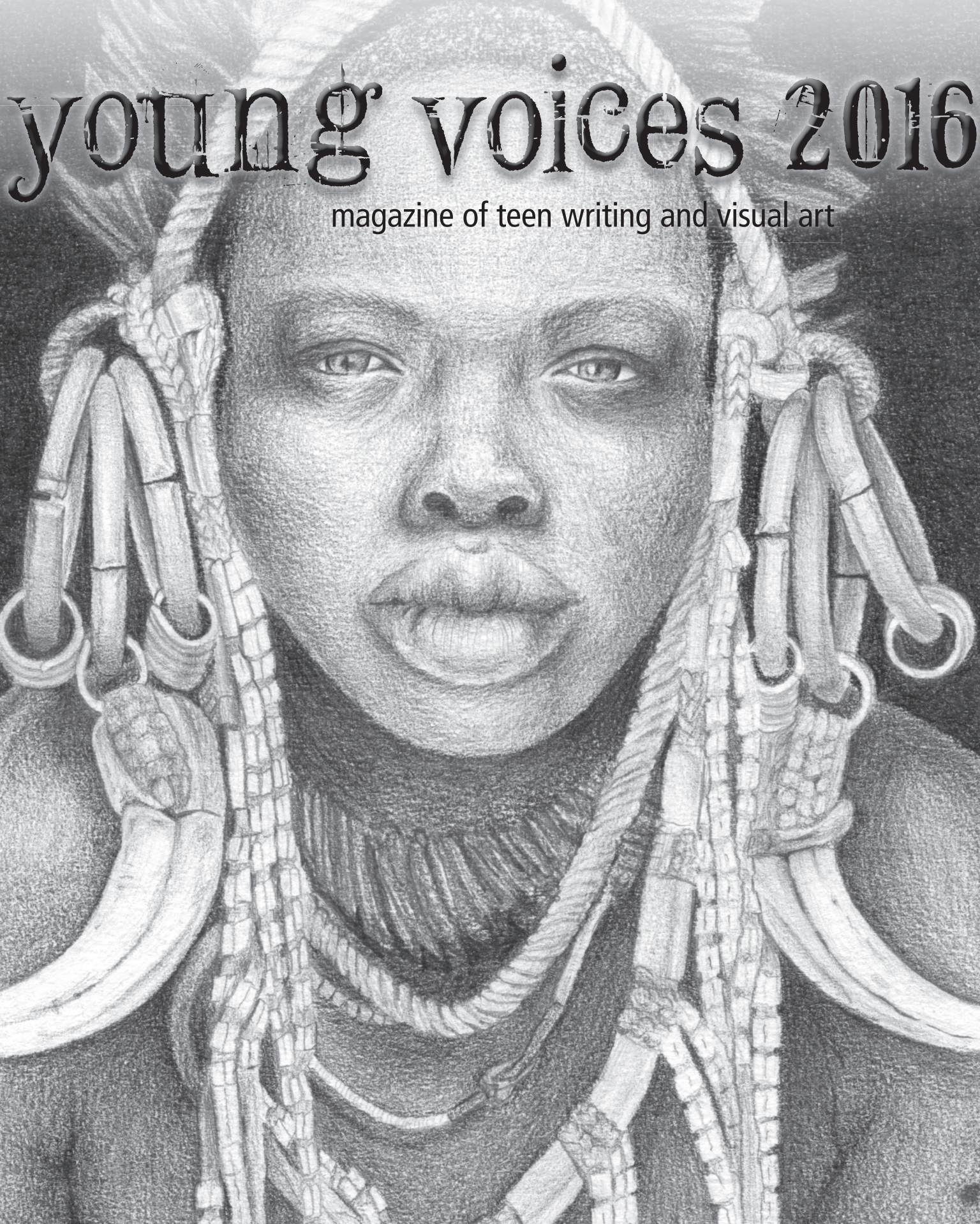


young voices 2016

magazine of teen writing and visual art



TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY



Birth of Spring

Rachel Choy, age 15

GET PUBLISHED!
in *Young Voices* 2017

Love what you're reading here?
Want to be part of it?

Submit stories, poems, rants,
artwork, comics and photos...

Submit NOW!
See page 62 for details.

The printing of *Young Voices* magazine has been made possible by a generous donation from the **Friends of Toronto Public Library, South Chapter**.

FRONT COVER ART

Identity

Jane Li, age 16



Welcome to *Young Voices* 2016

Toronto Public Library's annual *Young Voices* magazine holds a special place in my heart, and I'm thrilled to introduce the 2016 edition to you! I'm grateful to the contributors, who share their creativity; the professional writers and visual artists, who offer their expertise and mentorship; the Editorial Youth Advisory Group members, who share their important perspective and enthusiasm; and the youth services staff, who work hard to pull everything together. The result is nothing short of magic.

When you dip into *Young Voices* 2016, you'll see the world from widely varied perspectives; it's a world that's sometimes funny, sometimes painful, sometimes strange and sometimes beautiful.

You'll jump on a trampoline with a friend, hear from a Toronto actor questioning Hollywood racism and feel the kind of loud music that "beats your heart for you" when you're afraid your heart will stop beating. You'll endure the isolation of going to the movies with someone who wants to be anywhere but with you, and travel to the outer edges of our galaxy. You'll watch a young person hang "a sliver of moon as thin as rice paper" on the laundry line, see a fantastical world blossom from a head of long hair and discover what it looks like inside a fly's mind.

These are just a few of the experiences waiting for you between the gorgeous covers of this magazine.

I'm excited for your discovery of these talented new voices that will inspire you, bring you backward or forward in time, make you think about the world differently and, ultimately, make you feel good about its future with these amazing young writers and artists in it.

Enjoy!

Lisa Heggum
Manager, Youth Services and Special Projects
Toronto Public Library

The *Young Voices* 2016 editorial board:

Robert Adragna	Georgia Maxwell
Lillian Allen	Sachiko Murakami
Yanelle Bardhan-Mendonca	Anna Nabutovsky
Gary Barwin	Anupya Pamidimukkala
Michael Brown	Faith Paré
Nini Chen	Alana Park
Kristyn Dunnion	Terese Pierre
Benjamin Gabbay	Justine Shackleton
Lucy Haughton	Evi Tampold
Carol Hu	Matthew Tierney
Melanie Katz	Dunja Tomic
Karen Krossing	Caleb Tseng-Tham
Olivia Li	Annie Vimalanathan
Tracy Li	Kevin Wang
Wenting Li	Maria Yang
Geraldynn Lubrido	

CONTENTS

Poetry

Patchwork , Julliana Santos	5
Summer Night , Antonia Eckley	7
The Apple Pie , Anna-Maria Vlahos	7
instead of a heart , Aidyn Silverberg-Ceresne	8
Satisfaction , Isabella O'Hara	11
Time , Monidipa Nath	11
Bone White , Andy Zhang	15
Rare , Nicole Mason	15
The Box , Jana van Heeswyk	16
Yellow , Jordan MacDonald	16
Foosh , Rhyz Tonks	19
Admit One , Sam Shepherd	19
sunlight , Joanna Cleary	25
August Moon , Nelka Jankechova	25
Red Ribbons , Jean Kim	28
An Ode to the Beach , Rishona Altenberg	28
The Space Cadet's Sonnet , Rahma Wiryomartono	28
Moments of the Past , Glody Mungala	28
gossamer aria , Tiffany Leung	33
Sunday , Alicia Gan	33
untitled , E Dion	34
Hot , Maeesha Biswas	36
I Am From , Aira Biswas	36
Falling into Twenty , Nancy Wu	36
Math , Maryam Nasimi	46
A Collection , Odessa Hewitt-Bernhard	46
Current , Julia DaSilva	47
Sunshine in December , Catherine Le	47
Judas's Hymn , Briana Quinn	50
My Summer Hands , Eleanor Sokolowski	52
Wake Up , Amanda Murgel	55

Prose

Chris Rock Rocks the Boat , Chantal Saab	4
The Girl in The Meadow , Unique Faulkner	4
Courthouse , Marzan Hamid	7
Concerning Madness and a Starship Captain , Claire Kilpatrick ..	10
Why We Should Teach Arts in School , Bo Rui Wang	12
Out , B.B.W Scargall	15
Degeneration , Alexandra Pavel	18
The Pigeon , Lily Wang	22
Embrace , Lily Liu	24
WTF Reasons Why Listicles Are Destroying Journalism That Will Literally Blow Your Mind , Shann Chiu	27
Remember Your Music , Victoria Ho	29
A Wall to Break Down , Lizzie Kim	30
Blind to the Dark , Salwa Abdalla	33

I Am That Shadow , Erin Park	34
Dark Light , Tom Zhu	37
2015 Youth: On Reform and Revolution , Camille Intson	38
Simply Solitude , Lily Wu	42
Existential Crisis , Filip Panaitescu	44
Confessions of an Unapologetic Album A This I Believe Essay , Alice Cheng	49
Pain , Roy Shi	52
A Sea of Depthless Cold , Jessica Zhu	57
Doppelgänger , Leah Duarte	58
The End: A Meditation on Materialism and Mortality , Chelsea Cao ..	60
The Window , Tristan Vena	61

Art/Photos

Identity , Jane Li	cover
Birth of Spring , Rachel Choy	inside front cover
The Right Moment , Gautham Krishna	3
Pernicious , Fatima Qureshi	6
The Digital Age , Sophia Kostanski	9
Waves , Catherine Le	13
Mess , Aishah Tabassum	14
Unspoken , Elina Nie	17
Midnight Flight , Justine Lewicki	20
In My Head , Shally Zheng	21
The People and the Arch , Heather Stanley	23
Resurrected in Black and White , Novaya Politra	26
Serena , Aryana Rizvi	31
Formation , Juanita Lam	32
Miss World Peace , Annetzia Joseph	35
Kodama 児玉, Samira Ebrahiminia	39
Empty Eyes , Yoana Vasileva	40
Do Androids Read Books , Megan Li	41
Time's Passing , Sara Al-Temeemi	43
Organism , Vicky Wang	45
The Greedy Mouse , Cindy Xin Ran Huang	48
Musca Domestica , Andy Zhang	51
Not Obsessed , Filip Panaitescu	53
Running Through Time , Selina Qiu	54
Jessica Stam , Mahdi Mahira	56
Contemplation , Michelle Ng	59
Flowers for Mom , Teresa Han	inside back cover
The Stone Age , Cameron Bartlett	back cover

The Right Moment



Gautham Krishna, age 17

Chris Rock Rocks the Boat

At the eighty-eighth Academy Awards, Chris Rock asked the question, "Is Hollywood racist?" White nominations and white winners, yes, but as emphasized by the 2016 host, lack of diversity in Hollywood has come to be defined specifically as no black roles. Still, we dismiss other races that the media has also continued to neglect. And here's the scary part, it's not just Hollywood. You would think that Canada, famous for its *mosaic* acceptance of culture, would be a bit more considerate. However, as an Arabic actor living in Toronto, I have seen casting calls ask specifically for Caucasian actors what feels like ninety percent of the time. When there *is* the odd call for an Arabic actor, we are either running with or away from bombs. Running away from or struggling to follow the *strict rules and regulations* of the Middle Eastern culture. Oh, is that what we do? I guess no one ever told me. Because I'd like to play an honour roll student with teenage angst or maybe a party girl stuck in an indie movie romance. Those roles are out there! We see them all the time. Starring amazing, talented white actors. And I love that they are there! But I yearn for other races to be there as well. What will it take for the actors I see on the movie screen to be similar to the diversity seated around me in the movie theatre?

So *is* Hollywood racist? Maybe.

It's likely, however, that the problem is not with the Academy Awards, it's with the films being *made*. It begins with the actual creation of the film with perhaps a screenwriter or casting director or producer, who is not necessarily trying to *avoid* including diversity in their films, but aren't actively opening the same doors for everyone either. Which is why it's time to educate and encourage all artists to try something a little new. Like Chris Rock said, "We want opportunity." We *need* opportunity because the media is due for a reminder that the world is more colourful than it would like to imply. Actors of diverse backgrounds have roles to play in movies too. And sometimes even those parts are given to white actors (I'm looking at you Emma Stone.)

Chantal Saab, age 16

The Girl in The Meadow

Juliet Stone sat with her legs crossed on the wildly grown, debatably green grass which no longer carried the sweet, pleasant scent of summer. She loved the smell of the grass in late June and early July because she thought that it was the aroma of the earth at its peak of life and happiness. She especially loved the fragrance of the grass in the meadow behind her house (the same meadow she was sitting in now.) As she inhaled the odour of the end-of-August grass she knew that the earth knew that it was about to die because Juliet had a talent for such things and it gave her an otherworldly essence.

A cool, crisp breeze cut through the last of the somewhat warm summer air, slicing through Juliet's hair, the overgrown grass, and the many scattered bushes of Queen Anne's lace. She stared at the white, lacy flower feeling envious... She wished she were the flower; alive and at full bloom in the summer and absent in the colder months only to come back again to repeat the cycle for years to come. She closed her eyes and let the wind rip through her hair again and let her mind take her to a place where she didn't need to start high school tomorrow, a place where it could always be summer, and a place where the grass could be undebatably green and always smell like the hottest time of the year. She opened her eyes and sighed because even though she was a girl of fourteen, she was always left in melancholy when her mind didn't take her to where she imagined (in this case California, the land of people like herself; dreamers and people who could get lost in their heads.) A powerful breeze rocked Toronto back and forth... this one much cooler and crisper than the last; it knocked Juliet back into reality, leaving her in pieces and her mind to put them back together.

Her mind didn't put her back together; reality did, and all Juliet needed to do was face it. Reality and Juliet Stone had never been the best of friends; she was an optimist and reality was a pessimist, which was already the foundation of a fatal relationship. Nevertheless, the next cool, sudden blast of air and yellowing grass was all just a friendly reminder that she was a flower, the best kind; the kind that was at its peak of life year-round. She fell asleep in her meadow that night and woke up there in the morning and the earth knew that Juliet knew that she was ready, because the earth had a talent for such things.

Unique Faulkner, age 13

Patchwork

In the midst of the storm,
I sit here wrapped and warm
By the memories that have been built
By each stitch and each strand
Sewn by your loving hand,
Each patch of your life on this quilt.

I remember the days
When the world was a haze
And I'd sit by my mother at night.

She would sing a sweet song
And I would hum along
As she stitched by the slow dimming light.

When I asked her "what's this?"
With a smile and a kiss,
She would unfold the beautiful sight.

Then she would tell the story
As she wrapped around me
The soft blanket, snug, warm, and tight.

This pink patch over here
Is for you my sweet dear
From the blanket that you would hide under

When you were only three,
And you'd run up to me,
Afraid of the loud, raucous thunder.

This gold cotton square
From the dress that I'd wear
When it was a special occasion,

And this blue one, of course,
Was the one I was forced
To wear on my graduation.

This yellow striped one
Reminds me of the sun
On that warm day when you turned nine,

And there near the bottom,
That brown patch for autumn
When I lost a dear friend of mine.

Life has its ups and downs,
You'll have your smiles and frowns,
Remembering helps you hold nearer

All the lessons you've learned,
Every step, every turn,
That shows you the way to see clearer.

Oh those days of the past,
How I wish they could last,
When the world was a simple round sphere,

When you were by my side
In life's confusing ride,
Those old days when you were still here.

But now, I've come to know
That people, they will go.
The road up ahead shall be strange.

The whole world is turning,
And I now am learning,
To love, to walk on, and to change.

In the midst of the storm,
I sit here wrapped and warm
By the memories that have been built
By each stitch and each strand
Sewn by your loving hand,
Each patch of your life on this quilt.

So with needle and thread,
And a song in my head,
I now sew without fear or guilt.

My own story, my life,
A new stitch, a new stripe,
I now stitch onto our patchwork quilt.

