to imagine her house with two parents, but all the images always come up blank. She can't picture them together anymore. All she sees is her parents sitting as far away from each other as possible at her games. She notices the anger in her mom when she gets a text from her dad. She assumed her dad pulled another dick move. She is used to it now. She knew how angry her mom felt when her dad upset her, because she did too. She loves him, but she doesn't know how to love him fully. She doesn't understand what it means to love someone. She doesn't think she could ever love someone because the voice in the back of her head is saying "It'll end. Everything has an end." She's heard that voice, but it's her voice that says it so much that she has finally let it take over her. When she was little she used to see herself smiling with a husband and two kids, but she just can't see that anymore. She feels like anytime she ever gets close to someone, they will eventually leave. She wants that happy ending, but she's never seen an end be happy.

She hopes that someday she won't have her child hiding under tables, and overusing the word "sorry". She especially does not want her child to ever have to be an owl. Owls were her least favorite animal. She saw too much of herself in them. She was a messenger for life, carrying messages from friend to friend and Mom to Dad, but she hated most of all how they could fly. She would never be able to fly away from her problems.

She hated how she was considered the owl, but would never truly be "the owl".



Dreamscape

Andralyn Yao
Mixed Media
12th Grade
Independently Working



Novel Writing

The Courtyard Where She Disappeared

Deekshitha Daruwuri

When seven-year-old Damini witnesses her grandmother, Ammamma, vanish into the shadow beneath a car in the courtyard, no one believes her. Her mother silences her questions, relatives avoid the topic, and the adults insist Ammamma simply “went inside.” Only Damini knows what she saw. With a one-year-old sister depending on her, she grows up carrying that memory like a stone she can’t put down.

As Damini gets older, small details break through the family’s denial. The courtyard always feels colder than the rest of the house. Strangers avoid parking near it. Relatives whisper about “what happened years ago” when they think Damini is out of ear-shot. Eventually, she discovers old letters hidden in Ammamma’s room: letters hinting that the same thing happened to Ammamma’s brother when she was a child. A person disappearing into an unnatural shadow wasn’t a new event. It was a family pattern no one ever explained.

Damini pieces together the truth: members of her family are vulnerable to a strange phenomenon tied to deep grief. When they carry unresolved sorrow, certain shadows become gateways, drawing them in. Ammamma had been quietly mourning her brother her whole life, and the courtyard was where he vanished, too.

Determined to end the cycle, Damini returns to India as a young adult. She steps into the courtyard at sunset, when the shadow is deepest, and hears Ammamma’s voice calling faintly from inside. By reclaiming her grandmother’s memories and naming the truth her family buried, the shadow finally releases Ammamma’s body: long gone, but at peace. The cycle breaks with Damini, who chooses to protect her sister from ever inheriting the same darkness.

Chapter 1: The Shadow Under the Car

I still remember the color of the sky that day. A washed-out blue, the kind that made the sunlight look harsher than it really was. We were in India for the summer, staying in my grandmother’s (Ammamma) house, the one with the mosaic tiles and the narrow

staircase that echoed when you ran up too fast.

My little sister, only a year old, was balanced on my hip while I followed Ammamma downstairs with the day's wet laundry. Most middle-class families we knew didn't own a dryer. Sunlight did the job, and Ammamma always said the clothes came out warmer, softer, and more honest that way.

The terrace would have taken her too long to climb, so she decided to dry everything in the open space on the ground floor. It was a cramped courtyard bordered by uneven plants and the neighbor's old silver car parked too close to the gate. The car threw a long, heavy shadow across the ground, almost like it didn't belong to the car at all.

But I didn't think much of it. My eyes went to Ammamma's plants first. She had turned every empty corner of the courtyard into a tiny jungle. Mint bursting out of chipped clay pots, jasmine vines she talked to like stubborn children, and a sad-looking curry leaf plant she insisted would "find its confidence soon". She used to say plants behaved just like people if you paid close enough attention.

While she set the laundry basket down, she paused to pinch a dead leaf off her hibiscus, muttering to it the way she did with all her plants. My baby sister reached out toward one of the mint pots and laughed, calling her a "little gardener in training."

For a moment, everything felt calm and ordinary. Just sunlight, plants, a warm breeze, and my grandmother fussing over her courtyard like it was her own kingdom. Nothing about the scene felt strange enough to worry about.

The wind was wild that afternoon. It kept tugging at the clothes before Ammamma could wring them out fully. My sister babbled into my shoulder, clutching my braid like it was her personal handle.

Ammamma lifted one of my shirts to shake it out, and the wind snatched it straight from her hands. It fluttered, spun, and drifted down into the dark space under the parked car.

"Just a minute," she said, laughing softly as she stepped to-

ward it.

I shifted my sister higher on my hip, trying to keep her from slipping. She was squirmy that year, always wanted to crawl, but never content when she was actually put down. I looked away for only a second to adjust her.

When I turned back, Ammamma was gone.

At first, I thought she ducked behind the car or moved to the other side of the courtyard. She liked to tease me like that sometimes. So I walked a slow circle, calling her name. My sister kept making small questioning sounds, confused by my sudden tension.

No answer.

The courtyard felt too still. No wind now. Just the shirt lying on the ground, half in and half out of the shadow.

I felt panic rise in my chest. "Ammamma?" I called again, louder.

My sister started to fuss, her tiny finger clutching my arm.

I stepped closer to the car, reaching out with two fingers toward the shirt, when my mom's voice cut through the air.

"Don't touch that!"

She rushed over and grabbed my free hand, her breathing uneven. My sister reached toward her, relieved to see another familiar face.

"Where's Ammamma?" I asked. "She was right there. Amma, she was right there."

My mom looked around in every direction, but something was off.

She wasn't calling out. She wasn't searching the way I expected.

There was a tightness around her eyes that made my stom-

ach drop.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she said. “We’ll talk inside.”

“But where is she? Why aren’t you looking?”

She didn’t answer. And that silence, more than anything else, scared me.

Inside the house, whenever I brought it up, the adults kept changing the subject. They said I was tired from holding the baby. They said she must’ve gone upstairs without us noticing.

But I knew what I saw.

Later that evening, when things had settled and the house had fallen into that heavy kind of quiet, I watched my little sister crawl across the blanket toward me. She didn’t know anything was wrong. She was too young. She smiled as if everything was normal.

And I realized something no one had to say out loud:

Whatever happened in that courtyard wasn’t something the adults planned to explain.

Not then.

Maybe not ever.

Princess of Aurelia

Marissa Wang

Synopsis:

A dinner party turns deadly when visiting Velian royals assassinate the Aurelian king. His consort Queen Eleanor vengefully declares war, which spirals into a bloody conflict that rages for years without end.

When the palace comes under threat, thirteen-year-old Princess Cecelia of Aurelia gets sent away to faraway Windingbrook. She enjoys her new life in the countryside village, but she feels that something isn't quite right. After she tries and fails to save her neighbors from being forced to join the army, she becomes good friends with two village girls, Chloe and Viola. Yet even as Cecelia spends a joyful summer, her friendship with a boy named Oliver falls apart, and she later discovers that he was a spy for the queen.

Autumn brings more death, and Cecelia comes to realize that she must end the war. To do this, she ventures into the outer world, determined to help her people and her kingdom. Her influence reaches far, but when a visit to a major city turns disastrous, armed guards descend upon Windingbrook and watch Cecelia day and night.

In desperation, she runs away to Crystalen, where the Velians have offered to meet with her mother and discuss the end of the war. Unfortunately, Cecelia arrives at her uncle's estate to find the furious Queen Eleanor, who forbids her from leaving the mansion. But with determination, cleverness, and a bit of magic, Cecelia negotiates with the Velians anyway and brings peace to Aurelia.

Chapter 15

"Cecelia, I'm begging you. *Please*, take me along!"

I sigh. Today is the day of my visit to Cornelia, a nearby village that's the birthplace of the saint with the same name. Just a few minutes ago, I eagerly headed to the wagon I helped prepare last night, only to find Oliver Anderson waiting for me.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, “this trip was planned well ahead of time. I can’t just add a tenth person.” *Especially not you.*

“I really do want to accompany you, Your Royal Highness,” Oliver says, “and I won’t—”

I cut him off. “Enough of this *your royal highness.*” I vividly remember the beginning of my stay in Windingbrook, when I was flattered by his courtesy towards me. But it was all a lie to make me trust him, so that he could write letters to my mother every month detailing my every word and action. “I’m not bringing you along, and that’s the answer.”

“It’s not like before, I’m not reporting to your mother anymore, I swear!”

“Are you sure about that?” I hate how icy my voice sounds, but I just can’t trust him anymore. “Oliver, I think you would do anything for Her Majesty if she asked you to.”

He looks away. “No, Cecelia. I would do anything for *you.*”

“I bet you would, if I gave you enough money.” I smile. “How’s it going? Are you going to be asking me for more?” I bribed him. I bribed him to make him stop reporting to Mother. It was a dishonorable thing, but what else could I have done?

Just then, a young couple approaches the wagon, which puts an end to the conversation. “Hello,” my caretaker Lisa says, her eyes drifting to Oliver. “Cecelia, you never told me that you invited Oliver to come along.”

Oliver smiles. “It was a last-minute decision, but trust me when I say I’m going to Cornelia.”

I glare at Oliver, but in the end I decide to go along with it. What’s the harm? He won’t be able to cause any trouble today.

“That’s wonderful,” Will says. Though he’s Lisa’s fiancé, I’m barely familiar with him; he returned from the war just two weeks ago.

The rest of my companions—the Baroness of Windingbrook,

Sir Edmund Nightfall, Chloe, Mr. and Mrs. Miller, and Viola—soon arrive, so we set off for Cornelia.

After an hour of traveling the bumpy forest path, we arrive in the village, and I gasp. Much of Cornelia is in *ruins*. I can see a few gray stone cottages in the heart of the settlement, but the vast majority of buildings are abandoned. One house has only half a wall remaining, with fallen bricks nearby; another home is entirely overgrown with ivy. Ashes and charred wood are scattered everywhere. The icy wind howls through skeleton-like trees, the crackling sound sinister and ominous.

Our wagon comes to a stop in front of a pitiful gathering of a few dozen commoners; when they see us, they fall silent, and every person in the crowd kneels before me. Looking out of place in their luxurious fur coats are the three nobles who have control over Windingbrook; all of them greet me courteously.

I begin the speech I prepared. “Thank you to everyone here for receiving me today. It’s such a great honor to be able to directly visit my fellow Aurelians, particularly in the birthplace of one of our most significant saints.”

I gaze at the crowd of kneeling commoners and can’t help feeling that it’s not right. “I ask that you stand before me.” A murmur runs through the crowd. “I am not here to be deferred to, nor to command you. Today, I am here to serve you, and I want to hear what each and every one of you has to say. So tell me, my dearest subjects, *what do you wish the crown would do differently?*”

For a long moment, everyone is silent. Then, a young girl in a yellow dress steps forward. “Princess Cecelia, could you build us another road? One isn’t enough!”

The crowd laughs, and the answers pour in from commoners and nobles alike. Some people walk up to me, others shout from afar. Ending the war comes up a lot, there are plenty of other suggestions too. A young man advocates for lowering the royal fifth, a tax on all production, to a tenth; a matron with two small children suggests repairing roads and bridges, many of which are broken down; a little boy asks for more protection from bandits and other wrongdoers; and the Countess of Lakewood argues that royals, not locals and minor nobles, should provide funding for schools. I

dutifully record their answers; meanwhile, everyone in the village signs the petition, and the nobles accept dozens of signature sheets to distribute within their holdings.

Cornelia is a tiny village, so I manage to talk to everyone before the day ends. This time, I'm not asking for their concerns. Instead, I learn their name and profession, and then we just chat about anything and everything.

Every conversation I have is enjoyable, but the day eventually comes to an end. As the sinking sun gives way to the deep blues of twilight, we bid the residents of Cornelia farewell and prepare to return to Windingbrook.

We enter the forest, which is now so dark I can't see a thing except the menacing silhouettes of trees that loom over us. I become intensely aware of how vulnerable we are, ten humans slowly traversing the seemingly endless woods, so insignificant against the mystical forces of night. Every jolt of the wagon sends shivers up my spine, and I let out a sharp gasp when a harsh cracking noise emanates from below.

"What was that?" Chloe asks.

Lisa glances underneath our wagon. "Just a tree branch," she reassures everyone, "we're fine."

"Good," I say as I pull my coat tighter around me.

When we boarded our wagon, no one paid very much attention to seating arrangements, which meant I ended up in the back next to Oliver Anderson instead of someone more pleasant. Strangely, I don't mind much; I'm mostly just glad to have someone next to me.

"Do you think it's true?" he asks abruptly as we're passing through a particularly dark and eerie patch of forest.

"What are you talking about?" I ask him.

"Do you think Saint Cornelia haunts these woods?" Clearly, Oliver spent the day listening to some suspicious rumormongers.

“There is a possibility,” the baroness tells him, “Cornelia was a deeply tortured poet, and almost everything about her life was tragic. And she loved forests, especially this one.”

“Whatever,” Viola says, “let’s just try not to freeze to death.” The chill is now so pronounced that I can’t attribute all of it to the deepening of the night. Most people in front of me have started to huddle together for warmth, but I keep my distance from Oliver.

The regular pattering of horse hooves abruptly ceases, and our wagon creaks a few times before coming to a stop. Will leans over and attempts to reassure our horses, but to no avail. They simply refuse to continue down the path.

“Something about these woods has scared them,” he announces a little while later. “I just can’t get them to go on.”

“What do we *do*?” Chloe asks anxiously.

“And what’s *that*?” We all look towards where Viola is pointing to see eerie mist wafting towards us, the silvery-white haze almost luminescent against the pitch-black trees and dark gray sky. One glance and I can tell it’s not normal. This is something magical, something otherworldly...perhaps the rumors are true after all.

We have no choice but to sit passively in our wagon, the ten of us wide-eyed with fear and wonder as the fog grows ever nearer. As it begins to enshroud us, I fight the urge to squeeze my eyes shut. Soon we’re lost in a sea of cool mist, the only sight around us being endless whiteness...

Then, the vapor recedes, and a sudden flash of golden light almost blinds me. When I can see once more, a woman is standing before me, the bejeweled circlet upon her brow marking her as one who has ascended beyond mere humanity.

Cornelia looks every bit like she does in the statues and portraits, with her long hair, piercing gaze, and flowing white dress. But now, she radiates a warm golden glow, so bright against the darkness of our surroundings. And even though her life was long, she looks be frozen in the prime of youth. I kneel and gaze upon her, the aesthete, once mortal but now divine.

“Princess, what brought you to my hometown?” *Princess*. I spin around, only to find that my companions, who were here just a moment ago, have disappeared.

“Your Ascended Holiness, I visited your birthplace in order to speak with my people and better understand their concerns,” I say, “where—where are my companions?”

“They are alive and well, but they cannot see us.” Her voice sounds like a normal woman’s, but it seems to reverberate through the forest, her words burning into my mind. It’s unbelievable that she was once a common woman who dwelt in the village I just left; everything about her, from the kaleidoscopic colors of her jewels to the way her shoes don’t quite touch the ground, speaks of the divine. “There are matters to discuss that are for you alone. You are attempting to end the war, correct?”

I nod.

“Your intentions are righteous and your methods are sensible, but I have a warning for you,” Saint Cornelia says. I draw a sharp breath. If a saint feels the need to warn me, then danger is surely imminent. “I’m sure it has occurred to you that your mother opposes your actions,” she continues, “Her Majesty will not allow you to easily end the war that she has worked so hard to win.”

Saint Cornelia pauses. “This is not a prophecy; your fate is not set in stone. If you return home tonight and never make another visit, then everything will be all right, and you will soon return to the palace.”

“I don’t want that.”

She arches her eyebrows. “You don’t want to be your mother’s golden girl? The perfect princess? Admired by all, known by none?”

“No,” I say, “I hated being shut up in the palace. I—I want to help my people.”

Saint Cornelia nods and smiles. “Just as I thought. You have so much potential, Princess Cecelia, you could do such wonderful things for this world. *But be very careful*, because if you cross a

dangerous line with Queen Eleanor, if she deems you too dangerous to leave free, then you will be locked away in the gilded cage that you so despise. Never setting foot outside the palace grounds, never meeting commoners, never escaping the watch of armed guards... you don't want that, do you? I know you well, Princess Cecelia; your dreams of happiness are all of Windingbrook. Take caution, or your time will run out."

For the first time since I arrived in Windingbrook, I try to imagine my future when I'm back in the capital again. Not only will I have fancy gowns and jewels, I'll have balls to wear them to now that I'm old enough to meet suitors. My life, filled with tea parties and dress fittings and etiquette lessons, will be entirely confined to the splendid palace. There'll be no more sitting by the brook, or wandering through flower meadows, or helping out in the fruit orchards, or greeting my neighbors during the weekly market, or tending my friends' gardens...and my neighbors who accompanied me today—the Nightfalls, the Millers, Lisa and Will—shall be torn away from me. I will most likely never see them again.

But why would Saint Cornelia come to warn me of the inevitable? "Your Ascended Holiness, I thank you for your sage wisdom. However, I am wondering if you have some other purpose in meeting me today."

"Of course," she says, "I was just going to get to that. If you have read any of my treatises, then you know my tendency to ramble on. But yes, there is a more imminent danger: a traitor amongst the Windingbrookers."

A traitor? Never in my life have I thought of treachery from my subjects, especially not the kind people in Windingbrook. "Are they in the village now?"

"No. They are right by your side, though you are invisible to one another," Saint Cornelia says casually, as though she's making small talk at a tea party.

Lisa wouldn't betray me, Will probably wouldn't either, the Nightfalls and Millers are loyal...and that leaves one suspect, the most likely of them all.

His name rolls off the tip of my tongue. "Oliver."

“Yes. So tell me, my dear princess, why is he dangerous?”

“Because—because he’s already worked for my mother behind my back.”

“True, but that doesn’t explain it all; up until this moment, you had believed that he genuinely repented. Princess Cecelia, you must find some way to remove Oliver Anderson from your path, because his loyalty is easily bought by anyone with a handful of gold coins. And that is one of the worst things possible in a charming boy. If you are not careful, then he will betray you, sooner or later, because his ‘loyalty’ to you will disappear into thin air the moment someone with deeper pockets comes along.”

“What—what do I do about him?” I ask, terrified. “Must I kill him?” I don’t want to take life, ever.

“That would be ideal,” she says, “though your mother would have considerable opposition if you tried to execute him. It would be a most fortunate coincidence if he were eaten by wolves, or fell from a tree branch and cracked his skull.” Saint Cornelia laughs. “That was a joke. But keep a close eye on him, and tell his aunt that you’re worried about him. And above all, don’t let him leave Wind-ingbrook ever again.”

I nod numbly. “I will, Your Ascended Holiness.” A sudden impulse comes to me. “Can you see the future?”

“To a limited extent. Are you wondering if you will become Aurelian queen one day?”

“Y-yes,” I admit, my teeth chattering in the cold. Can Saint Cornelia also read minds?

“The future is cloudy, but your chances look favorable. You could be a great queen, Princess Cecelia, if you follow my advice.” My heart beats faster. Can this be real? Could I really be queen one day? And a good one, too?

“Yet if you are reckless,” Saint Cornelia continues, “if your mother begins to perceive you as a serious threat—well, then you can kiss the crown goodbye. And that’s fortunate, because a fool on the throne is beneficial for none.” She pauses and grins, somewhat

mischievously. “And if you do become queen, then I know the name of the one who will share your power.”

I know that even in times of darkness, Saint Cornelia found moments of levity. “Have I met him yet?”

“Only once, and I doubt you remember him well,” she replies, “but yes.”

“Is there more you came to tell me?” I ask, anxious as to where my companions are.

“No,” Saint Cornelia says. “And so you may return to your mundane reality now, though you are not permitted to tell your companions of what I said. Remember my advice; it will serve you well. I wish you the best of luck in all your ventures!”

And with that, she disappears in another flash of golden light.

Iscariot

Kalinda Lee

Synopsis: Kallias is a 10-year-old boy living in the heart of New York City with his influential but absent father, deranged mother, and recalcitrant older brother, Kyle. A promising business offer leads his family to move into a luxurious apartment complex where Kallias meets a strange boy, Felix, who uses his carefree perspective on life to teach Kallias how to find joy, handle grief, and weather storms. And paint water colors. This excerpt is from Chapter 1, which depicts Kallias' and Felix's early friendship.

CHAPTER I

It had been six weeks since Kallias had moved into his most recent apartment and neither of his parents had unpacked any of his things yet. He had considered taking up the task himself multiple times, and would have done so already if not out of fear of his mother's wrath.

"Not that she'd clean the carpets herself if you were bleeding out. Work is for the peasants—her children, obviously," Kallias' brother Kyle commented flippantly from Kallias' desk chair (the bathroom stool, for the moment). "It's an honor," he continued. "Not everyone can be the dirt on the bottom of her shoe, you know." Kallias did not know, and would have said as much if he felt inclined to voice his opinion, which he never did. Kyle frowned as he glanced over his brother's room for the first time since his return home.

"Where's your stuff?"

"Living room boxes," Kallias mumbled sullenly

"Are you ever gonna open it? It looks like you live in an asylum."

"The scissors, Kyle."

"Ah." Kyle reached over to ruffle Kallias' hair before standing. "Right." Kallias had been fervently forbidden from touching any of the remnants of their family's move—he would break something, or cause mischief with the tape, or worst of all, hurt himself with the

scissors and die and give his parents the wrong side of the publicity they were always craving. "I'll do it for you tomorrow."

He disappeared out the door, leaving Kallias to the excellent company of his toothbrush and three pairs of pants. Naps were the most efficient way to pass time, so Kallias miserably retreated to his bed—his only real piece of furniture—and laid a shirt over himself, pretending it was his soft green blanket he had parted with nearly two months ago.

Kallias awoke some time later to persistent knocking on his large window. He looked up. Five grubby fingers, extending from a skinny arm up above were rapping on the glass of his sixtieth-floor window. Kallias jumped up, horrified—Mother had mentioned that there might be strangers trying to kidnap him—but Kyle had said that she was just trying to intimidate him! Perhaps the stranger would be willing to bargain? Feeling very much daring and dangerous, Kallias crept cautiously to the window and cracked it open, shielding his eyes against the passionate sun to gaze upwards. A boy about Kallias' age was quite literally dangling out the window above. He had pleasant green eyes, a shock of blond hair, and an evident death wish. The boy grinned.

"Hello there!" the boy greeted.

"Hello."

"I've never met you! I'm Felix."

"Okay." A pause. "Are you going to kidnap me?"

The boy paused to consider it. Felix craned his neck up to assess Kallias' appearance, which Kal thought was a bit presumptuous from his upside down position. "Probably not," he decided. "I've never kidnapped anyone." Kallias sagged in relief and mentally patted himself on the back. He had handled that quite well.

"Why are you upside down?" The boy smiled even more.

"My father locked me in the house! He said if I dared to walk out the front door I'd regret it but clearly he doesn't know me at all."

"Oh."

A poignant pause.

“Well, the blood is starting to rush to my head so I really ought to work my way back up...but I’m delighted to meet you even though you didn’t tell me your name, and maybe we could spend time together sometime since I’ve never had a friend and you seem like a pretty good option because most people wouldn’t open their window for me, and also Poker is very fun and we should play together and make sure you open your curtains tonight because there’s a full moon and if you don’t see it you’ll be missing out.”

And with that, the boy awkwardly grappled with the wall and the thick rope that ran down the side of the high-rise until he disappeared into the window above.

Felix was very strange. “**Hmm. Strange kid!**”

Felix’s family was strange too, and mean, but they were very important. Kallias learned this a few days later during a rare occasion that all of his family members were home for dinner. It was no coincidence. Kyle had undoubtedly been manipulated into showing his face at the dinner table.

There was a knock at the door, and when Father answered, there stood in the doorway a lovely blonde woman and the **Boy From The Window**. The woman exchanged greetings with Father, who nearly even smiled before sticking out his hand for Felix to shake. Felix stared at the hand. The blonde woman’s hands trembled finely as she placed them on her son’s shoulders and apologized for his behaviour.

“His father was of course supposed to join us but he had to work late... you understand the chaos in the government nowadays. Felix is taking it hard—he must miss his dad a lot or he would never act like this,” she murmured, squeezing his shoulders.

Father smiled unpleasantly.

The woman’s name was Mrs. Barren, wife to one of New York’s most abundant senators. Kallias was conscious of the power play involved in the simple dinner invitation to the upstairs neighbours, but he was not nearly as interested in this as he was in Felix’s chosen entertainment for the night: exposing every bruise and

scab he had at the dinner table—in order to pick and press on them. Whether the action was out of boredom or with the intent to give both their mothers a heart attack, Kallias would never be certain. Probably both.

Felix felt Kallias watching. He caught Kallias' gaze and lit up.

"This one's from the window climb," he mouthed excitedly. He pointed vigorously to some vertical scrapes along his left shin, accompanied by a yellowish bruise.

"And this one," he gestured to his upper arm where a patch of skin had turned a deep purple, *"is from New York's shiniest plastic senator."*

A stranger Felix was, but Kallias recognized a vulnerable secret whenever it was offered, which was rarely, and he knew better than to neglect to offer one of his own.

"My brother hates my entire family," Kallias mouthed back.

"I can tell."

Mother leaned to snatch Kallias' hand so they could say grace, which apparently Kallias' family did every night. Mrs. Barren glanced over approvingly. Mother did not even acknowledge Kyle when he stood suddenly and walked out during dinner. Perhaps she was losing hope for him.

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It is quite difficult to share one's deepest familial secrets with another and not desire to see them again—but it wasn't for two whole days that Kallias struck lucky again.

"Kal, relax. I'll take you tomorrow. Go hang out in your room," Kyle's annoyed voice floated to Kallias through Kyle's thick bedroom door. *Grounded* was the word for Kyle these days, and *locked* was the word for his door. Mother had made sure of that.

"And do what!?"

"Play with your chess set or something. I don't know."

“I don’t have it, Kyle, I don’t have *anything*.”

“You still haven’t unpacked your stuff?”

“*Kyle*.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Fine! I’m going to the park by myself.”

“No you’re not. You’re ten.”

“Ten and a half.”

“I’m a glass half empty person. Go away.”

So Kallias went away. It was only three blocks to the park, but the perils of kidnappers and taxis and rats had been instilled in Kallias since he could walk and every large building was like an extra tall Father with an icy lecture and a fiery backhand. The sky, already murky gray upon his quarter past noon departure, grew blacker as he approached. Pride was a filthy thing though, and Kallias refused to turn back. When he finally turned left onto the narrow street that was home to his favorite dingy playground, the first noticeable thing about the park was the shiny blonde hair of a skinny boy laying on the dirty mulch, gazing at the sky.

Kallias sat next to Felix on the ground.

“What are you looking at?” Kallias questioned when he received no acknowledgement from the other boy.

“I’m talking to God.”

“Oh. Of course. Sorry,” Kallias hadn’t realized he was interrupting a conversation.

“You don’t know anything about God,” Felix mumbled. Kallias blinked. Feeling slightly offended, he pressed the matter.

“Yesterday you didn’t understand why your mom was tryna hold your hand while we were praying. You’ve never said grace in your life,” Felix stated. He finally turned to Kallias. He was grinning

now. "It's okay," he said. "I'll teach you, now that we're best friends! The hand holding is so that we can spread the Grace around the table to everyone, especially to the ones who really need it. Like germs!"

The sky rumbled. Kallias flinched. He was not equipped for a storm, that was prime time for kidnappers. Mother's friend's sister's cousin-in-law's daughter had in fact nearly been kidnapped in the midst of a blizzard. Such a problem was never an issue when Kyle was around.

Felix sensed Kallias' uneasiness.

"Don't worry!" he cried. "Lightning is just God striking down the wicked, you know." He closed his eyes and sighed. "Still wondering why he hasn't bullseyed my Dad yet, but patience is a virtue and all that."

"I suppose you're going to tell me the rain is His tears for the suffering of the righteous, then?" Kallias quipped.

Felix cracked an eye.