Julliana Santos, age 14

Pernicious



Fatima Qureshi, age 16

Summer Night

Seven years old,
Wearing matching pink T-shirts,
We jumped on her trampoline until late that night,
Until her mom stuck her head out the window,
And told her to come back inside,
We danced along the trampoline,
And she ran in the back door.

I sat there in silence,
Until I heard the familiar sound,
Of the door slamming shut,
I ran home that night,
The wind blowing back my hair,
The few stars shone brightly in the sky.

I stepped into the dark house,
Flipped on the light,
Upstairs I went
To join my brother watching TV
On the floral blanket.

Antonia Eckley, age 12

The Apple Pie

Oozing mountains pulled out from the flare
Warm cinnamon aroma fills the air
Like a circulating moth
Brown buttery crusts flake off
Toasted till they're frail
Ready for sale
On display for the world to see
But only those quick enough can guarantee
One for their own
To perhaps place in their home
Or devour and eat
As their own little treat
They sell out quickly
Everyone works briskly
Slice Slice Slice
Dice Dice Dice
Dust Dust Dust
Crust Crust Crust
The baker's best apple pie
Is ready to buy

Anna-Maria Vlahos, age 17

Courthouse

The old, yellow and brown leaves rustled in the wind, as the sounds of dead, weak trees creaked at every push the wind gave. Chills ran along my spine, something I could blame on the icy air of the mid-fall weather. I delicately pulled out a cigarette and lit it. I brought it closer to my pink lips and sucked the smoke deeper into my lungs. I exhaled a lumbering cloud of smoke.

My surroundings were heavy with the scent of wet stone, upturned soil; the air was dank and earthy. I slowly pulled the cigarette out of my lips and dropped the cindering butt onto the ground. I crushed it using the tip of my foot and felt the warmth rising into my shoe. This was my first time walking into a courthouse.

My lawyer was a tall, lanky man. His teeth were as crooked as the fence in my backyard, and his nose as curved as an owl's beak. He came to see me every day after my arrest, for a month. He came to see me more than my mother did.

"Ms. Dixon, you have to be prepared for today, try not to say anything that will be used against us. Try to be as honest as you can because lies will only make this more complicated," he reminded me. If only it were that easy. If I knew how to be honest, I would be. But everything I spit out was a confusion of syllables, a mix of letters that I didn't put together. Something else was controlling what I said, and everything that I wanted to say would cease to escape the tip of my tongue, much less my lips.

"Okay." I got out of my cell at the juvenile detention centre for troubled youth. It wasn't that long, but it seemed like forever. My room was empty, but full of my secrets. It was clean, but it was dirty with the thoughts I chanted to myself at night to keep myself from tearing the place apart. My entire life was a contradiction, an oxymoron; something that no one understood, or frankly, wanted to.

Wearing my black dress, I softened my stance and lowered my shoulders. I tried not to look proud, I tried to look vulnerable and weak. Not so that everyone would pity me, but because that's how I wanted to feel. Nonetheless, that's not how I felt. I sunk my gaze and looked at my shoes.

Marzan Hamid, age 14

instead of a heart

my music teacher says his ears are bleeding
and it's not because we're bad (we are)
but because it's so loud
and echoey
the room is small and not soundproofed
and there are lot of us
with a lot of energy
I'm not really sure how I ended up here
no one would say I'm good
probably the worst in the class
but I can fake
and no one notices me anyway.

I just kind of love the feeling of that room
even though my ears are
bleeding too
and my brain feels like it's shaking in my skull
because it's like someone has injected you with music
into your veins
the needle may be rusty
and make you anxious because you're probably
going to get a disease
and you could bleed
out of your ears
out of your brain
out of your eyes
and there's not really a word for that
for someone who clings to words
so tightly
that's distressing
but that's life.

you can't explain it in words
because there are no words
to explain why carrying a sixty pound canoe
through the buggy woods is fun
why the ocean isn't scary
why jumping off a cliff is the
best feeling in the world
how it feels standing alone with your eyes closed
in the middle of somewhere.

ever since I was young
I loved loud music
it might have been because
I have a fear that my heart will stop beating
and my lungs will stop breathing
but when the music is that loud
and you can feel it in your chest
it beats your heart for you
it sucks air into you
it feels for you
and it's so loud it's like a wave around you
and it's just you and the music
drowning you but not really
beating in your chest instead of a heart.

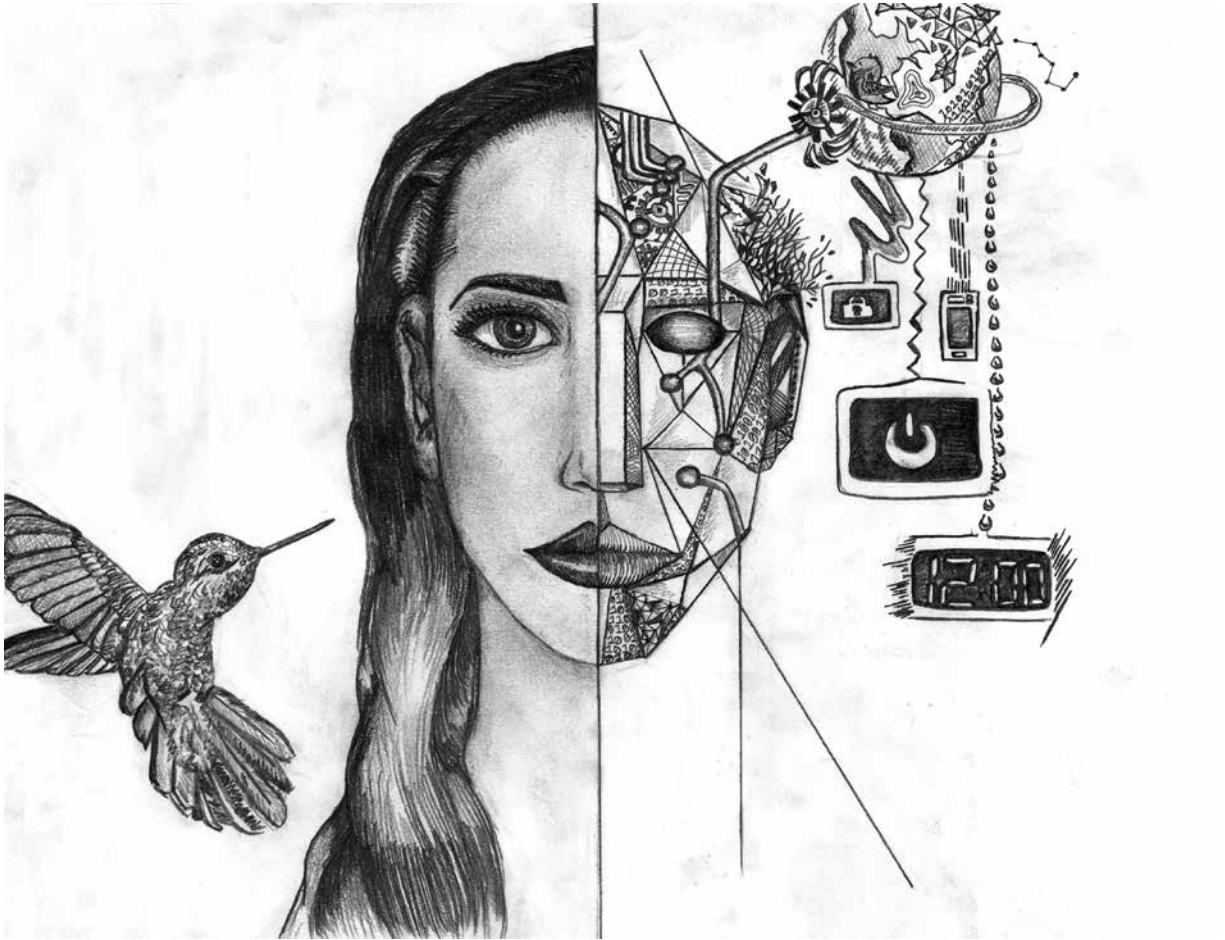
I remember the first concert I
went to
without my parents
it was some shitty pop band
I was in grade five or maybe six
my friend's dad was there with us
and even though the music wasn't good
it filled my chest
it just worked.

me and my friend being only ten or eleven had
wormed our way to the front
we were standing right there
by this huge speaker.

after the concert was over we went outside
I remember I couldn't hear anything
there was this buzzing in my head
my tiny ears were numb and it kind of
scared me
but I kind of loved it too
it was cold but we ran around in the parking lot
without our coats.

Aidyn Silverberg-Ceresne, age 15

The Digital Age



Sophia Kostanski, age 16

Concerning Madness and a Starship Captain

Maxine Lorde is twenty years old when she gets her first tattoo.

Twenty years old and a little drunk, and when she writes down her full name and they call her in, "Maxine," she stands and says: "It's Max. I beat up people who call me Maxine."

And so Max Lorde gets the solar system stamped over her shoulder, because she's just landed an internship to work at NASA (fetching coffees, most probably, but fetching coffees at NASA), and she's young and a little drunk and a lot swept up by the wonder of it all.

Max wakes up the next morning with the ghost of a headache and a stinging shoulder, cranes her neck in the mirror to see scabs healing over the galaxy in her skin. She thinks, humanity reaching Mars is a distant possibility. Any further than that is impossible within her lifetime, but she does not regret the tattoo.

It never hurts to have something to aspire to.

And besides, humanity has always defined itself by its yearning for the impossible. Why should that stop with her?

By the time Max is twenty-five, the unpaid internship is a paid internship. She is in the room when the Curiosity rover lands on Mars. The hope of that moment is so palpable, she thinks for a brief moment that anything is possible, and itches again to get a tattoo.

This is what it's about, she thinks, as scientists cheer and hug and cry all around her. *This is what we are for*.

It is, likely, the most significant scientific achievement of her time.

The next year, Curiosity discovers a satellite on Mars, transmitting at an unknown frequency.

Max is assigned to sift through the endless, garbled information the satellite is broadcasting, all those meaningless radio waves spilling out into all that empty space.

Two months later, aliens arrive on Earth's doorstep, sentient and friendly and with technology that makes the Curiosity seem like a sharp rock in the hands of a caveman. They say they were waiting for someone to discover the radio beacon, that they are so *glad* humans made it to Mars, that they cannot *wait* to see what comes next.

They tell stories of other solar systems, of all the life and light in the galaxy, of so many planets with sentient life and history and culture.

Earth's technology rockets forward thousands of years in the space of a few months, and Max looks at the tattoo that used to represent the furthest hopes of humanity and feels very, very small.

The human race finds itself with a sudden need for engineers; people to pilot ships and catalogue stars and *discover, discover*, in the relentless way that humanity has.

Max signs on, spends seventy glorious years playing repairwoman on vessels bound to the distant corners of the galaxy.

Humanity gets a reputation for its unquenchable thirst to explore, for its bullheaded, restless enthusiasm, and Max partakes in this stereotype with singular glee.

Give a human dinner and they'll be dissecting the meat by dessert becomes an intergalactic joke, and Max laughs along, and basks in the light of distant suns, and *dissects*.

Max gets tattoos of every new planet she visits, until her body is packed with solar systems, until there is no more room for ink on her weathered skin. She is ninety-five years old, and that is not *so* old, for a human, anymore, she has twenty, thirty years of adventure still in her.

She regrets only that there's no space left for tattoos.

Only, seventy years after humanity erupts onto the intergalactic scene in a riot of colours and unbridled enthusiasm, They arrive.

Ships from out beyond dark space, with technology far beyond what anyone has seen, ships the size of moons with the power to wipe out planets.

No one knows who they are, only that they seem bent on exterminating sentient life in the Milky Way Galaxy, and no one knows why.

Max is ninety-five years old, has touched stars and met aliens, her life has bridged the gap between earth's lonely past and its connected future, and now she thinks she may live still to see the end of all life in the galaxy.

There is an exodus. People fleeing the Milky Way on ships launched into dark space in the hopes of finding sanctuary somewhere outside of the reach of the Invaders.

Max is strapped into a stasis pod, opting for an uncertain fate in dark space rather than an uncertain fate at home. The Invaders may not wipe out the galaxy, but they also may, and after all, Max is ever an explorer.

She drifts, unconscious, for centuries.

Max wakes up so far from home in time and space it is nearly unfathomable.

She is a genius, a scientist, an engineer, but trying to comprehend a distance that *enormous*, hundreds of years and a gulf of miles so great it cannot be put to meaningful number; that would drive anyone a little mad.

Max looks at the wide expanse of far-off planets stamped across her skin and goes a little mad.

The aliens that find Max's ship are kind, and gentle; an unfamiliar race of alien, but they are patient, and they understand about loss, like all mortal things do.

The ship Max arrives on is the first hint of other life in the galaxy these aliens have ever seen, and they are incandescent with excitement, with all the implications of a wider universe, even as Max mourns.

And Max is so weary, disoriented with centuries of rest, with the uncertain fate of everything she left behind, with all the distance in the world.

One of the aliens who discovered her ship is so *young*, with eager starlight in their wide eyes, asking, *begging*, Max to tell all about the other worlds, the people of the distant stars.

"Why?" Max asks, one day, *exhausted*, and the alien smiles, bright teeth and brighter eyes.

"Because," the alien says, ineloquently, tongue tied up in wonder, fingers itching for the stars, and Max thinks maybe she's not so far from home, after all.

Claire Kilpatrick, age 18

Satisfaction

Peeling off a sticker in one go
Slitting a yolk and watching it ooze
Treading on a frozen puddle, just enough to rupture its shell
Flaking dried glue off your fingertips
Bursting sheets of bubble wrap
Yanking off your bra after a draining day
Popping a lid open, releasing its sound
Executing a faultless parallel park
Slamming soft-close kitchen cabinets
Shattering the top of a crème brûlée
Tearing dried acrylic paint off a palette
Opening a fresh tub of ice cream, unleashing its fruity fragrance
Stepping on a fresh coat of snow first
Click-clacking a pen
Ripping off fake eyelashes
Sleeping in on a bitter, frosty morning
Receiving a parcel in the post
Accelerating to, and beating that yellow light
Babies beaming back at you
Uttering the same thing as someone simultaneously
Thirstily glugging icy water
Discovering a forgotten five dollar bill in your pocket
Unfastening your hair from a slick, tight ponytail
Snuggling into freshly washed sheets
Flipping the pillow to its other side

Isabella O'Hara, age 17

Time

The man lies waiting
on a bench
that has long lost its colours

Its once smooth wood
turned brittle by raging winds
and merciless storms

Around planted feet,
a frenzy of orange and red
scatters sloppily across the ground

High above,
past the chilly night weather
and its embrace

The waning moon stands watching,
watching silently
casting its bright light
on the small, wrinkled figure

Monidipa Nath, age 15

Why We Should Teach Arts in School

Today, educators and policy-makers are continuously calling for more funding for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) programs at school. In fact, in the United States alone, over \$2.9 billion has been given to fund STEM in 2015. Although this is a great venture – STEM creates innovative, world-changing scientists, engineers and doctors, and evidence has shown that STEM programs significantly boost high school math and science marks – there is an increasing neglect for art programs in high school. For example, arts funding for high schools in the United States alone was just \$250 million in 2015, compared with the \$2.9 billion given to STEM and \$5 billion given to other science programs.

The arts are a fundamentally important element to education. The arts foster character, creativity, perseverance, communication and other skills that simply cannot be fostered through STEM. The arts have been proven to reduce stress, improve well-being, and increase happiness, which are essential to a successful high school experience. The arts allow students to explore the world, gain a deeper understanding of the world, problem-solve, analyze and critically think. Students who take arts are four times more likely to win an academic award than students who take STEM.

Arts help at-risk youth. Studies have shown that students who take the arts have the lowest dropout rate in high school. They are also the least likely group to use drugs or commit crimes. Arts lessons have been shown to make youth less aggressive. Most at-risk youth tend to underachieve in school, and music lessons have been proven to improve their performance by as much as 25 percent. Music is also a key tool in reducing crime. This is demonstrated by an example in Toronto. In 2014, the TTC decided to play classical music as a pilot project at eight of its most crime-ridden stations. Within a few months, crime dropped dramatically at those stations.

The arts, and especially music, are proven to raise academic performance. In fact, high school music students were surveyed and found to have a substantially higher GPA than non-musicians in the same school. A survey of 7,500 university students found that music students had the highest reading scores. Based on neurological research, students who were exposed to music-based math lessons scored higher on tests than those who were taught in the conventional (STEM) method. Furthermore, students who took music were, on average, 40 percent better at English and humanities than their peers.

Skills gained from the arts are also transferable to other subjects, which is something that does not happen in STEM. The analytical skills taken from music, for example, can be transferred to math and science, while the performance skills taken from drama can be transferred to English and French. The arts help to build and foster character through the promotion of respect, discipline, creativity and perseverance. The arts also help develop essential skills such as time-management, organization, critical thinking, and analytical and communication skills.

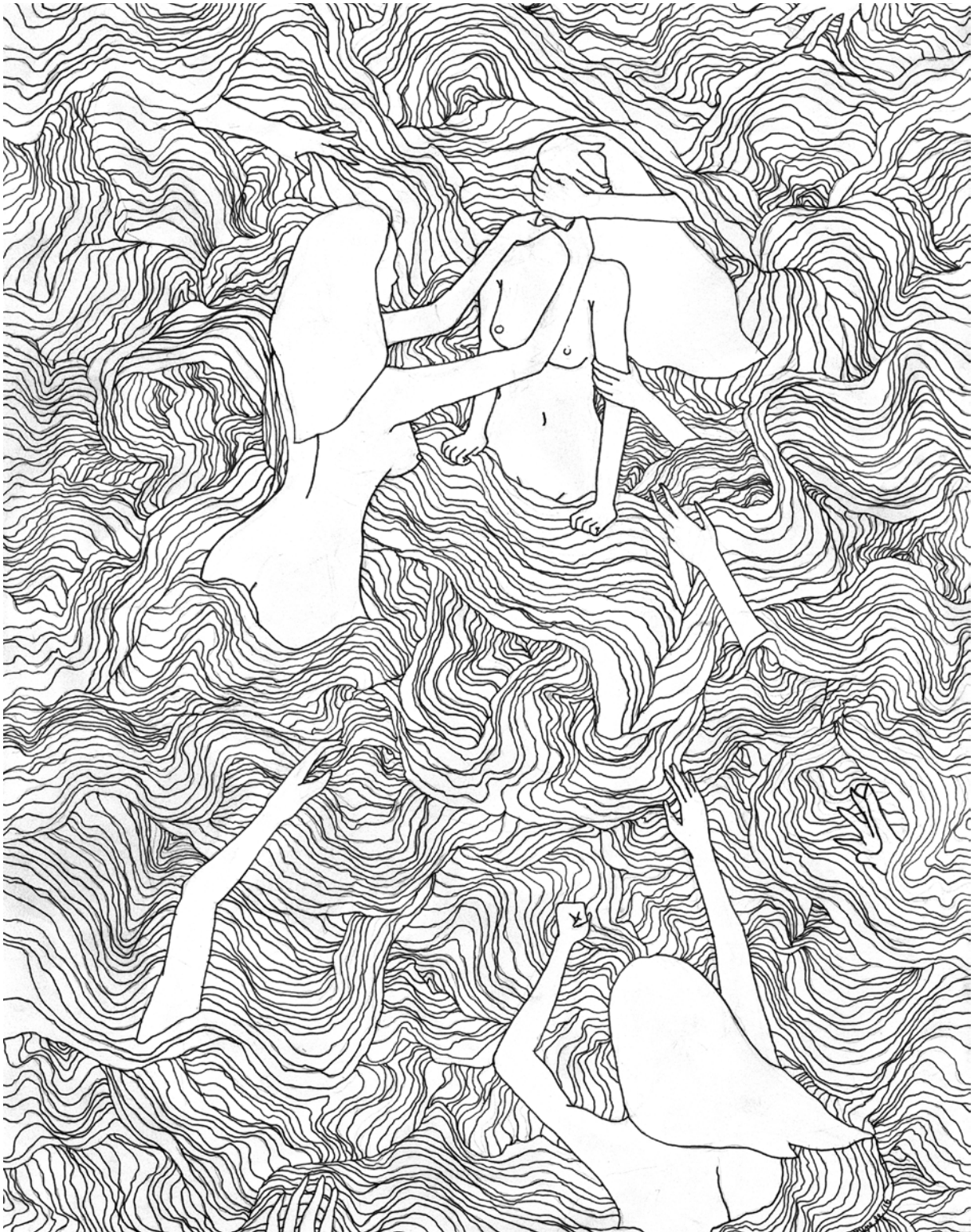
The arts also improve school rankings. A study done by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement showed that all the top-performing schools devoted at least a quarter of the day to the arts, especially music. The arts improve the education of students. Studies have shown that participation in the arts increases students' desire to learn, willingness to learn, and achievement in learning. The world's best education systems, as ranked by PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), all require mandatory arts participation for students. In Japan, consistently one of the world's top performers, students are required to take music from the start of middle school to the end of high school.

The bond that musicians, actors, artists and dancers have with one another is special and unbreakable. It is arguable that no other group in high school can develop such a long-lasting, tight bond. In one survey, 90 percent of the people agreed that music brings family and friends closer together. This is because the arts promote teamwork, perseverance, practise and patience. The arts promote social skills and allow students to work with each other rather than compete with each other.

Sadly, although the benefits of the arts are numerous and prominent, due to the requirement of funding for STEM, many schools have cancelled arts programs. Music is proven to greatly improve academic and social performance, yet many schools have scrapped their music programs, instead adding more math and science courses in their place. Although this is an efficient short-term solution to boosting standardized test results, in the long run it not only lowers students' performance but is also detrimental to their social and mental well-being. Please, think twice before cutting arts programs, and create a better future for schools, students, and society.

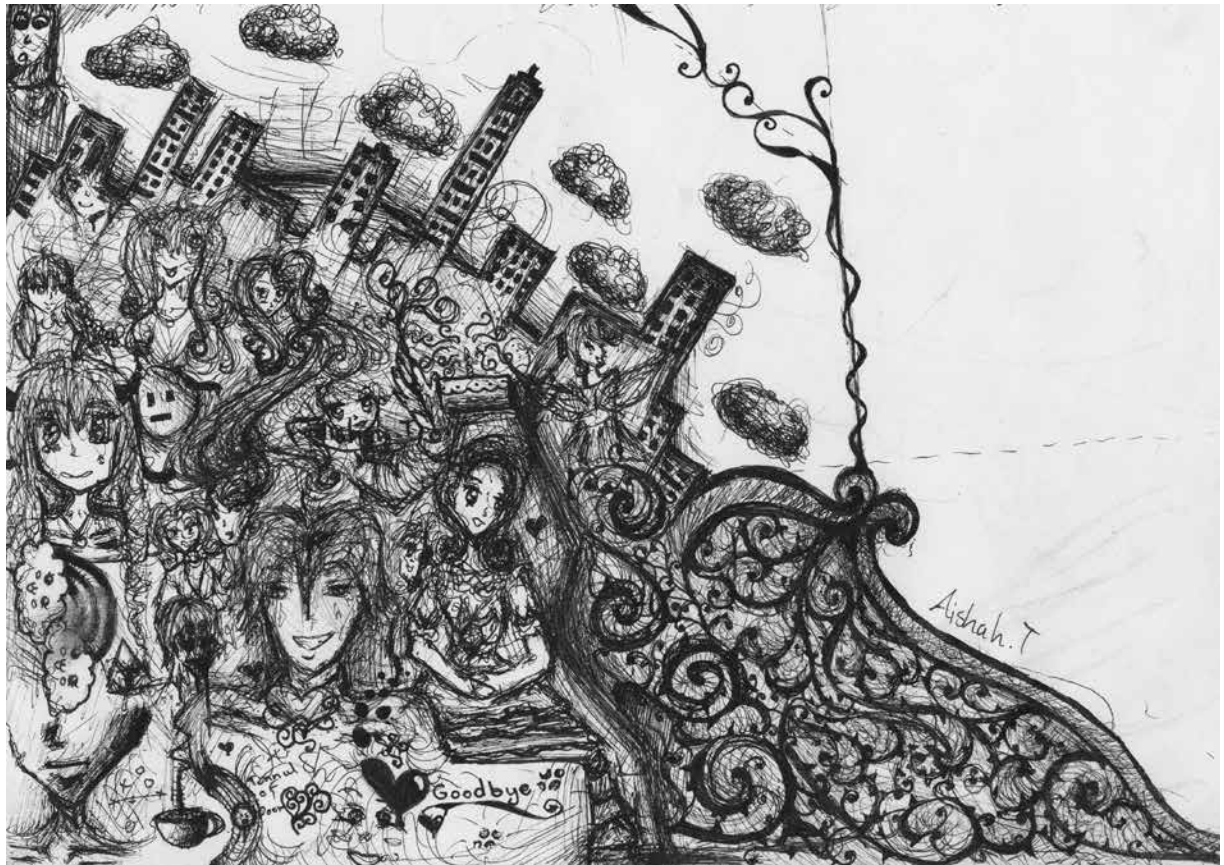
Bo Rui Wang, age 16

Waves



Catherine Le, age 16

Mess



Aishah Tabassum, age 12

Out

Shit.

Get out. Finish. Oh my god.

"So, well, what school are you from?"

"Hmm? Northern."

"Oh, nice."

This was a fourth world show and tell. An exposé of inconvenient and hostile public facilities. A rancid literal shithouse with a line of boys waiting. Many contaminated their phones as a coping mechanism. Others refused. No conscious fresh air would come anywhere near us because warning vapours poured out. A skunky place. The synthetic herbal scents were not effectively masking the pungency growing in piles. I just had to wait.

Mirrors lined up across the wall but nobody was using the sinks. The floor was, in the past, white. I could hear the light bulbs, or generators, or wires, I'm unsure, something was humming. I wished the sinkholes doubled up as audio inputs so I could plug in and gain a bit of white noise. Outside, another gunshot went, meaning that my race drew nearer. Inside, another athlete warned me with his shuffling that he had a bomb brewing. Just don't talk about it, you'll see it in a second.

Then I saw feet turn towards the toilet from underneath the stall door. The door creaked open to a round of mental applause. Meaning, I'm next. The guy who finally opened that door was one guilty little pup. He knew that I would soon see his shameful secret, floating in chemical water, his illegitimate test-tube child. Eye contact, then straight down to the "white" floors. He had obviously been in my position before.

It was empty. Now it was mine and I claimed it. The few seconds of rejoicing were soon muted by hell. Imagine listening to clumps of meat mushed in yogurt being squeezed through a paint tube and splattering on the floor only a meter away. Plus I was exposed below the waist. Plus my coach could see me. Naked and defiled.

Shit.

B.B.W Scargall, age 17

Bone White

Sitting below the hills, an old village dressed in bone white
The night sky a deep violet against the moon's light
Softly, gently, snow drifts in earthward waltz
To the deathly beauty such sole act of life exalts
The lustrous flakes drift down ever so slow
White blankets emitting soft moonlit glow
A wolf's solemn call breaks the silence of night
Stirring the village below, dressed in bone white.

Andy Zhang, age 15

Rare

I would like to be beautiful in the way that a cactus is beautiful:
Small pink flowers, isolated in miles of sand.
I'm in love with strange physical modifications
Right down to my daily purposeful mutations
My nails are painted the colours of flowers
A sight which at some point was quite strange to see.

Nicole Mason, age 16

The Box

It has a menacing face, a menacingly innocent face
that really isn't menacing at all.
In the end,
it is just a box.
It never goes anywhere,
yet seems to follow you everywhere, and it scowls at you;
it's tempting, really,
what secrets you left behind. Of course, it was you
who put it through its misery,
though you consider yourself kind
to everything that's kind to you.

And no, this isn't about the box.
The box feels no hatred,
no remorse, no regret. Its companions make a home
of the jungle of dust on the shelf,
they make a home of the emptiness inside the box,
filling the cavernous corners and endless pits
with things you left behind:
angry letters, blurred photographs,
remnants of ancestors you never knew.
Remnants of you.

This is about you.

There's something satisfying about filling a box,
something you know shouldn't feel satisfying
and you regret it later.
You wait restlessly for garbage day,
when you can dump it on the curb and watch it
being swept away.
You know you feel guilty inside,
but you would never admit it to yourself.

You move the box down to the basement,
crowded with the wrath
of your decluttering frenzy.
You know that the box notices
and you are furious that you ever
felt sorry for it.
It avoids your eyes all day.

The next day
you put the box out on the curb;
it doesn't look at you, and you scowl at it.

But this isn't about the box.
This is about you.

And you'll regret it.

Jana van Heeswyk, age 13

Yellow

She wakes me up in the morning
with a blinding smile
that lights up my room
like a heavenly sundial.

She is the field of sunflowers
swaying in the hot summer breeze,
that wave at me,
she loves to tease.

She is the canary
perched high in the lilac tree
that sings her sweet melody
but she's ever so prone to jealousy.

She is the sharp pencil
that scribbles this pointless poem,
laughing as I struggle,
my thoughts are completely muddled.

She is the bright raincoat
that makes me stand out like a beacon,
a small boat, barely afloat
amid a sea of strangers.

Yellow is my friend
despite her odd personality
she is always there to mend
and sweep me away from reality.

Jordan MacDonald, age 14

Unspoken



Elina Nie, age 13

Degeneration

You lie down in bed. The air around you feels warm. The sheets you rest on crinkle with every shift of your body. The warm yellow light that filters in through your window has woken up with you, the morning sun slowly inching its way up over the horizon. A clock hangs on the wall above your head; its relentless *tick tock tick tock* reminds you that you are no longer dreaming. The stillness of the room feels eerie. For a moment, maybe even for a minute, you forget where you are. This room isn't your room. The sheets beneath you seem itchy and uncomfortable. The air surrounding you is too warm, suffocating. You feel like you are stuck in a sealed fishbowl. You've complained several times before but nothing has changed. It doesn't smell like home. This isn't home; it never will be.

But pictures sit on the nightstand, photographs of you and your son, and his son, and your sister. The four of you sit around your scratched-up mahogany dinner table, the food untouched, the smiles unwavering. There you are again, this time in a park. The photograph is of a gleeful couple; your husband pushing a then twenty-year-old you into the bushes. Your dress is a dull grey in the photograph, but you remember the exact colour: a beautiful canary yellow. You remember because it was your husband's favourite colour, and it made him smile to watch you twirl in it. You have a wide grin on your face even though the rose bush has swallowed up both of your legs. You stare at this picture with longing. You can still remember what it felt like to be adored the way he loved you. You can still remember how it felt to be gazed at with those cool green eyes.

A date scribbled on the bottom right-hand corner of the photograph catches your eye. The black ink has smudged; the trace of your husband's thumbprint smears the number one in the year 1946.

Where was this taken?

You close your eyes and focus on the name of the city. It's silly, really, how you can become so easily frustrated over a simple five-letter word. Certain letters pop up in your mind; P and S in particular. You can picture the shape of the word in your mind, the edges blurry, the letters bunched in a teasing way. But you can't string the letters together in any nature. You shut your eyes even tighter, hoping that the word will become clearer. But the word is out of reach.

Well, it's not that important anyways, you shrug without a second thought, and look away.