"Have you never been to school? That's the water cycle. It's called *participation*."

~~~

Kallias' time spent with the boy upstairs grew exponentially. Mother and Father had been very pleased that Kallias was interested in spending time with Mr. Barren's vivacious son.

"Maybe you could teach him some manners along the way, couldn't you, darling?"

"Of course, Mother."

Kyle had been less than pleased.

"Why are you hanging out with that scrawny creep? I'm not gonna be here forever, you know," Kyle admonished. *Well then, maybe it was time for Kallias to meet someone who would be around for a while.* That was an inside thought, though, and it re-

mained there.

After receiving his parents' lukewarm permission (and allowing Mother to storm Felix's apartment to remove all of the scissors), Kallias opted to spend his Saturday visiting his new friend.

Kallias knocked politely on the front door.

"COME IN!"

Tentatively, Kyle turned the doorknob and the door swung open to reveal Felix sitting cross-legged in the middle of a flurry of canvases, brushes, and paint. He was using a comically large brush to paint a crooked nose onto a man on his canvas. Felix looked up and brightened at the sight of his friend.

"What are you doing?" Kallias questioned.

"I'm making disciples!" He pushed a blank canvas, smudging it with brown paint in the process, in Kallias' direction. "You can help! I'm painting Judas Iscariot—not sure why we're supposed to make more of *him*—but you can do one of the others! Did you know that Judas Iscariot in Hebrew is *Yehudah ish Kerioth*?"

"I did not know that."

"Now you do!"

They worked for hours. At some point, Felix's mother brought two tall glasses of lemonade and brownies, which Felix offered to eat on Kallias' behalf. Kallias enjoyed the pleasant bleeding of the colors onto the paper and the attention to detail required in Felix's hobby and found himself unexpectedly lost in the work. When he finally looked up, the night sky outside was sprinkled with stars and Felix was bent over and fast asleep, nose-to-nose with Judas. There was brown paint in his eyebrows.

Felix and Kallias became very close. Kallias was utterly delighted to have a friend and Felix was even more delighted, if possible. Even their parents were happy, considering it a 'strategic match of interests,' which Kallias didn't understand until Felix explained that that meant their parents were becoming richer and using their children as an excuse to mingle. Nearly everyone was satisfied. Yes,

very nearly.

Oddly enough, Felix found out first.

Following a ridiculous overnight camping expedition (to the bare patch of grass and half a bush growing in front of their high-rise), Kallias returned home to find his apartment unlocked. After bidding goodbye and watching Felix wrestle the tent he had neglected to deconstruct into the elevator, Kallias wandered into his apartment, absentmindedly shutting the door behind him. Thinking to beg Kyle for a trip to the park, Kallias shuffled into his brother's room and knocked, only for the door to fall open easily against his fist. Kyle was not in his room despite his commitment as of last week to be burdensome to their parents. And his room was clean; bed made and clothes put away. Kallias had not seen the floor of his brother's room for very many years. Deciding to wait for his return, Kallias trudged into his own room where he found a short note on his pillow.

bad news. come upstairs ~ Felix

Felix had left him a note right before they had gone outside together? Frowning, Kallias tucked it into his pocket and hurried out of his room to the front door. He paused. The living room boxes were sitting by the wall, tape sliced cleanly open, the edge of one of his sweaters peeking out. The scissors sat innocently next to them.

Feeling his heart pound a little harder in his chest, Kallias made the journey up to Felix's apartment. He was already sitting in the hallway, the tent still at his side. His joy from earlier was faded.

"I went to your place yesterday morning to see if you wanted to play checkers. I saw him packing his stuff. I'm really sorry," Felix confessed. He produced a folded piece of paper and held it out to Kallias.

Kallias unfolded it.

"I wanted to be here when you found out because I couldn't convince him to stay and I wanted you to have someone to be angry at," Felix said quietly.

Kal,

I swear I wasn't planning it for a long time, I just can't be here anymore. I know you love our parents and I don't know why. Come find me when you graduate or decide that you're ready to be free. Love you

1600 Oak Street Bronx

~Kyle

Kallias had nothing to say. His brother had been his world since the day he was born and he was leaving him to the silent apartment, Father's cold backhands and Mother's inflammatory words. And lots of money, an inheritance thick and suffocating.

"Do you want to go find him? Your parents don't know yet. It might not be too late."

"No," Kallias said bitterly. "It was too late a long time ago."

"I hate your brother," Felix said angrily. "*Yehudah ish Kerioth.*"

Kallias cried.

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# Stars of Glass

Petra Malcolm-Clarke

## CHAPTER ONE

The wind whipped and howled around Ystradat's face, the carried moisture in the air frosting the tips of her eyelashes. Lines of direwolves snaked around the mountainside, carrying hulking, shouting men with perished deer swaying on their backs as the ever-moving procession marched onward.

A hot breath warmed her ear, but the words were ice.

"Ystra, keep up. I did not bring you here so you could embarrass me. Your strength grows weak. Control your mount."

Glancing to her right, Ystradat recognized the sharp features of her older brother Haldar, his cheeks red from the nipping cold and dark brows furrowed at her lagging wolf.

Her white steed refused to stride forward with the others, no matter how hard she squeezed the saddle or slapped his neck with the reins, uncharacteristic for a naturally obedient direwolf.

"Understand me, brother. You know not of the difficulties Bodil gives."

With a great gust of wind, the hood on her neck flew back onto her shoulders, exposing her to the unforgiving cold. Her brother yanked the connecting halter that pierced Bodil's ears, causing the beast to let out a low growl.

"I *told* you to bring a reliable warwolf!" Haldar snarled before glancing upwards, distracted by the quickly darkening sky.

Shadow poured over the rocks scattered across the landscape, creating pockets of darkness beneath the ridges.

There, across the Mountain Yix, the clouds swirled into rolls of black and grey, hurling across the sky like raging bulls from the south, just like the ones Ystradat once saw with her father as a babe.

One of the men in the front line yelled out a warning to the other riders, his wolf kicking up snow and dirt as she came to a stop. The soldier swung his legs off the saddle, his armor-clad feet hitting the ground with a metallic thump. Leaning down to inspect the ground, he placed his hand in the snow, searching for answers. His eyes suddenly went wide, and waved for a woman sitting on a grey-blue hound. She dismounted quickly, raising questioning looks from the surrounding soldiers, who whispered among themselves. The pair squatted together on the ice, talking in hushed voices as they deliberated.

Ystradat could barely hear him as he asked the woman on his left, “Are you sure? They have not been here for hundreds of years!”

“No other earthly creature can make these prints.”

Ystradat inhaled sharply.

*What creature?*

Suddenly, snow tumbled down the mountainside, forming an avalanche big enough to bury the whole group under rubble and snow. The investigating soldiers tried with vigor to stand, but the now trembling earth shook their flailing bodies, collapsing like flowing river water in the spring. Ystradat felt Bodil lift his nose to sniff the air. He whimpered.

Before she could ask him what was the matter, a huge black bear with blazing emerald eyes burst from a nearby snowdrift, grabbing four soldiers with wolf-sized paws, crushing their iron armor in its jaws. Chaos erupted throughout the clearing, the tranquillity of moments ago shattered by the bear’s bloodthirsty roars and the clattering of metal as the warriors threw spears and arrows at the creature. Ystradat watched in disbelief as her companions were hurled aside like ragdolls, the strongest of them killed without any effort. Heart rattling like a raven trapped in a cage, Ystradat whirled around in a panic, searching for the familiar face of her brother. He disappeared from her side as soon as he saw the bear prints.

“Haldar!”

The tall figure of her kin was fighting tooth and nail against

the snapping jaws of the beast, and Ystradat noticed that he clutched his abdomen. One hand covered his left ribs, blood seeping through his fingers. His other was tightly wrapped around a Hrørgrothen blade, forged with the strongest obsidian and wrapped in a steel handle, the symbol of a renowned fighter. But no matter how hard Harald struck the bear, it did not retaliate, nor show any signs of pain. She had never seen such a ravenous animal. Its bone-colored hide was scarred by swords and lances thrown by past adversaries, some lesions a healed white, others a newly slashed red. The archers surrounding the creature rallied, arrows lodging into fur. Agitated and roaring, the bear reared up on hind legs and charged forward, barreling towards Ystradat.

“Run, Bodil!” She cried, kicked his ribs with her stirruped boots to spur him on, her new armor starting feeling much heavier than before.

*I shouldn't have come here*, she reflected, remembering begging insistently to Haldar, urging her brother to finally let her don armor and ride in a hunting party. Bodil took one look at the charging bear, and instead of bounding away to safety, he dove down and stuffed his head into the snow to hide.

“No, Bodil! We must flee!” Ystradat tugged on the reins and tapped the side of his snout, desperately trying to wiggle his face out of the soft white powder. It was no use, Bodil would not budge. Time seemed to slow down as the beast's paws thundered toward her. She could see how its eyes had no shine, no soul, just bleak and vengeful.

A wave of terror flooded over Ystradat, fogging all other emotions. In one last act of resistance, she reached behind her to untangle her shield from her pack. The bear was so close that she could feel its breath envelop the surrounding air, so hot it melted the snow on Ystradat's fur cloak. The shield finally freed from its confinements, she raised it up for protection. She grasped the steel boss so tightly that she could feel her knuckles turning white within her gloves, her hands shaking and body coursing with adrenaline.

*Stay still. Hold it firmly*, Ystradat reminded herself, and she counted the number of divots on the back of the wooden shield, created by her brother throwing spears at her during training. Something, *anything*, to keep her calm and planted on the saddle.

The bear was now a fox-tail's length away. She could hear its heavy breathing inches away from the shield, and braced for its huge jaws to crush her skull.

Before she could cry out, Ystradat felt a heavy weight crash against her side, and she fell off Bodil, her legs yanked out of the stirrups. The sound of metal colliding with ice and stone was a stark contrast to the gently falling flakes of snow, and Ystradat could see the other warriors rushing over to the bear, who was now facing away from her, battling once more. Left trembling on the ice, she felt the weight lift off her side.

A mother wolf, swollen with pups, stared down at Ystradat, heavy exhales melting the frost cradling her muzzle. Ystradat suddenly felt very tired. All the sores and pains of the battle and the mountain set in. Her very bones ached. For the first time, she noticed a trickle of crimson blood from her leg dripping onto the sharp rocks. Groaning, she carefully lifted up her shin guard to inspect the damage. It seemed her armor had been rubbing against the delicate skin of her calf, causing chafing and bruising. Nothing broken. She sighed and the black wolf leaned down to sniff the injury, and to Ystradat's surprise, started licking up the blood that was oozing down her leg to her ankle.

"Thank you," she stated in disbelief. She reached up with mittened fingers to thank her rescuer, but was met with only chilled air, the wolf already gone. Confused, Ystradat looked around the clearing to seek the majestic canine, but there was only blood and overturned rocks that the bear had knocked over with its great power.

Was it real? There were no paw prints around the snow, only the impression of Bodil's, who was much smaller than the she-wolf. Had some great, old beast saved her? Or had she imagined it? The more she turned over the encounter in her mind, the more it made no sense. The more she searched the ground for answers, she was met with only the dead body of the bear lying in on the cold, hard stone, and the laughter of the conquerors echoing through the mountain air.

## SYNOPSIS-

It is coming. The long forgotten shadow of old is rising, the

people unaware. In the frost-engulfed land of Hrørgroth, the once supple fish wash to the shore with hollow bellies and spongy flesh. Nameless beasts crawl through the deep mountains, their screeches and howls echoing through the night. Ystradat and her Hrørgrothen village can no longer go beyond the iron gates, for too many of their soldiers have come back with tales of ravenous monsters stalking hunting parties. After being saved by a mythic wolf from certain death, Ystradat and her brother Haldar creep into the forest to seek the unfamiliar beast. Instead of the creature, they find a cave filled with ancient secrets and wisdom deep in the foliage. An old crone, the Prophet Neskiiya, guides them along their journey to find the source of the recurring evil. The three reunite the long-divided Hrørgroth to defeat the forces that attempt to separate them, and in the process find their own path to greatness.



## **June in the Valley**

***Eisley Motz***  
Ceramics & Glass  
*10th Grade*  
*Bloomington North High School*  
*Teacher: Daria Smith*



# Screenplays & Scripts



## The Deal

***Rebecca Stewart***

Illustration

11th Grade

Bloomington North High School

Teacher: Ted Allanson

# Life on the Reservation

Kaydence Mongosa

## Dramatis Personae

Sage Lewis: daughter of Cheyenne Lewis

Cheyenne Lewis: mother of Sage Lewis and Enola Lewis

Enola Lewis: daughter of Cheyenne Lewis,  
sister of Sage Lewis

Emmanuel Johnson: friend of Sage Lewis,  
son of Mr. Johnson

Mr. Johnson: shop owner, boss of Sage Lewis, father of  
Emmanuel Johnson

## Scene

Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, USA

## Time

September 28, 2022

ACT I

Scene I

SETTING: We are set in a high school at the Pine Ridge Reservation of South Dakota. This reservation is among the largest reservations in the USA with a high crime rate and poverty rate. Home to the Oglala Sioux Tribe. The fall weather makes the school cold without heating or AC. SAGE is sitting at her desk in her small math class. *On the corner of her desk, lies a brand new journal and brand new pen she had just received from her boss at work. She has not written in the journal yet and the cover is a dark blue with a flower pattern. The first page says, "For my hardest worker."* The school is very outdated with plumbing issues, cracks in walls, and mold growing from the ceiling.

AT RISE: SAGE finishes up her math assignments and opens up her journal. She starts writing with her new pen.

SAGE

(SAGE writes)

“September 28, 2022— I feel so stuck on this land. I want to leave, but I can’t find the strength to leave behind my little sister. Everyday feels like a repetitive cycle. I wake up, go to school, go to work, come home, and take care of Enola while Mom drinks because she was reminded of Dad, then go to sleep. Sometimes I feel sorry for her, but I mostly hate her.”

*(The bell rings for the end of class and SAGE packs up her belongings as her friend waits for her at the door)*

EMMANUEL

*(rushed)*

Hurry up, Sage. I’m trying to get to lunch early ‘cuz I’m hungry.

SAGE

*(sighs)*

Alright, Manny. The food is not going anywhere.

EMMANUEL

*(SAGE and EMMANUEL speed walk to the cafeteria and get in the lunch line)*

So have you given any more thought about college?

SAGE

It’s always in the back of my mind, but you know how it is. I can’t just leave Enola here with mom. Plus, I don’t have time to look into colleges and don’t even get me started on the money.

EMMANUEL

*(EMMANUEL looks at SAGE solemnly)*

Well, y’know you always have a place to stay and a place to work.

SAGE

*(jokingly)*

“For some reason?” Everyone loves me because I’m amazing, but your dad loves me especially. He just gifted me a journal for being his best employee.

EMMANUEL

*(EMMANUEL grabs a slice of pizza and puts it on his tray)*

I think he likes you more than me sometimes. But seriously, Sage, you could get into a college with a full ride with your perfect grades.

SAGE

*(SAGE thinks about a future where she goes to college)*

Maybe... but still...

EMMANUEL

You know you can do it. Everything will work out for you. Believe me.

SAGE

*(EMMANUEL and SAGE finish getting their food and sit at their usual table)*

What about the University of South Dakota? I could apply for them and maybe apply for some scholarships.

EMMANUEL

*(EMMANUEL stuffs his face with pizza)*

Just do it. You’ll regret it if you don’t. I’ll apply with you. And we can live in a dorm together and we can see each other everyday and

we can go to our classes together and eat lunch together and...

SAGE

*(laughing)*

I get it, I get it. I can come over later after work and we can submit applications together.

SAGE

*(SAGE's phone buzzes and she reads a text message from her mom in her head)*

“You need to take care of your sister tonight. I won't be home 'til tomorrow.”

*(SAGE sighs)*

EMMANUEL

*(EMMANUEL rolls his eyes)*

Let me guess. Is it your evil mother?

SAGE

Yup. I have to babysit Enola. Nothing new.

EMMANUEL

Aw man. You can bring her to the shop with you and I can watch her while you work your shift.

SAGE

*(feels guilty)*

That would be amazing. Are you sure?

EMMANUEL

*(smiling)*

Of course! Anything for my bestie.

SAGE AND EMMANUEL EXIT

ACT I  
SCENE II

SETTING: It is the morning of September 30, 2022. We are set in the shared bedroom of SAGE and ENOLA. Blankets are strewn on the broken windows to block the chilly air from outside.

There is a bunkbed with layers of homemade quilts of green, red, orange, and yellow geometric shapes. Drawings made by Enola are hung on the walls.

AT RISE: SAGE slowly rises from her bed, not wanting to leave the warmth of her blankets. Last night, she dreamt of getting accepted into college. She wipes the tiredness from her eyes and looks at her little sister who sleeps in the bed next to her.

SAGE

*(SAGE yawns and taps her sleeping sister on the shoulder)*

Wake up, Enola. Time to get ready for school.

ENOLA

I don't wanna go to school, Sissy.

SAGE

We all have things we don't want to do, but you have to do it anyway. I'll make you some pancakes. How does that sound?

ENOLA

*(ENOLA's eyes light up and a smile widens on her face)*

Yay! Pancakes!

SAGE

*(CHEYENNE enters the bedroom, interrupting their conversation)*

You're home already? What's going on, Mom?

CHEYENNE

*(CHEYENNE angrily stomps further into the room and holds a journal in her hands)*

*(shouting)*

I just found this little thing on the dining table! Tell me more about why you want to leave me so badly!

*(shouting)*

I just found this little thing on the dining table! Tell me more about why you want to leave me so badly!

SAGE

*(becomes panicked)*

*(SAGE stands up and also starts shouting)*

Why did you go through my things? That's private, Mom!

CHEYENNE

I don't give a damn! This is my house and I own everything inside of it.

SAGE

*(with tears building up in her eyes)*

Give me back my journal! Please stop.

CHEYENNE

You think you have everything figured out? You need to wake up!  
You're still a child that doesn't know anything!

SAGE

*(now sobbing)*

*(SAGE tries to take her journal, but CHEYENNE keeps a firm grip on it)*

I'm not gonna take back anything I said. It's all true.

ENOLA

*(crying)*

Mommy, please stop!

CHEYENNE

*(the journal rips in two and CHEYENNE lets go of the journal, then slaps SAGE in the face)*

You will not be leaving this home and you're selfish for even thinking of that nonsense. If you leave, you'll be just like your deadbeat father.

SAGE

*(SAGE is taken aback and brings her hand up to her cheek)*

Don't ever compare me to him. I will never be him and I will never be you. I'm gonna do something with my life and I am never gonna look back. I am not living another second in this house with Enola. She's coming with me and you will never have to see us again.

*(SAGE picks up the two separate pieces of her journal and grabs ENOLA's hand)*

CHEYENNE

If you step one foot out of this house, you will never be allowed inside it ever again. You hear me?

SAGE

I am fine with that. I have managed this long without you or Dad's help anyway.

*(SAGE walks to the front door with ENOLA in hand and does not look back at her mother)*

SAGE exits.

ACT I

Scene III

SETTING: A few days after SAGE's argument with CHEYENNE. We are set at the Johnson's Family Market where SAGE and ENOLA have been staying after leaving home. SAGE sits behind the counter with ENOLA on her lap and EMMANUEL on a chair next to SAGE. The market is small and run-down.

AT RISE: SAGE takes a roll of tape from behind the counter and tapes together her journal that was ripped in two pieces.

SAGE

*(SAGE to the audience, other characters don't hear)*

I used to think people like me didn't get out. That this place was a loop. A routine of the same dirt roads, same empty fridge, same sound of bottles clinking in the sink. I can't believe that anymore. I used to think that if I just tried harder, then Mom would stop drinking. I thought that if I cooked more, cleaned more, smiled more,

then my life would magically get better. But, I can't stay here waiting for her to get better anymore. I can't drown here with her and I can't let this town swallow me whole. I want to wake up somewhere new. I want to wake up without the heavy feeling of dread first thing in the morning. I want to make it out of this town because I have to. I need to do this for Enola, but more importantly I need to do it for myself.

EMMANUEL

*(EMMANUEL looks at SAGE with concern)*

How's it going, Sage? Are you doing okay?

SAGE

*(SAGE snaps out of it and looks at EMMANUEL)*

I'm ok. You don't have to worry about me, Manny.

*(MR. JOHNSON enters the store from the back entrance)*

MR. JOHNSON

*(MR. JOHNSON walks toward EMMANUEL with a letter in his hands)*

Hey, Kiddos! I have some mail for you, Son.

*(MR. JOHNSON gives the mail to EMMANUEL)*

EMMANUEL

*(EMMANUEL takes the letter from MR. JOHNSON and looks at the address)*

It's from the University of South Dakota!

EMMANUEL

*(EMMANUEL opens the letter and reads it aloud)*

“Congratulations! It is my pleasure to welcome you to the University of South Dakota.”

SAGE

*(SAGE claps for EMMANUEL)*

That’s great news, Manny! I’m so proud of you.

MR. JOHNSON

Congratulations, Emmanuel. You deserve it. Now, Sage, you might have gotten a letter too. I stopped at your mother’s home to check as well.

*(MR. JOHNSON pulls out another letter from behind his back)*

SAGE

*(SAGE gasps and her palms start sweating as she slowly takes the letter from MR. JOHNSON, then opens the letter carefully)*

I got in! I got in! I can’t believe it. And, I got a scholarship to pay for all four years.

*(SAGE’s eyes start to water due to relief and excitement)*

*(ENOLA hugs SAGE tightly and they both start to cry)*

SAGE

It’s gonna be a challenging journey, but we can get through anything together, Enola.

*(SAGE reaches for her battered and taped-together journal from the counter and writes an entry)*

SAGE

*(SAGE writes)*

“October 2, 2022- I still have to get through the rest of my senior year of high school, but I will finally leave this town and I’m not alone anymore. My family is right here with me.”

*(SAGE looks around at everyone and closes her journal)*

End of play

# What Hides Behind a Mask (querade)

Therese Corong

Character List:

Sage Lark / Rose - Wife of Keith; Assassin; Mid 20s.

Keith Lark / Aspen - Husband of Sage; Assassin; Mid 20s

Draco Maureen - Sage's Boss; A muscular, tall man.

Host - Host of the Masquerade

## What Hides Behind a Mask(querade)

Setting: The inside of a house. Classical music plays from a phonograph in the corner, which has a small compartment with a keyhole.

**SAGE LARK** sits on a cushioned chair, reading a book. A wall/door splits the stage in two, allowing space for a bedroom. **KEITH LARK** enters, wearing a suit and black leather gloves. A splotch of red escapes the gloved area, just barely noticeable. He walks to **SAGE** and kisses her on the cheek.

### START SCENE I

**KEITH**

Sorry I'm late. We had a work dinner. Did you wait for me?

*(SAGE turns to KEITH and shakes her head 'no')*

**SAGE**

I'm glad you're okay. I was worried.

*(she eyes his gloved hands)*

What's with the gloves? It's summer.

*(Takes his hands in hers and places a hand to his forehead)*

Are you sick?

*(KEITH pulls back abruptly, then as if catching himself, relaxes)*

*just as quickly)*

**KEITH**

No, no. Just cold.

*(yawns)*

I think I'll head to bed. You should do the same, it's getting late.

**SAGE**

*(smiles)*

I will. Good night.

*(KEITH exits to the bedroom)*

Shuffling is heard until the sound of a door shutting. **KEITH** gets into bed, while on the other side of the stage, **SAGE** continues reading until she glances in **KEITH'S** direction. She pauses then stands up, setting her book on the floor, before grabbing a key from beneath the chair's cushion. She walks to the phonograph and inserts the key. The compartment pops open. **SAGE** pulls out a burner phone, then looks at a clock, set at 10:59. When the clock hits 11, the phone vibrates.

**DRACO'S VOICE**

*(breathing heavily)*

Rose...

**SAGE**

Draco.

*(SAGE places a hand on her hip)*

You do know you're not supposed to say anything... *incriminating*

until you know who you're speaking to, right?

*(she pauses)*

You okay?

**DRACO'S VOICE**

(scoffs) Aspen is loose again. Killed three of our men this time. He almost nicked me, but I slipped out just in time.

**SAGE**

*(chuckles)*

So? We're assassins, Hunter. It's part of the job description.

*(she sighs)*

What's the plan?

**DRACO'S VOICE**

I seem to be the target. Out of all our people, I've seen him the most. I need you to kill him before he gets to me.

**SAGE**

Hmm... A pity you can't handle him yourself.

**DRACO'S VOICE**

*(DRACO takes a sharp breath, as if planning to bite back, but decides against it, instead ignoring the snarky comment).*

I need to attend the city masquerade ball tomorrow, at six. Intel suggests he's heard about my appearance there and is coming to crash it. You'll need to be there to greet him.

**SAGE**

And how, exactly, do you plan on sneaking me into that party?

**DRACO'S VOICE**

Who said I'm sneaking you in?

*(pauses)*

You'll be my plus one.

**SAGE**

*(gasps)*

I'll have you know, I'm a married woman.

**DRACO**

*(scoffs, tired at SAGE'S jokes)*

We'll talk about the plan tomorrow night. I'll bring a costume for you. Just figure out how to get there.

**SAGE**

Yes sir.

**SAGE** locks the phone back into the record player's compartment. She turns the music off then goes to the bedroom. **KEITH** is laying on the far side of the bed.

**SAGE**

*(turns on a soft lamp)*

Honey? Are you still awake?

**KEITH** turns toward **SAGE**.

**KEITH**

I am. Is something wrong?

**SAGE**

*(gets into the bed)*

I'm afraid I have a work dinner tomorrow at six. I might not be back until late. I could make dinner before I leave—

**KEITH**

No, that's alright, love. I'll be fine. You don't have to worry about me.

**SAGE**

Thank you.

*(turns out the lamp)*

The lights go out.

**END SCENE I**

**START SCENE II**

The lights come on, revealing an elegant ballroom. Guests talk and dance.

**SAGE** and **DRACO** ENTER. **SAGE'S** hand is holding **DRACO'S** arm. She wears a crimson gown, a matching mask in hand.

**SAGE**

This is a boring party.

**DRACO**

You're not here for the party, Sage.

**SAGE**

*(exasperated sigh)*

*(whispers)* My codename is Rose. Stop mixing up my names...

When you need to call me by my alias, you call me by my real name. When you need to call me by my real name, you call me by my alias. Get your act together!

*(DRACO rolls his eyes, unbothered).*

*(KEITH ENTERS, dressed in a black suit and mask. He is seen engaging with other guests)*

**SAGE**

So... where's the tree?

**DRACO**

Tree?

**SAGE**

Yeah, an aspen is a–

*(DRACO'S face shows obvious confusion)*

Nevermind...

**DRACO**

Anyway, we don't know where he is or what he really looks like. But he shouldn't know who we–

*(SAGE gives a pointed look)*

–you are either.

**HOST**

Hunter!

*(All guests turn to look in their direction)*

**SAGE**

*(snickers)*

So much for being incognito...You really should've thought about that.

*(HOST comes to greet them)*

**HOST**

I'm glad you could make it.

*(He turns to SAGE)*

And who is this beautiful young lady?

**SAGE**

*A friend of Mr. Maureen's. Pleasure to meet you.*

**HOST**

Yes, it is nice to meet you as well. However, us men do have some business we must discuss. So if you'd kindly excuse us, miss.

*(HOST and DRACO EXIT. DRACO looks back toward SAGE, a scared look on his face. SAGE waves fondly as they exit)*

*(Seeing DRACO exit, KEITH makes his way toward SAGE. A soft, melodic, music plays, and guests begin to slow dance.)*

**KEITH**

May I have this dance, mademoiselle?

*(SAGE is taken aback. Her eyebrows furrow)*

**SAGE**

I'm sorry, you seem terribly familiar. Do I know you?

**KEITH**

I believe this is the first time we've met. Although, strangely I'm feeling a sense of *deja vu* as well.

*(KEITH extends his hand, which SAGE takes)*

**KEITH**

And you might be?

**SAGE**

Rose. You are?

*(They begin to dance)*

**KEITH**

Aspen.

*(SAGE shows no emotion—her face is the same, calm and collected)*

**SAGE**

Pleasure to meet you.

*(KEITH twirls SAGE and she falls into his arms as he dips her)*

**KEITH**

How do you know Hunter?

**SAGE**

I met him at a party once. He asked me to accompany him tonight.

*(They continue dancing)*

**KEITH**

A word of advice, get far away from him.

**SAGE**

Oh? And why's that?

**KEITH**

He's a dangerous man.

**SAGE**

*(scoffs)*

And? All men are dangerous, are they not?

**KEITH**

He's killed people. Hundreds.

*(The dance ends)*

**(HOST ENTERS)**

**HOST**

Dear guests, if you could please follow me out to the courtyard.  
We've prepared a magnificent fireworks display for you all!

*(Guests chatter with excitement and EXIT. HOST EXITS with the crowd)*

*(SAGE has her back turned toward KEITH, getting ready to walk out)*

**SAGE**

I think I'll take my chances.

*(KEITH grabs her arm, forcing her to face him)*

**KEITH**

You don't want to do that.

**SAGE**

*(SAGE glares at KEITH)*

And why not?

**KEITH**

*(sighs)* There are people planning to kill him. And trust me, they're not going to care if you're in the way. They'll just get rid of you too.

*(SAGE reaches under her dress, grabbing a sharp dagger. She points it toward KEITH)*

**SAGE**

You'd know a lot about that, wouldn't you?

*(KEITH doesn't flinch. He pulls his own sheathed dagger out from his sleeve)*

**KEITH**

Did he hire you?

**SAGE**

No.

**KEITH**

You his wife?

**SAGE**

*(disgusted)* Ew, no.

*(KEITH raises an eyebrow)*

He's my boss.

*(SAGE lunges toward him. KEITH blocks her arm with his)*

**KEITH**

Why're you even trying to protect him? Do you not know what he's done?

*(SAGE continues attacking while KEITH continues to block her attacks)*

**SAGE**

What? He's killed people?

*(scoffs)*