With your palms flat against the bed, you struggle to prop yourself up on your elbows, and with a shaking hand you grab the bed's banister and pull yourself the rest of the way until you are sitting on the edge of the bed, small feet dangling above the floor. You pause for a moment and close your tired eyes. Completing that simple task makes you feel dizzy. Years ago you looked forward to getting out of bed to tackle the busy day ahead, but now you desperately want to lie back down and forget about the people, the places, the memories.

With a heavy groan you push your aging muscles to work, until you are standing solid on both swollen feet. The nurse makes you wear compression socks during the night to reduce the swelling, but the fabric digs into your wrinkled skin and now you can't feel your toes. Your walker is resting across the room, leaning against the door. It's only a few steps away, but with each step you take toward the stroller, a persistent shake quivers down your left leg.

The damn thing isn't good for anything anymore.

You know exactly when the pain is going to start. You've become so accustomed to the relentless torture your body has put you through for the past twenty-odd years, that you have memorized how long it takes for the dull pain to begin in your left hip, shoot down through your brittle bones, and trickle down all the way to your toes, not leaving a single inch of flesh in peace. Two bright pink pills sit on your table every morning, in one of those little paper cups that you have trouble holding in your puffy fingers. The nurse tells you they're for the pain, but you know she's wrong. They haven't helped your bad leg one bit in the year you have been taking them. Or has it only been half a year? You can't recall. A year, six months, who still bothers to differentiate; it's all the same in your mind.

You reach the walker, and grasp the handle with both hands, knuckles a pale grey. The support lets you shift most of your weight so that your left leg can relax. You hobble over to the vanity table in the corner and pick up the telephone. A sticky note is stuck beside the telephone cradle, and with a frail hand, you pluck it off the table. *CALL DAN*. And there's a number.

Holding it close to your face, you squint. You had a pair of glasses that you depended on for many essential tasks like watching TV or reading small notes, such as this one in your hand. But they have been missing for a few weeks now. Whenever you bring the disappearance up in front of the cleaning staff they reassure you that you have misplaced them somewhere in your room. But you know they're lying. You know one of them got greedy and stole them.

But who is going to believe you?

You struggle to punch the ten-digit number in the right order; your fingers slip and accidentally hit the wrong button. In frustration you slam the phone down on the table, the sudden motion causing the joints in your hand to burn with pain. But you pick the phone back up and try again. This time you get the order right. You are kept on hold.

A smile stretches across your face when you see his name. You remember now why you put the sticky note there. Your son, Daniel. He tries to visit you every Sunday – that is, if his job allows him to. Most weekends he has to stay at work an extra shift, which means he must tell you the regretful news over the phone. But every time he apologizes, you forgive him. And every time you call him to say goodnight in the evenings, and find yourself leaving a message because he hasn't picked up, you call again. Once, twice, three times in a row. During the third he usually picks up. He apologizes. You forgive him.

He's your son. He's all the family you have left.

Alexandra Pavel, age 17

Foosh

I went skateboarding with my friends
down steep ramps around sharp bends
I wore my helmet and my pads
I did not want to hurt my nads
I've worn a cast once before
I'd rather not have any more
our halfpipe tricks were pretty sick
although we looked like lunatics
I'd bought some brand new trucks that day
I thought that they would be okay
alas, my trucks were a tad too loose
they wobbled like a spastic goose
as I sped down the steep slick slope
I wiggled like a snaking rope
my deck went sideways with a swoosh
I stumbled and I did a foosh
what is a foosh you may wonder
it is a rather common blunder
it may not sound that masculine
but it's a useful acronym
they treat them in emerg each day
and call it foosh so as to say:

Falling On Out Stretched Hand

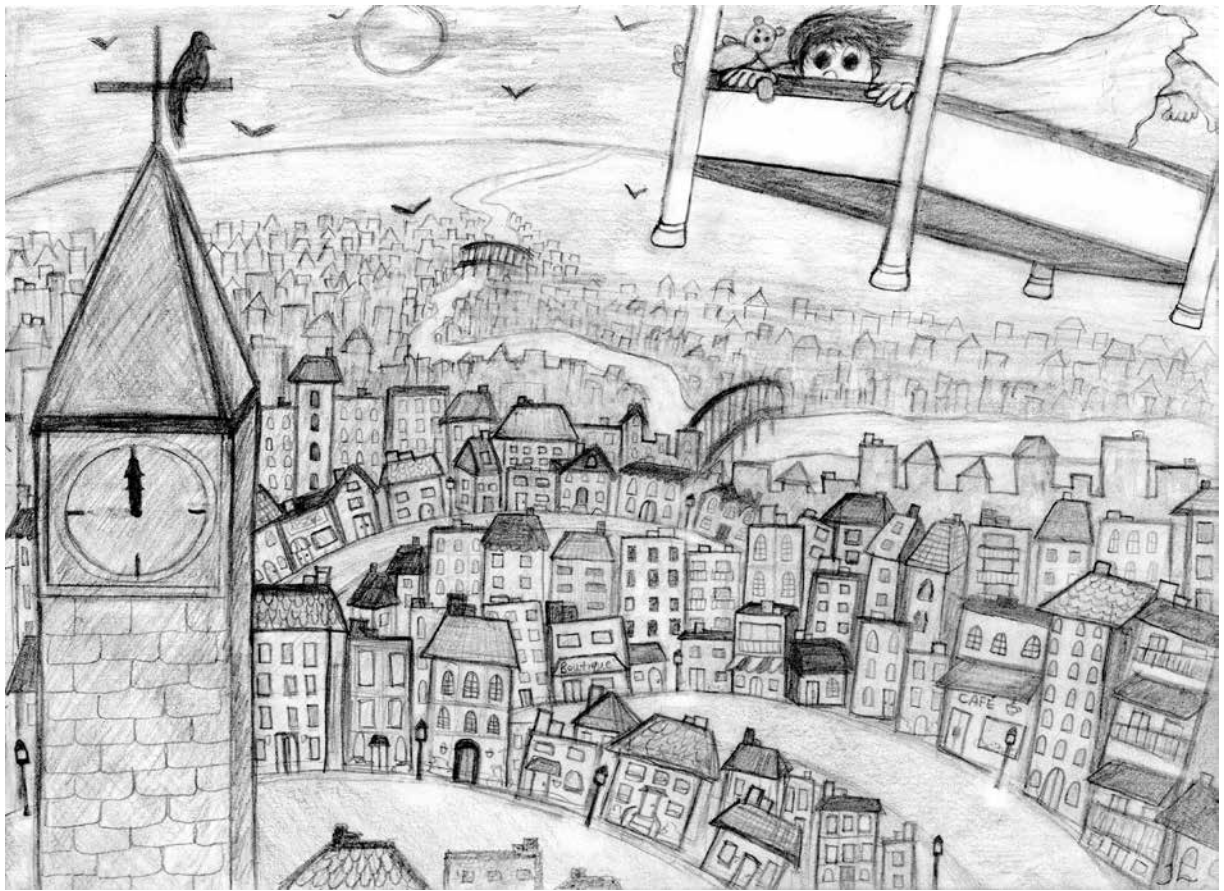
Rhyz Tonks, age 12

Admit One

Whenever we go out, we go to the movies
It doesn't matter what's showing. She always wants to go
To smell the popcorn, I guess
To sit in the darkness, I guess
And if we go for dinner after, she's always somewhere else
Scrolling listlessly through pictures on her phone
Sighing, eyes fluttering, playing with her straw
On the surface we're fantastic
At parties she is a goddess of charm, a conductor of light
Aphrodite envies her. How could a human be so charming?
But whenever we are alone it is always just a daydream
An unsatisfied soul lurking behind layers of makeup
Trying to be normal, I guess
Soaking in the moment, I guess
And she doesn't even like the movies
She just likes the isolation
Not having to make eye contact with me for another two hours
Releasing herself from my smothering chains
Whenever we go out, we go to the movies
So she can be anywhere but with me

Sam Shepherd, age 15

Midnight Flight



Justine Lewicki, age 15

In My Head



Shally Zheng, age 15

The Pigeon

He took the microfibre cloth to his glasses, rotating his thumb against the lens methodically. There was a slight smudge where his finger had brushed the lens. If he could get that smudge out, he thought, if he could clean the lens, he could clear his mind. He pressed down harder, with surgeon-like precision, determined the exertion was imperative.

The glasses fell to the table, clanging against the desk lamp.

Jon brought two heavy hands up to his face. *What's the point?*

His words were devoured by an acidic sourness rising within him, a sourness that numbed rather than stung. A few surviving syllables crumbled away into whispers, never quite reaching his lips.

He stared blankly at the contents of his writing desk. At the BIC pen with its chewed blue cap, the USB drive he had copped a few years ago at some college fair, at an empty picture frame he kept telling himself he would fill, and his trusty old notebook.

It was torn in all the right places, scrap paper sticking out of every corner, the faded ink on the front cover reading JOURNAL. A writer's notebook wasn't just a bundle of pages stamped with all your brightest ideas, it was the writer in book form.

He stared up at the corkboard, rejection slips pinned in a crude display: "Thanks for submitting to us Jon, but this isn't what we're looking for." Letters of the same grating nature laughed mockingly from his email: "We received more submissions than we had been expecting, if you weren't selected please try again next year."

What's the point of it all?

A bird cooed outside. Jon wanted to hurl himself against a concrete wall, crack his useless skull, mash his brains onto the keyboard. *HERE YOU GO HERE YOU FUCKIN' GO THIS IS ALL I'VE GOT.* He wanted to plunge the BIC pen between his ribs and pop his balloon lungs. He wanted to find that cooing bird and pry its beak off far enough for the breakfast worms to come squiggling out.

His hands went to his face again, faster this time, fuelled by shame.

A flutter of wings woke his curiosity. *It's the Cooing Bird. It must be. It heard my thoughts and flew here. I don't know why. Probably to shit on all my stuff.*

It was a pigeon. Fat and grey and disgusting. It peered at Jon with a purulent eye that rested within a ring of crust, clinging to the sill with scabby claws. Jon imagined shooting the pigeon with a hunting rifle. He imagined it bursting in an explosion of green pus.

Jon stared at the pigeon. The pigeon stared back.

Two minutes passed. Four. Six.

Six whole minutes and neither made a move.

The couple upstairs were arguing about whether or not they should order a set of pots online. "Em, we don't even need pots!" "But honey they're ON SALE!"

"You're a messenger," Jon spoke at last, "you are aren't you?"

The pigeon remained motionless.

"Stop looking at me like that. If you have something to say go ahead and say it. Stop staring."

Nothing.

"Help me out here. I... I don't know what to do."

The pigeon shit.

Jon examined the pigeon with what he felt to be a scientific eye, but if the little girl playing hopscotch on the street had happened to look up into that second storey window she would have gone home that night and told her mother about the crazy writer who lived upstairs. "Cariño," her mother would have said, "you stay away from that man, sí?"

Jon lunged at the pigeon.

Weighed down by years of city crumbs, the pigeon struggled to lift its wings. They were crutches for a four hundred pound man, takeoff was unsuccessful. Horrified to find itself encased behind the bars of Breadman's arms, it began to shit everywhere.

With much effort, Jon hauled the flailing pigeon to his writing desk. *YOU NEVER SHOULD HAVE COME HERE,* he roared in his mind, *THIS IS THE LION'S DEN.* With one hand still wrenching back its wings, he reached for his BIC pen. *LET'S HEAR THOSE BALLOONS POP!*

The couple upstairs had finally settled on buying the pots – they were, after all, ON SALE.

With a final stroke of determination, the pigeon broke free from Jon's grasp. It knocked over the desk lamp, spilled a cup of stale coffee, and hurtled out the open window. New Yorkers, it thought, they were all crazy.

Jon sat in stunned silence.

I tried to stab a pigeon with a ballpoint pen...

He looked down at his notebook, which was covered in feathers and drying bird crap, and began to laugh. He laughed so hard that he started to wheeze, tears streaming down his blotched face.

It was him in book form alright.

Upstairs, Em and her husband discovered the pot set they wanted was sold out.

All right. All-fucking-right.

Lily Wang, age 18

The People and the Arch



Heather Stanley, age 12

Embrace

She stands there, sometimes. In front of the small mirror. For seconds and minutes, hours often, still and unmoving, eyes dark and staring and carefully, carefully blank. Her face expressionless but fingers clenched at her sides. Tears biting at the corners of her eyes as she speaks volumes, speaks worlds with her silence.

It's hard not to look, maybe, but not that hard.

Her reflection – it stares back, too, but she knows it's different. Every bit as stubborn, every bit as unwavering but *different*, somehow. It stands straighter, taller. Chin raised, eyes a challenge, tears made invisible by the shadows of her face. The expression it wears is strong. Defiant. The pressed lips of her reflection swallow every single thing she's ever felt as if it's all nothing more than a breath of air.

And she hates it, doesn't she?

It's even harder than not looking, but it's not impossible to see.

Her fingertips are trembling now, as she wages an unspoken war for the sixth night in a row. Her tight fists loosen only to twist together again. Her reflection watches calmly. Mimics. Repeats. Copies every twitch of her hand, every intake of breath like it's supposed to. So perfect that she can almost believe it, almost be convinced that the one in the mirror is herself.

Fool.

She doesn't stop staring. A hand reaches out and touches the mirror, the smooth glass of the surface. Cold, icy, freezing, but it stays there, a silent plea.

It's plain to see. She wants to escape.

Jump into the other world that she feels there... is it really so difficult? To let everything, all her pain and all her regrets, dissolve into air? To allow the hands of her reflection to guide her away... it's not as impossible as it seems, is it? Her fingers drag across the surface, leaving a smudged blemish across the neckline of the girl there. Surely not any harder than her intricate, terrible routine.

No, but that's not fair.

She knows she's being ridiculous, but she can't help but think about how cruel it is, that even the mirror – which is supposed to display everything just as it is, just as *she* is –

The truth, clearer than ever before...

It cannot help but lie under her gaze.

It makes her furious, really. How easy it is to lock everything away, and how hard it is to find it all again.

You're losing yourself.

She's losing herself, she realizes. Even the mirror won't help her. She's losing herself, in bits, pieces, shards as bright and burning as the morning sun – losing all she was and is and could ever be.

Her hand falls, limp, to her side.

Now you understand.

She tears her gaze away from the smouldering eyes of her reflection and counts to three.

After all this time...

Allows one last glance, to capture her in the mirror. It burns with strength and life and clarity. It's easy now. She looks at it, and tries to keep it in her memory. Somehow she knows she will.
She walks away.

Don't look back.

She doesn't look back.

Lily Liu, age 13

sunlight

sunlight spills rusty down the
throat of morning golden and
quivering in the dawn like eggs
while the mist spreads itself
over rays in greedy laughter
i am trembling with delight the
air the air the molecular structure
trembles as well the equation for this
sighs translucently as i memorize it
too softly this is too touchable too
malleable please don't break under
my fingers like water please my
fingers clumsy like children please
sky is the only skin that holds itself
dearly remaining unchanged by
touch i could hold it dearly too i try
but morning birds sing songs for sorrow
and leftover traces of stars hanging low
all the while sunlight scampers around
fields of green and white mocking
my still waiting hands until it becomes
lazy in the afternoon staying golden
with the way it slides slowly to a halt
carrying something sightless or hidden
that fades with stillness i think i could
reach to hold it now but how and why and
does it hurt when you become evening
does the light of the moon feel different
will you stay the night will you leave

Joanna Cleary, age 18

August Moon

one week in august,
when my sister hung our laundry on the line
with her two chapped hands,
she found a sliver of moon as thin as rice paper
crumpled neatly in the basket –
still soggy, she hung it up to dry
next to my red shirt,
where it dripped fat gobbets of silver
and sloughed off skin, shiny as pearl and cracked as eggshell,
that melted like butter in the hot, dead grass

Nelka Jankechova, age 14

Resurrected in Black and White



Novaya Politra, age 15

WTF Reasons Why Listicles Are Destroying Journalism That Will Literally Blow Your Mind

Buzzfeed, Upworthy, and Smosh are easy targets. Cantankerous journalism veterans relish at the opportunity to attack this new, disruptive format. The advent of the adjective-heavy listicle has been derided by both middle-aged journalists and readers alike. The playful, brightly-coloured format attracts youth readers; entices us with numbered headlines and promises to “make us question EVERYTHING” when exposed to photographs of Oscar-winning celebrities doctored to look like Guy Fieri. This new and exciting plaything – specifically BuzzFeed – captivated me as quickly as it repelled me as a reader. The cloying, pandering voice made me feel as if I were talking to Hillary Clinton attempting to appeal to youth voters. A once deceptively innocuous news aggregator has now over-saturated the online journalism industry with hollow, lacklustre filler devoid of any semblance of integrity.