And so? Are you saying you haven't?

*(slices)*

We're assassins, we kill people to make money. What makes you think you're better than he is?

*(Fireworks are heard from a distance, along with chatter and applause. KEITH finally tries to attack SAGE. She dodges)*

**KEITH**

At least *I* don't kill without reason. Can you not understand that I was trying to save you?

**SAGE**

That was kind of you, but I don't need saving.

*(SAGE tries to kick him. She hits him in the arm)*

I can take care of myself.

**KEITH**

*(He groans)*

That's exactly what the others said.

**SAGE**

Others?

*(KEITH lunges at her, flipping her over. SAGE lands on her back on the floor)*

**KEITH**

I suppose you're new. I've been trying to kill Hunter for a long time. And over the years, I've encountered... other people trying to protect him.

*(SAGE gets up and runs toward him, her dagger slices his cheek just before he jumps back)*

**SAGE**

Guess you're bad at your job.

**KEITH**

The fact you've heard of me proves quite the opposite, actually.

*(pause)*

He's just very... skilled at evading. He's like a snake.

**SAGE**

Who hired you to kill him?

**KEITH**

No one did.

**SAGE**

You're working alone?

**KEITH**

I am. He isn't just some *target*. This is revenge. He killed my younger sister when she was eight...without a reason.

**SAGE**

*(scoffs)*

You've said it yourself, assassins don't care if someone's in the way.  
She was probably just caught in the crossfire.

*(KEITH goes to slice at SAGE. He cuts her mask. The two pieces fall to the floor. KEITH freezes)*

**KEITH**

Sage...?

**SAGE**

How do you—?

*(DRACO ENTERS with a long weapon. He makes his way toward the couple)*

*(KEITH removes his mask)*

**SAGE**

Keith...? You're... No. You can't be—

*(DRACO stabs KEITH in the stomach)*

**KEITH**

*(gasps)*

*(Blood trickles down from KEITH)*

**SAGE**

Keith!

*(SAGE catches KEITH as he falls. They fall to the ground together, she lays his head in her lap. Tears begin rolling down SAGE'S face)*

**DRACO**

I've got to admit, you lasted longer than I thought you would.

*(chuckles)*

Ah, finally. We're done with this Aspen problem.

*(He pulls a phone from his pocket and dials)*

Yes, it's done.

*(To SAGE)* We've gotta get out fast, before everyone comes back in.  
Dump the body, 'kay?

*(Chuckles and turns around)*

See ya later, Rosie.

**(DRACO EXITS)**

**SAGE**

Keith... Keith, stay with me...

*(sobbing)*

Don't close your eyes. Please...

*(KEITH blinks up at her, and smiles weakly)*

**KEITH**

It's okay.

*(He reaches a wobbly hand up to wipe her tears)*

I'm glad I didn't kill you...

*(KEITH slowly lowers his arm)*

**SAGE**

I... I love you... Please stay with me... Please...

*(KEITH's arm falls to the ground and his eyes close)*

**SAGE**

Keith...Keith?!

*(SAGE sobs loudly, cradling KEITH's head in her arms)*

**END**



## Gloom

**Grace Zhu**  
Painting  
9th Grade  
*Independently Working*



# Short Story

# Daisy

*Phoebe Mendota*

## Daisy

The Second of November, 1923. Walt Disney had signed a contract 17 days prior, officially founding The Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio. 15 days before this,

The Great Kantō earthquake ravaged Tokyo and Yokohama, leaving thousands dead and missing. Warren G. Harding, the U.S. president who presented Marie Curie with a gram of radium in 1921, had passed away from a sudden and unexpected heart attack in San Francisco two months before.

And...

Irene Emerson turned 16. She was pretty, with big, sad eyes and shining hair that she wore close to her head in tight curls. A doll, they called her. A gift. And she was. A doll, that is. She was quiet, but could sing like a bird if the company requested. She was always making sure everyone around her was comfortable, never thinking of herself. Each birthday, all she asked for was caramels to share with her little brother, Peter. No new dresses or red lipstick. Just a little bag of candies.

Irene's mother was increasingly worried for her daughter, her constant need to please others, her seemingly non-existent concern for herself, but her father was perfectly content being waited on hand and foot. He thought she was a doll, too.

1

She opened the paper bag and smiled. Half a dozen candies, individually wrapped and sweet smelling. "Caramels?" Her brother shrieked. "Chocolate," her mother said. "They didn't have no caramels." Irene watched her brother's face fall, but hers remained a perfect, porcelain mask. "It's alright, Pete. Mama bought them special, you'll like them." She knew he wouldn't. But her father was

watching. “Run along and don’t spoil your dinner,” Irene said evenly. Peter took the bag and stalked away. Irene rose from the table and nodded to her mother. “I think I’ll join him,” she said. “Oh, alright,” her mother replied.

Before she could get to the door, though, she was stopped by her father’s rough hand on her shoulder. “Don’t let that boy eat them all,” His fingers dug into arm, but she didn’t flinch. “He’ll kill himself, all those sweets.” Irene bent her head in a slight salute and pulled away from his iron grip. Only after she pushed open the storm door and felt the cool evening air on her cheek did she brush her fingers over the angry sores that covered her back and shoulders, where her father had placed his hand moments before.

## 2

Peter had never been fond of chocolate. Irene found him by the pond, sitting with the family dog, Daisy, tearing dried maple leaves and letting the pieces dance above the water in the wind before settling on the misty surface. She let a shudder run down her spine. Winter was coming fast, and their mother wouldn’t like it if Peter caught cold. “Pete, come along. You better wash up. And thank Mama for the treats.” She sat beside him, drawing her knees up to her chin. “I didn’t even have them. Daisy did,” he tousled her scruffy fur. Irene frowned. “Those were nice chocolates, Peter. What’s Mama going to think?” Peter shrugged. “She’ll think I ate them.” Irene had hoped she might have one. They were her present, after all. But if they were gone, they were gone. “Right. Come along, we’d better get to bed, it’s getting dark.” She grabbed his arm and tugged him back up the hill to the house, pausing only for a moment to take one more breath of the night air. Then they were swept up into the warmth and bustle of the house, leaving the little dog to chase flies by the pond.

## 3

Something woke her, some whisper in the wind, something drawing her from unconsciousness. She rubbed her eyes and combed her fingers through her shining hair, slipping out of bed. Irene tiptoed down the staircase, making sure not to rouse her

mother, asleep on the sofa. She didn't sleep in the bedroom, not anymore. Irene stood there for a moment, listening to her calm, steady breathing before pushing open the back door and silently heading out to the pond. The night air was harsh and cold, but it was a relief from the stuffy interior of the house and she gratefully let it fill her lungs. When she came to the pond, she stepped carefully into the shallow water amid the recently fallen autumn leaves and twigs. The water was frigid and brought her out of her grogginess. Look left. Look right. The trees seemed closer and darker in the moonlight. The house loomed behind her, promising something darker still. And yet, she had to return.

She stepped backwards, cattails brushing her ankles. As she reached the edge of the water, her foot grazed something that didn't feel like a stick or a weed. She reached into the icy water and pulled out a loop of leather, damp and cold. A dull piece of aluminum dangled from it, and as she read the name engraved on its surface the collar dropped from her shaking hands. *Daisy*. Irene backed away from the water, her whole body shaking now. The pond seemed to stretch and spin, waves of murky water creeping up the hill as she tried to scramble away in vain, catching her up in a whirlwind of sound and movement and dragging her down, down to the depths of hell with her poor dead dog. Irene shook her head. Just clear water. Crickets, the occasional ribbit from a brave toad. The irony struck her, then, and she almost laughed. The dog was rotting beneath the surface, minnows nibbling on her ears and beastly things filling her stomach and lungs and eyes. But everything seemed so... calm. Everything was perfect. It had to be perfect. *She* had to be perfect. So she took up the collar again, running her fingers over the rough leather before hurling it into the still, perfect water. Now it was alright. Now it would be alright.

She didn't wake until the late morning sun hit her cheek and she heard the familiar sound of Daisy padding down the hall to her room, her little yip as she pounced on the twin bed, and her tongue like sandpaper on her nose. Irene smiled, still dazed and glassy eyed from sleep, but as her eyes opened and her grogginess fell away, she realized that something was wrong. Her shoes, tossed to the floor

instead of neatly placed just beneath her bed like always, her quilt twisted as if she'd been fitful in the night, her hair in tangles. And as Daisy nuzzled Irene's hand in delight, she finally knew what it was. She shrieked and shoved the dog as hard as she could, sending her skidding across the hardwood floor in terror. This couldn't be.

She had seen the collar, felt it in her hands, cried for the dog and cried for her part in the accident. It wasn't a dream. Wasn't a hallucination, not a trick of the light. It couldn't be. Irene slipped on her shoes and practically tumbled down the stairs, pushing open the door to the yard and not minding if she woke her mother. She was stopped short by the sight of her parents, not asleep but standing a few feet from the pond with four or five men and women she didn't recognize. Her mother was clinging to another woman, older and dressed conservatively. A few of them, including her father, were wading into the water, and one seemed to be praying on the shore. As Irene got closer, she saw what they were seeing. A speck of red and blue in the water on the far side of the pond. "What is that?" she asked no one in particular, voice trembling. Her mother turned, and Irene could tell she had been crying. "Go back inside," the older woman said. Her voice was commanding, but Irene didn't move. "Please," she managed. "Tell me what that is." But Irene didn't need an answer. The people in the water had reached him, were now lifting him out of the water, and his face... she could hardly bear to look at his once bright face, now a sickening blue-gray. And his eyes... they were once so full of light. But now they were dull and swollen and lifeless. She then remembered the woven leather necklace he wore, the one with the metal token from the war. And that he never took it off. And that Daisy's collar was made of rope. Her stomach turned and she ran back inside, back to the relief of the indoors and the warmth of home. Except now it wasn't home. Not without Peter.

5

Irene sank to the ground, eyes screwed shut, mind spinning with ways she could make this right, make it okay again. But no matter what she did or thought or told herself, her brother was dead, and it was her fault. Not an accident. Because she knew what an accident looked like. An accident is feeding all your sister's chocolates to the dog because you don't understand birthdays or

presents or sharing. An accident is leaving the dog to play after dark instead of bringing her inside. But it's your fault when you drown your brother in the night because you wish things were different, you wish your father didn't beat you for things that weren't your fault and you wish your mother would stop him even though it isn't her fault that he beats her too. And then you begin to think that it is your fault that he hurts you, so you do everything you can to show him that you're good, but he still hurts you and still hurts your mother and the only person he doesn't hurt is your little brother, and something inside of you wants him to feel every little bit of the hurt you do. So in the night when all the world is quiet, you bring him to the pond and while he's half asleep you show him where all the frogs hide and where the best skipping stones are, and then you hold his head under the calm water and watch him thrash and push against you but you don't let go, not until the thrashing stops and the last bit of light in his eyes fades to black. And then you gently push him into the water and he floats like a feather at the water's whim to the center, then the far side of the pond. That's your fault.

6

A doll, they called her.

7

### November 4th, 1923: The Strange Case of the Emerson Family

On the morning of November 3rd, Peter Emerson Jr., the four year old son of Pete and Marie Emerson, was found drowned in the pond behind the family home. Official reports say that no foul play was involved, but many darker suspicions have been circulating due to the deaths of Pete and Marie the same day, midday and evening respectively. The confirmed cause of death was declared murder early this morning. The killer? Their own daughter, Irene, who bludgeoned her father to death and later shot her mother, before turning the rifle on herself. Updates will be published as they come.

## **Tekiel The Life Caller (Angel of The Resurrection)**

*Robert Bik*

Tekiel silently soared across the sky as the warmth of the new world began to open its eyes. He listened to the tone of the earth and the hum of revived presence. Where once only grief had dwelled, now anticipation sparked. Yet, Tekiel sensed this was not the end of his missions to call. The awakening had begun, but was not yet done. There were still places where light did not fall.

Far Below, beyond the wilderness of nature, there was a great city whose joy never rose, whose lamps never burned. Tekiel saw it like a black spill on the bright white canvas of the living world. He descended there.

The city gates hung open. Doors stood ajar. Dust coated the windows. The people had not passed all at once. They had faded. Hope had left them, and life's burdens followed. Tekiel sauntered through streets where silence was thick and still.

At the center of the city was an open courtyard. There stood an old man hunched over a hollow bowl of water. He dipped his fingers into it, though it was dry. When Tekiel approached the man did not lift his head.

"I have heard the stories," the old man muttered. "They say the dead rise again. But water can not bloom from stone. Life can not return to where it has been forgotten."

Tekiel knelt beside him. "You returned here every day," he said. "Why, if you believe nothing can change?"

The old man's voice quivered hesitantly. "Because I fear forgetting my family more than disappointment."

Tekiel placed both hands over the bowl.

"Memory is its own seed," he said.

From his palms, warmth spread. The dry stone bowl filled slowly, silently, until water shimmered within it. The surface reflected not the gray sky, but a golden radiance. The old man's breath caught.

Tekiel spoke again, his voice quiet but firm. "You remembered them. And so they remember you."

The statues knelt around them. What had once been carved in marble began to glow with inner fire. The old man gazed in bewilderment as heavenly figures gathered at the edges of the courtyard. Not physical bodies. Not ghosts. Light-forms. Presences.

A woman stepped forth, shaped from gentle luminescence. Her face held kindness.

The old man whispered, "My wife."

Behind her, two smaller figures. Children, smiling.

The old man pressed a hand to his chest, eyes melting. "I never thought..."

Tekiel finished the sentence for him. "...that love endures even in silence?"

The old man nodded.

A nearby young man passing through the square unnoticed, stopped in awe. He saw the light figures, and more people began to gather. Slowly, the empty city was filling again with the unseen.

Tekiel straightened. "Not all awakenings come through trumpet or thunder. Some come quietly, through remembrance."

Word of Tekiel's legend spread like dawn across distant lands.

In one valley, a mother awoke at night to hear her grandmother laughing softly in the next room. Her grandmother had

passed decades before.

In a fishing village, a child claimed she dreamed of her lost grandfather teaching her his favorite song. When she woke, she still remembered them.

In a distant monastery, monks in meditation felt warmth behind them like the presence of old teachers. Lessons once forgotten became clear again.

Tekiel sensed the widening of his work. It went beyond graves and beyond bodies. It reached stories. Into memories. Into echoes.

But with expansion came resistance.

Not far beneath the earth laid deep caverns where lost spirits wandered. In there, an ancient being stirred. A figure shape made of frost and shadow, known as the Keeper of the Stillness. This spirit had grown strong in the age when hope faded. Without sorrow, it weakened. Without despair, it thinned.

Tekiel's awakening threatened its dominion.

It rose through cracks in the earth, unseen to mortal eyes. It tasted the air and found it too warm, too alive. It hissed into the winds. The leaves shuddered frigidly.

Tekiel heard that whisper. A cold tone. A challenge.

"You bring imbalance," the shadow voice murmured. "Not all should rise. Some must remain silent."

Tekiel did not fear, but he paused. His wings dimmed slightly. "I did not break the cycle," he answered. "I restored its missing half."

The shadow replied, "Life without death is chaos."

Tekiel lifted his trumpet, but did not sound it. "And death

without hope is cruelty.”

The Keeper recoiled at that word.

Hope.

It was the one force it could not swallow.

Their conversation did not erupt in rage. It swayed like two tides crossing.

“You call them back,” the Keeper whispered. “They belong to stillness.”

Tekiel shook his head. “They belong to the living.”

“And what of you, Awakener?” the Keeper asked. “You too had once been silent. You too waited. Did you not belong to stillness as well?”

Tekiel considered this. His waiting had indeed lasted eons. But his stillness had not been death. It had been preparation.

“I waited,” Tekiel said. “because the time was not yet right. But now the time has come. Not for ending, but for returning.”

A hush fell.

The Keeper faded back into the earth. His retreat was not defeat, but caution.

For the first time in its long existence, doubt crept in.

Tekiel resumed his journey.

He walked the boundary between life and memory, between waking and rest. He soon learned that resurrection did not mean returning all spirits back in flesh. Many were meant to remain as light forms, as watchful presences, as whispers and guides. Some returned as intuition, some as dreams, some as sudden inspiration

Tekiel understood.

His role was not to reverse death.

His role was to prevent oblivion.

Years passed in human time, though Tekiel did not count them.

Eventually he came to a quiet hill overlooking the sleeping city, now gently alive with unseen warmth. Beside him appeared the messenger of light who had first summoned him.

“You have changed much,” the radiant one said.

Tekiel nodded. “And yet there is more to do.”

“Yes,” the messenger said. “But not alone. Others have heard the awakening. Other callers are stirring. You are no longer singular.”

Tekiel lifted his gaze to the horizon and saw faint figures walking the skies in distant places, each carrying their own kind of trumpet, bell, or torch.

He felt peace at that.

“Will the world remember me?” he asked.

The messenger smiled. “Some will recall the origin of your name. Others will feel your presence. Many will never know you at all. And that too is correct. For resurrection is not about the caller. It is about return.”

Tekiel breathed in the living air. The world was warmer than when he first arrived.

He closed his eyes and felt its pulse.

People would die.

People would grieve.

But now, no heart would remain alone in darkness.

Somewhere, a memory would light a spark.

Somewhere, a voice would murmur through a dream.

Somewhere, Tekiel would stir again.

For awakening was no longer an event.

It had become an ongoing ripple.

Tekiel, once forgotten in the halls of heaven, now moved with purpose among the living colors of the world to carry a truth that would outlast empires and outshine endings:

every life echoes

every story continues

no spark of being

ever truly disappears.

## the cracks that grow

*Ava Jewett*

Mara's new apartment looked like it had never been touched by human hands. The walls were sterile white, not a single brush-stroke visible in the pain. The floors were polished to a cold gleam, reflecting the ceiling light in perfect symmetry. Even the air smelled scrubbed, as though the vents inhaled bleach and nothing else. The silence pressed down on her like a weight, humming in her ears, empty in a way that made her feel more ghost than person. It was supposed to feel like a fresh start, but all Mara felt was that she had been buried alive in cleanliness.

"It was supposed to be a fresh start," Mara kept repeating. That was the promise of relocation. No history. No clutter. No trace of who had been here before. Only purity, only symmetry, only perfection. Yet as Mara dragged her suitcase across the polished floor, she could not shake the thought that she had walked into a coffin disguised as a home and that she was not meant to live here but to decay slowly in silence.

When she entered the bedroom, she stopped. A mirror stretched across the far wall, tall and unblinking, built into the plaster so tightly that it looked less like furniture and more like an organ of the building itself. But its surface was not flawless. A crack split through the center, running jaggedly across the glass like lightning froze mid-strike. The line caught the fluorescent light, turning it into something sharp and cruel. She knew exactly what this meant.

Broken objects were forbidden. The Ministry had decreed it long ago: no blemishes, no stains, no fractures. Inspectors came weekly to ensure compliance. A citizen with a damaged object received a correction notice. Three notices meant disappearance. Nobody asked questions about the disappearances. Nobody dared. Their apartments were sealed, their files erased from the Records Division. Their names were stripped from the system as if they had never lived. Never even existed. The city did not tolerate flaws. Because flaws were contagious.

Mara should have reported it. She knew the rules. If she filled the digital form tonight, the Ministry's workers would arrive tomorrow, remove the mirror, and install a new one without a trace. It would be as if the crack never existed. She should have welcomed that.

But instead she stood there, staring at her distorted reflection, unable to turn away. Something about the fracture felt alive, and for a moment she thought she saw her reflection blink a second too late, as though the glass were breathing. Her heart stuttered in her chest.

Her fingertip rose before she could stop it, pressing against the crack. The glass was cold, colder than the room, colder than bone. For a heartbeat, she thought she felt a pulse beneath her skin. She gasped and pulled her hand back, trembling. The mirror stilled again, her reflection staring back with eyes too wide and mouth pulled into a grimace she hadn't made. She whispered to herself that she imagined it, but the words felt hollow. She lay in her bed that night beneath the buzzing fluorescent light and dreamed of cracks spreading across her body like veins of glass.

Work was no escape. Each morning Mara dressed in her Ministry-issued uniform: grey from collar to cuff, pressed until not a single crease remained. Wrinkles were punishable. Stains could bring inspection. To live in the city was to live without error, and the uniform made that the law visible on every body. In Records Division, the Ministry's motto glowed above the entry gates in blinding white letters: PERFECTION IS ORDER. ORDER IS MERCY. Mara read it every day and hated herself for the way her heart shrank under the words.

Her task was erased. She sat inside a narrow cell. Walls smooth, desk seamless, chair bolted to the floor. And stared at a glowing screen. Every hour, new files arrived. Citizens flagged for correction. Buildings deemed outdated. Accidents and crimes the Ministry no longer wanted to exist. Her job was to delete them from the record. Once gone, they were gone forever, no trace left but the faint ache in Mara's chest as she pressed the delete key again and again. The Ministry said she was cleansing the city. Mara felt like

she was burning it alive, piece by piece.

Her supervisor drifted between the cells, reminding them of their duty. “Perfection is mercy,” he intoned, his voice a lifeless hum. Mara repeated it in her head sometimes, not because she believed it, but because the silence of her thoughts scared her more. She wanted to believe there was mercy in order. She wanted to believe she could make herself better, smoother, flawless like the city demanded. But the more she tried, the more jagged she felt inside, like the cracked mirror was spreading through her veins.

At night, the apartment swallowed her whole. She told herself she checked the mirror only to see if the cracks had worsened, but the truth was simpler: she couldn’t look away.

The fracture warped her reflection into shapes the Ministry would never approve of. Her smile bent downward like a wound. Her eyes widened until they looked like dark pits. Sometimes her face vanished altogether, leaving only lines and fragments, as if she had already been erased.

She began writing in her notebook, small exercises to convince herself she was still in control. She filled pages with blanks:

The city is \_\_\_\_\_

People are \_\_\_\_\_

I feel \_\_\_\_\_

At work, she forced herself to write what she was expected to: safe, united, strong. But at home, in the suffocating silence of her apartment, the truth spilled out: empty, tired, wrong. Her handwriting grew frantic, words crawling up the edges until the page looked diseased. She wanted to believe writing was therapy, that she was trying to get better. But every word only carved the hole deeper.

The more she looked in the mirror, the more she saw not just herself, but other faces flickering in the cracks. Faces broken into shards, reaching for her. They were too fast to be real, too strange to

belong to anyone she knew. But they lingered in her mind like scars. She whispered into the glass, begging it for answers. All it gave her was silence.

On the fifth night, she stayed in front of the mirror too long. Her reflection tilted its head a heartbeat behind hers. The crack shimmered faintly, catching light that did not exist in the room. Mara's chest tightened, her breath shallow. She whispered the words she had been writing all week: I am \_\_\_\_\_.

The silence stretched. Her reflection lips parted a second after hers, curling into something cruel. Then she heard it: faint, sharp, inside her head or inside the glass, she couldn't tell. Worthless. The word struck harder than any correction notice could. Mara staggered back, spine pressing against the wall, her notebook slipping from her hands. Her reflection blinked in sync again, bland and ordinary. But the echo of that word rooted itself inside her. Worthless. She wanted to fight it, to say she was more, that she could change, that she could help others fight against this obsession with perfection.

But even as she thought it, the weight of the word crushed her chest. The harder she tried to believe she could improve, the more she knew she never would.

The next morning, a correction notice was waiting in her cell. Its surface gleamed sterile white, her name etched across the top like a wound. Mara Llyeve. Subject displays inefficiency. Subject risk imperfection. Her blood turned to ice. No one survived three correction notices. She had no one now.

Her supervisor glided past her, gaze sliding over her like she was already erased. Mara's fingers trembled on the keyboard, deleting history as commanded. But every file felt heavier. Every erased name screamed louder in her head. She wanted to stop, to save every one of them, but her hands obeyed, striking the delete key again and again. Each press sounded like nails on a coffin.

She thought of the mirror, of the whispered word. Worthless. Maybe the Ministry was right. Maybe she was failing the system.

Maybe she had always been failing. Still, beneath the drowning shame, something flickered. A hatred she hadn't dared to feel. Hatred for the Ministry, for its lies, for its perfect cruelty. Hatred for herself too, for bowing her head and obeying.

Nights grew longer. The mirror was her only witness. She started screaming into it, asking it questions the Ministry never answered: why must everything be flawless? Why do I exist if only to erase others? But the glass only fractured farther, the crack now webbing outward like veins. Her reflection face warped into doppelgangers of herself. Smiles too wide, eyes too hollow, skin peeling at the edges. Sometimes it laughed. Sometimes it mouthed the words she couldn't hear.

She stopped eating. Stopped sleeping. Her notebook filled spirals, with jagged words: wrong wrong wrong wrong. Pages tore under the pressure of her pen. Her hands shook so badly she couldn't bear to write anymore, but she couldn't stop. If she stopped, the silence would crush her. If she stopped, she'd disappear.

One night, she carved the words into her own arm with a shard of glass from the mirror. Worthless. Watching the blood drip down her skin gave her a strange calm. For a moment, the voices felt quiet. For a moment, she felt in control. But the guilt surged again. The Ministry demanded perfection, and she was proving herself more broken every day.

By the second Correction Notice, Mara was beyond saving.

The power glowed like fire in her hands: Subject is defective. Subject displays instability. Defective. Instability. The Ministry's words pierced her deeper than the glass had.

At work, she began to break down. Her deletions slowed. Files remained open longer than they should. She saw faces in the names. Strangers, the innocent. She imagined them begging her not to erase them. For the first time in her life, she pressed save. Her heart raced with terror and thrill. She had just committed treason.

Her fear almost made her vomit, but it was too late to turn back. If she was going to be erased, she thought, then she would take something with her. Something bigger than herself. Something the Ministry could never hide. She began collecting fragments: unauthorized copies of deleted files, half-erased histories, the secrets of a city built on lies. She hid them in her notebook, between her spirals of madness. The lines between survival and destruction blurred. She no longer cared which side she stood on.

The third Correction Notice came like a death sentence. Termination Pending. Mara stared at it, numb. There was no point in pretending anymore. No flaw was forgiven, no mistake survived. The city demanded her perfection and found her unworthy.

But instead of collapsing, something inside her hardened. If she was worthless, if she was broken, then she would show them what brokenness could do. She dressed in her flawless uniform one last time, pressed until it gleamed. She carried her notebook like scripture: Inside it, names, histories, truths the Ministry had destroyed. Imperfections made fleas in ink.

She walked into the Records Division with a smile that felt like a blade. Her supervisor looked at her, so puzzled by her calm. Mara moved faster than she ever had, shoving her notebook into the main terminal, forcing the system to open her forbidden files. Alarms blared instantly, red lights flooding the cells. Every erased name, every erased memory, every erased truth exploded back into existence on every single screen possible. The perfection of the Ministry shattered in a wave of chaos.

The guards came, faceless in their black masks. Guns raised, voices shouting. Mara laughed. Ragged, broken, desperate. Because at last, the cracks in the system showed.

She infected their flamed order with imperfection, and they couldn't erase it. Her reflection in the terminal glass screen stared back at her. This time it did not smirk. This time it did not whisper. It simply looked back at her, whole and unbroken, as if she finally caught up to herself. She almost cried.

The first bullet tore through her chest before the thought could finish. She staggered but kept laughing, blood spreading across her perfect grey uniform. She slammed her hand on the terminal one last time, ensuring the files spread beyond her reach. The screens flickered with names, faces, lives the ministry had tried to erase.

Her final breath was a whisper: imperfection.

Then the world went dark.

## The Finger On The Welcome Mat

*Atavia Boyle*

Rain had been tapping the window all morning, and I'd been avoiding opening the front door because I knew the cold would creep in. But the doorbell rang- two short chimes - and I sighed, dragging myself to see who it was.

No one.

Just a single object sitting on the welcome mat.

At first, I thought it was a piece of raw chicken. Pale, limp, oddly shiny under the gray sky. Then I noticed the jagged end, red smeared all over it, dripping into the little grooves of the mat.

My stomach flipped.

It was just a finger.

Not just a finger - a bloody finger, the kind that would make my mom scream and my little brother post it on Snapchat with a "yoo Look what I found" caption. I crouched down, my hand hovering, and hesitated. Touching it feels like crossing some invisible line between "grossed out" and "part of whatever this is."

But curiosity wins over common sense every time. I picked it up. The skin felt rubbery and cold, not quite like real flesh, more like the eraser end of a pencil. It was lighter than I expected. and the blood didn't smear. That was my first clue. Fake.

Still, I glanced over my shoulder, like someone might be watching me react.

There's no note. No box. No explanation. Just a single fake finger. I carried it inside, setting it on the kitchen counter next to the fruit bowl. Against the bright yellows bananas, the red looked darker, almost real. I kept staring at the fingernail. Slightly yellowed. A little too specific in its detail for a dollar store Halloween

prop.

Then I remembered something.

Last week, someone had been breaking into lockers at school, leaving random junk behind: a bent paperclip, a single playing card, a ticket stub from 2019. Nobody knew who was doing it or why.

The finger had the same energy, useless, weird, unsettling. I stuffed it in my hoodie pocket and walked to my neighbors porch. Kyle was always in on dumb pranks, and he was the most likely suspect. I rang his doorbell, and when he opened the door, I held up the finger between us.

“Yours?”

He blinked, then smirked “Guess you got the next clue.”

“Clue for what?”

He grinned wider, pulling a folded sheet of paper from his back pocket and handing it over. The paper was damp, edges curled, scrawled in black Sharpie were the words:

“Follow the trail. Winner takes all.”

I looked down at the finger in my palm. It suddenly felt heavier, even though I knew it wasn't real. My heart picked up.

“Trail to what?”

Kyle didn't answer, just nodded at my pocket. “Better hurry, someone else might get there first.”

The rain outside turned into a steady drizzle, and as I stepped back into it, I realized something: I wasn't grossed out anymore.

I was hooked.

And whoever left this finger... They knew how to get my attention. The paper had an address lightly penciled on the back—two streets over. Of course, Kyle would make it close enough to walk but far enough to feel like a mission.

By the time I reached the place, my hoodie was soaked through.

The house looked abandoned—peeling paint, sagging porch, the whole horror-movie starter pack. And right on the top step?

Another fake finger.

This one had a tiny metal ring on it, a cheap plastic gem glued on crooked. When I picked it up, the gem rattled in its setting.

Someone had actually put effort into this.

Under the porch railing, another note was taped:

GOOD. YOU'RE NOT AS SLOW AS THEY SAID.

“They who?” I muttered.

No answer, obviously. Just rain.

I shoved the finger in my pocket, but something across the street flashed, like someone catching light with a mirror. I squinted through the rain.

“Hello?” I called.

No reply.

But I did see someone—a hooded figure slipping behind a fence across the road.

Because my brain has zero survival instinct, I followed.

The backyard behind the fence was muddy and quiet, with a

rusty swing set creaking in the wind. On the swing sat a small wooden box tied with twine.

A note was tucked under it:

OPEN IF YOU DARE.

OR QUIT HERE LIKE THE OTHERS.

Others.

My fingers felt shaky as I untied the twine. Inside the box was a Polaroid photo—fresh, still smelling like chemicals.

It was me.

Taken earlier that morning.

Standing on my porch.

Holding the first finger.

Someone had been watching me. Up close. From the street.

My stomach turned.

At the bottom of the box was another note:

NEXT: 112 STONEBRIDGE.

MIDNIGHT. COME ALONE.

YOU'RE CLOSER THAN YOU THINK.

A twig snapped behind me.

I spun around, heart slamming into my ribs.

A figure stood a few feet away, hood up, rain dripping off their sleeves. I couldn't see their face. But I recognized the shoes—

white Nikes with a green swoosh.

Maya from my class had those exact shoes.

“Maya?” I called.

The figure stepped closer.

Not Maya.

Too tall. Too broad.

They didn’t speak. Just pointed past me at the box and Polaroid.

Then they stepped backward into the shadows, disappearing behind the trees. When I ran after them, no one was there. No footprints except mine.

My heart wouldn’t slow down.

Whoever this was, it wasn’t Kyle.

This was someone else.

By midnight, the rain had stopped. The sky was a weird purple, the kind that shows up after storms, like the world’s been reset wrong.

112 Stonebridge was an abandoned community center—broken windows, graffiti, tall weeds swallowing the walkway.

A single light flickered inside.

Every nerve in my body screamed to go home, but my feet took me forward anyway.

Inside, the air was damp and cold. Something dripped steadily in the distance. The floor creaked under my weight.

In the center of the room was a circle of fake fingers—ten, maybe twelve—arranged neatly like some kind of ritual.

Inside the circle lay a spiral notebook with my name written on it. Not printed. Handwritten. In looping, clean cursive I didn't recognize.

I picked it up.

Inside were pages of photos. Of me. Different days, different places. Walking home. At my locker. In the grocery store parking lot. Sitting in the cafeteria.

My hands shook as I turned each page.

I had no idea any of these moments were being watched. On the last page, written neatly:

YOU FOUND US.

A floorboard creaked behind me.

I turned slowly.

Figures stepped out of the shadows—hoods up, faces hidden. Seven of them, forming a half-circle around me.

One stepped forward and dropped something at my feet.

A finger.

A real one this time.

Blood dripped onto the floor, bright and thick.

I stumbled back, my breath catching. “What—what is this? What do you want?”

The lead figure crouched. When they spoke, their voice was calm.

“We wanted to know if you’d follow the trail,” they said.  
“Most people stop at the first clue. But you?” They tilted their head.  
“You don’t run away. You walk right into the dark.”

My throat tightened. “Why me?”

“You were chosen.”

“For what?”

The figure stood, and even without seeing their face, I could feel them smiling.

“For the next game.”

Every light in the building went out at the exact same moment.

And the last thing I heard before everything went black was the quiet sound of someone clapping.

## A Letter Sourced from the Pontus Archives

*Ava Reita*

[A letter sourced from The Pontus Archives, Brazil, an institution that uses abstruse and paranormal documentation to further support academic research.]

Statement transcribed on 1 July, 1964.

Reviewed 22 January, 2074.

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Edward,

I preface by apologizing for leaving your previous letter unanswered. I have been indisposed, and frankly, I wasn't certain whether you still existed. Time is difficult and esoteric circumstances have called for my immediate withdrawal from people whom I used to know. But, if in the off chance that you do still remember my existence in what I can only assume is a different reality, I wish to explain why I have been distant.

There's something about the undeniable blackness of water in the middle of the ocean that makes you strain your ears to listen. Listen to the steady push and pull of the undertow, flowing to a beat not unsimilar to a pulsating heart. As you know, I have always been fascinated with the methodical thrum of the currents paired with the smooth, ink-like darkness of what's below. The water rolling and ebbing, following the rhythm of something very large and likely immensely old, reminded me that I was an insignificant blot in the constant evolution of the universe, unable to do anything but watch the violent waves crash against the side of the offshore oil rig that I once believed harbored protection. The moon played its part in turn, masking the unnerving possibilities of near-lifelike tides in a more logical argument, but science is always preferred to explain the state of the unknown. Better to be safe than admit that perhaps the darkness between stars just found a new home in the reflection of the ocean beneath me. It swallowed everything. Light attempted to gently caress the surface at times, but still didn't dare sink lower than eye level. After all, the impermeable blackness is a force of

nature. And I was far too deep in its territory.

Far off the coast of Guyana, there is an oil rig in the Atlantic Ocean. Its conductor pipes are burrowed 7,000 feet below the surface and have been corroding into the sea bed far below for decades.

This is where I was given the gracious opportunity to work, despite having a bachelor's degree in petroleum engineering. Even while being overqualified, it is immensely difficult to find a job in London, so I knew that I needed to look elsewhere if I were to support us. Regardless of my financial need, I'm slightly ashamed to admit that I was constantly bad-tempered and perhaps not as careful as I could have been with monitoring gas levels and making sure the drilling equipment was in "tip top shape" as my supervisor, Desmond Gaddis used to say. On top of that, I had been giving the higher ups trouble for weeks regarding the safety measures implemented on maintenance work, so when they alerted me that my job included patching an oil leak on the subsea system platform, I didn't have it in me to be surprised. It was always the young workers who still had color in their hair that were chosen, so I could be sure that this decision had been a targeted selection.

Newly-acquired saturation divers like myself were given a day of debriefing, which consisted mainly of seventeen or so rig managers explaining the protocol to us in a droning tone usually reserved for new recruits. This one had a chip on his shoulder so pronounced, I was surprised he didn't topple over and needless to say, once he started leading the discussion by explaining decompression sickness, I started to nod off.

When I awoke, the galley seemed to be completely empty. I was fairly surprised at this and had to take a moment to fully gather my surroundings before questioning the situation. Had they just left me there and locked up without sparing a second thought? The lights hadn't turned off, but they seemed dimmer than usual, as if a shadowed hand was gripping each one, reluctant to let any light drip into the sparsely furnished room. The crates housing drill pipes and other tools seemed warped, casting thin shadows on the metal flooring. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that I was rather unnerved and got out of there as quickly as possible. In my haste, I tripped on

a puddle of foul-smelling water, and fell down, crashing onto my back. As you know, I am no longer a young man and had to lay there for a few minutes, trying to recover from having the wind knocked violently out of me. I was worried that I would not be in a fit condition for diving tomorrow, but my agitation dissolved when the rig's nurse practitioner, Andrew, found me lying there ten minutes later. He gave me a few percodan tablets before inquiring if I was under too much pressure. I left in a haste, embarrassed by his assumptions of my inability to work but only now do I understand the cruel irony all too well.

Normally, saturation divers live in a metal tube at the bottom of the ocean for twenty-eight days to allow their bodies to accommodate the work but as this was an emergency maintenance job, I was being sent down into the highly pressurized depths with minimal training to attune my body to the condition of being 7,000 feet under the water. Of course I wondered if this was breaking protocol, but I was already on probation for my untoward attitude and mismanagement, so if I could redeem myself while simultaneously avoiding being dismissed from the job, I would have done most anything, however questionable.

The expedition started off normally enough. This was a solo mission, so I was to embark the support vessel exiting the rig's trunking space. Near the base of the vessel, lay the diving bell I would board to take me to the conductor pipes connected to the subsea system platform. It was metal and cylindrical; shining as if it had been polished that morning and devoid of rust or any sign of decay. Its hollow insides were big enough to store two to three people, but this specific expedition was to be attempted solo since it was uncomplicated, though urgent. There were tubed valves on the sides, built to let out used air and balance deep-sea pressures while being lowered. Descending to the work site, it was to act like a sort of elevator. Or a tomb.

At the top of the bell was a pulley made to lift it onto the diving deck. Upon being opened, the hatch in the bottom let out a small puff of stagnant air as it was propped open against the deck. Boarding it that day remains distinct in my mind because of how choppy and violent the water was. Normally, it's dangerous to send

a crew in when the waters are unpredictable but I must have been relatively expendable at that point. On top of the unsafe conditions, I remember thinking how strange it was that the rig manager was facilitating the expedition, yet emphasized the inefficacy for hypoxic gas or full pressure suits. I felt strangely naked, being lowered into the ocean protected by nothing but a simple diving suit and a copper helmet.

The bell slowly sank into the water, held by nothing but the pulley system and I saw the sea encompass the entirety of the vessel, covering the windows in its crashing waves. A sea mist surrounded the vessel and I remember thinking how I should have been too South for this evaporation to occur. Before being completely swallowed by the ocean, I realized that I could faintly make out a sound somewhere in the distance. It might just have been nerves causing me to hear things, but I could have sworn it was a whistle coming from the support vessel above, resonating and haunting to the effect of a boatswain's call.

Despite being directly above me, it sounded piercing, yet distant, as if being blown through an echo chamber. I will not lie to you Edward, it unnerved me to no end because in my head I couldn't help comparing it to a death knell's toll.

I kept a close eye on the circular window of the bell after it sounded, feeling rather jittery. From my vantage point, I couldn't help but notice how calm the ocean was under the surface. And not just in the fact that the aggressive currents seemed to have dissipated. Sharks are always an abundant threat in warm waters, but through the flashing torch mounted on the top of the vessel, I could see no life. Not even a single school of fish made their presence known as the only sign of movement was that of the rotating light above, the only thing cutting through the surrounding darkness that only seemed to physicalize as the bell crept deeper. The only view worth mentioning was the barnacle-encrusted sides of the oil rig's pillars and the occasional bubble from methane gas released from the sea floor.

After what felt like a lifetime of lowering, the bell finally paused ten feet from the subsea platform. After taking a steadying

breath, I unfastened the iron bolts connected to the hatch below me and exited the bell. I expected the water to be warm due to how far South I was, but the chill struck me to my core instantly. The pressure from being so deep was a dull, throbbing pain in my ears, squeezing me on all sides in an almost daze-like agony, crushing me in a constant, blunt motion. Without the white-hot of nerves reacting accordingly, I will admit that it took me longer than I had previously anticipated to get used to it, and even when I did, I made sure to fasten the umbilical cable to my suit and swim to the platform before I lost consciousness.

I found the hole almost instantly. It was almost as large as I, with sloped edges and angled corners thrusting out. There was a bevel around the lip of the hole and signs of severe material displacement, jutting out. Even with all logic and my brain telling me otherwise, there was no mistake about it—this hole had been pierced from the inside out. But that didn't make any sense. Only an excavation drill could have made a hole this large and this precise but the closest means of acquiring the materials needed to accomplish such a feat was 102 nautical miles away. To increase my bewilderment, the hole fully went through the entire pipe, and I could see the darkness of the ocean on the other side perfectly fine without any obstructions.

I got closer, wishing to assess the damage before deciding on a course of action. It's impossible of course, but the water seemed to be getting even colder as I swam towards it. I gripped the side and swam through, wanting to gauge the amount of damage on both sides. It was a foolish move of course. Any sane person perhaps would have known not to swim into the violently punctured hole, especially one that was leaking methane gas, but I didn't wish to take the time swimming all the way around an 150-odd foot pillar and likely succumb to decompression sickness sooner. Admittedly, this is the excuse bouncing back and forth in my brain, but really I think I was just curious and rather drawn to it in an inexplicable and irrational way. After all, fear and fascination often bleed into each other, coloring your perception of what is perhaps the logical solution to a very illogical situation.

I was all at once hit with weight pressing in on all directions

and the deep primal knowledge that I was somewhere I didn't belong. The pressure must have been causing me to hallucinate, because on the other side of that hole was nothing but darkness. It was as if the oil rig was on a cliff edge and there was nothing more than the infinite vastness of what lay underneath. Any fear I might have possessed was dampened by the overwhelming confusion I felt in that moment as I stared out at this phenomena that by all accounts, *should not have existed*. But then, something stared back.

This is the point where I started to get light-headed and realized with a numb feeling of grim acceptance that I no longer felt the tug of the cable behind me. The darkness severed every sense, not just my vision, and I started to realize that I was no longer alone. Something was silhouetted against the nothingness, somehow even blacker than the murk surrounding it. Its outline was distorted but from what I could tell, it was colossal. It seemed to be the blurred figure of a huge *something* stretching from one corner of my vision to the other, only slightly darker than the actual water that I was certain was going to entomb me. The currents shouldn't have been as harsh as they were, and you may think me crazy, but the way they were rushing almost seemed sentient, crashing into me as if it were thousands of separate tactile feelers.

But out of all this torment, what hurt the most was the sheer hopelessness I felt about ever reaching the surface again. The sun was a distant memory, tinged with so much distress, it left a bitter taste in the back of my throat. The last thing I thought of before I blacked out was you, Edward, and how there is nothing I wouldn't have done just to see your smiling face again. And then it was gone, and I had been utterly consumed by the vertigo of the ocean's inky depths.

In this realm of half-consciousness, I was adrift. I felt the blood drain out of every orifice and get replaced by the muted heat of thousands of nerves unanimously screaming in agony. I was senseless, devoid of any feeling except for the constant throbbing of being pulled apart and then put back together over and over again. I was being physiologically and mentally destroyed, disassembled by what I can only describe as the inescapable belief that I was going to die alone in that void-like darkness. I was glass, silhouetted against

nothing but the constellation of my own cracks and I knew then that it was not simply the darkness that held me in its iron grip, but the view of nothingness, abstracted.

I awoke in the sick bay of an offshore oil rig in the Atlantic Ocean, far off the coast of Guyana. Now, this is the part where you turn this letter in to the police and introduce it as the ramblings of a madman. There was no sick bay on the oil rig I worked at. It was relatively small, and scarcely had enough room for living quarters, much less a first-aid clinic. The lone nurse had always bemoaned his medical accommodations and operated out of a closet-sized 'office,' but yet here it was, and there I lay. I awoke to see Andrew monitoring a cardiachoscope, surrounded by medical appliances. Out of date instruments sure, but instruments nonetheless. Noticing my awareness, Andrew looked at me with an expression of utmost suspicion and asked me who I was. Now, I understood that we weren't the most familiar with each other, but I had been working there for almost eleven months at that point, and told him as such. His eyes narrowed and left to fetch what I presume was the rig manager. Desmond Gaddis walked in, accompanied by the nurse and some other young men who I knew rotated SAT diving shifts on the seafloor as well. Undoubtedly emboldened by their numbers, they each drew the courage to tell me an unnerving story.

Gaddis had sent down two divers in a diving bell to do a routine checkup on a pipeline when they noticed a diving suit sinking behind the rig's conductor pipes with a severed cable trailing gently behind it. Upon further inspection they had realized there was someone in that suit and sent a message to the surface team through line signals, alerting them of an emergency situation. They pulled me to the surface, rushing me to the infirmary after realizing that I was still alive, and found some peculiar markings on me. Red welts and bruises in spiraling patterns covered the entirety of my body, making it nearly impossible to take off my diving suit as it seemed to be fastened to me, stuck in the indentations of them. To say I was completely addled was an understatement, and that was before they dealt me the final, disorientating news.

Tomorrow is January the eighth, 1964. But that simply can't be true since the date I submerged was on the twenty-first of the

very same month. That was two weeks ago. Needless to say, I was dismissed to the mainland the following morning with no money, no prospects, and have been wandering London since. I've tried to find my friends, to talk to them about what happened, but they seem different somehow, more distant, weary. I can't find my old flat, or several buildings that I *know* are supposed to be here and I knew everything was wrong when I found an old boatswain's whistle wash ashore. You are the only person I can turn to now. If you even still exist. I went to the bank this morning to withdraw some money for transportation, but they told me on no uncertain terms that there are no records of me being within their system, or for that matter, even being born.

The spirals begin to itch when it rains and if I close my eyes, I can still feel the grip of one thousand darkened tendons beckoning for me to return.

Write back soon.

All my love,  
Rhodes Clarke  
07/01

# Perfect Failure

Bridget Ballard

I hate my math teacher.

Surprisingly, it has nothing to do with the fact that he teaches the stupidest subject in human history (when am I going to “solve for  $x$ ” in the real world?) and everything to do with the fact that he’s also a motivational speaker. I like to call that “professional lying” because motivation is really just a bunch of lines to convince people to get themselves together. He has a podcast called “Mr. Meter’s Math for Magnificence” that he likes to remind us of every class. No one listens to it. But he keeps trying.

Mr. Meter has these motivational posters hung up around his classroom that say things like “subtract the negatives and add the positives” and “it’s about how you work, not the number you get” and “laughter  $\times$  love + curiosity - hate = happiness.” There’s one poster in the front right corner of the room, directly in front of my desk and exactly at my eye level. It says, “It doesn’t get easier; you just get stronger.” I hate it, because it reminds me of a memory that I still can’t make sense of, and I hate it when I don’t understand things.

It was the first class on the first day of school. Most of my classmates were still half asleep at 8:00 on a mid-August morning, but my mind had been buzzing with the anxiety of another year of grades and homework and sleep deprivation. I was the only one sitting erect in my chair, fingers twitching, when Mr. Meter strode into the room.

He was unnaturally tall and bony, like a skeleton, with icy eyes that pierced your skin. The suit he wore was bright purple and covered in indigo math symbols. In his large hands, he twirled a meterstick as if it was a baton.

He took a moment at the front of the room to silently survey his class, turning the meterstick round and round. Then, in the blink of an eye, he smacked it against his desk. A sharp crack split

the silence. My heart lurched.

“Math,” Mr. Meter began, holding our attention with his cold gaze, “is a subject of strength.”

He picked up a stack of textbooks and began walking through the rows of desks, dropping a book on each one. THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. Like a loud heartbeat.

“Math,” he repeated, “is a subject of strength. Why, you may ask? Because it gives us hope.” Each sentence was punctuated with the THUMP of a textbook. “It is the blueprint to the universe. Math—if you do it right—shows that there is a way to reason through every problem. Because math is behind every problem. And math is behind every solution. Knowing how to find solutions gives us hope. The ability to hold on to hope is what makes a person strong.”

When Mr. Meter got to my desk, he stopped. His sharp eyes pierced mine. “Are you strong?” he asked me.

“I have straight A’s,” I offered, hoping to impress him.

He dropped the last book on my desk. I jumped.

“Math is a problem that will never get any easier,” Mr. Meter announced, walking away from my desk. “You just get stronger, because you will be filled with the hope of finding a solution. Because math is not in your brain, but in your heart.”

Mr. Meter never complimented my grades.

The poster in front of my desk appeared the very next day.

\* \* \*

I’ve been in his class for a month now. Every morning begins with that senseless poster. Whoever made that up must’ve had a real hard life. People don’t get stronger. Things just get easier.

The bell rings. Mr. Meter steps into class and slams the door violently behind him, causing me to jump. His suit is bright blue, covered in scarlet A-pluses. “Welcome,” he says, “to another day of math with Mr. Meter.”

The class is silent as he waltzes to the front of the room, twirling the meterstick.

“As you may recall,” Mr. Meter continues, “we took our first 50-point exam last class. Those exams have been graded and will be passed out to you today. But before I do that, I must first make something very clear.”

He walks to the front of the room, props the meterstick against the wall and with exaggerated slowness, opens a bright pink dry erase marker. When he is done writing, he caps the marker, grabs the meterstick, and turns to the class. My brow furrows. The left side of the board says WORTH. The right side of the board says ACHIEVEMENT. They are separated by a symbol:  $\neq$

“This,” Mr. Meter uses the meterstick to point to the left side of the board. “Is your worth. This,” he points to the right side, “is your achievement. The things that happen to you. Your grade on this test is an achievement.” He smacks the center of the board. “They are separated with a symbol. That symbol means that your achievement—your grade—and your worth are not proportional. Your grades do not affect your worth.”

I scoff. My future disagrees. My GPA disagrees. Hell, I disagree. My achievements—President of three clubs, finalist at speech nationals, star soccer player, straight A student—define my value.

“Why is there a disco ball?” Someone asks. I look up. I can’t believe I didn’t notice the large, sparkling sphere hanging from the ceiling.

“That,” Mr. Meter explains, “is because we must celebrate our efforts. People tend to do too much work and not enough celebrating.”

The class is silent as Mr. Meter stalks to his desk and opens his laptop. Slowly, students begin to whisper as he pitter-patters away on the keyboard, and the room soon fills with the buzz of anticipation. Kids lean across desks, making predictions. Who's going to get the highest score? They all want to know. I can't wait to see the looks on their faces when they find out it's me, the quiet girl in the corner, who consistently gets a perfect score with effortless grace. Someone kicks my chair.

"What do you think you got?" The girl behind me—Kylie Heart—whispers. Her brown hair is styled the same way we did in elementary school, even though we're both sophomores: pigtails, tied up with sparkly pink ribbons. We called it "best friend hair" in third and fourth grade. I remember how she cried the first day of fifth grade when I threw away my sparkly bows and wore a single braid instead of piggies. She had apparently decided to never grow up. That's why I'll always envy her.

"Probably a perfect," I say.

"You always get perfects," she replies.

I shrug. "It's easy. Plus, I'm smart. What else would you expect?"

"Like Mr. Meter said: more parties and less work."

My brow furrows. "What?"

Kylie shrugs and the sequins on her pink top glisten.

"Sarah." Mr. Meter begins calling names. "Michael. Kylie."

"That's me!" Kylie hops out of her chair and skips to the front of the classroom, making her pigtails bounce. She looks dumb in her purple skirt and mismatched, knee-high socks. After grabbing the paper, a grin spreads from her right ear to her left. "Oh, wow!"

"What did you get?" I ask when she sits down.

“I got a C+!”

“Are you gonna retake?”

She looks at me like I’ve just sprouted a second head. “Why would I do that?”

“It’s a bad grade,” I say.

“It’s worthy of passing!”

I nod. She may be happy, but at least I have the skills that matter. I understand how to have a successful future: perfect GPA, good college, high-paying job. In the long run, I’ll be the one who is satisfied. She’ll be the one struggling to keep up. I’m better.

“Abigail.”

At the sound of my name, I stand up, walk to the front of the room, and grab my test. Look at the grade. For a moment, all I can do is stand there. Tears well in my eyes as the realization sets in. I feel dizzy. It can’t be mine. It’s not.

“Mr. Meter, this must be a mistake. This isn’t my paper.” I hand it back to him.