Buzzfeed is notorious for stealing copyrighted photographs, videos, and entire articles. Reddit user TheKoG reported that his photo was used in a Geico-sponsored BuzzFeed listicle. He confronted BuzzFeed’s CFO and recounted his experience on Reddit: “At first he told me that they try their best to find image sources, but that it can be difficult and he assumed since the photo’s been all over the Internet that it was in the public domain” [1]. Yet a copyright owner has to voluntarily release their product into the public domain for BuzzFeed’s use of the picture to fall under fair use. There are seemingly innumerable (I’m being hyperbolic; but according to BuzzFeed, that’s all you need to gain mainstream success) accounts of BuzzFeed lifting creative content from other, lesser-known sites and individual content creators online. In each case, there is a constant of BuzzFeed avoiding any transformative or particularly innovative twists with their plagiarized content. The craft of a dedicated journalist is rendered meaningless if BuzzFeed steals the article and hides the citation (if one exists) on the very bottom in pale grey. Why even become a photographer or filmmaker if you don’t work for BuzzFeed? Why even bother?

Plagiarism aside, BuzzFeed has confounded its critics by discovering other ways in which to defecate on journalism culture. Although websites like Cracked provide nuance to the format by using (sourced) pictures to augment their articles rather than to dominate them, BuzzFeed would rather continue with their uninspired pseudo-journalism. The lazy and cynical format of the listicle has been discussed ad nauseam. Yet it seems as if BuzzFeed thought the appropriate response would be to lower our expectations to such a degree that it appears silly to have expected anything of them to begin with. One of their most popular articles, “The 21 Absolute Worst Things in the World” relies solely on pictures. The only original writing in the entire article is as follows: “THIS THIS THIS THIS THIS THIS THIS THIS THIS THIS THESE THIS THIS THIS THIS THIS And The Black Eyed Peas” [2]. I should just cancel my subscription to *The New Yorker* this instant, when I can have access to journalistic prose of this calibre for free.

I’ve entertained the idea that this is a multi-million dollar hoax. I predicted that Jonah Peretti would come from behind a curtain (dressed as the Wizard of Oz), to announce that The Onion is BuzzFeed’s parent company, and that its longstanding success contributes to a meticulously orchestrated, elaborate social commentary. I realized later that it would be unlikely for one to provide satire directly towards an ‘innovation’ they pioneered, especially one as culturally enduring as BuzzFeed. Yet the most apparent resolution to the growing popularity (and accompanying disdain) of the listicle is to simply accept it. Accept it and give yourself over to quizzes insisting that you must discover which piece of IKEA furniture you should identify with based on your astrological sign.

It goes without saying that the listicle relies on reaction GIFs and minimal text, making the format bright, vapid, and ready to publish. The apathy towards content creators supplements their image in the mainstream media as this cartoonishly evil Bond villain. But senile, bitter men griping about an internationally-recognized corporate entity which promotes equality and light-hearted fluff and excess will not dent their success. As strongly as I feel, I won’t deny myself the pleasure of taking a questionnaire with friends if it means I can keep them. What’s integrity?

Works Cited

[1] Cade, D.L. “BuzzFeed and Samsung in Hot Water for Using Photos Without Permission.” Petapixel. ‘Petapixel Online’, 12 Jan. 2013. Web. 16 Dec. 2016.

[2] Stopera, Dave. “The 21 Absolute Worst Things In The World.” BuzzFeed, ‘Buzzfeed’, 17 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Dec. 2016.

Shann Chiu, age 17

Red Ribbons

Let me stand in the feigned rain
In my transparent dress
And give you my red ribbons

Let me hide behind a created waterfall
In my acute human
And show you my red ribbons

Let me cry as my home cries
In my raw form
And share with you my red ribbons

Let me turn on the shower
As myself
And weave you my red ribbons

Let me; tell you what it means to cut:
Out goes worth and in comes shame

Red ribbons go down the drain
Until I am clean again.

Jean Kim, age 16

An Ode to the Beach

The living quality
of your waves
lies in their sheer intensity.
You speak to the gritty soles of my feet
screaming frozen froth-tipped words
up my scalded bare legs.

A piece of azure memory
sits windswept in my palm
shaped by what surrounds it, you,
so strangely human in this condition.

Your world is not one I frequently inhabit,
but neither is it just an adventure –
not just a rare chance
to commune with nature
as so many billboards advertise.
You are simply a part of the worlds and places –
loosely connected –
that I consider my home.

Rishona Altenberg, age 13

The Space Cadet's Sonnet

And now I find myself afloat in space,
Limp body drifting past the placid stars.
My thoughts they race, under my glazed straight face,
I'm speeding past the dust that flees from Mars.

Dislodged from weight and up against my will,
Vortex of time, it slows and starts to warp.
A captive of this spell that rests so still,
Existence cloaked under a hidden tarp.

Yet now I'm back again in focused state,
Awareness jolts itself into my bones.
Subconscious shape swiftly starts to deflate,
The solid realm – I've left the clouds to roam.

Space slips away, I'm rooted back in Earth.
How could I possibly find any mirth?

Rahma Wiryomartono, age 19

Moments of the Past

I get a mixed reaction when I look back into the past
At what I should let go of and of what moments should last
That makes my day and gives me a smile without any notice
And not sting me so profoundly that it'll bring me at my lowest.
It haunts me sometimes. I oftentimes wish I can press replay
And make some changes. But if I did so there'd be so many alterations.
I can't erase my own mistakes and situations
But rather take them and find the treasure in those tribulations
And utilize them to make inspirational quotations
That I'll start a flame in many souls for generations
And look at them as blessings and not horrible abominations
Lest I'll rot away with big and gruesome lamentations.
But what's the use of looking back at the unchangeable moments
That'll leave a man paralyzed and frozen and broken.
I turn my head from the black and gruesome moments of the past
And look straight ahead in my future that's in the open.

Glody Mungala, age 18

Remember Your Music

"We're ready whenever you are," the Julliard faculty member told me.

I nodded, and poised my fingers above the piano.

One and two and three and four and, I counted myself in, and off I went, my fingers flying above the keys.

As soon as I began playing, I found myself lost in old memories.

"That's it, Madison! You've nearly got it!" Mom told me as I struggled to play 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' on the piano.

A wide smile broke out on my face as I finally played the song without mistakes. "Mommy, look, I did it!" my five-year-old self exclaimed.

"Yes, you did!" my mom agreed.

I hopped off the piano bench and tugged on my mom's hand. "Now, will you play for me?"

She laughed and replied, taking a seat on the bench. "Do you want to hear Chopin or Beethoven?"

My face scrunched up in confusion as I thought about the question. "What did you play last time? And the time before that?"

"I played Chopin last time, and the time before that, I played Beethoven," she softly replied.

My face lit up as I realized that I liked Chopin better. "Play Chopin," I told her.

Her fingers started to move as a beautiful melody came out of the piano. I lost myself in the notes, in the beauty of the piano.

Too soon, the song was over. I heard trills and leaps as the piece came to its end, with a whisper, rather than a shout.

I asked my mom what that song was.

"It was a nocturne, a song inspired by the night."

I perfectly finished my A major section and modulated to E minor. I noticed one of the adjudicators was nodding to my piece and the others were scribbling notes down. I hoped that that was a good sign.

I was fully ready for the difficult E minor section, which was the part that my mom had always emphasized. It suddenly hit me that she couldn't do that anymore because she was not here.

"Mom, no," I begged my mom as she lay in the hospital bed.

She smiled sadly. "I'm so sorry, but I can't do anything about it."

My eyes widened as the words finally sank into my thirteen-year-old brain. "Mom," I sobbed. "Please, just please don't die on me! I can't lose you too!"

My mom softened and tried to pull me into a hug. "Your grandparents will take good care of you. Just..."

I bit my lip as I realized these could be her last words.

Struggling for breath, she finished her sentence and uttered her last three words. "Remember your music."

And with that, she was gone.

I began to sob, falling into a haze as my grandfather gently pulled me away. He was also crying, but I couldn't notice.

The next few days passed in a blur, her funeral, me moving to my grandparent's house, everything.

Now the piece was coming to its coda. I felt my mom with me like we had been so many times before. I did not feel that I was playing Chopin's piece anymore. It became more of my own piece, a song flooded with memories and emotions.

When I was fifteen, I found an old recording of my mother playing the same nocturne she played for me when I was five. I can't remember how many times I listened to that tape, over and over again. It was everything to me, my last tangible memory of her other than a photograph of her.

When I found out from my grandparents that she went to Julliard, it became my goal to get into the prestigious school. I practised long and hard every day, hoping that it would be enough. I saved up for private lessons so I could improve my playing. I did everything I could do to make sure I would be prepared.

I stood up and bowed, resting one hand on the piano.

I knew that my mom would be proud of me. And for me, that was enough.

Victoria Ho, age 13

A Wall to Break Down

When I was forced to look at him face to face, I could not help but turn away immediately. It was difficult to make any eye contact with him. No part of him offered any comfort or warmth. I felt disturbed to be around such a person. Yet, I knew this interview with him was something to be done, so I mustered up my courage to mutter up my first words to him.

"Who are you? No personality, characteristics, or qualities. I straight up want the facts."

To my surprise, he did not show any remorse or distaste toward the question. As if he understood why I was asking such a simple question, he answered me quite patiently and carefully.

Like how any parent would feel about their child, William was Erin and Paul Liu's precious and valuable son. Born on September 8, 1998, William became the youngest child to the family, the oldest being Henry Liu, who accordingly is currently studying in university. Although he is of Chinese descent, he is not familiar with his culture at all, not even knowing how to write his own name in Chinese. This made me laugh instinctively. Unlike Will's cold impression, he was a lot more awkward and honest. Will laughed along with me, and I was immediately more sympathetic to his softer side.

Will has always had a close relationship with his parents, but the bond mostly consisted of respect rather than playfulness and love. He had always been closer to his brother, Henry, but the intimacy they had together waned as time passed on. The siblings used to play video games together and hang out, but after Henry's university entrance, they lost time for each other. I could feel his regret and sorrow in his voice as he talked. He choked up a little while tracing back to his bittersweet childhood that he spent with his brother. I wanted to reach out to him. A part of me desired to wrap my arms around him, to console him. I could understand that he did not have anybody to share his problems with, since this was not something that anybody could help with nor understand fully. Yet, my fear for him did not completely disappear, restraining me from comforting him.

To the majority of people who first meet William Liu, he will come off as aggressive, due to his egotistical aura. However, the arrogant image that people have of him is merely their prejudice. When I asked him about his confidence, instead of an audacious reply, he exposed a vulnerable side. He said, "I'm not always confident. You're always most critical of yourself." We both burst into laughter at the cheesy quote, but we were merely too afraid to admit that it was true. We claim that we are afraid of not being able to fulfill others' expectations, but we are actually scared of not surpassing our own. William was identified as gifted in grade five, which led him into the special program. He ended up continuing the program and belonging in the Advanced Placement Program. The competition he had against his classmates and the pressure that comes from peers around him and his family was inevitable. I could not help but empathize with his struggles. He needed not only to fulfill his family's expectations, but his own as well. These internal conflicts are often overshadowed, and nobody recognizes them except for yourself.

On the topic of fears, I pondered, "Could a guy like this really have fears?" At first, he brought up typical subjects such as the possibility of not being rich or dying earlier than he wanted. Then he paused midway and hesitated on a seemingly dark memory. It took a while for him to mention it in pure honesty, but eventually, he admitted to the divorce of his parents. Before the event, as a child, he was always carefree and worryless. So, growing up watching the two people he loved the most argue and disagree with each other was scarring and confusing. Then, the final separation was tough for him to accept. This reality that William was forced to face at such a young age made him develop a defense mechanism, which he presents through his aggressiveness. Though, often, people around him interpret it as a tool meant to offend them. I thought it was a shame that he was misunderstood often, because of his regrets at not being more considerate so he could have had a better relationship with others.

What I found the most humorous about Will was how he defined success. His future goals, plans, and wishes shaped his perspective on happiness, and his raw honesty surprised me. Most people would be willing to twist their words around with stereotypical lines like, "I want to be with the people I love," so that they would not seem selfish. However, William is not afraid to be truthful. He directly said, "I want money." He is very honest and tremendously realistic, and it is somewhat admirable.

William Liu is not a self-centred person, but rather somebody who is very alert about his surroundings. His flaws are not based on his own skills, but on the way he treats those around him and develops himself. For instance, he stated, "When I'm receiving advice, I only listen to people I respect. So, I end up having only one perspective." Then, he reminisced the many opportunities he missed, such as not taking the initiative to continue activities such as art and piano. William wishes that he had been more patient and accepting of not being the best at something, knowing there was room for improvement. Although people are quick to judge William, he is far different from how most people view him.

I took a deep breath and looked at William in the face again. The reflection of myself blinked back at me, and I was not afraid to look at it any further. I could finally look at myself in the eyes again with no shame. I am not a bad son. I am not a bad friend. I am not a bad person. I know how to love.

"You've worked hard getting through everything," I said to the mirror loudly. "I have flaws, I need to improve, but I am okay. I am a good person. You've done well, and you will do even better."

Lizzie Kim, age 15

Serena



Aryana Rizvi, age 14

Formation



Juanita Lam, age 16

Blind to the Dark

Though five years have flown by, aurora borealis still lies fresh in my mind. It was nearly midnight. The dirt roads were empty and it seemed like the dark sky was spreading against the pitiful lights of the small stars. If you listened closely, you would hear the emptiness, the gentle yet cold, cutting wind. It seemed that it was waiting to swallow up and blanket anyone who dared step foot out in the dark. At the moment, it became close to impossible to even consider that I would rather choose to leave than stay in the comforts of my cozy, warm and inviting bed.

Have you ever woke up in a time where everyone and everything were silent? It sounds as if the whole world had been put on mute and paused, as if this was the time you could watch the world from another perspective. I happen to be quite good at shutting out everything around me and simply going to my 'quiet place'. Sadly, I couldn't bear to use that skill right now. It's a myth when others say that when the witching hour nears, others close their eyes and sleep. However, my parents were awake and kicking. Literally. No doubt all of our neighbours (who are about one kilometre away) could hear their shrieks, shrills and shouts throughout their fight. My already head-smashing migraine was getting too much for me to bear.

Without a second thought, or even a first one, I pulled on my favourite navy blue Gap sweater and some neon orange running shoes. Being as swift as possible, I slipped out of my second floor window, shimmied down the enormous maple tree, and jogged to the clearing in the dense, gloomy, dangerous forest; anything would be better than having to listen to your parents yelling themselves hoarse.