He looks at it. “Is that not your name?” He points to the top of the page with his bony middle finger. My stomach churns. It is my name.

“I’m an A student,” I tell him. I meant for my voice to sound strong, but it cracks, whimpery and weak.

“That, my dear, is such a silly and small identity to have.”

My face burns. I fume beneath Mr. Meter’s unwavering blue-eyed gaze.

“Do you have any other questions?” Mr. Meter’s voice slices the silence.

It was a ridiculous thing to ask. I have so many questions, but none that have answers. My hands curl into fists, the sounds of the crumpling paper sharp in the quiet stillness of the room. Without a word, I turn and hurry back to my desk.

“You alright?” Kylie asks.

Another ridiculous question. I don’t answer. Instead, I uncurl my crumpled test, smoothing out the wrinkles. I stare at the letter scrawled across my paper in scarlet ink. How could you have done this, *Abigail*? Frantically, I flip through the pages of the test, searching for answers. Wrong, wrong, wrong. Everything I felt confident on, every answer I thought I had, every question I thought I could solve is wrong.

My chest burns. Uncried tears blur my vision. I am an A student. Abigail always gets A’s. That is the reputation I have given myself. My achievements are my defining traits, the things that make me extraordinary. With shaking hands, I flip back to the front page of the test. The single letter drawn in scarlet ink reveals the person beneath the arrogant assertions.

F.

F for feeble.

F for futile.

F for failure.

Everyone says deep breathing will help you feel grounded when your mind is out of control. No one tells you how to feel grounded when your body is out of control. I try to breathe, but a vise tightens around my chest. I’m shaking. My heart pounds, throwing itself against the prison bars that are my ribs. I want to escape. But there is no escape from failure.

*Failure is in your future. You can’t avoid it.*

I can.

*You can’t.*

I can.

*You can't.*

I don't understand Mr. Meter's next words. The buzzing in my brain is too loud. *Your future holds failure, Abigail. Everything you ever care about will result in a failure. You can't get through life without failing.*

"Please f—king stop," I say to the voice in my head. .

"Abigail, do you need something?" Mr. Meter's question is full of genuine concern. I didn't expect that. I don't know how to respond.

"I...I need to use the restroom," I say. My voice is strained. "Please?" I wipe my puffy eyes and look at him, praying that he will agree.

Without hesitation, Mr. Meter nods. "Whatever you need. I'm here for you."

I let out a sigh of relief. Push back my chair. Leave the room.

*You know I'm right.*

The hallway is empty. Gray lockers line the walls, and the carpet beneath my shiny mary janes is charcoal. A light flickers above me. If I stay here, I'll get a headache.

I don't go to the bathroom. Instead, I round a few corners and find a secluded nook by a window where the golden sun beams onto the floor. I place my hand against the glass and look out of it. People come and go below me.

A car speeds by, going far too fast for the little country road at the front of the school. I wonder what it's running from. And if it will escape.

There aren't escapes in this world, Abigail.

I bite my nails. The voice in my mind is wrong. There are escapes. I can escape failure.

*You can't stop it. Failure comes for everyone.*

The sun gets hidden behind a gray cloud. The window grows cold.

There's a squeaking sound behind me. I turn to see a janitor wheeling a bucket with a mop in it. His back is painfully hunched, and he shuffles by with the speed of a snail. I watch as he makes his way through the hall and takes his cleaning supplies into the boys bathroom. A wave of nausea washes over me at the thought of spending my days cleaning up diarrhea and vomit, and I brace myself against the wall. I can't help but wonder what got him there. Was it one large failure? Or a succession of small mishaps?

*This failure is the first. The catalyst to a steep downhill slope of your life, your future, your wellbeing. You will keep failing. You will fail over and over again, and that failure will consume you. You will become a failure. You are a failure. Give up now.*

I'm shaking again, partially from the anxiety, partially from the force of the cool air from the vent above. Goose bumps rise along legs. I wish I hadn't worn my pleated, plaid skirt. Pulling at my perfect braid, I sit down, curl into a ball, and cry. I cry and cry as I feel my life slipping, slipping, slipping out of my control. There's no air to breathe. My body convulses.

I am not in control.

The bell rings. A steady stream of students flows into the hallway like a river. I know I should get up, go to class, like any normal person would do, but I can't. I'm stuck in a downward spiral of terror.

Then someone sits down beside me. "Shhhh, I'm here, Abigail." Arms wrap around my shoulders. Again, Kylie whispers, "I'm here."

A warm feeling expands in my chest. I don't know why Kylie is here, sitting next to me in her piggies and tutu and mismatched, knee-high socks, but I'm thankful not to be alone. I lay my head on her shoulder. She rubs my back, and as my sobs begin to quiet, I notice that her body is shaking too. We sit that way for a long time, crying and hugging until the tardy bell rings and the halls go quiet.

"I can't control it," I whisper. My voice is hoarse.

"None of us can," Kylie replies.

"I'm a failure."

"You are not a failure." Kylie says, bopping my nose with her finger. Her voice is calm, confident, despite the tears that trace her cheeks. "Failure happened to you. You can't control the things that happen to you. You can only control how you happen to the world. And you, Abigail, will happen honorably."

I shake my head. "How?"

"Because you're worthy. And you don't need achievements for that."

I smile. Just before I stand, I notice, "There are mascara stains on your shirt."

Kylie glances down. "Mascara happens!"

I laugh. And she does, too. I can't remember the last time I laughed with someone.

Kylie swipes her fingertips across the skin beneath her eyes, stained onyx by her running mascara. She stands, smooths her purple tutu, and offers me her hand. "Let's go make something great happen."

I'm unsure. I don't think I'm ready. You'll never be ready.

I know that. But I take her hand and stand up anyway.

It's the first Monday after fall break, five minutes until the bell, when I finish the last question on the retake. I spent two months with an F in honors algebra. My parents didn't mind. In fact, they said failure is an important experience.

During the entire fall break, Kylie helped me study. We'd walk down to the nearest Starbucks with our books and calculators. I bought a pumpkin spice latte and she got hot chocolate. We'd sit down and work for an hour before going for a walk in the park, leaves crunching beneath our boots—hers were pink and mine were brown.

We didn't study at all yesterday, because Kylie believes Sunday is a day of rest. So, we only went for a walk, listening to the leaves crunch and breathing in the crisp autumn air. She reminded me, "You can't control the things that happen to you, Abigail. But you can control how you happen to the world. Go happen honorably."

I told her that I would. And I did.

It's time for me to turn in my test. I don't think I'm ready. You'll never be ready.

I know that. But I stand up anyway.

Mr. Meter smiles when he takes my test. His suit is green, covered in golden pencils and metersticks. "Good work, Abigail," Mr. Meter tells me, even though he hasn't even looked at the test. When I point this out, he says, "I can tell you've learned a few things since you saw the F."

I shrug. "I've had a few good teachers."

He sets my retake on his desk. I'm startled to see a hint of a smile on his lips. "How do you feel?"

I smile and answer honestly. "Stronger."

## **I Still Love You (Even When You Break Everything For Me)**

*Archer Taylor*

The angels are hungry tonight,” Ginger murmured as he stared out the window.

Harry looked up from the book he was reading to glance uncertainly at his lover. He’d been saying things like this for two weeks now. He was considering boarding up the window at this point.

“What do you mean they’re hungry?” He asked, already regretting the question.

Ginger didn’t avert his eyes from the glass. “They’re hunting. They’re looking for lost souls.”

Harry set his book down and walked over to the other. Gently, he put his hand on the other man’s shoulder. “I think you should move away from the window now.”

Ginger nodded and stood up, but he didn’t take his eyes away. They remained fixed in something Harry couldn’t see. He sighed and guided his boyfriend away. Ginger didn’t resist, but he didn’t look away until Harry steered him into another room, one without an opening to the outside.

After putting his lover to sleep, Harry returned to the sitting room. Before sitting down, he drew the blinds shut. No use having them open. Not when “hungry angels” were out.

Harry loved Ginger to hell and back, but he’d been acting strangely these last two weeks. His odd new phrases were just one of many recent changes. He got cold easier. His limbs were stiffer. He struggled with fine motor skills. He wasn’t as used to eating or drinking anymore. He was quieter, and he got less sleep. His vision was worse, and he took longer to process the things that happened around him.

The most important change was in his eyes. Ginger’s eyes

had been full of light and wonder. The word *lively, full of life*, didn't begin to encompass them. Now, they were empty, hollow. If before they had been full of life, now they were lifeless.

But what did stay constant was the color. His eyes were mesmerizing. They reminded Harry of the sky on its clearest, sunniest day. He felt dizzy just looking at them. That, at least, remained the same.

Harry sat in his chair and re-opened his book. If he focused hard enough, he could ignore the flapping of wings outside the window.

The night was moonless, and the stars were concealed by clouds. It was the best night for what they were doing. Shiloh perched on the branch, careful not to get his wings caught. Lara stayed on the ground.

"This house contains one," Lara reported. Their tone was purely neutral. Angels with names, the Ones Who Take Lost Souls, rarely moved their voices across the spectrum of emotion. Everything was a simple observation. "A lost soul dwells within."

Shiloh moved out of the tree and glided to the ground. It tucked its wings against its back and stood by its companion. "We cannot enter a mortal's home without permission." This obstacle often got in the way of their targets. But not tonight.

No, tonight, Lara let out a solemn four-note whistle. It carried across the breeze, looking for ears to hear it. The pair flew a bit closer to the house. Again, Lara whistled, closer to the windows this time.

Shiloh gazed at the house as it paced around the perimeter. With its angelic vision, the walls kept no secrets. There were two inhabitants that dwelled within. One's soul shone a soft, pale yellow. This was one that they could ignore. The other's soul glowed a light, forlorn blue. The Lost. It was crying out for help. If it listened close, Shiloh could almost hear it.

Lara whistled another four notes and joined Shiloh. “You see it.”

“I do.”

Inside, the Lost seemed to stir a bit. Lara let out another four notes. It stirred some more. “It hears us.”

“It does,” Shiloh agreed. It was no longer looking at the Lost, however. Instead, its gaze was turned toward the other soul. The One Who Kept The Lost Away. The Keeper. Objectively, the act of Keeping was wicked. A Lost never became Lost on its own. A Keeper always led it astray, often in spirit form.

It did not matter the motivation. Keeping was detestable, and the Ones Who Take Lost Souls were created to combat it.

Lara repeated the whistle. The Lost stirred and rose inside the house. Once it was outside, the Angels would be able to help them.

Harry heard the window slide open in the bedroom. This was wrong. Ginger was meant to be asleep. Of course, he’d had trouble resting ever since two weeks ago. But Harry was sure he’d been asleep when he left the room.

Outside, he heard something. A mournful sound. A sad four-note whistle. The one that the angels used. The angels... Ginger had said they were hungry tonight.

With a start, Harry leapt out of his chair, slamming his book down. He sprinted out the door and around the back of the house. In front of him, two angels stood. Ginger was there, too, near the wall. His eyes were wide and unblinking despite the light that emanated from the Ones Who Take Souls Away.

Harry ran and placed himself between the angels and Ginger. “Ginger,” he whispered, trying to mask his fear and desperation. “Go back inside.”

Ginger didn't move. His stare remained fixed in place. One of the angels stepped forward.

"You are the Keeper."

Harry looked at the mask that covered the hunter's face. It was silver and had a long beak. Neither its voice nor its face betrayed any emotion. "The Keeper?"

"The one who disrupts this world's order for his own selfish desires."

Harry could see where this conversation was going. "I only did what was right—"

"You have rendered this soul Lost and Desolate," the angel cut him off. "You have brought it from its rest with hopes that it would remain with you."

"You don't understand. It wasn't his time, I—"

"You do not decide when one's time is."

Unnoticed by Harry, the angel's partner, the One Who Gathers, had crossed around to Ginger. The angel snapped its fingers. Ginger blinked, and suddenly found himself standing in a void.

He was not really in a void. His body still stood by the back of the house. The angel simply wanted to talk without the protests of the Keeper.

"Ginger Whitman." The use of his last name made the boy flinch. He'd never had a great relationship with his family. "You may not know this consciously, but you are a Lost Soul."

Ginger opened his mouth to deny this, but nothing came out. He shut it again.

"You have been Lost for two weeks," the angel informed him. "Normally, the period takes no longer than four days. However, we

were preoccupied. The delay was out of our control.”

Ginger didn't know what it was talking about. Despite this, he felt something stir inside him as it continued.

“I am going to ask you a question,” it stated. Ginger could do nothing but nod. At the edges of his vision, the void appeared to be cracking.

The angel came closer and put a clawed hand on his shoulder, careful not to scratch him. “What happened to you exactly three weeks ago?”

The void shattered. Ginger fell to the ground, clutching his head. He screamed. His eyes had opened even wider, the blue spilling out of them in a burst of light.

They were back in the real world. Harry ran toward his love and dropped to the ground next to him.

Ginger ceased screaming. Sobs racked his body.

Harry turned furiously toward the angels. “What have you done to him!?”

Before either hunter could answer, Ginger— the Lost Soul, the Prey— answered in a broken whisper. “I remember.”

Harry had to swallow the sudden lump in his throat. “You... what?”

“I remember three weeks ago,” he repeated. “Three weeks ago, something... happened.”

“What happened?” The Angel Who Gathers asked, though it sounded more like a statement.

Ginger had to stifle the next wave of tears that came. “Three weeks ago...”

Harry steeled himself, knowing what was coming.

“Three weeks ago... I died.”

It had been an accident, what happened. They hadn't been paying attention. They had been walking in the forest. Their hands had been entwined.

Harry had just told a joke, and Ginger was laughing. Neither noticed that the ground was unstable.

Ginger had let go of Harry's hand, just for a moment. Just to make a gesture. The dirt had given out under his feet.

Perhaps if they'd still been holding hands, Harry could've saved him. Perhaps if they'd still been holding hands, Harry would've died, too. But they hadn't still been holding hands, and Ginger died in the impact of the fall.

Harry couldn't let go of him. Not now, not yet. They'd had their whole lives ahead of them. He'd climbed down, gotten the body, and dragged it back to their house. Then, he set about searching for a way to disrupt the cycle. To rewind Ginger's time.

He couldn't let go of him. Not now, not yet.

It took a week to gather all the materials. To be sure he had everything, that he knew the exact way the words were pronounced.

It had been a long time since he'd studied these things. After all, he'd sworn he'd never again do this unless under dire circumstances. And dire these were.

When the spell worked, it looked as if the air around the body was warping, twisting itself into new shapes until it spat out a soul. Ginger's soul. It was as blue as the young man's eyes, as blue as the sky on its clearest, sunniest day.

He couldn't let go of him. Not now, not yet.

So he took the soul and re-bounded it to its body. Ginger awoke with a shuddering gasp and no memory of the accident that had almost taken him away.

Harry had embraced him tightly. Ginger, though disoriented from his sudden return, was more than happy to hug back.

It had worked. He had brought his most important One back. He had defied the cycle of life and nature.

He didn't know that this would be such an issue for those who upheld it.

He couldn't let go of him. Not now, not yet.

Harry felt the same desperation he had when he gathered the materials to bring his beloved back to life. Ginger, upon recalling his death, had started to cry harder. Harry held him tightly.

The angels watched the scene unfold before them. There was nothing they truly needed to do now. Once a Lost Soul realizes they are Lost, they will wish to return to the afterlife. It is only natural.

When Ginger spoke again, his voice was a strangled whisper of its usual self. "Harry... I want to go back."

Harry shook his head furiously. "No. No, you don't. That's just the Angels talking. You said they were hunting tonight."

He had said that. Harry hadn't realized how serious his partner's warning about Hungry Angels had truly been.

Ginger made a small, pained noise. Harry hadn't realized that he'd tightened his grip so much. He could already see bruises forming on the skin. Another change. Ginger bruised so much easier now.

"You're not going," Harry insisted. "You can't."

Shiloh, the One Who Hunts, took note: "You are possessive

of the Lost.”

“He’s not lost!” Out of Harry’s mouth, the title of Lost meant nothing. A simple mortal word for misplaced objects. “He’s right here! He’s supposed to be here!”

Lara, the One Who Gathers, shook its head. “The Lost is dead and has remembered its death. It has voiced the desire to return to the Land of the Dead and be content. It has no Earthly Ties. You cannot change that with your False Love.”

False Love. The words were not toned as an accusation, but Harry felt the weight of it nonetheless. He felt anger contort in his gut. “My love for him is real. It’s true. How dare you suggest it’s not!”

“We do not mean that you don’t love him,” the One Who Gathers clarified. “False Love does not mean you lack care. It means that you are too possessive to let go when you must.”

“You must let go of the Lost Soul,” the One Who Hunts stated. “It will be restless until it is allowed to return to the place it belongs. Do not be surprised if it no longer loves you after its Being has become shattered from the strain.”

Harry shook his head as the Angels spoke. He couldn’t let Ginger go. Not now, not yet. There wasn’t enough time, his death wasn’t supposed to happen, it was an accident, he shouldn’t have to leave yet because of a fluke.

“I won’t let you take him.” He glared at the creatures before him. “You don’t understand everything I did to get him back. He can’t leave. It’s not his time. You’re Wrong. He can’t leave yet.”

“Harry.” Ginger’s voice. It was so soft, such a contrast to the hard and energetic way he usually carried it. It reminded Harry of when they first met seven years ago. “You need to let me go.”

“No. No. I can’t. Please don’t say that.” Harry could hear his voice cracking as he looked into his beloved’s eyes. They still made

his head spin, even now, as they begged to leave him. “It’s not fair. You weren’t supposed to die!”

He still held Ginger tightly, not daring to loosen his grip. Not daring to lose him now. The way he held him while kneeling brought back memories; reading his books as Ginger laid in his lap, listening. Always so attentive. Always worried when the characters were in danger. Always sad when a character died. Always happy when Good prevailed.

Perhaps Good was prevailing now, but it did not feel like it. Nor did either man feel happy or fulfilled.

Ginger reached up and placed a hand on Harry’s cheek, gently wiping his tears. “It’s okay. I’ll see you again soon. I’ll wait for you.”

“Wait for me...?”

“I will. As long as it takes until I see you again.”

“No, no! I can’t live in this world if you’re not in it! Don’t do this to me!”

“Darling.” Ginger never used pet names. This wasn’t right. “It’s time to let go.”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, trying to stop the breakdown he could feel coming. Ginger slipped lightly out of his grip.

“Wait!”

Ginger froze. Harry looked into his dull blue eyes, the same ones that had captivated him all those years ago.

“Please... don’t go...”

Ginger gave him a sad smile. “I promise I’ll wait for you. I love you. Don’t forget that.”

Harry could not respond. He could only watch numbly as Ginger stood and willingly went to his fate.

“Goobye, Harry. I’ll see you soon.”

As the Lost Soul faded and the Angels left to guide him, the world fell silent. All of nature heard a final whisper of the No Longer Keeper as he tried to let go. As he tried to believe the words that came out of his mouth.

“Goodbye, Ginger Whitman... I’ll find you again someday...”

# Shine Bright in Silver

*Jenny Bao*

The wind howled in the starless night. The moon shone against a pitch black sky, stained a violent shade of crimson. On nights like this, Aurora feared that the sun may not have the courage to rise again the next morning.

She sat quietly, huddled underneath the towering willow tree. Its cascading branches did well to conceal the shimmering wings that adorned her back. Aurora hated them. The sparkling silver only set her apart.

There was only one standard in Arteshire. Wings were gold, never silver, never bronze. Gold. Aurora had been destined from the day she was born to be different. Silver eyes, black hair cascading down her back. She would never fit in.

Fairies weren't supposed to represent such dark colors. Silver belonged to the dragons. The semi-translucent fairy wings that fluttered across the sky every morning and night should never be silver. Aurora didn't fly. Her wings didn't glow warmly in the early morning sunlight, they didn't spread a glow across the town when they caught the moon's shine. Aurora had long since accepted it.

She wore leather instead of silk to hide the cold shimmer of her silver wings. She hid whenever she could. Aurora couldn't remember the last time her parents had loved her. Perhaps they never had.

Aurora had thought about running away. Many times, in fact. But she could never bring herself to leave the cold indifference she knew so well. There were legends, of course. Stories of far away lands where fairies and dragons lived in harmony. Where the sunlight shone off of bronze, silver, and gold alike. But they were only myths. That's what Aurora had to tell herself.

Because she couldn't leave. She couldn't allow herself such dreams. They would only hurt her.

Aurora's hand twirled the leather buckle of her jacket, flipping the clasp back and forth. A Sunflower Jay chirped somewhere in the distance, a soothing melody that sounded like liquid gold.

The lamp lighter fairies would be out soon, carrying crackling torches of bright flames. They would light up the streets, and Aurora would go home. That was the rule. "Be back when the lamp lighter fairies come out," her parents had said.

Aurora pushed herself off the ground, dusting the dirt off of her skirt. She walked home, past vast forests of shimmering trees, over bridges which covered ice blue streams. The world around her was always so beautiful, so pure. Like a landscape to be cherished. But she couldn't cherish it. She couldn't love it. Not when the very same forests seemed to whisper about how she didn't belong. Not when the fish in the streams mocked her with their golden glow

It wasn't right, how easily everyone else could fit in. It wasn't Aurora's fault her wings were silver. So why was she punished for it? Then again, the perfect world she lived in wasn't always so perfect.

And then she was home. The moss lined rocks that made up her parents' cottage were so familiar she could find that place in her sleep. Aurora slipped through the door—which was always unlocked—and tip-toed to her bedroom. Her parents would be furious if she woke them up.

Her bedroom was unlike any other part of the house. Silver glinted in every corner, soul blue fires lit the room. While the rest of the house glowed warmly in the candlelight, Aurora's room looked like an ice princess's dungeon. She loved it. She loved getting to be herself, getting to pour herself into something.

Sleep came easy that night, unlike many others. Something simply felt... Different. The day had been exactly the same as every other, but Aurora fell into a dreamless sleep for the first time in years.

Aurora woke to sunlight peaking through the tinted window

panes. She blinked groggily, squinting to see. Wait a minute... That wasn't sunlight. A bright white light continued to fill the room, creeping into every crevice, leaving no shadows. "What the—" Aurora cut herself off as she looked up.

A young boy, looking to be around his teenage years, sat on her windowsill. On the inside of the windowsill. His snow white hair was cropped messily around ear level, and the waves looked as if he'd just woken up.

He had ice cold eyes, bluer than the sky on a cloudless day. His skin glowed, that bright white that Aurora couldn't look away from. He didn't look like he belonged in Arteshire. He didn't really look like he belonged anywhere.

"Who are you?" Aurora questioned hesitantly. She sat up, rubbing her eyes just to check that she wasn't dreaming. The boy just laughed.

"I'm whoever you want me to be," he replied breezily. His voice was light, not cold, but refreshing in a way that couldn't be described.

"And if I want you to be gone?" Aurora asked, gaining confidence.

The boy smirked, holding up both hands in surrender. "Woah, just hear me out for a second. Then, if you still want me gone, I'm gone."

"One luminaris," Aurora counted, "go, get out."

"Okay, more than one second. Please, I've been waiting for this opportunity for a long time,"

Aurora blinked. "You've been waiting for a chance to sit on my window sill and watch me while I sleep for a long time?"

The boy, or maybe not a boy, Aurora didn't really know, nodded.

“Yes.”

A few moments passed, a random Sunglow Jay was singing its bright melody again. Aurora finally spoke, “Then talk,”

“Right, thank you,” the boy started.

“Wait,” Aurora said, “what’s your name?”

The boy paused. He hesitated before whispering, “Fynn,”

“That’s it?”

The boy—Fynn—nodded. “Ok, Fynn. Go on,”

So Fynn continued, “I’m from the North. I’m a dragon born, but I have feathered wings.

I ran away when I was eight years old, and that was the last time anyone up there ever saw me. I saw you sitting beneath that tree a few orbs ago. The orb was at full glow that night, shining so high in the sky and so vibrantly I didn’t even need my dragon sight to help me see. And you were there. I could see the silver shimmer of your wings under your jacket, and I knew. I just knew that I had to talk to you,”

“So now you’re here, at my bedroom window,” Aurora deadpanned, “I believe you, said no one ever,”

A draft whipped through the open window, blowing Aurora’s silky black hair in every direction. Oh great, now she looked like a crazy person in front of the boy she thought was cute. Wait, no. Don’t go there, she told herself. Yeah, no, she went there. He was cute, okay?

“Just give me a chance, please?” Fynn slid off of the window sill, extending a hand towards Aurora. “There is somewhere out there where we can both be ourselves. We just have to find it. All I’m asking you is for us to find it together,”

Aurora stared at him blankly before returning to her senses. “And if we can’t find it?” she whispered, “If it doesn’t exist?”

“Then we come back here,” Fynn said, “and your parents won’t even notice you’re gone,”

The sad thing was, her parents wouldn’t notice she was gone. Or, at least not until they needed someone to do the dirty work. But Aurora wasn’t about to admit that. “What if they notice?” she asked. “What then?”

Fynn let out a sharp laugh that floated through the air like a melody. “Oh sweet darling, don’t lie to yourself. They don’t value you here. If they notice, they’ll look for you for a few minutes, but not much longer. So come with me. Find a new place to call home,” Fynn stretched his arm out further, his palm flat and inviting.

There was a beat of silence that seemed to stretch for an eternity. “Look, this whole thing sounds awfully inviting, but I can’t just uproot my whole life and run off with you,” Aurora reasoned. “I’ve lived here my whole life, everything I know is in these forests.”

“What’s your name?” questioned a bemused looking Fynn.

“Aurora,”

“Ok, Aurora,” Fynn took a deep breath, as if steeling himself to continue. “Can you really say that there’s much for you here? Do you have much of a life in this place?”

Another beat of silence. “No,” Aurora admitted, “but I still have something. If I went with you, I would have nothing.”

Fynn slid off the window sill, sighing rather dramatically. “You know that saying? What was it,” he paused, feigning thought. “A tall, healthy tree is better than a forest of dead ones?”

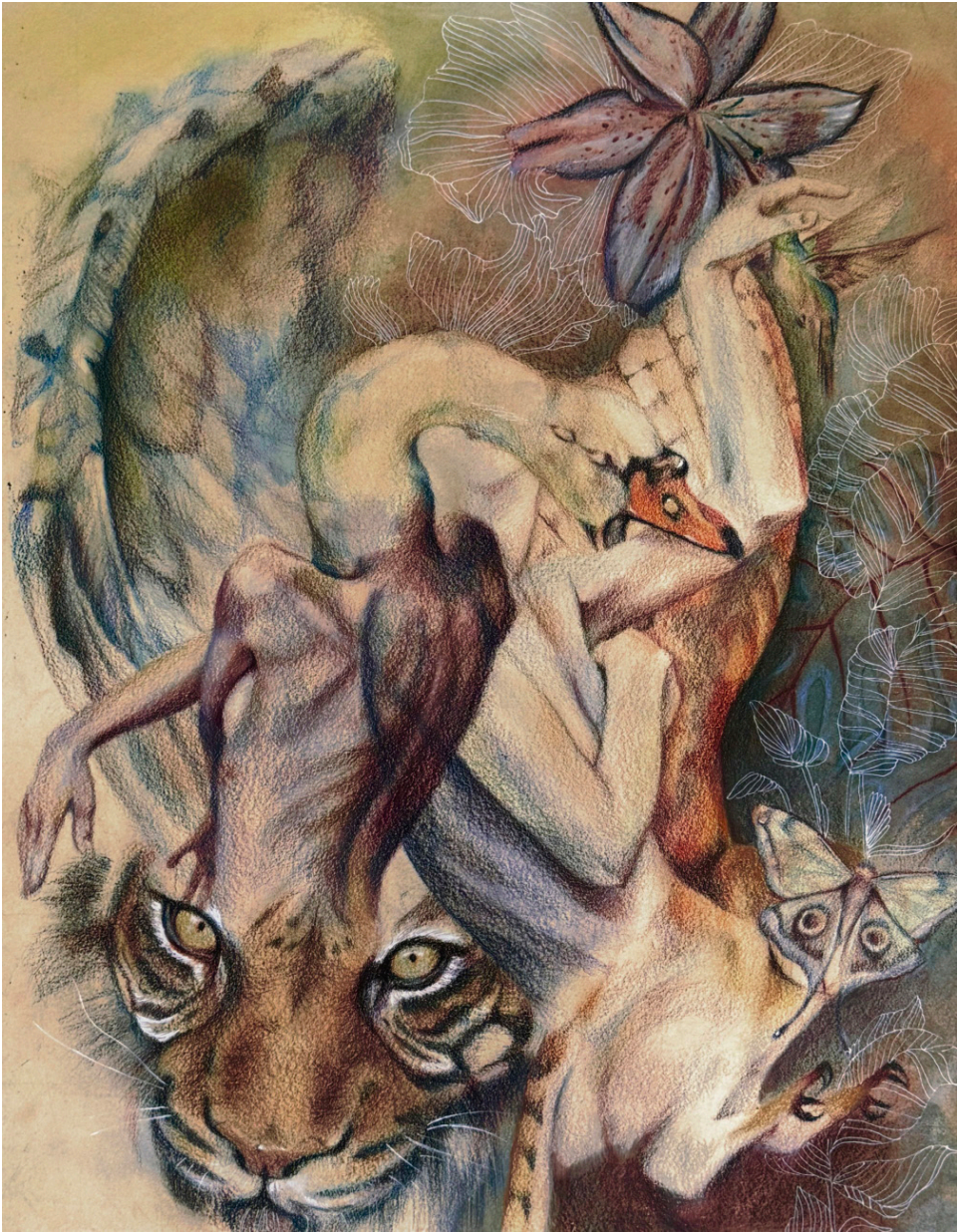
“And you think you’re offering me a tall, healthy tree?” Aurora challenged.

“Yeah,” Fynn stood there, looking very happy with himself.

So Aurora did the only reasonable thing there was left to do. She took his hand. “Then let’s go,” she declared confidently. Fynn started to pull her through the window, but Aurora pulled back.

“I’m not leaving in this outfit,” she said, gesturing down at her rumpled sleep shirt and skirt. Fynn laughed and released her hand.

That was all they needed. For now, a new beginning could start with a shared laugh, a delicate whisper. One day, they would find freedom somewhere far away. But right then, they could treasure the little things. And that was enough.



## The Jungle

**Andralyn Yao**  
Drawing  
12th Grade  
*Independently Working*



# Poetry



## **Cycles**

***Megan Xia***  
Painting  
12th Grade  
Carmel Senior High School  
Teacher: Drew Murrary

## I Don't Know What To Call This Feeling

*Robert Thawng*

Some nights I break a little  
just folding laundry—  
a sock without its pair  
can ruin me more than it should.  
I guess it reminds me  
of all the things  
I've had to learn to do alone.  
But then the dryer hums  
like it's trying to calm me down,  
and I let it,  
because I'm tired of pretending  
I don't need gentle things.  
I still carry old versions of myself  
in the back pocket of every day.  
Some of them are crying.  
Some of them won't talk to me.  
Some of them are still waiting  
for someone who already left.  
And yet—  
there are mornings  
when the light lands just right  
on my kitchen floor,  
and for a second  
I believe the universe  
is trying again, too.  
I don't know what to call this feeling.  
It hurts, but it's tender.  
It breaks, but it builds.  
It's the kind of ache  
that makes you clean your room  
at 3 a.m.  
because hope doesn't always show up  
as sunlight—  
sometimes it shows up  
as trying.  
And maybe that's enough.

## Alternative Ending

Max Birge

She's asleep in the backseat  
head pressed on the glass as the city rolls by  
Fifteen, five-foot four, full of anger;  
and somehow so peaceful, only in rest.  
While in wake, she is 'too much'  
Black combat boots, lifting her height— unnaturally, by an inch or  
two, ready for battle  
hair streaked with *unusual* color, true blue, and telling of rebellion  
Black pencil lines cold, cool eyes; like a nocturnal creature,  
unfit for the waking world.  
She is a girl malformed, malfunctioned, and mutilated.

—  
In the car, she continues down the highway, her head bumping soft-  
ly against the window pelted with rain; down a familiar street.  
Same tapping of rain, same rumbling rhythm.  
She wasn't supposed to be coming back. She told herself again,  
louder. Mentally, she had blocked the vision of the long, unpaved  
road lined by various shrubs and trees— completely out of her  
sight— but it was if the road had memory, curving her there again  
She forced her eyes to shut tighter

The car won't turn around; she won't try to run this time.

—  
Back at home, friends wait  
both anxious and excited  
setting plates, smiling as chocolate frosting is messily piped  
onto a heart-shaped pan; appearance wasn't so important  
rather the words adorning the mess of rich cream piped on top.  
First, three numbers

1  
0  
0

Then, four letters wedged beneath

D  
A  
Y

S

And below that, still five more to end:

C

L

E

A

N

Finally, the car stops.

A large, looming building like a castle on a hill. Her coat falls to her elbows, trailing like a royal cape into the manor of solitude— revealing the ripped skin trailing down to her fingers, like twisting red rivers through the tips of her nerves.

A girl ridged, unready for the world— ripe for fixing, but solid like stone, unready to change. Unready to face the disappointment, the kitchen messed with batter. The bedroom torn apart. The razor-blades on the bed.

The cake collapsed inward, candles drowned in wax.

No laughter left in the walls, she returned to the silence awaiting.

“Next time” she promises, “Next time we’ll bake a cake.”

## peach ring girls

Ava Reita

peach ring girls

let's hide sour candy under our bunk bed—  
the kind of bed that shakes if you shift  
a bit too much— the kind that collapses  
if your dreams become too heavy.  
do you still sleep with the blanket over  
your head? downfeather pillow covering  
your face, your cup, your words  
empty & i will tell my mother

to play deftones at my funeral.  
my mother's embrace is not a reward  
for dayside anger, splitting sugar-coated  
lips— a butterfly's sting. we stab each  
other with push pins because these  
tongues were not made for tears but  
you swim laps in my waterline anyway  
& trace my cataracts, as if looking  
into a cloudy mirror & not liking what  
you see. i want to call the shots fired  
earthward into murky lakes until they become empty shells slugged  
& burned the old fashioned way with sugar whiskey & sake leaving a  
sweet bitterness in your gums.

i was raised by bubblegum & naturalists who picked peaches on the  
sultry afternoons where i remember heat waves that sent all of the  
neighbors inside begging for water— but nothing lies like memory—  
except you did effortlessly & now blood loss sends me back to the  
mattress from so long ago— & i have to cauterize the wound with  
sour sugar & peaches before it clots & we will die young  
with the autumn. candy wrappers crunch under my feet and future  
poets will compare me to a withering flower as i make my  
way alone to the empty bed, perfectly made.

# Egg Girl Sells Lemonade

*Novia Chiang*

In the hot heat of  
summer's suffocating sigh,  
Sun is a blinding lemon  
that catches on sunglasses  
and makes sidewalks sparkle.  
Divine hand  
squeezes the fruit,  
sending sour juice  
dribbling down into trees  
and coalescing into dreams.

Behind a cardboard stand  
is a girl in a white dress  
covered in frills  
that flirt with the air.  
Hot air wiggles and swirls  
the faces of passersby  
while she sells lemonade  
by the curb.  
Sun sizzles on her black hair  
like it's a frying pan  
at an old-school diner.  
The heat is diner-like and,  
if she squints,  
Sun is a yellow egg,  
sunny-side up on the grill.

Sizzling sunny-side girl  
cannot sell lemonade.  
A cent a cup  
but still not a soul glances  
from the street  
as egg girl melts  
into the heat.

Man passes by under shade

and throws shade she's sure  
is meant to be helpful;  
tells her the only yellow  
that is "mainstream"  
is the yellow in her skin.  
Tears stream down her hot face  
because oh, she's known.  
But maybe a part of her held hope  
that some kind soul would stay  
and offer sugar.  
Sour souls and  
puckered mouths  
turned down in frowns  
pass her by.  
They'll only buy her lemonade  
if she sells her skin.  
She wants to sell her lemonade  
She wants to sell her  
Skin? Her Soul?  
The cardboard stand  
is a cardboard box  
painted yellow by the sun;  
painted yellow by their hands.

Marketable, they remark.  
Make yourself a joke.  
There is a choice.  
Yellow ink  
Or invisible ink.  
A great choice, really.

A cardboard stand  
washed in white  
or painted yellow  
that bleeds from her skin.  
Egg girl chooses yellow every time,  
wishing there was another box  
to choose from  
(because no matter which box,  
white or yellow,

she is surrounded and defined by colors).

When sour souls see egg girl,  
they do not see the cracked shells,  
frilly | flirtatious | crushed into the dust and dirt  
and smudged like tally marks  
on prison walls.

## Sunday Morning

*Demi Zhang*

Every Sunday, golden beams of light filter through the blinds.  
Flour floats across the kitchen like icy feathers,  
and coats our wrists like winter-dusted branches.  
Mother stretches and folds and twists the elastic and glutinous  
dough wriggling underneath her warm palms like fuzzy kittens pin-  
ing for their mothers.

The filling rests in a chipped porcelain bowl,  
the rim speckled with cracks.  
Tenderly cut pork chunks,  
homegrown green beans,  
耗油 oyster sauce,  
酱油 soy sauce,  
香油 sesame oil  
My mother mixes these ingredients with a silver spoon,  
the metal scraping softly against porcelain.  
Under the glow of morning sun,  
the mixture is tenderly meld by ivory fingers.  
The sharp aroma of spices dance through the air,  
twirling into our eager nostrils.

The filling is concocted from instinct,  
not a recipe.

Mother fills the dough skin,  
concaved within fingers;  
tablespoon by tablespoon,  
never too much, never too little...  
just enough to give the dumpling a little belly swell.

Mother tells me the secret to folding:  
*Not too tight and not too loose.*  
The dumpling needs to breathe,  
like steam curling lazily from a piping cup of tea in the morning air.

My fingers press and pinch like awkward marionettes.

The soft mound clings to my skin, like golden drops of honey on tessellated honeycombs,

As the filling bulges into a mountain of pork and green beans. The pork chunks and green beans struggle and push against the dough, threatening to spill through the puckering and gaping seams.

A silver metal pot cooks on the stove, the water inside gargling and burbling, before breaking into laughters of bubbles, blooming and collapsing, pushing and popping, like tiny clear translucent pearls. Lustered dumplings gyrate within the scratched metal, tumbling and turning, edges fluttering in the cloudy water, like rose petals caught in a whirlpool.

We speak in half sentences,  
好了吗? Ready yet?  
快了。 *Almost.*  
好香。 Smells good.  
嗯。 *Mhm.*

The folded crescents float to the top, pale, bobbing bundles scooped with a ladle, water dripping like morning dew back into the bubbling liquid. Steam coils out of the pot, soft and delicate like cobwebs. It fogs the edges of the windows, blurring the garden into a celadon-green haze.

I neatly line them on a ceramic plate, careful to not tear the warm, delicate skin lacquered with beads of tinted water.

I count in English,  
one, two, three, four...  
My mother counts in Chinese,

一，二，三，四...

Our voices slip past each other,  
like two arctic blue streams,  
sometimes converging,  
but never truly one.

My clumsy hands grasp polished cedar chopsticks,  
fingers wrapped around them like a snake.  
The tips click and slide apart,  
falling out of my palms.  
I try again,  
chasing a dumpling across the plate,  
watching the pair of smooth wood slip out from my fingers,  
again,  
and again.

Finally, I sink my teeth into one,  
the fragile wrapping giving way with ease.  
Hot savory juice pools my tongue.  
Pork,  
green beans,  
oyster sauce,  
soy sauce,  
sesame oil,  
melts into a flavor that tastes like home.

The taste is both familiar and strange,  
like a word I almost remember,  
but can't quite situate.

I only keep fragments,  
pieces,  
slivers,  
of a place that I am from.  
Even as I try to recreate the taste of my mother's homeland,  
the dough never rises quite right,  
and the spices seem too dull.

Even what remains,  
the memories,

the laughter on Sunday mornings,  
are slipping through my fingers,  
one recipe at a time.

## Adonis Vernalis

*Evan Dahlie*

The Pheasant's Eye,  
This perennial buttercup stands,  
Yellow-petaled, full of hope and pride,  
Nestled deep within the meadows of Ukraine,  
Where it has stood and  
Healed and  
Amazed for centuries,  
Stands watching, staring at a flock of unknown machines,  
Loud, metal, and dangerous,  
That come careening toward it.  
The Pheasant's Eye can see them,  
    A new audience to take in its beauty,  
    To be dazzled by the enduring Ukrainian landscape.  
But they choose not to see it.  
The Pheasant's Eye  
Cannot know  
The devastation that they, these daunting metal creatures, will  
bring.  
It cannot know that  
    The trees and the animals and the ecosystems  
    That make up the flower's known world,  
Its community,  
Will be trampled by them. No, the flower sees  
    An admirer with a tail of white then blue then red  
    Horizontally sliced like the clouds, the sea, and the  
earth  
    Trailing behind it.  
The Pheasant's Eye knows not Russia,  
It understands not war.  
It knows just the sweeping green meadows and wild forests  
Whose sounds have run alongside its history.  
The flower's new company moves closer.  
And soon enough moves away.  
Behind this awful machine, a solemn now-gray flower droops —

Like the cities reduced to rubble —  
Where once stood a stunning yellow  
Testament to life.

*\*Adonis Vernalis, also known as the “Pheasant’s Eye,” is a flower that can be found in southeastern Ukraine where the war with Russia has been most destructive.*

## Zuihitsu at Larson Spring, a rare freshwater near Las Vegas, one of the Seven Fallen Urcities

*Evan Ting*

When I was younger, as was  
all else in this accursed world,  
I remember being struck by a  
small phrase; spoken by a  
fictional revolutionary:  
*clarity of purpose*. An ideal which  
I thought only I possessed.

And then every burning city  
brought me clarity of the  
truth, knowledge glassy-clear and  
painful beyond recognition.

Clarity is not righteousness,  
it is standing here and  
seeing and taking note of the  
cracks spider-webbing across the  
long-forgotten ribbons of  
concrete, vestiges of yellow paint  
now hard to find. Clarity is indeed the  
synaptic union between crack in  
once-highway and chasm in  
vast and arid desert, like two dead  
neurons in the mind of a long dead  
nation.

Beyond the greyness, a  
small distance into the vastness, a  
judgemental cactus tilts, a  
thousand thousand of years of  
evolution have not equipped it for the  
rapture. It thirsts, bulbous limbs doing a  
plaintive little rain dance. Rain,  
it is clear as the heavens above  
its home. Clarity of a cloud.

In the far distance, seeming there the  
last barrier to touching sunset, an  
old welcome-turned advertisement-turned warning  
sign. Trilling its final notes in  
flickering neon. And  
I wonder who might have seen it as the  
great harbinger of their  
great new open future; their, *our* prophet set against  
speculate clouds. Above mountains which  
we are not. I too, have grown too old to  
be writing such sentimental lyrics.

## I Come From

*Amy Xu*

I come from a kitchen I've only seen in pictures  
narrow as a hallway, crowded with bottles and bowls,  
a window looking out on red buildings  
and a sky tangled with wires.

I come from stories of streets  
where shop signs peeled in the heat,  
bikes slept restless  
people waking before the sun crowds the sky  
because life didn't wait for anyone there.

I come from a place I've never lived.  
but somehow still carry  
handed down in grocery bags reused a hundred times,  
in accents folded into every phone call home,  
I come from immigrants who crossed an ocean  
not to chase a dream,  
but to build one for someone else  
trading cramped rooms and cracked sidewalks  
for a future in a foreign land that doesn't want them  
either

I come from the quiet strength of people  
who don't brag about what they survived,  
who believe in making enough out of not much,  
who gave up a life so I could grow into mine.

## lost to the ground

*Amy Xu*

I guess when you left, I didn't really notice.  
Your torn yellow laces dragged across the floor,  
and all I could do was build  
the iron cage that fell upon my little world.

The rattan coaster still smells  
of the perfume you sprayed  
on my desk, into my mouth, into my eyes.  
Maybe it will always smell like us—  
that cheap mist of almost-love,  
of sleepovers and forever promises.

You said we'd be friends for life.  
I think you lied then.  
Well you lie now.

When the pegboard on my wall collapses,  
and the photos from your pale blue Polaroid  
fade into a kind of merciful oblivion,  
I'll still remember.

I wish I'd held on tighter.  
It was almost poetic  
when the bracelet you made me  
slipped off my backpack one day,  
never to be seen again  
until someone else found it,  
mended it,  
And strung it on their own pegboard of dreams

Time will pass.  
The pill jar of trinkets we collected  
will be lost.  
And when it goes,  
you'll go too.  
You probably don't remember at all.

# Chasing Home

*Ava Reita*

A gated cul-de-sac; the sweet smell  
when leather jackets are discarded  
to wooden coatracks—pasted road lines,  
fresh and crisp Georgian lemonade,  
always unsweetened. An axe is posted,  
anchored above the rental door; look in  
its well-traveled blade and admire,  
not knowing where to look to find a  
house or where to find a home—  
a post-modern Prometheus, lay my  
entrails upon Pennsylvanian campfires  
set aflame, sending washed-out light  
to gathering rainclouds, my gift.  
Downtown Philly festivals, amber  
Old Fashioneds drunk on an adolescent  
afternoon, Pac a Deli. Ohio is for rulers,  
but I am queen of nothing and there,  
buildings are towering steeples of ash  
and concrete, forever trying to deny the  
red earth from staining our Converse.  
5 for 1 Shampoo where you can remember  
the sting in your eyes without the white-hot  
of too many nerves. A plethora of petoskey  
stone eyes, collected like those  
accidental moments you fail to recreate,  
finally welcoming you home to  
the end of the cul-de-sac.

## The Red Secret

*Yuki Jalali*

It's a dark, dirty thing to hide your heart.  
And with red string, your fingers are tied to one another.  
And not even your friends can see the target you've placed  
Because you never damn bothered to tell them where it was.

And your thoughts are shallow.  
Because you've tied chains around those feelings  
and they're threatening to pop from the restraints  
because they grow and grow.

And your heart spikes grey when you hear the giggles directed their  
way  
because couldn't they see the string?  
Couldn't they find another hand to tie with theirs?

And you take a needle one day  
when you've grown bored from waiting for your string to come back  
and loosen.  
And the chains fall around a deflated balloon.

Until one day, you hear the giggles close  
right by your side, surrounded by a snapped blue string,  
from a friend.  
But were they really so?

And you push them away and still  
towards your string.  
Because how could they have ever known?

You can only hope they don't step on exploded pieces on their way  
out.  
What a gruelling and arduous feeling it would be  
to watch them dance.  
And for you to pray for them to trip over ribbons.

And one day the balloon will inflate again

and it wants to tie itself to another.  
But as you approach, on their finger is a string  
of a copper sulfate blue.  
And your balloon erupts again  
to stop itself from floating away.  
And its burning rubber pieces drag along the dirty ground in defeat  
because it could never tie itself to Hell.  
And Heaven barely noticed its weight among the several hundred  
other bows that were tied around its feet.

And blood wells up in your vision from pain rotted inside  
until your string is invisible to you (until your string matches the  
color of you)  
and you can't remember a single reason why you always drag along  
to that magnet now-turned metal weight.

Because why would you weep for a name that  
never knew the melody of yours?

Or once looked your way.  
Even as a glare.  
Even as a stare?  
A glance?  
Never even once.

And would you ever know their secret?  
That the red string of yours lays pitifully on the ground  
because they never cared to tie it on?

The epiphany that they had never pulled you towards them?  
That your resentment was petty and a  
one-sided war?  
And that it was you who need not any chains to chase and chase?

And you're too fervorous to notice.  
Because your blood is cold and hot.  
And your heart has sunk and leaped out.  
And you're filled with thoughts of murder  
and filled with thoughts of dread.  
And your yarn has been tugged, twisted, and trashed.

Stabbed, smashed, and shattered.

No wonder this painful thing is called  
a crush.

# somewhere the sky is orange

Riva Jain

yesterday, i turned off the news. social media too  
but the world kept spinning anyway

notifications vanished like ghosts  
but stayed anyway, hanging around  
thin & gray like the sick smoke over California  
heavy. darker. brooding  
darker still

MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!

the slogan implodes through cracked city buildings  
tweets marching in as if the world might bend to punctuation  
the algorithms nod

eager

obedient and darker still  
counting outrage like it's a tithe  
the wealthy profit / the poor pay  
a rich man's headline  
a poor man's funeral.

outrage

it spills out anyway.

leaches into cities, villages, neighborhoods that never asked for it  
and when people ask me how i feel

or which way i lean

i say: like milk pouring from an empty carton  
nothing left to give

my tears wasted on this blighted nation  
my sweat evaporating off scorched streets  
my blood once red & white & blue now dried up  
pooling up like two-day old news  
even the birds seem partisan today  
the vegetables too.

i open the fridge: half-empty  
political parties fermenting in the drawer  
a tomato rolls across the floor  
red, obviously

and i whisper apologies to the onion

because someone somewhere  
has to take the blame.  
there's a word for this feeling  
i think.  
small?  
helpless definitely  
or maybe not a word at all  
just a hum behind my ribs  
like a tenant who stopped paying rent  
but refuses  
to leave  
the ache that squats in your chest  
and calls itself  
patriotism.  
maybe it's the national pastime  
pretending everything's fine  
while the house burns down again  
and the politicians stand in the yard  
debating whether fire  
is even real.  
maybe it's what happens  
when democracy is patched together  
with thin, flimsy threads and  
a prayer whispered over ballots  
ten years expired.  
or maybe it's the grief of growing up here  
mourning a country that's still alive  
still stumbling forward  
still insisting it knows where it's going  
while walking straight  
into the hurricane.  
but only when we march into the eye together  
the sweet quiet, the halcyon serenity  
will we feel the weight of what we disturbed  
the air bracing  
the ground remembering  
everything we tried to forget.  
but right now  
somewhere the sky is orange  
& i can't tell

if it's pollution  
or  
anger.

# Before He Knew Me

*Minna Steensland*

I climb the crooked stairs, open the creaky hatch.  
The floorboards groan, as if unsure they can hold me.  
Boxes lean in rushed stacks, evidence of how quickly we moved in.  
Dust floats in the thin light of the windows,  
all of it converging on one pile.

I pull down the top box, tear it open.  
Out slides a green leather yearbook.  
Inside, smiling faces frozen in ink.  
I flip, page after page, until my father.

Before he knew me, when his hair was lighter and fuller  
When he didn't have his smile lines, but still had his dreams of be-  
coming a jazz musician  
unaware of the daughter who would one day  
find him here.

There are signatures scrawled in looping pen,  
"Good luck!" "Don't change!" "See you at the dance."  
I wonder which friends still think of him,  
and which were lost to time  
like ink faded by sunlight.

It feels odd  
as if I've stumbled upon a stranger  
who looks like someone I love, but isn't someone I know.

I like to imagine that if I met his eyes  
in the hallway of that old school  
Something in me would ask,  
"Have you seen the new Star Wars yet?"  
"Did you play ultimate frisbee today?"  
"Do you still lose your keys all the time?"

He's just a boy in the photo, a boy who's lost his father  
I pause to think for a moment, to just feel  
I am now the age he was, yet our lives look so different.

For a moment the attic doesn't creak and the dust hangs in the air  
It's just me and the boy who will one day become my father  
A man who knows everything about me, yet with this book I realize  
I know little about him.

I close the book  
but his younger face stays with me  
a reminder that before I existed,  
he was already becoming,  
already playing the first notes  
of the life that would lead to mine.

## Interrogation of the Mirror

*Ysabella Delamater*

Mirror, be honest.  
Do you ever tire of watching me measure myself?

When I turn sideways,  
do you laugh at the way I pinch my stomach?  
Sinking my hands into mud  
that remembers the storm that came before.

Are my hip dips your favorite thing about me,  
or the place where your reflected light forgets how to love?  
Deep dark valleys,  
cruelly carved into my skin like stone.

When my thighs press together,  
do you flinch at the sound of thunder or applause?  
Two pillars holding up the cathedral of a girl,  
still learning to worship her temple.

These stretch marks,  
do they look like lightning strikes to you?  
The handwritings of a god  
who touched me too hard and signed their name.

When I examine my birth marks,  
are they truly a beauty that's unique to me?  
The stabbing of cigarette butts  
smothered against my skin.

Do you remember the first time I looked at you,  
and didn't recognize the creature inside?

Tell me, mirror  
if I stopped begging you for the truth,  
would you stop lying in return?

If I looked at you

without hunting for proof of my own ruin,  
would you finally show me  
how beautiful survival looks  
when it's shaped like me?

## Nashville Jazz

Cailyn Cho

The present- Piano.

I wake up at eight o'clock by the sound of jazz. Maybe I dreamt of jazz, maybe it was there. Maybe the radio wasn't on.

The piano part sticks out to me today. Every note is secure- a promise of the present.

The new daylight spilled in like milk. Or maybe like you, spilling your eyes on these words, reading this passage.

My phone, on the desk. Ringing. The source of the jazz. I wash my face and walk to my kitchen.

I open my fridge. The contents?

- Avocado: a quarter
- A slice of sourdough I saved for myself
  - Next to the avocado
- Magnets on the outside

They rattle. The magnets: Nashville, a college, another college but on the East Coast (obligatory).

My parents wanted East. I wanted South. I ended up in Tennessee. Maybe I went west, maybe I went south. I can't tell. I leave.

My past revisited- Drums.

I woke up at eight o'clock by the sound of jazz. The drums filled the empty parts of the song. It set a foundation and continued what had already happened.

It was almost ritualistic and I memorized almost all the songs that were playing on the radio. Today was *La Garota de Ipanema*.

I used to live in Rio de Janeiro next to Ipanema Beach.

...

I walk to the kitchen in pajamas. My mother would have scolded me for that but she is not here anymore.

In Rio, Ipanema was a sidewalk, not a song.

I used to bring back cheese bread whenever I would visit my parents.

Fluent in two languages but not in knowing what to do. I

remain here.

I open and close my refrigerator. The magnets on it rattle. Two from colleges my parents wanted me to go to (the googly eyes follow me). One from Nashville. That was my favorite, but my parents loved the East Coast. They never bothered to ask me what I wanted to do, and they don't talk to me anymore.

I can imagine them deleting my number in silence two years ago when they stopped calling. The magnets stay.

I finish up my routine and leave. I still tie my shoes the way my older brother taught me to. "Like rabbits' ears," he would say but we were never soft people. Would he still recognize the rabbits on my shoes?

My future- Rhythm.

I will wake up at eight o'clock to the sound of jazz. The rhythm is different today. Is it the song, is it me? Is it a different singer from the usual? Where is Stan Getz?

It's not an unwelcome change. The singer's name is Astrud Gilberto.

I get up and wash my face. I change into my clothes, athletic clothes but I'm not used to these.

I consider eating breakfast. I open my fridge and see a quarter of an avocado and sourdough. I close the fridge. The magnets on it rattle; postcards from an alien time.

I tie my shoes, new shoes that piqued my curiosity a week ago. I run and feel the barely-spring air on my face. Am I running from something or toward something? The air is still half-winter and it's cold.

In my haze, I see Ipanema Beach as a Kroger. My father works the register.

*Do you want a receipt?*

I hand him the quarter-avocado.

## These Cracked Lips

Kaia Ursem

My lips are cracked  
Like the maze of furrows in the bark of the Redwoods  
We raced through those trees once,  
running our hands along the woody armor  
Beaming at the dappled canopy above our heads,  
Each leaf fighting for a slice of sunlight.  
When I smile I can feel the cracks widen  
Making room for the joy that you bring into the world.  
I only hope that the world doesn't burn down your joy  
The way it burnt down the mighty forests of California.

My fingernails are torn  
Never the same length,  
always lopsided,  
never clean  
Because when my gloved hands close around your softball  
My nails bend and break.  
Crawling along the rocky cliffs in Hvar  
Sun beaming through my white cotton blouse  
Yelling at you to hurry, hurry up  
My fingers scrabbling amongst the cracks and crevases  
They get caught and snap,  
leaving behind tiny translucent pieces of me  
I only hope that the rest of me doesn't snap, too.

My soles are covered in blisters  
Because when I slip my feet into Brooks,  
Or Nike spikes, or Hokas,  
And pound, pound the balls of my feet into every inch of our town  
My lungs scream with exaltation  
High on adrenaline and competition  
I break myself down, piece by piece  
So that something stronger can grow  
on top of the splintered fragments  
I only hope that I'm strong enough.

Cellulite glows like lightning on my legs.  
I see it when I frog kick through the Mediterranean  
The Waves kissing my calves, dancing a ceaseless dance. But I don't  
want you to see it—that's why I wear pants.  
When I rise out of the water,  
the Wind licks away the last drops of the ocean  
Leaving the white crust of salt  
I rub it in, hoping it will scrape away my doubts

My skin is filled with more cracks  
than the Death Valley mud flats  
Because when we ski down the Tetons  
Quads aflame, spirits alight, eyes aglow  
The Wind, screaming in my ears,  
Pulls the moisture out of my body.  
Why should I fight a battle against Nature herself?  
I've been fighting enough already.  
I only hope that one day the world will embrace  
the peace of acceptance.

My teeth aren't perfectly white;  
When I smile you can see them.  
I only hope that one day, someday,  
I can show you—and me—that they don't need to be.  
And prove to you that each lesson you taught me  
In the Angels stadium,  
the icy beaches, and the Alpine slopes  
Has not gone to waste.  
I only hope that I can make it all worthwhile  
With every word that passes through my dry,  
Cracked lips.

# Inheritance

*Areeba Alam*

Nanu's hands smelled of oil and cardamom.  
She parted my hair with the care  
Of someone tending a garden  
Worried she'd never see it bloom.

I was hardly a week old when Dada said,  
"Maybe she'll become president,"  
Not as instruction or expectation  
But just a thread cast into the air  
That I could shape into my own life.

My parents speak in blueprints and promises  
Stability and success measured  
In formulas I cannot yet name.  
I carry their silent prayers like stones  
In the hollows of my chest,  
Feeling their weight even as I may reach for something else.

Inheritance isn't what fills the hands  
But what haunts them;  
The quiet expectation,  
The ache to be worthy  
Of all that was sacrificed in silence.

It moves like air under doors,  
Through unwalked corridors,  
Through moments I have not lived,  
Teaching me the patience  
Of something older than memory,  
Of something that does not forgive or forget.

I feel it in the stillness of mornings,  
In the pause before a word is spoken,  
In the shadow of my own heartbeat  
That echoes the memory  
Of hands that labored unseen

So that I might stand.

Inheritance is the ache of becoming  
Something I do not fully understand,  
The feeling in the chest  
When I realize how much has been given  
Without ceremony, without witness.

It's the weight of possibility  
Pressing against the ribs, An insistence that life bends  
Toward what it cannot yet name,  
That hope isn't ever a thing I hold,  
But a current flowing beneath my feet.

Yet I float through it,  
Learning that to live fully  
Is to hold both grief and love  
In the same hand,  
To carry absence and presence alike,  
To feel their pulse in every breath.

Inheritance is not a gift.  
It is the feeling in my chest  
That teaches me  
The weight of silence,  
The ache of love,  
The insistence of all that came before  
That I may not ever be able to repay,  
But must carry anyway.



## Persephone

***Lucy Mercer***

Printmaking

12th Grade

Franklin Community High School

Teacher: Kelli Park

## Impartial Stars

*Melody Fei*

The car wound up and up the mountain past slumbering pines,  
while the round glowing eyes of white-tailed deer shone from the  
trees.

My eyelids opened and closed to snippets of glacier-carved granite,  
as the car vibrated against my resting head and cold stars glared up  
high.

On the mountain, veiled in milky fog, I scrambled onto a li-  
chen-covered rock,  
feeling at the brink of sky, gazing down at the murmurous Atlantic  
Ocean.

Slopes of green rose above the sea,  
clusters of golden lights marked small Maine towns where fisher-  
men woke to catch lobster.

My teeth chattered as the raw cold cut through—  
even the thick polyester blanket couldn't keep me warm,  
but my eyes were drawn upward, ignoring the birch and holly that  
smelled of damp paper,  
towards the dark blue sky that held the brilliant pearls suspended in  
nighttime air.

Despite chill, I dreamed, longed to slip beyond Earth, to soar like a  
stellar falcon.

Maybe I'd find another planet to live on, one where I'd escape red  
pens and mile times,  
the stages with bright lights and textbooks that wait for me, the  
smirks and stares.