As soon as I hit the clearing, I bolted. Without a clue as to where I was going, I simply let my feet lead me. Branches whipped, smacked and scratched at my face, yet it didn't slow me down one bit. Tears streamed down my grimy face in a rush. My run slowed down into a jog, then into a walk, until finally I stopped. I was in a secret clearing and how I got there I don't think I'll ever know. Suddenly, a beautiful striking green light surged across the sky. Soon after, the deepest yet brightest string of purple came flowing across the sky. My tears stopped as I stood in awe of what was happening above me. The lights shyly came together and wove an exotic and magical dance. Merging, mixing, and making colours that I have never seen in the sky: red, yellow, green, blue, and violet shining brightly. After flitting, fluttering, and flickering, the show came to an end. To other eyes, the sky became dark and empty again. To my eyes, it looked like a new beginning. Slowly, but surely, I walked back to my home. I heard no more shrills seeping out of the walls and no more bangs and bashes against the silence of the night. As I opened the door, both my parents rushed at me. Not in anger or annoyance; in distress and worry. In their embrace, I figured everyone has their bumps and bounces. The only important thing is that they get through it. I turned around and gave one last smile at the night sky. Then it struck me; without darkness, there would be no such thing as light.

Salwa Abdalla, age 14

gossamer aria

beyond the seagulls' cries, hear
the sighing of wind
the ebbing of ocean tides
and the [whispers] of sins

beyond the airplane's whine, hear
the bicycle rolling on hard-packed ground
feet swishing along sand
and the defeated [sighs] of those who are bound

beyond the slathered laughter, hear
a voice, all but hollow
a last murmur of help
and the silence that follows

Tiffany Leung, age 18

Sunday

Getting his wife home
I go into the kitchen,
and make out the shadow
of a hunched back.
The TV screen lights up his face.
As the clock strikes eleven,
the phone beside him
vibrates with urgency.
He jumps out of his chair,
and slides his arms into his coat.
With his hands on the steering wheel
he arrives at his destination.
He breaks into a huge smile
when he sees his beloved woman
waiting for him under the streetlight.

Alicia Gan, age 15

untitled

Long before electricity,
there was fire.
Patches of buildings and skyscrapers
that dominate the western hemispheres
were once caves and huts
made visible against the shadows
by misshapen, glowing gas.

It was a gift from the gods, they say.
And the first time man met it
was with a careful curiosity.
Their hands were mild grips
of and for
security.

They lit up their corner of the world
one branch after another.
They torched circles
and danced around,
all night long,
feeling like gods themselves
as they flicked the eyelids of the sun:
on and off
on and off

Before long,
their part of the world became a light of its own
attracting moths
from unseen pockets of the earth.
And the men with the fire saw,
for seeing had never been a sin then.

But as man lit branch after branch,
their land grew barren
till eventually,
there was not much else for them to light.
So they carved match sticks out of their hearts
and set it aflame.

Bright as they were,
it was blindingly so
that they assumed the right,
as gods did,
to bring fire to the rest of the world.

They traced the moths they called upon
back to their cocoons,
in closets and chests,
which, having lived in total darkness
spent one last night
sleeping under shadowed stars
only to wake in a field of blaze,
as their towns and villages
were burned down by the men with matchstick hearts.

Years later,
the fire which towns burned with
and hands burned for
became nothing more than a careful accessory
lit upon scented wax;
while the ashtrays of the world,
still dusting smoke from the noses of charred skeletons,
with only the slightest compassion left,
pray, pitying Prometheus;
restless where he lays.

E Dion, age 18

I Am That Shadow

I am that shadow over your shoulder, that whiff of scent you smell for just an instant, that whisper you hear in the night, that brief cold breeze that gently envelops you, and that flutter of a kiss on your cheek before you fall prey to slumber. I am all those things; however, I am doomed only to observe and listen, never to be fully immersed or a part of Earth and its inhabitants. Rather, I can only break that barrier for a moment, able to, in a fleeting moment, softly feel what I could have felt if only I could have mustered up the strength for my final battle.

If I had the bravery to pull through and shatter the barrier that separated my body and my spirit, my soul, my essence, I could have kept living in this world. I could have still felt my mother's kiss on my cheek, my friend's hand in mine, but I lost. Darkness won. The barrier turned into a dark wall the very instant my body decided to stop breathing. Once I realized I regretted my choice, it was too late. Darkness carried me away from my body, the pit, my murderer, my loved ones, and this world.

All I can do is watch. I still manage to crack the wall, but when I break through, all that my being can contain is marking my fleeting presence to others. But, they can never see me, nor the many others who haunt the wall between Darkness and Earth. You see, ghosts are always there, you just can't see them.

Erin Park, age 12

Miss World Peace



Annetzia Joseph, age 15

Hot

If I left my house
its eyes wide open
The pupils would contract but not close
Rays would leave bubbling burns,
a sad scarlet
I would see red
and markedly mistake
Acetone for Aveeno
Callouses for Coppertone
And realize
I should really stop
letting in the sun

But you were a freak of the
Woods and trees,
The birds and bees
And the rain's spittle that
tickles the roots of my hair
when it's muggy outside
in my naked protection
against the elements
You were a solar flare
The reverse of easy
to not stare at
something so entrenched
with exclusive, heated existence

and the reverse of safe

Maeesha Biswas, age 16

I Am From

I am from enraged monsoons,
Muddy water grasping my knees.
Watching fireflies on moonlit nights
As the ceiling fan ceases to spin.

I am from the ashy remnants of Diwali firecrackers,
Priests gently chanting the Bhagavad Gita,
The charismatic aroma of agarbatti.
I am from fuchka and jhal muri adorned with spice,
fixed to wreak havoc in your guts.

I am from cataract surgeries and X-ray machines,
Playing with Baba's stethoscopes,
Doodling on Ma's anatomy texts.
I am from a hundred tiny bells above my ankles
and their whimsical reverberation.

I am from the virtual esthetics of my Instagram feed:
Exquisitely arranged carnations,
Pastel skies, wicked sunsets.
I am from a mountain of deleted photographs
awaiting their annual multiplication.

I am from shrubs of memories
That subsist as etched silhouettes
Feeding hungrily on tears and smiles,
With no promises of revival.

Aira Biswas, age 17

Falling into Twenty

I'm being cornered onto a cliff's edge. The wind up here is gliding its fingernails over my naked back the way I caress my chocolate cake with a fork before puncturing its decadent, messy goodness.

I don't think I'll be as sweet.

Nancy Wu, age 19

Dark Light

A cold winter evening swept across the silent town of Peterbruh. Everyone seemed to be packing up from a horrible day at school. The same can soon be said about a certain young boy and girl. As mobs of students cleared, Phil and Mabel remained on Peterbruh High's parking lot.

Normally, being with one or two people was comforting, but not today. The air was more like stone as Phil's hairs began to tense. He could feel his whole body going numb, resisting his control. Sweat rolled down his back, making him as cold as the snow hailing down with the roaring wind. His heart thumped profusely, filling his whole body with the warmth he desperately needed. The young boy's stomach danced around like performers on a stage, making him feel as if he might puke at any moment. Mabel's intensive stare did not help either, effectively burning the poor boy's soul out.

The sky was engulfed with darkness as Phil realized he couldn't sustain this stress anymore. It was as if time slowed to a crawl in those few moments of regret and agony. There were so many questions he needed to answer in this moment, "Should I do it? What if she accepts? What if she doesn't accept? I mean she's sure to accept, right? I mean she's so kind, considerate, and thoughtful of everyone. On the other hand, she could decline..." An infinite amount of possibilities took shape in his head, all incredibly stupid in his opinion.

He glanced at the girl across from him, noticing her white skin blended with the snow. Her blond hair flowed through the glistening cold air. Phil could not help but look over a couple of times without thinking: she was so incredibly beautiful, and everyone at school knew this. Just the right height, just the right width, she was perfect. She just happened to be the superstar of just about everything too, from sports clubs to the student council. Everyone knew her and she was always busy. It was a wonder that she was still at school this late.

Even though time seemed to slowly trickle away, Phil could tell this was taking too long. The lick of his braces soothed him ever so slightly, but alas, not enough. The stress was killing him, so in the heat of the moment, he decided to follow through. After slowly practicing in his head a couple of times and quickly adjusting his glasses, he was ready.

"I like you," Phil broke the silence. "I love you and love all the things about you, like how you sit in class looking fabulous and always swing your hair back. I love the way you look when you're sitting in class and attentively listening. I love the way you care for everyone and I love the way you laugh and the way you smile..." So I was hoping, maybe we could get a lunch out sometime like that."

The wind howled over their ears as they both stood, Phil staring at the ground and Mabel with a humongous smile on her face. Both of them could not look each other in the eye, especially Phil.

"I'm sorry," was all she could say with her mouth scrunched up to seem as if she was sincere.

In the midst of the night that had befallen them, the two left without another word. As the parking lot built up with snow, Phil's heart was left to freeze along with that cold winter night.

It had been three years since that incident. All the trees had grown just a bit, along with all the people in Peterbruh. Outside, on Peterbruh High's parking lot, Phil considered those old memories from three years ago. They made him cringe, but he accepted them, for they made him into the person he was meant to be. With his last day of high school coming to a close, there was but one thing he needed to clear up. This was why the two teenagers faced each other in the same parking lot, just as empty as before.

"Hey Mabel," Phil started.

"Hey Phil," Mabel replied. "I just wanted to ask if that offer for lunch is still valid?" she asked.

However, Phil knew this time. He had seen it in her eyes, but only after his mistake. She had always been a dark light, just like everyone else. All those cool kids, all those people, all of them were dark light. The cold beady eyes were always there, he just was blind the whole time. The once thoughtful caring Mabel had never been there. His feet, as though by some instinct, moved automatically.

"Wait, Phil!" the shouting continued. This only pushed Phil to move faster, to leave this old life behind. A place in Harvard had been reserved just for him, no one else. Why should any of them notice him now? After all, none of them even tried noticing him. It was only at that one point where he was known, but even then, no one wanted to know him. He had been that one nerd that no one wanted to talk to, his life just as empty as the parking lot. He had been laughed at, shunned, forced to be a part of this high school society that did not even want him. Now he was the one everyone wanted to know.

As his old life begged him to stay, he marched on. The old shining stars that he looked up to had long ago been black holes. They had ripped him apart, but he had been born anew. He did not know what life had in store for him, but he would overcome these challenges as himself, not the man society wanted him to be. Stopping in his tracks for but a brief moment to look back at the person who had changed him forever, two words slipped out of his mouth.

"I'm sorry."

But he did not mean it.

Tom Zhu, age 15

2015 Teens: On Reform and Revolution

Today, we make history. This year, I am but one of the billions of people overwhelmed with pride and happiness for the men, women, and other gender identities that have been vindicated by new legislation put forth by the United States Supreme Court. The social reform which we have spawned will indefinitely go down in history, defining generations of open-minded revolutionaries in the charge for equality. I am ecstatic. I consider myself infinitely fortunate to have been born in such an innovative, socially conscious era that is nothing but encouraging for all caught up in the movements. Each and every day, conservative moral standards are challenged by new voices as today's youth, my generation of misfits and phone-hounds, are given chances to thrive.

I was born in the year 1997. I was raised on All The Right Type and Kid Pix, exercising my creativity through puzzle-based computer games and artistic programs. From the age of nine, I've been part of a generation taught to rely on technology as the notebooks in which we wrote turned into Microsoft Word documents. Pencils turned into keyboards, and desks to monitors. Our teachers encouraged us to open our minds with a realm full of information at our fingertips, to learn and create, and to satisfy our deepest curiosities concerning the world around us.

When I turned twelve, all of this changed. The very people who had bewitched our minds with the charm of new technology were now hell-bent on taking it away. Time and time again, I kept hearing things like: "It's just your generation, you've all got ADD because you can't get off your computers and phones." "Maybe it's the technology that's made you all so aloof." And my personal favourite: "Why are computers brainwashing our kids into being narcissistic, simple-minded zombies?!" Even now, as I sit on my laptop creatively writing or toying with video editing software, I am accused of "being on Facebook all the time" and "letting my brain turn to mush." Although I often try to explain myself, my defences are always shut down.

It is now 2015. I am eighteen years old, and it has taken me seven long years to write this letter. An active contributor to multiple social media platforms, I have grown up with generations of tumblr bloggers and twitter users. I have felt humbled by and wondrous about the rise of YouTube and the ways in which it has inspired people to pursue their dreams. I have used the Internet as means of self-expression, sharing my writing and music with the world. I have had the utmost pleasure of meeting the most open-minded, socially enlightened individuals the world has ever known.

From the year I turned thirteen, I have been bombarded with positive messages on every social website that has taken me into its cyber home. With the legalization of gay marriage and spreading of gender equality movements such as HeForShe, my social feed seems to explode with overwhelming support and joy for equality and for one another. Emma Watson's address to the United Nations has surpassed fourteen million views on YouTube, and Facebook's Celebrate Pride campaign has consumed its users' newsfeeds. Internet stars including Joey Graceffa, Ingrid Nilsen and Caitlyn Jenner have used social media to reach out to teens struggling with their sexual identities with their own inspiring coming-out stories. Popular artists such as Macklemore have come out with chart-topping singles promoting equality such as "Same Love," the video of which has been viewed and shared 141 million times. Campaigns for social justice have gone instantly viral, most recently "Justice For Leelah Alcorn" and "Pray for Charleston." Racist, sexist, and other derogatory terms are shunned both online and within the walls of my former high school. Gender neutral washrooms are beginning to be opened. The transgender community has been widely accepted thanks to Web stars like Gigi Gorgeous and Netflix series like *Orange Is the New Black*. Words like "s***" and "w*****" have almost become extinct as feminism continues to be embraced. And this is barely a sliver of the progress made.

I for one have sat through many evenings of long dinnertime stories that always seem to start with the words, "when I was your age..." and end with, "we didn't even have the Internet, and we were much happier." But what did "much happier" entail? Back when my parents were teenagers, it was normal to use racist slang in everyday conversation. Words like "retarded" were acceptable and over-popularized. The idea of third wave feminism was laughed at, and sexual education still had a long way to go. Is this "much happier?"

Despite all this, we know our fighting is not yet over. Three years ago, when I was enrolled in eighth grade sexual education, I felt scammed because never once did we discuss what it was like to explore one's sexuality as a woman. We were taught that only men had sexual desires, and it was our duty to say "no" until marriage. As a woman, I feel cheated by the media for placing so many unrealistic standards and false expectations on me every single day. At my senior prom, I went dateless when all my friends had escorts. I remember my dad asking me, "Camille, I know it must be strange going to prom without a boyfriend... are you sure you're okay?" I found this question strange because if I were a boy I wouldn't be asked the same thing. I would be commended for my independence, not pitied for it. I still continue to hear sexist terms thrown around every once in a while and pride myself on trying to stop it. I look forward to the day when women are paid the same amount of money as men for the same work. I hope this is next.

Despite all this, I am one to proudly say that I have the utmost faith in all that our generation can accomplish as we constantly strive for equality and justice. I am proud to have grown up on a computer, to have gone through my hardest years in such an accepting online environment. I am proud to have contributed to one of the most important social revolutions of all time. I am proud that I never quite got off "that friggin' phone."

Camille Intson, age 18

Kodama 児玉



Samira Ebrahiminia, age 17

Empty Eyes



Yoana Vasileva, age 16

Do Androids Read Books



Megan Li, age 19

Simply Solitude

Close your eyes.

Feel the swell of power building within yourself when you howl to the mighty sun. Hear the trees and wind howl in rhythm. Watch, as you and the world become a single rising force, one interdependent spirit. So to touch the expanse of pale pink and grey, over to the multi-green rolling valleys dotted with pines and rivers. They meet at a peaking yellow-orange horizon. Stand there, you're barefoot on cold rock. Do you feel dawn's breeze?

Like a bobcat you climb down the mountain. Fingers are tingling with life. To home you've arrived at last. To home of nobody's claim. Light through the cabin window sheds onto unseen particles. The furniture, blanketed in a thin layer of dust, smells of rot. Find yourself devouring familiar scents and sounds. Listen, the soft song of the brook. Yes, you love it all. The pureness and essence of life free of chains, which you find really isn't a separate thing at all, but a whole togetherness. An interweaving system where everything depends on everything else.