I'd meet creatures who welcomed me with open tentacles and  
spongy blue fruit.

I imagined living in a world where moons didn't circle planets;  
instead, they twirled around each other, admiring each other's pits  
and scars.

The moons would share a gravitational pull, each holding the other  
from drifting into space.

I sat on the cold stone, watching the stars fade into the creeping  
dawn,  
masked by the dewy golden liquid of the rising sun.  
Colors swirled in the sky—orange, yellow, pink, gray, then blue.  
I climbed back into the car, warmth enveloping me like the embrace  
of family as dawn bled into the world outside.



## Strands of Devotion

***Meera Venugopal***

Photography

11th Grade

*Hamilton Southeastern High School*

*Teacher: Angela Fritz*



# Writing Portfolio

Dakota Macklin  
*On Obsessions*

## Rotten Fruit

*Dakota Macklin*

Lucy hummed to herself as she skimmed over the letter that Robert, one of her friends—one of her ex-friends, that is—sent her. Without any further fanfare, she placed it neatly into the paper shredder. Lucy watched the letter shred to pieces, and she smiled. Did she technically waste paper by printing off an email, so that she could then shred the printed copy? Maybe. Still, it was so much more cathartic to watch your last insults exchanged with someone be ripped to pieces by the paper shredder. Lucy likened it to peeling off the skin of a peach. It might not be quite as healthy as just eating the skin, sure, but it was satisfying. Almost as satisfying as telling Robert what Lucy really thought of him would have been. That is, if he hadn't blocked her, first, and, besides: she didn't want to see his face again. The paper shredder would do.

When the letter was gone, Lucy let the smile creep across her cheeks.

Well, what now? She thought at first, patting the paper shredder like she would a good dog and then standing up. She had shredded the letter, and she had deleted the original email a day earlier. Lucy was also debating shredding another one of those past emails, just for fun, but honestly, it was getting too late to annoy or stress herself out. Whatever she ended up doing, she would put it off until the morning, so that she remembered to put the paper shreds in her compost bin. She might not have the backyard space for a peach tree yet, but once she did ...

Lucy lost her train of thought, and her stomach grumbled. When had she last eaten? It seemed like the whole day had passed her by in just a few minutes, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Did she eat any of those? Lucy didn't remember much. She had felt sick to her stomach for the past week, a feeling that didn't quite go away until she had shredded the paper to pieces. Now that she was beginning to feel normal again, she was starving.

*I may as well go downstairs and get a snack.*

A few moments later, Lucy was in her kitchen, peeling back the door to the cupboard to look at her stash, as she seemed to do just about every day, recently. Every shelf of the pantry was fully stocked with cans and jars of fruit, and even little bags of dehydrated peaches that she hadn't gotten around to trying yet. Of course, she had cans or jars of peaches from a few of her favorite brands: Fruitcom-branded Peach Slices (not a very good brand, except for their peaches, oddly enough); Summer Dawn Yellow Cling Peaches (slightly sour, but she liked sour peaches more than most); even a few glass jars of expensive Festives!-branded spiced peach halves (most people thought that they tasted too much like cinnamon, but to Lucy, there was no such thing as too much cinnamon).

Over the 22 years of her life, Lucy had found one thing to be true. Others might not always be there for her, but she could always count on food.

Peaches, in particular.

If she was going to feel down about her closest friend talking over her, or breaking a promise to her, or if he was acting as though her best wasn't enough for the umpteenth time, and if she was going to feel down about her reluctance to end the friendship because Robert was technically her oldest friend, she might as well grab a jar! Canned peaches are cheap, tasty, and healthy (so long as there isn't added sugar, and they keep the skin), and they're something that she would always have, so why not dig in?

Lucy remembered eating peaches since she was young. Some of her earliest memories were biting into juicy slivers of peach and somehow ending up sticky all over, as though someone had dunked toddler-Lucy into a vat of the juice headfirst. As a child, she used to love them because they were sweet, but now, as an adult, she liked most of their varieties. Whether they were sweet, or sour, or too firm or mushy, they were always delicious, and they were always available. They would continue to be available for a long time, even if Lucy was struggling to afford food, because a single can was so inexpensive.

They had been there for Lucy as far back as she could remember, much farther back than her friendship with Robert.

Lucy rummaged around in the back of the cupboard, and after a moment, she pulled out one of the *Festives!* jars.

The peaches inside would be sweet, and the jar had so much cinnamon that she could see flakes of it shifting and floating through the brine as she turned it over in her hands. The peaches didn't have the skin, but still, they were satisfying. They would never tell Lucy that they were unhappy with just being friends, and that they didn't care if she didn't reciprocate, or that they didn't care if she wasn't the right person for them. These stupid peaches would never think that all she had to offer wasn't enough for them.

It was a jar of peaches. And the peaches inside were with her through thick and thin, always sweet, and always good enough to eat.

Lucy released a breath as she held the jar above the sink, and twisted the lid off in one motion with her whole arm. She didn't feel sad at all; not nearly as much as she expected. She had left a rotten sliver of fruit in the jar of peaches that was her life for far too long, and it had finally dug itself out, for better or for worse.

*If only I could have cut him off myself, she thought.*

Oh, well.

Time to dig in, and to enjoy what would soon fill his place.

## Creature Comforts

Dakota Macklin

Clyde, a small, trembling, fluffy dog with a tail that wagged against the ground behind him, sat next to his “owner” as a girl kneeled down beside him to ruffle the fur between his ears.

“Clyde,” she whispered, continuing to run her fingers through his fur, “I’d give my life and soul for you.” Clyde only panted, sticking out his pink tongue and looking up toward the girl, being too short to lick her face in response. Recently, because he had been more of a “good boy,” he had started to get more treats from his bumbling idiot of a Human, Peter. While treats were always appreciated, this was exactly what he was looking for.

*At last, my plan has worked,* he thought, squinting as the sun seemed to stab at his huge brown eyes.

*This soul will be the first of many.*

Clyde was only a hatchling Imp when he first witnessed this phenomenon. Humans called it “cuteness,” and though he didn’t understand it, he knew that he was onto something from the moment he first saw a Human on the Mortal Plane pet a dog. The dog was a small, weak, fluffy thing, no longer than two Human hands and probably light enough to take to the air if it was hit with a gust from a leaf blower. Its Human called it a “Pomeranian.”

However, Clyde only realized just how valuable “cuteness” was when he was performing some minor mischief and tearing a few pages out of some college student’s textbook. He couldn’t remember much about it, but he remembered that the section the student needed the most was on physiological reactions. One of those reactions was a response to cuteness, and while Clyde tore that page out of the book like he did the others, it lingered in his memory.

It wasn’t a particularly detailed scientific textbook, because it was more about examples and less about equations and real definitions, but it was something, and it made Clyde think that he should

do a bit more research about it.

He found another dog and followed it around for some time. It was much larger than the first dog Clyde had seen, with shorter fur and a flat and flabby face (if you could even call it a face), but still, it earned praise from the Humans around it just the same. It was a good little con artist. It didn't deserve such praise simply for existing, but still, somehow, this "cuteness" tricked its Humans into spoiling it. It reminded Clyde of himself, because clearly, it was quite Fraudulent, and therefore, very aligned with his values.

If such a small thing could not only be Fraudulent, but also earn praise so easily and undeservedly, how could Clyde not attempt something similar?

Only a day after Clyde started following the dog, the Imp heard the words that would change his eternal life: after the dog had licked a college-aged girl's face a sufficient number of times, she gushed with praise and love for the disgusting creature that would be undeserved even if it actually was "cute," and she told it that she would give up her soul for it. If the dog had been a demon, that soul would have belonged to the creature.

Praise was rarely received by Imps, but for the souls alone, this opportunity was not something that Clyde could pass up. Humans didn't even need promises of wealth and power and whatnot to hand over their souls! All they had to do was experience a dog's "cuteness," whatever that was. So, Clyde shaped his tiny Imp form into a much fuzzier, quadrupedal one. He grew long tufts of fur (which he occasionally tripped over) from everywhere except his paws and face, he reshaped his claws into pitiful nails, and he gave himself a short, upturned snout and wide bug-eyes that looked like they could pop out of his skull if he so much as sneezed. Clyde was a little Pomeranian, and as far as the Humans were concerned, he was goddamn adorable.

Clyde appeared in his furrer form in front of a dog shelter one morning a few months ago, eager to test his "cuteness" theory. If he was right, many souls would be his, and he would need to do next to nothing to get them. A strategy that was not only Fraudu-

lent, but also Slothful. Perfect.

On that very day, he was taken in by the shelter. They called him a “very good boy” (but little did they know, he was not). Accepting bribes such as their praise and their “treatos” would not only get them nowhere; it was also what Clyde had always thought of as the purpose of his life. He was confident that the shelter workers were on-track to hand over their souls, but then, his hapless Human came into the shelter only five days later. Clyde was curious to see what he could do to a Human who wanted to actually adopt a pet because of “cuteness.” Unfortunately for Clyde, he was too successful. He was taken to the Human’s home after only a few hours of knowing him, before he could even attempt to take the shelter workers’ souls. Oh, well.

Still, things were progressing well, Clyde told himself, snapping out of the memory. As the small Human who had struck a deal with him began to walk away, thanking Peter for letting her pet Clyde, Clyde told himself that all new things advanced slowly. Even if he hadn’t met his monthly quota of souls, he could always sneak out of the house at night to take an extra soul or two. There were always people willing to make deals. This just happened to be the most Slothful way to make them, Clyde told himself.

As Clyde and his Human walked home, his Human beamed, and occasionally reached down to scratch the space between Clyde’s ears. Being a “good” “dog,” Clyde leaned into the scratch, headbutting his Human in the leg by accident. But, of course, he was missing his horns, so it didn’t hurt the man at all.

*Shameful*, Clyde thought. But, still, his Human grinned wider, reached into his pocket, and handed Clyde a treat. That made it acceptable, though it would be better, of course, if he owned that Human’s soul. Somehow, in three months, he had only taken the one from his time spent posing as a dog. He kept telling himself that experiments take time, and that this was the method most aligned with his values, but he doubted that his superiors would see it that way (and, of course, he couldn’t just tell them the truth ... that wouldn’t be Fraudulent at all).

As the two reached their home, Peter bent down to get a better look at Clyde, and Clyde barely licked at his face. If that Human knew what was good for him, he would hand over that soul.

“Oh, right,” the Human said, and he reached into his pocket. “Do you want a treeeato?” Peter dangled a cakey peanut-butter flavored treat above Clyde’s head, and at that moment, Clyde nearly forgot about the soul that he wanted so badly.

“You’ll need to sit if you want a treato, buddy!” Clyde’s Human said, and though it was shameful, Clyde sat. He wanted something peanutty, and he would get it, no matter what he had to do. It was far better than the food in Hell.

“Good boy!” The Human cried, and Clyde hardly cared, because the tasty little cake had dropped down from the Human’s hand to the floor.

The Human scratched Clyde between the ears one last time and stood up. “Well, I’ve got to work, buddy,” the Human said. Clyde, caught up in the moment, forgot to pant for a few seconds. Still, his dog disguise was good enough that no Human could discover his secret just because he stopped panting. Especially this one. From what Clyde had heard when his Human occasionally called his family, this one wasn’t the brightest; he got his money from streaming, and spent most of his time in a computer room upstairs. Clyde had never seen the room; his legs were too short to carry him up the staircase.

“Maybe you can take a nap!” Peter offered, and he pulled a plush miniature bed in front of Clyde. The bed was large enough that Clyde could probably still fit if he dropped the disguise, though just barely small enough that Clyde stayed in Pomeranian form while he stayed in the Human’s home. It was easier to (visually) remain a pathetic creature such as a dog, and still, Clyde didn’t want to risk being discovered. Even if he couldn’t work on charming his Human into giving up his soul, Clyde was fine with using the time to sleep, or to annoy the neighbors by barking at them as they walked past. Their anger and astonishment always amused him.

Clyde trotted over to his usual spot (on top of the couch so he could see through a window), and his Human pulled Clyde's bed next to him, scratched him between the ears, and left.

Clyde sighed, though it sounded more like a short huff, and took a few moments to stare. There would be no use in denying it: he was 10 souls behind the quota for the month, and he would need to get a lot of work done if he was going to get them through his experiment. If he was honest with himself (ugh), he probably wouldn't meet the quota through his work here, even if it was good (bad) work. At least he was lying to Humans more frequently, but even that took shameful behavior like sitting and staying, and being a "good dog." Disgusting.

As he stared out the window, however, he felt some small amount of glee. When the neighbors walked past like normal, he would bark and startle them, and he would still get his "treatos" and his naps, no matter what happened. He sighed again, letting out a much longer breath. He wasn't doing this for the souls. It was about time he admitted it.

He trotted over to his bed, walked in a circle three times, and rested on it, still staring toward the window. What a fuzzy thing, so unlike anything from Hell. It wasn't right for an Imp like him, but it was right for a "good boy." He didn't even need to own any souls to have it.

*Damn it.*

## **Preface: My Only Regret**

*Dakota Macklin*

*On The Discovery of Aliens In Our World*

Preface: My Only Regret

If this is to be my preface for the book that will explain what led me to this moment, I'll make it brief. The story that I'd like to tell spans years, and the collective memory of my family, friends, and supporters is more than enough for me to tell a story with a good amount of detail, and more importantly, an accurate story.

If you've read any of my books, you already know that I strive to tell an accurate story. I always have, and I always will, whether I write fiction or nonfiction. However, before I continue, I have a few requests for you, the reader. First: please don't ask me questions about this book (unless it's about my fiction). Second: please let this be the last nonfiction book that I write. For a science-fiction writer, it seems I've written more science than fiction—far more than I care to. Finally: let me talk about my regrets here and now, so that the rest of the story won't be interrupted by them. If my writing is as pessimistic in nature as some people claim, then let me have my little pessimism chapter, and then let me be.

Just in case you read this page before reading the title of the book, let me introduce myself. My name is David Starr. I discovered the existence of an alien species, the Altairians, three years ago in 2025. I won the Nobel Prize in Physics only two years after the discovery, and the Nobel Peace Prize for my first contact with the aliens just this year. If you knew of me before reading this book, I have no doubt that this is why you know of me.

“But, Mr. Starr, how did you ever do such a thing?” I'll get into the specifics later in the book, but in short, I used a fancy little telescope array (actually, a VLA, or Very Large Array in New Mexico—a very large array of very large radio telescopes that act together as an even bigger telescope, that have to be programmed to move because they otherwise can't be) with a specialized program to find the first alien ship in our galaxy.

As you'll read, I was a weatherman in Albuquerque for most of my life. I was 64 when I discovered the aliens. From my long career, I had a few connections with NSF officials who operated the array, and I was able to write a "citizen scientist" proposal for testing a custom program that I had written in preparation for one of my stories. I happened to be lucky enough to be able to give them my program and help troubleshoot when they encountered errors.

So, once I had the idea for a special program to use on the array, I made the proposal for my program, my proposal was fast-tracked to the front of the queue because of my connections at the VLA, and the rest is history.

If only someone else had made the discovery. Though this is my pessimism chapter, let me make it clear that I wouldn't want my life to have gone any differently than it has. Sure, I wish that I hadn't broken both ankles in my excitement after discovering the Altairians in 2025, but I have everything that I've ever wanted: a Nobel Prize (I never would have expected to win two, and one was certainly enough for me); a place in the history books; and an amazing and supportive physical therapist who helped me regain the use of my legs after the 2025 incident.

However, since this is my one pessimism chapter, let me use the time that I have with you to tell you that I always wished for fame, and especially for fame as an author. I wanted to pique peoples' curiosity about our world; I wanted to become influential enough to speak out against injustices in our world; I wanted to sign books and support the next generation of writers with my wealth. After 40 years of writing and dedicating my life to my books, I didn't write one single bestseller. Not one. But once I try to test out the science I made up for my book, using the connections I earned over my real moneymaking career as a weatherman (the only one of my two careers that made money), what do I earn? A Nobel Prize in the wrong category, that some real scientist probably deserved more than me. Heaven knows, I earned it completely by accident. The Altairians were out there already, looking for someone to make first contact with, and the VLA that I helped modify happened to spot a signal from their ships before anyone else. If the Wow! signal was strong, the signal we picked up could be called the 'HOLY SHIT!'

signal, because it was certainly strong enough that anyone with equipment like I had been using would be able to pick it up. That accident was the best, and the worst, moment of my life. Of course, once my name was on national (and international!) television, people began to realize that I was a science fiction writer and buy my books, but somehow, it won't ever be the same to me. I'm not "the science fiction author with a day job as a weatherman," anymore: I'm "the Nobel Prize-winning scientist who also wrote a few science fiction books."

Of course, I don't want to give the impression that I'm ungrateful for all that happened, because this isn't at all true. I'm grateful beyond measure for all of my support from the managers and owners of the New Mexico Very Large Array, my social media manager, who has had to put up with a lot from me over the years, and especially my editors for *On The Discovery of Aliens In Our World*, who usually don't edit anything but fiction, but were gracious enough to lend me a hand in making this book. Heaven knows, I needed all of their help to get anywhere at all.

I'm especially grateful for my luck in establishing first contact with the Altairians, and my work in learning their language and helping to transfer messages from them to everyone else on Earth. That, I did do myself, and I'm glad that I did. It was the most real and honest part of my scientific work, if you don't count my work as a weatherman. Whether I like it or not, I'm a real scientist now. And my science fiction is being praised as some of the most realistic of the century. After the discovery of the Altairians, who knows? Maybe it won't be fiction for very long.

If only I still had the time to write after work every day. I had always been more interested in my work, my writing, and my aspirations than finding a spouse or children, so I would certainly have the time if I was still a weatherman. I don't feel like I missed out on anything there; I enjoyed my life with my closest and dearest friends, and I enjoyed my careers too much to devote my time to anything else. (Though, somehow, it would feel just a little like cheating, now that I'm already famous,) perhaps I could take another crack at writing science fiction once I retire. I certainly have the inspiration for it, after the scientific success of the last few years.

But, for now, I think I'll put my fiction writing and my projects on hold. I'm too busy to write, even if it's important to me, and I'm doing important work with the Altairians. It's too important for me to split my time and effort for my work with my writing, and I would certainly need more available time in my daily life if I wanted to write with my usual quality and attention to detail. Who knows? Maybe, I would accidentally discover something else new, in my next project where I try a little too hard to be accurate, and a man my age (and with my patience) doesn't have time for that. Plus, I'm sure that my new writing would be overshadowed by my work, anyway. What I'm doing with the Altairians is far better than what I could ever do as a writer.

This is my only regret.

## Do Your Part

*Dakota Macklin*

In a land of ashes and dust, one tortoise moved toward another. The second one was on the ground, unmoving. Its shell had cracked open and collapsed from an impact long ago. Its insides were visible, rust and rot staining the interior of its shell. Its legs were splayed out across the ground, and the dead thing had flattened two of its feet with its own weight, from sitting on top of them for so long.

The first did not falter, and only moved toward the second at a moderate pace. To the creatures it kept inside its metal shell, its footsteps were faint, muffled, and so constant that they had become unnoticed, almost imperceptible. The tortoise's behemoth form continued toward the second, nearly crushing one of its splayed-out legs with a foot, but avoiding the leg by a few meters. When it reached the dead one, it stopped, it lowered its head to the neck of the dead one, and with behemoth jaws, it clamped onto the other's neck. With a groan of metal, the tortoise bit down, making a cavernous hole that was large enough for a team of its human parasites to drop down into the dead one. It hadn't learned of this corpse until it had discovered the mass of metal in the distance with its drones, so a salvage operation was long overdue.

Amber peered up from her clipboard. She had just checked off the last of the items on her list, and she knew that she had all that she needed to begin her work.

It was difficult to use her peripheral vision, due to the baggy hazmat suit practically sealed around herself, but as a cloud of metal dust flooded the air around her and her team, she was instantly glad that she had it. Even with the suit, the air smelled like metal and decay. Amber was standing nearly at the back of a line that would have stretched from where the tongue of the giant machine would be, to the very top of its neck, if it was a real tortoise. There were two lines, with each being in good formation and ready to deploy – everyone was standing exactly two feet behind the person in front of them – and the team's commander, marked by a black

armband wound around the sleeve of their suit, put a gloved finger to the the place just above where their ear would be, and they cleared their throat. Amber had to resist cracking a smile, even though no one would be able to see it through her suit.

*They must have received their orders.*

Amber had always wanted one of the comm chips that was embedded in their ear. Artillerists, mechanics, salvage captains, and even a few particularly patriotic citizens would be given the honor to directly hear the will of their Tortoiseshell, the Marisol, and it had always been Amber's dream to hear what it had to say. Those who knew more would be more directly involved in the war effort, after all.

“SALVAGE TEAM B!” The salvage captain said, turning back toward the row of people standing behind them. Amber stood a little straighter, trying to get a better view of the captain, but only got a slightly better view of the head of the person behind her. “You all have your lists of supplies,” she said. “You know what to do.”

After only a few moments, the Marisol had lowered a few chains from the bottom of its “chin” (that is, if it were a real tortoise). The salvage captain motioned for the others to climb down into the dead machine, and the operation began.

The hallway had a steep downward incline, and the uppermost part of the hallway had so many holes rusted into its roof that some small amount of sunlight leaked through. Still, Amber pulled her flashlight out of her bag. She would rather take a reprimand for wasting batteries in low-light conditions than fall and injure herself. When Amber stepped down into the ruined Tortoiseshell, she noticed from the chipping paint on its metal corridors that it must have been a different kind of Tortoiseshell from the Marisol – probably a Mark 10 or 11, rather than the latest Mark 17. The Marisol herself was the 17th Tortoiseshell ever made, but still only a Mark 14. This was why she survived the early days of the war.

*How did this one even survive for so long?* Amber wondered to herself as she kicked a piece of scrap metal through the hallway,

“Ensign Crawford! Move it!” the salvage captain barked. Amber began to rush down the darker end of the hallway at the mention of her name, where only the B-team was assigned to work. The others must have already left without her. It might have been dark, and on an incline, but it was better to lose an inexperienced worker than an experienced one, and it would be a better place to prove herself. Who knows? Maybe she could even land herself a promotion, after a salvage operation or two?

Amber hoped that after a few salvage operations, she would earn a promotion. Every citizen over 18 was at least an ensign; it was how life on the back of the Marisol worked. Most people were happy about staying an ensign, because they could do their part once the war picked back up, but Amber didn't want to just do her part. Amber wanted to be promoted to the rank of captain someday, but she didn't have the mind for becoming an artilleryist or engineer, and she didn't have the strength or the opportunity to be a foot soldier, which was lost when the enemy Tortoiseshells decided that using nuclear bombs on the land would be the only way to win the war. Even if she were on their side of the world, no one would be able to walk on the surface of the Earth for what must be at least a few centuries, if not a few thousand years. Plus, the Marisol had been keeping distance from the enemy Tortoiseshells for the last 40 years; the Marisol knew that if she went any closer to the coast, there was a chance that she could be spotted by one of their drones over the ocean.

So, if neither military service nor finding work as an engineer would realistically work out for Amber, then she'd have to rank up through surviving salvage operations.

There was no way that she'd be just another of the Marisol's crop-cloners, teachers, or military parade officiants. The Marisol was one of the few of the great machines alive since the war escalated, and Amber had lived in the city built on its back for her whole life. How could she not serve the war or the purpose it fought?

As Amber continued walking downward, shining her flashlight down the corridor, she suddenly stopped. The steep incline had dropped to a pit below her.

This must have been where the neck of the fallen Tortoiseshell craned downward, and was only supported by its head, which was face-down in the ground. If she hadn't been using her flashlight, she definitely could have fallen. The corridor was so dark that it was hard for Amber to see a few feet ahead of herself, even with a flashlight. Though there were a few large holes in the ceiling, the sun was obscured by a cloud of dust, as it always was. The cloud made the few rays of sunlight streaming into the Tortoiseshell look as rusty in color as the ruins of the machine itself.

Amber peered down into the pit. If she tried to slide down, she would surely fall, so she took off her backpack, secured a rope inside of it to a piece of metal on the floor that was slightly bent upward, stowed her flashlight, and she descended down into the dark fallen Tortoiseshell's neck.

The neck was longer than Amber expected. After what she thought was about five minutes of lowering herself down, her feet finally touched the bottom of the pit, or what would have once been a wall. At least, she thought it was the bottom.

As Amber turned on her flashlight to look at the bottom of the pit again, she saw that there were only two things of note: a pair of half-open doors, and a sign that read "LOADING DOCK". Amber grinned. Even if this room probably wouldn't contain anything useful, it would still be interesting to see.

Of course, the Tortoiseshells got their name from the giant metal domes on their backs, which protected the cities that were built inside from most radiation or environmental hazards outside. Still, the fact that the part of the machine resembling the tortoise's head had a door that swung open like a jaw, in order to facilitate scavenging operations and easily load civilians and potential prisoners back inside, was surely also one of the reasons behind the naming of the original Tortoiseshell design. Amber remembered that it was back in the 2000s, when the Great War had already been raging for nearly 60 years. Amber didn't remember all that much from those early days of the war from her history classes, though she had seen a few old drawings and photographs of tortoises before, and she could kind of see the resemblance.

Amber was about to drop the end of the rope down into the room when she heard a voice from down below.

“Finally!” someone hissed. “Are you the last member of the B team?” they asked.