Curiously you find yourself sinking in with the earth. Your cabin dissipates, transforming faster than the speed of light, for really, all that is just an illusory barrier of the mind.

Ink of ebony pours onto an upturned ocean, blotched with spilled salt scattered across the sky. The universe is wallowed and washed with a deep watercolour purple and blue. Listen gently. Silence becomes a cloak within and throughout you in which any straying thought or emotion dissipates into the quietude. Feel your fingers. You are suspended in a soft bed of water. A blank canvas. Starlight is distorted in the fluctuating delicacy of the glassy surface. Listen again. The soothing gulps kiss you softly on the cheeks while a sigh of wind chills your face. You drift off, deeper, deeper, until nothing exists except your very existence, your inseparability from the universe. As you become one with it and it is you, you become simply a fluctuating frequency of energy; you have no head, eyes, fingers. You are simply a witness to the world beholding these sensations.

Open your eyes.

It is 8:09 in the morning. Dread creeps up from the back of your mind and you start pulling off your pyjamas almost violently before squirming into your clothes. You scoop up your books that sprawl sullenly on the floor and stuff them in your bag. In a last ditch effort, you make a dash for school, dodging noisy crowds and honking cars, through flashing lights and soaring buildings. Another detention, another late assignment. You find yourself on the bottom step of the stairwell, intensely overwhelmed. Loud students gather in clumps and whiz past you.

So you take a sigh.

Let's wake in the midst of sleeping people.

You stare out the window at the frenzy of cars at rush hour, then close the blinds and roll onto your bed. Placing your hands behind your head, you close your eyes and begin to dream again, drifting into the simplicity of solitude.

Lily Wu, age 14

Time's Passing



Sara Al-Tameemi, age 14

Existential Crisis

"Hey Sybil, I just came up with the most brilliant idea!"

"Not now Zoe, I wanna get my stupid homework done for once."

"No, but it's really philosophical, just listen!"

"That, I cannot guarantee."

Zoe's older cousin walked calmly into her room and sat at her work desk while Zoe stared at her from where she was sitting on the bed. Zoe had not been invited into Sybil's room. At all.

The younger girl took her cousin's silence as a reason for her to go on. "So basically, have you ever wondered if our lives at this very moment are actually a short story written by an adolescent weirdo because he had nothing else to do in his spare time? I mean, think about it: That would mean that we have absolutely no control over our fate! Doesn't that concern you even a little?"

"No Zoe, I have more concerning things to think about than my control over my fate. Like how much I like my appearance every morning when I get out of bed."

Zoe quickly retorted, "But this concept means we're nothing but ants being threatened by the magnifying glass of our creator. We can all be destroyed when the author decides the story has to end, and we can do nothing in protest because we are written to exist only for this period of time without questioning it!"

"Yeah, well, what do you want me to do, sacrifice someone to the god of paper to obtain the gift of free will?"

"... Actually, that was exactly what I was thinking..."

Sybil turned to catch Zoe's knowing grin just as it faded. "You are a strange child, Zoe. A strange child indeed."

Zoe continued "Even the fourth-wall-shattering concept I'm spouting right now has been pre-planned! We have virtually NO FREE WILL!"

"That's nice Zoe, now can you get me my bottle of hair conditioner? I want my hair to continue to defy the stereotypes that I've been spreading about goths at school in order to baffle my colleagues."

"Is that really why you wear old-style and black clothing while maintaining unnaturally shiny hair?"

"Nahh, I just think it looks pretty."

Zoe sat up in mock surprise, slapping her hands to her chin.

"Don't you care at all about what the masses expect from you? Don't you want to fit in even if it makes you a slave to popular media and oppresses your individual input?!"

Sybil did not seem to notice Zoe's special effort at mock despair.

"Who was the one talking about the importance of free will a few minutes ago?"

Zoe moved toward her cousin and posed herself like a mini replica of Rodin's *The Thinker* before saying, "You'll always remain a weirdo to me, Sybil."

Sybil was just finishing with her hair as she replied, "Right back at you, dearest cousin."

"Hey, what were we talking about again?"

Filip Panaitescu, age 15

Organism



Vicky Wang, age 17

Math

What is math?
Not something that'll make you laugh

Quadratic equation...
Nope, more like internal deflation

Pythagorean theorem
Worse than injecting me with truth serum

Don't even get me started on sinusoidal functions
I bet those are just complicated malfunctions

Why are you so obsessed over finding your x?
Why do you have to be so damn complex?

Page after page you ask me to solve your problems
Wreaking havoc like little goblins

You ask me to justify
Yah goodbye

Just please let your x's roll freely
You got a problem go and ask Siri

You teach me how to measure the width of a candy bar
But not how to fix my own car?

Taxes upon taxes
Could have taught me how to handle them,
in those boring classes

Can I not simplify
And just let this fly?

As if mental math wasn't hard enough
You're just getting way too tough

English major
Looking fresh in my new blazer
Using words like my very own lightsaber
Glad I won't be seeing you later

Maryam Nasimi, age 18

A Collection

It was conversations on concrete steps
Hiding boldly from the rain
And holding hands in the corridor
Where nobody could see.

It was the silver sweater in the front row
Of plastic tree stumps
Growing in the grey-green meadow
Of the church basement.

It was softly reading the bible,
The one with the red woven cover,
Telling me why I was wrong,
And wondering why I didn't bring a book.

It was the last rose coloured fish
On the last hook that still bothered to work
And sleeping upside down
Just to be a bit closer.

It was flying into the sunset
Trying to keep away the dark
Placing speckled stars
Onto a sandy sky.

It was politics in the swimming pool
Observing the veins and arteries
Of the old piano
And wondering how someone could be so happy.

It was a living lie,
A secret one
Revealed by the sticky light of a stained glass window
Wondering if all this was normal
Or weird
Or just plain wrong
That is what it was.

Odessa Hewitt-Bernhard, age 13

Current

One morning I watched the river run
To the shore, on the ocean's decree,
And I thought, I shall write a story
About being lost at sea.

And I thought, I must feel the angry waves,
So I set out in a boat:
A tale of floundering under the foam
From one left far afloat.

I understand: the logic leaps –
I'll document its fall.
From my seat behind the railing,
I'll transcribe its drowning call,

But how to account for the seaweed, ensnaring,
The hopping conclusions, and those who chase,
Making a maze of the cavernous sea
That poisons the darkness with grace?

And the mud that obscures, the leeches that drain,
Or the panicked undertow,
And if I am dry to hold paper and pen
Then what of the waves can I know?

If indeed I am dry; for somehow I squirm
As the eels swim over the page,
And my fingers are wet with the ocean's decree:
The salt-blood that leaked from its cage.

Yes, I have walked along the shore
But the drop-off thence is steep –
And my careful pages begin to dissolve,
When I find I have jumped in too deep.

Julia DaSilva, age 17

Sunshine in December

two numb hands in one mitten
we trudged through grey snow/slush
and into her dingy basement
grins frozen solid
teeth chattering
to the thump of young heartbeat

we stripped the day's costume
I sat on her lintball sofa
her coffee scalded my throat
(two sugars, just the way I like it)
our entangled legs defrost
under the mess of old purple fleece
(careful not to disrupt
the delicate chemical reaction
of her flesh searing mine)
careful to ignore
hail claw, claw, clawing
at the window
a divine protest to
the heave of our laughter

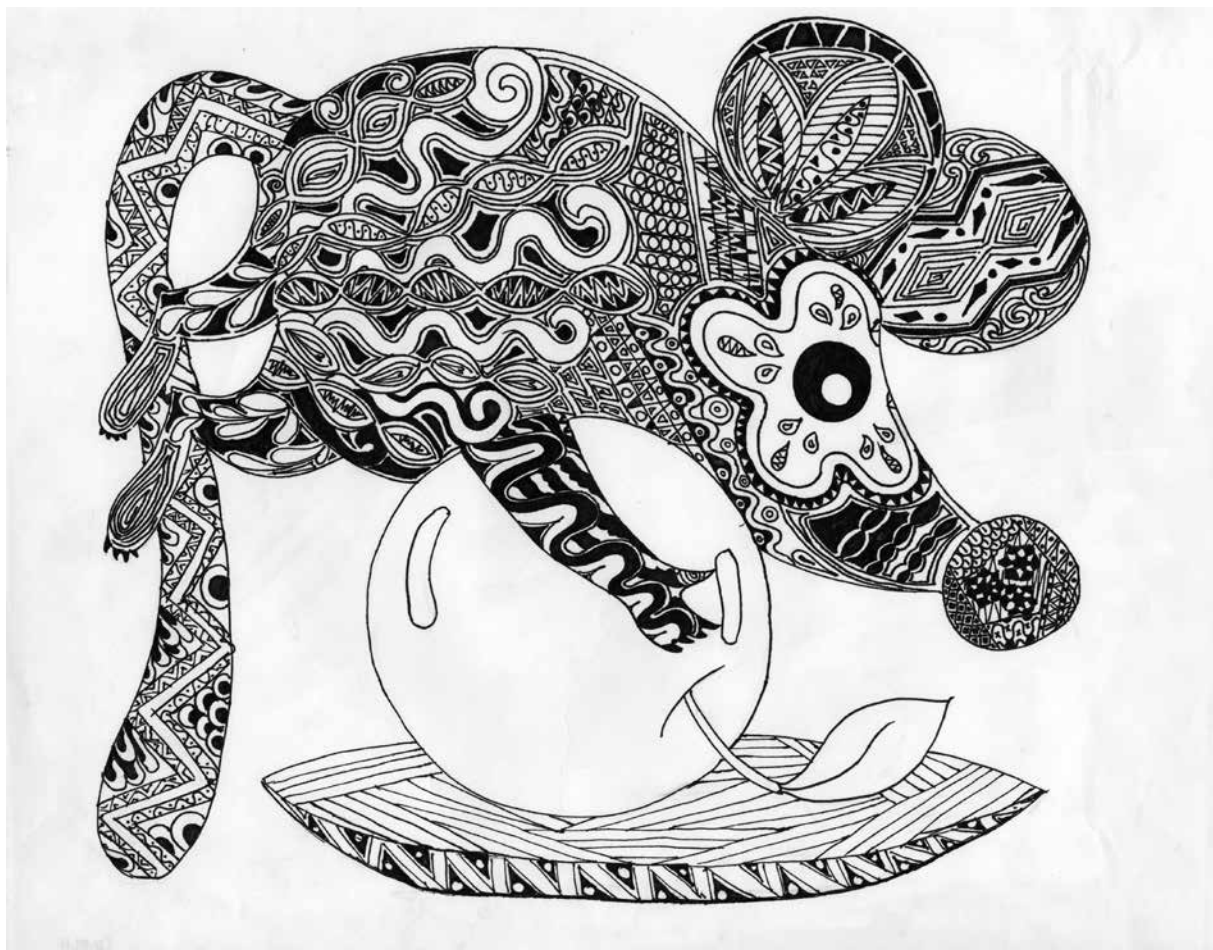
before all is but a hush
her giggles like my prayers

(I didn't know someone's voice
could feel so soft
slipping through my trembling fingers)
we said nothing worth hearing
but it was home I longed to return
not empty dinner tables
silence bubbling like storm clouds
when I'd rather hear her voice
warm on my face
as if the sunshine in her laugh
tore apart December skies –

but my tongue was still scared frozen
so I held my breath as she sang
to me sweet songs of spring
(to the beat of swallowed I love you's
still ringing like a broken, broken record)

Catherine Le, age 16

The Greedy Mouse



Cindy Xin Ran Huang, age 13

Confessions of an Unapologetic Album

A This I Believe Essay

Photographs are moments permanently frozen in time; some are encapsulated in perfect gloss, beckoning admiration. Others appear faintly etched as mere fragments of an image on a deeply crinkled surface, worn out by decades of exposure. Every day, photos are constantly taken. They are memories captured in a plethora of finishes, ranging from black and white to a more nondescript grey-scale to brilliant, bold colour. Certain photos invoke extreme euphoria, yet there are always pain-inflicting snapshots that trigger horrific flashbacks. Over fifteen years, countless photographs of mine have been compiled into a personal album.

Whether I like it or not, this album cannot be destroyed or altered. Gathering the courage to flip through it doesn't come effortlessly. But when it happens, I oftentimes find myself fixated on one particular image.

Prestigious, preschool, uniform-clad, my five-year-old self stares expressionlessly into the lens, donning a dishevelled hairstyle which spills onto my blank, non-smiling face by way of a lone strand down the centre. My position, isolated from my peers, acts as further testament to my rejection from mainstream Japanese society. A parent had just pulled their daughter away from me, warning her to "avoid contact with the *Chugoku-jin* – the Chinese immigrant," while my mother harshly chastises me for my inability to convey basic feelings through facial expressions.

It's not easy to pinpoint when exactly I stopped smiling in childhood photos. For as long as I could remember, I was "that deviant loser," prone to being outcast and ridiculed, which only drove my introverted predisposition off a cliff and straight into an isolated abyss. I was three when I first developed seizure-like symptoms; frequent hospital trips stemming from anxiety attacks were a necessity, while refusing to talk or give the slightest hint of eye contact were a given.

It was at this moment I desperately wished my album could end, but my irrationality was quickly shot down by a strong support system and a change in environment, where I found others I'm grateful to call "friends" today. The process was mired in trials and tribulations, but slowly I learned to become my own photographer; by going out and capturing more through my personal lens, I no longer feel compelled to exert copious amounts of energy fretting about how others perceive me through theirs.

Despite my grand epiphany, I'm more than aware of the stark contrast between my past and present. These days, when I get an inquiry regarding my photo album, I don't hesitate – nor am I ashamed – to share a single one of my photographs. They are all landmarks along the journey of self-discovery, and I take pride in the changes that occur.

Photography is subjective; it is not purposeful to regret, wishing the photo would have turned out differently, because one cannot turn back time and retake it. Likewise, obsessing over flaws and tiny details when preparing to photograph a moment is superfluous; life will naturally fall into place.

Alice Cheng, age 15

Judas's Hymn

I am afraid but I will not go out in fear,
My voice may be silent as the crowds do cheer.

My powerless limbs will thrash and throttle, my teeth will snarl and in a desperate pursuit,
To break the necklace that is bound to my neck.

I will not be afraid when I see that burning light; I will be seared in hell fire and scolded by heaven's light.

My skin will burn like a letter from a lover, to the flame of a match,
My eyes will tear and my throat will catch.

Oh mother, oh mother, will you hold me in your arms? Will you swaddle me like the infant I once was oh so long ago?

Will you cry tears of mournful sorrow when you stand over my grave?
The grave I have dug for myself?
The lash of the whip
Branding my back with scars
Each tattoo of my wickedness,
A reminder of my youth, a trophy of my faults.

Will our father's wrath smite me? Or will he show mercy on my soul?

Oh brother, oh brother, will you stand by my side, this oasis is burning and my body is churning and I will soon be no more.

Oh sister, oh sister, will you still believe in me? The person I once was before I became the enemy?