“Yes,” Amber said. “Why? What’s wrong?” She asked, aiming the flashlight beam down at the loading dock and trying to see where the voice was coming from. It was almost too dark to see.

“The rest of us fell down here,” they said. Their voice was quiet. “We didn’t see the pit. I fell on top of the others.”

“You did?” Amber asked. She had the rope in one of her hands now, twisting it between her fingers. “Are the others alive?” Amber continued. Even as she shined her flashlight into the darkness, almost all that she could see was the dull orange of several hazmat suits, though Amber couldn’t tell if they were the Loading Dock spares or if they belonged to the team down there. As she looked closer, she saw the brown of rusted metal, and she could imagine the reds and pinks of flesh well enough from old war films.

Still, it was hard to differentiate the color of rust from blood in the darkness, and Amber couldn’t hope to see an open wound from that distance; she could barely differentiate an arm or a leg from the pile.

The person inside the hole made a sound somewhere between a whimper and a cry, and Amber’s stomach tightened. “I don’t think so,” they said. “I think my legs are broken. I can’t move them,” they said.

“Please, help,” They finished, their voice cracking and squeaking on the word “help”.

Amber moved to toss the rope down, but she stopped her hand before she was about to drop it into the opening. Would she even be able to carry them back? Would the medics in the *Marisol* even be able to fix their legs?

Amber hoped so.

*Then again ...*

Amber knew what her commanders would want. She knew what they did want from this mission, she knew that they didn't want to waste time, and she knew that they didn't want soldiers too weak for the war effort. None of them had seen combat in their lives. The Marisol herself hadn't even seen combat since the 2020s, when the oceans grew so large that her sensors couldn't pick up on any other enemy Tortoiseshells across the sea, and her AI couldn't come up with any new tactics to use against them. So, the Tortoiseshells on every side of the war, and the people they commanded, waited, either to find a way across the sea, or for the other sides to find a way across. They would surely have it, eventually, and then the Great War would come to an end. Still, Amber knew that the Marisol couldn't keep using resources on people who contributed nothing to the war effort.

Amber didn't know why at first, but she smiled to herself. She had never seen combat before. She had never seen death. To be the first one to see such a violent death, and to be the first one to make such a difficult decision in decades ...

*I'll make junior grade lieutenant sooner than I thought.*

“WAIT! PLEASE!” The voice in the pit cried, but Amber was already securing her flashlight to the front of her hazmat suit and wrapping both hands around the rope. She had already made up her mind. War required sacrifice, both in combat, and out of combat. Everyone had to do their part, and everyone had to pull their weight. The voice in the pit couldn't pull their weight for any longer.

Before Amber was about to leave, a glint of metal on the floor caught her eye. Amber couldn't quite identify what it was, though she could tell from its shape that it was definitely an artillery shell of some kind. It was a miracle that it hadn't gone off yet. Of course, she couldn't take it with her, but it was an interesting find. It must have punched one of those holes in the ceiling, Amber thought. It was the only way that she could imagine such a thing ending up at the bottom of this shaft.

Ah, well. As interesting as it was, Amber had other things to do. After a moment of silence, Amber held the shell above the Loading Dock door, which was still ajar, and she dropped it down. Amber couldn't hear an impact over the noise of the shell going off. It was so much louder than she expected that Amber flinched, almost falling into the pit herself. But, after only a moment, Amber knew that she had made the right decision, because now, she could only hear the voice replaying in her head.

With shaking hands, Amber tried to get a good grip on the rope. For a moment, she stood at the opening of the pit, trying to squeeze the rope in both hands. Her feet felt like they had been submerged in pitch. She could hear the voice's words in her head, over and over again. It was someone she knew from school, though only barely. Amber knew just about everyone who lived on the Marisol's back.

War requires sacrifice, she thought to herself. Maybe, if she repeated it enough times, she would be able to get the voice out of her head for good.

As Amber hoisted herself up the rope, the voice grew faint, and after some time, it faded, and it stopped.

## Plenty Of Charge Left

*Dakota Macklin*

I walked to the toilet with one goal in mind: avoiding my homework for just a little while longer. My family's house was old, and my bathroom's walls were made of cinder blocks, with a few thick layers of insulation snug inside the house. Even though the basement only had one window to let a little bit of light into my room *on some days*, I was glad that it was mine, because it was always warm in the winter. My basement bathroom was windowless, and the sturdy door could be locked—so, I could watch short videos on social media without earbuds, put my phone on Do Not Disturb mode so I wouldn't be interrupted, and not worry about being caught.

*Just one more*, I told myself a few times. A few of my favorite content creators had posted some new videos—memes and short skits, mostly—and, besides, they were only about 15 seconds each. If my parents caught me procrastinating, I could just tell them that I lost track of time.

For a few minutes, I sat and watched video after video, and I lightly chuckled at each.

*I should probably get to work*, I began to think, and my face twisted upward into a grimace. No, I didn't need to. I was fairly caught up.

*For now.*

Still, I stayed. Quickly enough, five minutes turned into 10, which turned into 20, and finally 25 minutes, as I turned to look at the old glass-and-metal clock sitting on the counter by the sink. It was 6:23 PM. I was running out of time before my parents would call me for dinner and ask about my homework.

I scrolled to one more video, adjusting the way that I sat on the toilet to stop my legs from falling asleep, and my next video must have been a skit, because the acting and special effects were

superb! A meteor arced through the sky, flying down at a rapid rate until it finally collided with a house below. The camera was shaking, and I heard a hushed “Oh, God ...” from the cameraman. I checked the comments, almost out of habit, but there were none. This was posted five minutes ago, and the camera work and voice acting were so realistic, and still no comments?

“First,” I typed in the comments, and I clicked “save comment.” I noticed after a moment that they only had five followers, and I frowned. I hoped that this wasn’t some sort of AI deepfake account. People were cutting the supports out from under them, using AI to create content like this. Didn’t they realize that, sooner or later, AI might replace a lot of content creators, if they kept doing this?

*Ah, well. Time to move on.*

I scrolled down to the next video, but what I saw was just about the same. The person who recorded the short was standing near a window, watching pieces of a meteor overhead break off and descend upon the homes in their neighborhood, punching holes in just about every building there. I watched as they shut the door, closed the curtains, and picked up their cat in one hand. “To anyone watching this, you need to get inside, right now!” they said, and the video ended. I frowned, and I looked at the description. This was by a completely different content creator, and on the other side of the world. As the video looped, I realized that the timeframe also fit—the red-hot glow of the rock overhead was just enough to light up the otherwise-dark night, and allow the smaller chunks of rock to be seen as they fell down to the Earth in an infernal rain.

*What is this? Some kind of trend?*

I looked back to the clock for a minute. It was only 6:25, and I had enough charge in my phone that I could stay here for a while longer.

*I may as well stay.*

I scrolled down again, and just like I expected, I saw another

er one of those videos. This time, it was a livestream. The name of the stream was “Apocalypse 01.” The ground shook underneath the person shooting the video, the space around them turned red-hot, and just a moment after they turned their camera around to reveal the rock hurtling toward them, the stream was cut off.

A message popped up, right where the video was: “Oops! It looks like we have some technical difficulties,” the message read. “Try reloading or updating your app.” Just as I was about to reload my app, the lights flickered off and on.

*Well, isn't that a coincidence?*

I ground my teeth. My friends always made fun of me for getting scared first, whenever we played horror games together. It was because of this that I preferred watching horror games (or short videos about them) instead of playing them. It must have been residual nerves from that livestream.

After only a few seconds, the lights flickered again, but instead of flicking off-and-on as they did before, the lights were off, and my phone was the only light in the room. The next moment, the ground shook, and I heard a rumbling that seemed to come from the Earth itself. For a short amount of time, I wondered if the basement ceiling would collapse in on me, but it seemed that just about everything but the walls of my house shook and clattered. Then, I heard a series of crashing noises coming from upstairs, as though it was raining kettlebells. The noises reverberated through the walls of my house. I held my hands to my ears, and curled into a ball, leaving the toilet so that I didn't have to put my weight on it while it shook, with a base that now seemed to slide independently from the floor.

I wasn't sure how long I had stayed like this, but eventually, the noises stopped, until I only heard the occasional crash from upstairs, and until, finally, I heard nothing. I checked my phone, and it was 6:49 PM.

*Good. I'm not late to dinner.*

I laughed at that thought. I lived in California, and in a building that wouldn't exactly handle an earthquake well (and it probably was an earthquake, though it was odd that most of the noises came from upstairs). I was easily spooked, too. I had always been easily spooked—like a turtle, my friends said, always withdrawing into my shell whenever I got uncomfortable.

I only realized how much my chest was hurting once I stopped grinding my teeth. I felt as though some of the rebar had come free from the cinder blocks in the basement walls and constricted themselves around my chest and throat, squeezing the two until they burned. I felt faint, though I was breathing so quickly that neither the chest pain or the lightheadedness made sense. My hands were shaking so much that I put my phone on the floor so that I could look at it again. My phone showed no network—5G or home WiFi—and for a moment, I wondered what to do. I could reach out in the darkness and try the door. Should I go upstairs? I could ask my parents if everything was alright.

*Everything's all right, sweet girl*, they would say. They would brush my hair out of my face, tell me to gather my things so we could leave (in the case that it was an earthquake), and ask me if my homework was done. But, where were they, if they weren't already here ...? What should I do, what should I do, what should I *do*?

Why couldn't I do something? What *could* I do?

After a moment, my breathing slowed. Did I have to do anything right at this moment?

I remembered that the week before, my friends had shared a few folders of downloaded short form videos with me, and without thinking, I found the folder in my Downloads app. The basement door wouldn't go anywhere; I would always have the option to open it. Sure, at some point, I'd need to put my phone down, but for now?

I felt a smile creep across my face, and my shoulders began to relax.

*I have plenty of charge left*, I thought, and mechanically, I

queued up the first video.

# Charity

Dakota Macklin

EXT. TRAIN STATION -- DAY

The train station is crowded and noisy. It appears to be early summer; the grass is green, the sun is shining, and the sky is bright blue. The train station is small, but packed full of people.

MINA (*mid-20s, enthusiastic*) exits a train and looks around in awe, holding a flyer in one hand and dragging a suitcase with the other. She is bumped accidentally by a person in the crowd, but she shrugs it off after a moment.

A graduation cap sticks out of MINA's bag; she looks as though she just graduated. She wears a brightly-colored sweater from a fictional college.

Printed on the flyer is the following phrase: "BECAUSE WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE."

INT. APARTMENT (*DOORWAY*) -- DUSK

MINA talks with an old woman (*THE LANDLORD*) as she walks through a doorway to an apartment, suitcase and poster in hand. The door has the number 8 printed on it in silvery lettering.

(*MINA closes the door and locks it behind her.*)

INT. APARTMENT -- MOMENTS LATER

MINA stands in the apartment and looks through the small window. Behind her, her belongings are in place.

The camera focuses on her apartment as she stares. The apartment is nice, although sparsely decorated and small.

On the room's left side (*from the view of the door*), there's a pennant from a fictional college pinned on the wall, a

doorway into another room, and a desk with a jar filled with dried cranberries tacking a few papers to the desk.

On the right side, there's a mattress and a stack of books serving as a place to hold an alarm clock.

After a few seconds of staring, MINA uses a tack to pin the poster to the wall. A close-up of the poster reveals that it's an advertisement for a position at a charity, by the images on the poster.

She opens a laptop next to the poster and starts a new document titled "MY NEW PLAN".

INT. CENTER -- EARLY MORNING

MINA carries a box and talks with her boss (*ED*) as she approaches a desk, appearing enthusiastic. *ED* has a round face with half-closed eyes and a gentle demeanor. He carries a cup of coffee.

*(MINA sits at the desk.)*

*ED* deposits the cup of coffee on MINA's desk with a slight shrug.

*(EXIT ED.)*

MINA waits with a patient smile; the sky brightens into day, and the first few people approach her desk. MINA quickly stands, shaking their hands and saying a greeting that sounds muffled.

MONTAGE OF PEOPLE APPROACHING:

As MINA sits, five people approach the desk that day (list below). MINA is shown talking with them. When they exit, they each leave a paper on her desk.

The first (*CAIDEN*) has dark red wire-framed glasses. He has a round face and looks tired.

The second and third (*ANNOYED PAIR*) come to the desk together. By their expressions, they seem to dislike each other.

The fourth (*ACCIDENT-PRONE MAN*) has a bulky cast on one leg and crutches. He doesn't seem to be proficient with the crutches yet. His handwriting is shaky, and MINA grabs his arm to keep him steady. He immediately falls when he turns to leave, despite the fact that MINA helped keep him steady.

The fifth (*OLD WOMAN*) is an old woman with thick glasses. She has a smile a lot like Mina's, and she gives MINA candy as she leaves. The papers begin to pile up, and DAY turns to NIGHT quickly.

--END MONTAGE

INT. APARTMENT (*DOORWAY*) -- NIGHT

MINA enters the apartment. She kicks the door closed with her foot and puts her bag onto the desk. She collapses onto the bed and stares at the ceiling, grinning.

After a moment, she digs her laptop out of her bag and finds the document she made the day before, "MY NEW PLAN". She writes the following sentences in the document: "Help people." "Do useful work."

INT. CENTER -- MORNING

MINA returns to the desk. She sits down and finds a note from ED in the spot where she places her bag: "Amazing work for your first day! Try to promise a little less. You'll break the bank if you aren't careful.:)"

"-Ed"

MINA puzzles over this for a second, covering her mouth with her hand and tapping her pencil against the desk.

MONTAGE OF PEOPLE APPROACHING:

The same five people approach, along with a few others (*not stated in the following list*).

CAIDEN seems glad to see MINA as he approaches. The two talk, MINA shakes CAIDEN's hand, and CAIDEN signs a form before he leaves.

The ANNOYED PAIR argue during the time they spend at MINA's desk.

ACCIDENT-PRONE MAN presents a signature that doesn't look shaky. He has a cast on his right forearm now. Cut to the ACCIDENT-PRONE MAN tripping down the staircase at the end of the lobby.

The OLD WOMAN smiles at MINA. She slides a form over to MINA, and she gives MINA a handful of candies as she leaves.

Three OTHERS visit the desk, appearing for less time than the first five. MINA eats the candy as she talks to them.

Day turns to night just as quickly as it did the first day.

--END MONTAGE

INT. APARTMENT -- NIGHT

MINA sits at her home desk, turning the jar on her desk as she thinks. She opens her laptop to the document, and adds to what she has:

“Help people.” “Do useful work, no matter what.”

INT. CENTER -- MORNING

The weather outside (*seen from a few windows*) shows that it's fall now: the leaves are turning red and falling off of trees, and the grass is turning brown.

MINA appears a little less enthusiastic than she did before, but still happy to keep working.

MINA holds a second note: “Please, promise a little less. Offers aren’t guaranteed, and they aren’t always more than \$100. Good news: Today is a finance meeting.”

“-Ed :)”

INT. CENTER (*MEETING ROOM*) -- MOMENTS LATER

MINA sits through a meeting in a dimly-lit room, her laptop in front of her. On her laptop are the downloaded slides, and they show that there isn’t enough money to help people as much as she wanted to help them.

MINA creates a new document, with the following title:  
“CHARITY FINANCING HELP”

INT. CENTER -- DAY

MINA returns to see a short line of people at her desk. She helps one person from the ANNOYED PAIR, the ACCIDENT-PRONE MAN (*whose arm-cast now covers his entire hand and forearm*), and the OLD WOMAN (*who only seems to want to give MINA candy*). This time, seven others are waiting after them (*although CAIDEN and one person in the ANNOYED PAIR are gone, this time*). She waves after each person leaves.

INT. APARTMENT -- NIGHT

MINA sits at her apartment’s desk and looks at the empty “CHARITY FINANCING HELP” document. Then, she begins to type. Her things move around and her clothes change as though time was speeding forward.

The jar of dried cranberries is emptied and refilled several times, and MINA’s clothes become progressively warmer as the seasons change.

MONTAGE OF PEOPLE APPROACHING MINA'S DESK:

We see MINA help person after person (*through still images and ambient noise*) through the windows of the office. In the background, fall turns to winter, which then turns to spring. We see people leaving and coming, and although MINA looks similar each time, her posture begins to droop. Her expression caves from the hope she had at the beginning into a stagnant, bored expression.

Throughout the montage, there are also glimpses of her original document. It changes from: "Help people." "Do useful work, no matter what."

TO:

"Help people." "Try to do useful work, no matter what."

TO: (CONT'D)

"Help people." "Try to do useful work?"

TO: (CONT'D)

"Do something that helps people."

TO: (CONT'D)

"Do something."

She arrives home in between the other parts of the montage. Though she always arrives at around the same time, she carries herself differently--tiredness and boredom creep into her demeanor, and she goes from waving to THE LANDLORD to barely acknowledging her as MINA passes THE LANDLORD. NINA's clothes also have progressively duller colors.

MINA eventually brings a coffee whenever she enters her apartment, appearing gradually more exhausted.

The last time she enters the apartment, she drops her bag on the floor next to her desk, and she collapses onto the bed.

--END MONTAGE

INT. CENTER -- AFTERNOON

MINA sits at her desk, slumped. A muffled voice yells at her, and she looks up with a neutral expression. The remaining person in the ANNOYED PAIR slams a poster on her desk. It looks the same as the poster MINA had in the beginning of the film. MINA looks at the poster, and then returns her gaze to the remaining person from the ANNOYED PAIR.

*(MINA looks toward the end of the line.)*

The line of people needing help ends somewhere beyond the door. MINA shakes her head as the person at the front of the line shouts something else at her.

MINA reaches backward with a sigh and places a sign in front of her. The sign reads: "I'll be back soon :)"

A crowd of people suddenly surrounds her desk, angered. As the remaining person from the ANNOYED PAIR reaches to grab her arm, MINA is pulled back by ED and into another room. MINA grabs her bag as she leaves.

INT. CENTER (*MEETING ROOM*) -- MOMENTS LATER

The two wait in the room. MINA drops her bag down on the nearby table, and she sits on an office chair. Time slowly passes: the room gradually becomes darker. The noise from outside dies down. The clock on the wall behind MINA goes from 8:47 to 11:30. ED checks the outside, and the crowd is gone.

ED motions for her to leave with an apologetic expression.

MINA looks up at ED, her face creased with sorrow, and she begins to write on a paper left on the table. She hands it to him, and it reads: "I can't do this any longer."

ED sighs and nods. The two shake hands, share a brief hug, and MINA picks her bag up from the table. The two go separate ways after leaving the room, and MINA walks slowly, her shoulders down and forward.

INT. APARTMENT (*DOORWAY*) -- MOMENTS LATER

MINA enters her apartment without acknowledging THE LANDLORD, and she swings her door open and shut. MINA sits on the bed, with her back to the camera. The camera is angled so she appears small, even in the cramped room.

It's easy to tell that she is crying, despite the fact that she doesn't move: she wipes her face with her sleeves. She stares at her posters for a few minutes.

MINA stands up and stares at the original poster, still in mint condition. Temporarily, her expression creases with anger, and she rips the poster off of the wall.

She keeps looking at the paper in her hand for a moment, her tears dripping onto the paper, and she tears it in half for good measure before throwing it in the trash.

MONTAGE WITHOUT HOPE:

INT. APARTMENT -- DAY

MINA sits at the desk in her apartment, drinking from a cup of coffee. As time passes, MINA is shown typing and trying to find a new job online. She starts by deleting her plan document and her financing document.

There are a few changes made to her apartment. The posters depicting the charity on her walls are removed, revealing parts of the walls with a brighter shade of paint. Flyers advertising jobs are seen on the table, then in the trash. The jar of cranberries on her desk is now consistently full.

By the time summer arrives (*based off of the sunny weather and*

*MINA's clothing*), she eventually finds a corporate job (*shown by MINA finally hanging up a poster for the job*). She shows up at the large building for the interview, and she walks into a nice office, showing that she got the job.

--END MONTAGE

EXT. OFFICE -- NIGHT

As MINA leaves the office, she sees CAIDEN. He wears nice clothing and a nametag with his name on it. MINA approaches to talk with CAIDEN. He's obviously better-off than he was earlier.

The two leave and find a cafe. They sit at a table and drink coffee. As MINA looks around, she begins to see a lot of the people she helped around her-- the person in the ANNOYED PAIR who stopped showing up is there, smiling; the OLD WOMAN sits in a booth near them, splitting a large meal with two adults and a small child; the ACCIDENT-PRONE MAN sits in a wheelchair, seeming to have broken his other leg. He waves at CAIDEN and MINA with his remaining hand.

CAIDEN stops talking and looks up at her. Mina knows what she's supposed to say:

MINA  
How do I know if I can help?

CAIDEN shakes his head.

The two stand. The two shake hands and part ways, walking in opposite directions. MINA waves to CAIDEN as she leaves, and CAIDEN copies the motion.

INT. APARTMENT -- NIGHT

MINA passes THE LANDLORD with a short wave and closes the door behind her. She sets her laptop right next to the jar of cranber-

ries, opens it, and she looks at the “GARBAGE” icon on her computer’s desktop. In the recycle bin, she sees the mostly-finished charity documents.

She looks up at the pennants posted on her room’s walls, and a picture of herself in her graduation robes, smiling. She is reflected in the glass over the picture, showing both versions of herself, when her face softens into a less saddened expression.

MINA turns back to her laptop, and she removes the files from the garbage. MINA opens the smaller file, and she types the following sentences into it: “Take a leap of faith.” “Try your best, though you may fail.”

EXT./INT. CENTER -- NIGHT

MINA rushes into the center, holding her laptop in her arms. Her former coworkers seem surprised to see her there, and she waves and smiles to a few of them as she rushes through the corridors. She rushes past her old desk, ignoring the member of the ANNOYED COUPLE that waits there.

MINA peels a note off of a nearby desk: “I’ll be working in the meeting room today, in case you need anything.

-Ed :)”

MINA finds ED the meeting room, and he looks up at her when she enters.

MINA puts the laptop on the table, and she opens it. The laptop shows the title of a document and its first paragraph. The title reads: “CHARITY FINANCING HELP”



## Wreckage of the Reef

***Asa Leisure***  
Ceramics & Glass  
12th Grade  
Wapahani High School  
Teacher: Katelyn Wade



# Appendices

# Gold Key Winners Supplementary Information



**Madeleine Adams**

9th Grade | Bloomington High School South | Educator: Sheila  
McDermott-Sipe

**Garrison Dowling**

12th Grade | Center Grove High School

**Lucia Moxey**

11th Grade | Indiana Academy-Science, Mathematics,  
and Humanities

**William Liao**

11th Grade | Bloomington High School South

**Aneequa Mohammed**

10th Grade | Signature School

**Emma Hu**

12th Grade | Carmel Senior Highschool

**Joseph Shing**

12th Grade | Academy of Science Entrepreneurship

**Katie Won**

11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Educator:  
Marydell Forbes

**Benjamin Lu**

11th Grade | Carmel High School

**Ja Seng Lahtaw**

12th Grade | Franklin Central High School | Educator: Lisa Laker

**Leah Pugh**

12th Grade | Franklin Central High School | Educator:  
Jaclyn Keller

**Angel Zou**

12th Grade | Bloomington High School South

**Owen Stringer**

11th Grade | Bloomington High School South

**Max Gregg**

12th Grade | Franklin Central High School

**Kenzie Mason**

10th Grade | Mooresville High School

**Melody Fei**

8th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Educator:  
Marydell Forbes

**Jein Park**

11th Grade | West Lafayetter Jr Senior Highschool | Educator:  
Marydell Forbes

**Olivia Rawe**

9th Grade | Bloomington High School South | Educator: Juliana  
Henderson Crespo

**Evelyn Rose**

11th Grade | Fishers High School

**Evangeline Zhang**

8th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School

**Daphne Goldberg**

9th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Educator: Lisa  
Mills

**Deekshitha Daruvuri**

11 Grade | Center Grove High School | Educator: Catherine Tedrow

**Marissa Wang**

7th Grade | Jackson Creek Middle School

**Kalinda Lee**

10th Grade | Carmel High School

**Petra Malcom-Clarke**

10th Grade | Bloomington Highschool South

**Kaydence Mongosa**

12th Grade | Franklin Central High School | Educator: Lisa Laker

**Therese Corong**

10th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Educator: Lisa Mills

**Phoebe Mendota**

9th Grade | Bloomington High School South | Educator: Juliana Henderson Crespo

**Robert Bik**

12th Grade | Franklin Central Highschool | Educator: Lisa Laker

**Ava Jewett**

12th Grade | Franklin Central High School | Educator: Lisa Laker

**Atavia Boyle**

12th Grade | Franklin Central High School | Educator: Jaclyn Keller

**Ava Reita**

11th Grade | Carmel High School

**Bridget Ballard**

10th Grade | Noblesville High School | Educator: Bill Kenley

**Archer Taylor**

12th Grade | Noblesville High School | Educator: Bill Kenley

**Jenny Bao**

8th Grade | Wainwright Middle School | Educator: Ethan Kuhn

**Robat Thawng**

9th Grade | Franklin Central High School | Educator: Lisa Laker

**Novia Chiang**

12th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School

**Demi Zhang**

10th Grade | Carmel High School

**Evan Dahlie**

11th Grade | Park Tudor School

**Evan Ting**

10th Grade | Park Tudor School

**Amy Xu**

10th Grade | Carmel High School

**Yuki Jalali**

9th Grade | Park Tudor School | Educator: Laura Gellin

**Riva Jain**

11th Grade | Carmel High School

**Minna Steensland**

9th Grade | Park Tudor School | Educator: Laura Gellin

**Ysabella Delamater**

9th Grade | Park Tudor School | Educator: Laura Gellin

**Cailyn Cho**

12th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School

**Kaia Ursem**

10th Grade | Carmel High School

**Areeba Alam**

11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Educator:  
Marydell Forbes

**Josie Seymour**

11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Educator:  
Marydell Forbes

**Meera Venugopal**

11th Grade | Hamilton Southeastern High School

**Chloe Sigua**

10th Grade | Park Tudor Highschool

**Jazira Hernandez-Stallworth**

11th Grade | Wapahani High School

**Megan Xia**

12th Grade | Carmel Senior High School

**Andralyn Yao**

12th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School

**Eisley Motz**

10th Grade | Bloomington High School North

**Rebecca Stewart**

11th Grade | Bloomington High School North

**Grace Zhu**

9th Grade | Carmel High School

**Lucy Mercer**

12th Grade | Franklin Community High School

**Asa Leisure**

12th Grade | Wapahani High School

**Dakota Macklin**

12th Grade | Bloomington High School South | Educator: Maggie Guschwan

# Writing Judges



Evan Allee  
Becky Armoto  
Kathy Barlow  
Terrian Barnes  
Theresa Barnes  
Denise Beck  
Jen Bingham  
Ethan Brubaker  
Emily Cain  
Nicole Cardassilaris  
Dan Carpenter  
Earl Carrender  
Alyssa Chase  
Mary Ann Cohen  
Gay Lynn Crossley  
Tony Crunk  
Carol Divish  
Mitchell Douglas  
Bailey Evans  
Evan Ewy  
Caitlin Flowers  
Chris Forhan

Sarah Ginter  
Annie Goeller  
Max Goller  
Chris Grissom  
Hannah Haas  
Siren Hand  
Sara Harrell  
Kelsey Hawkins  
Jarvais Jackson  
Alec Jarvis  
Lynn Jettpace  
Tasha Jones  
Chris Judson  
Lasana Kazembe  
Andrew Keith  
Sarah Layden  
Julia Lewis  
Natalie Lima  
Temeka Lomax  
Jackie Lutzke  
Alessandra Lynch  
Sarah Masson

# Art Judges



Peter Abraham  
Wendy Alvarez  
James Cramer  
Sakura Fuqua  
Stevie Griffin  
Jarvais Jackson  
Freddie Kelvin  
Nasreen Khan  
Ann McGriffin  
Sydney McQuade Otto  
Wendy Meaden  
Norm Minnick  
Stephanie Robertson  
Donna Rund  
Emma Rund  
Trevin Rund  
Lesli Tilly  
Marty Tormoehlen  
Crystal Vicars



# Contributors

Aneequa Mohammed

Archer Taylor

Atavia Boyle

Ava Jewett

Ava Reita

Benjamin Lu

Daphne Goldberg

Deekshitha Daruvuri

Emma Hu

Evangeline Zhang

Evelyn Rose

Garrison Dowling

Ja Seng Lahtaw

Jein Park

Jenny Bao

Joseph Shing

Kalinda Lee

Kaydence Mongosa

Leah Pugh

Lucia Moxey

Madeline Adams

Marissa Wang

Max Birge

Max Gregg

Melody Fei

Novia Chiang

Olivia Rawe

Owen Stringer

Petra Malcolm-Clarke

Phoebe Mendota

Robat Thawng

Robert Bik

Sahaana Terani

Therese Corong

William Liao

Evan Ting

Amy Xu

Yuki Jalali

Riva Jain

Minna Steensland

Ysabella Delamater

Cailyn Cho

Kaia Ursem

Areeba Alam

Dakota Macklin

Josie Seymour

Meera Venugopal

Chloe Sigua

Jazira Hernandez-Stallworth

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Asa Leisure