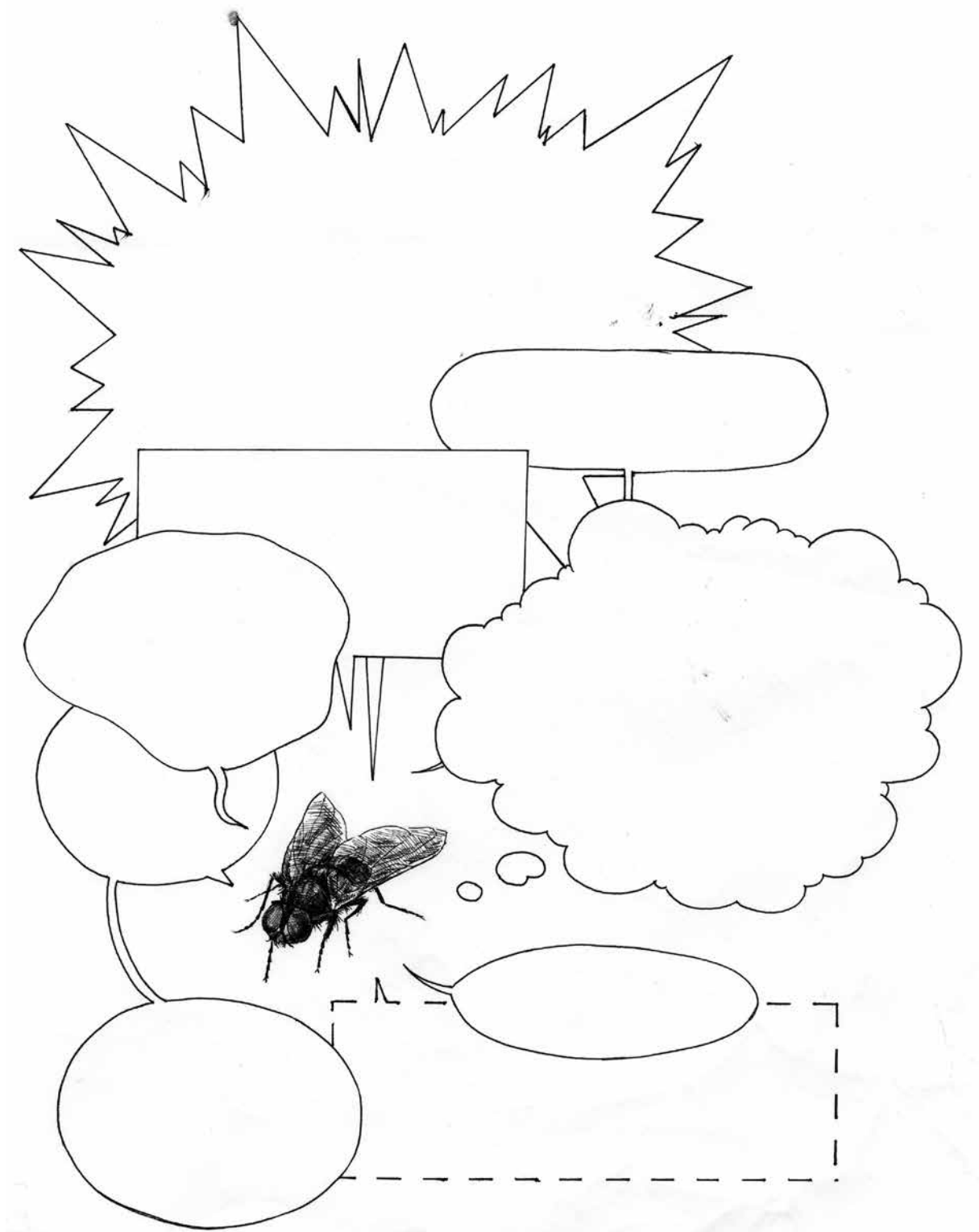
These lies I have created sewn sin by sin, chaining me down by my every limb
For I am the forsaken, my name is nothing more than a vice.

I kneel here before you, hands clasped with all my might
My lips tremble as I whisper my vow, a prayer in the lifeless night
A testament to my righteousness,
For my unforgiving pride.
My greed blinded me, though my betrayal was not blind.

Forgive me our saviour for I was once your friend.

Briana Quinn, age 16

Musca Domestica



Andy Zhang, age 15

My Summer Hands

My summer hands hold a Diet Coke bottle
dripping with ice water
at Laya's infamous end of the year party

My summer hands anxiously support the pointer
shaking rapidly like a patriotic flag waving in the wind
as I read from the Torah at my bat mitzvah

My summer hands slide through the coarse pages
word after word
to captivate me during a seven hour flight to London

My summer hands are the ones that help me bite into
light, airy, heavenly
English fish and chips

My summer hands hold out museum pamphlets
guiding us through the history
each exhibit more scholarly than the last

My summer hands help me devour
oozing with greasy, rich flavour
butter tarts at my rustic cottage

My summer hands hold on to a wakeboard handle
aching with pain
For so long it hurt to pick up my dinner

My summer hands wave goodbye to my family
fading away in their navy car
as I am dropped off at summer camp

My summer hands haul forty pound duffel bags
loaded with anything I could possibly need
to my new home for the month

My summer hands learned the settings of a camera
aperture, exposure, ISO
becoming more intrigued with every picture taken

My summer hands blister
and get denied a Band-Aid
after paddling for eight hours

My summer hands spear marshmallows on a rugged stick
as the embers soar into the sky
by a dancing campfire on canoe trip

My summer hands hug my friends goodbye
tears forming in my eyes
as we exit the bus and greet our loving families

My summer hands fasten my tie under my collar
they greet my school hands
anxious to start the next year

This time, as I step out of the door on the first day of school,
my school hands do the waving

Eleanor Sokolowski, age 12

Pain

Lying, I watched the city burn before me. Ashes rained down upon me like raindrops. The city, once beautiful, with its golden spiralling towers and extravagant peaked manors, crumbled before my eyes. How could something that wonderful fall apart so quickly? Pondering over that question, I heard the sound of the city, once filled with the laughter of children, replaced with the screams of tortured people. I longed to help them, to go to them, to do anything but lie here, but I couldn't. My body, once strong, was now a broken heap. If I could barely stay conscious, how was I supposed to help the people? I struggled to stay awake, despite the pain I felt, pain both emotional and physical. Pain, the pain of a broken man, a man who watched as all his loved ones fell before him. How I wished, desired, to feel anything else. I even envied the people below in the fallen city, for at least they could still have hope. I watched the city with weeping eyes, knowing that I could do nothing. I began to close my eyes, as the pain slowly overcame me. Hesitantly, I shut my eyes, and drifted into blissful unconsciousness.

Roy Shi, age 13

Not Obsessed



Filip P, 2016

Filip Panaitescu, age 15

Running Through Time



Selina Qiu, age 13

Wake Up

Wake up
Smack the alarm
Stagger to the bathroom
Flick on the light
Pull out a towel
Undress
Get in the shower
Tune the water to a loud sprinkling pulse
Get that perfect temperature
Standing under the stream
The never-ending heat

The comfort gives me time to think
I can't sing
I feel so depressed
The water gives me
A desperately needed hug

One tear rolls down my cheek
Was it a tear?
Maybe it was just the shower...
Torrential downpour in the forecast
I sob
Quietly at first
Then heaving breaths
No one can hear me
Over the ordinary sounds of the water running

The ache grows
My stomach hurts
I can't even feel the shower anymore
Does anyone know?
Does anyone care?

I think about you
Your face when you're worried
About what?
About me
Maybe you care enough
But who would want to?

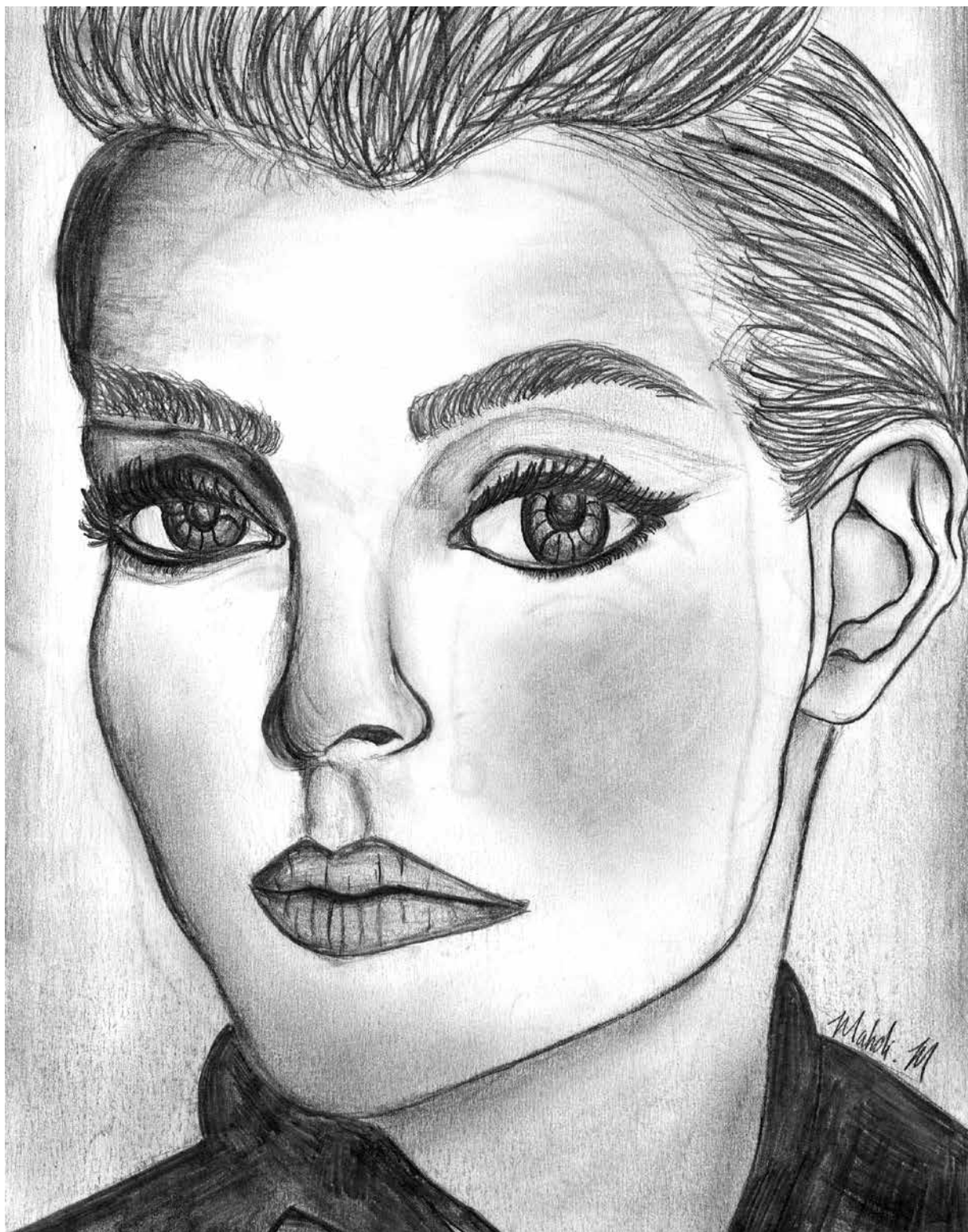
I feel like
The river from my tired eyes
Will never stop
But a drought will always come
After the flood

My tears drop
They drip like a leaky faucet
I'm slowing down
They splatter
On the pearl white tub
Beneath my feet
I am a flower
So fragile
Don't pull the petals
Off
Don't let them drop
I make myself into stone
I don't feel
I push your beautiful face away

Where can I go
When I need to escape you
Escape the world
Escape everything
That holds me down?
The shower
Where no one can hear me cry
Where no one can see me down
Where I can pull myself away
Where I can keep it from everyone else
Where I can confine my thoughts
To the water
That never tells

Amanda Murgel, age 14

Jessica Stam



Mahdi Mahira, age 17

A Sea of Depthless Cold

She put her hand on the frosting window, looking down at the streets below. The snow fell past the window, floating softly and twirling in the wind. She felt the cold seep into her fingertips, chilling her veins, making her blood run cold.

A nurse walked in, and upon seeing her standing so close to the window, hurriedly put down the plastic tray in her hands and rushed over.

"Don't stand so close to the window, honey," the nurse coaxed, as if coercing a child, guiding her back toward the sterile white of the bedsheets with one hand on the small of her back. She followed the guidance wordlessly, her bare feet treading on the cold white hospital tiles.

Honey. The nurse always called her *honey*. The word had a nice ring to it, really, the connotation was pleasant, but it sounded immeasurably cold to her.

The nurse didn't know her name, that much was clear. After all, she had countless patients to look after. What was one dying kid in a hundred? Not worth it, that's what. She was surprised the nurse even made the effort to sound kind, but perhaps even those who had developed a sort of immunity to experience felt the compulsion to be nice to the ill. It was something that came with dying. People tended to be nice.

She supposed it should have hurt that the nurse didn't even care enough to ask her name again, after the first time, that was, even though there were innumerable opportunities for her to use it throughout their repeated encounters. She knew the nurse forgot it long ago.

Such revelations of how little care people felt for her no longer seemed to matter, not as much as they used to. She supposed this was her immunity to the hurt that came with being invisible.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, upon the crumpled white bedsheets, allowing the nurse to push her down into a lying position and lift her legs up onto the mattress. The nurse then walked out, leaving the tray of stale hospital food on the table and the lingering scent of lavender perfume and disinfectant. She turned her head to look back out the window at the snow-filled sky. The snow was white, so white. It reminded her, sickeningly, of the stark white hospital in which she lay.

The nurse, at least, didn't think she was special, not special enough to garner pity, and that relationship was fine with her. It was suffocating when people tried too hard to pity her, to pretend they didn't see her as anyone different than they were because they thought that was what she wanted. She felt like she'd drown in those fake smiles and kind words. And she did drown. Or, at least, you couldn't see her anymore, not in the waves that made up the great sea of people who pitied her. No, she'd already disappeared beyond the horizon, overshadowed by their fear of death.

It was a sea, all right. It was a sea, and she was one of the fish trying to break the surface, but ultimately succumbing, plunging back beneath the waves of expectations, of predisposed actions.

They thought she wanted to be treated like she wasn't dying. They thought the topic was delicate. They thought they could compensate for her imminent death with their kindness. They thought she didn't notice. They thought they were acting carefully. They told themselves that they cared.

Well, they were wrong. It was a sea, all right, and all they saw were the waves.

Jessica Zhu, age 14

Doppelgänger

It is frighteningly easy, she thinks, to change one's face. How different she seems in her own mirror when she smiles, grimaces, snarls at her reflection. How greatly the face changes when the clothes, the hair, the confidence that frames it change as well.

She reaches for one of the rainbow assortment of creams, neatly stacked along the vanity's edges. She wrinkles her nose in distaste, able to detect the cloyingly artificial fruit scent even without opening a jar. But the day has been a long one, and she can already feel foreign toxins and pollutants working their way into her pores, ruining the soft skin. Contaminating it.

Quickly, she grabs one of the less offensive jars and delicately applies cool white cream to her face. She smiles at the mirror when she is done; healthy, youthful skin stretches easily across her cheekbones. Perfection. She pinches each cheek lightly, savours the flow of hot blood through her veins.

The effect is immediate, and her eyes flicker disdainfully to the rows of blush and bronzer in front of her. She prefers not to use makeup; it seems embarrassing, like cheating at a children's game. Besides, she would rather not age this skin prematurely. So young, so soft, so many lovely years left in this face... No, better to use the masks she's collected to play her many parts, than to wear out just the one.

She can be anyone, with the right application. Her closet is stocked with good, sensible clothes that she hasn't gotten around to replacing just yet, and solid shoes with nary a heel among them. Adjustments will need to be made, naturally, especially if she plans to nest here for some time. But slowly, slowly. That's always the way. She must play it off as a change in taste, not a personality reversal.

If nothing else, the distastefully long skirts and heavy knit sweaters provide an ideal shelter for her most prized possessions. She can feel them, sitting at the back of the closet under lock and key in that sturdy, unassuming box. They call to her with shapeless, gaping mouths in a wordless chorus. She checks the locks on her bedroom door, in case the mother decides to check in. She returns to the closet and removes the box, carefully unlocking it with the worn, hard-hewn key slid under a pair of sturdy winter boots.

Empty of marrow now, its pores rasp beneath her touch. Ideally, an instrument as potent and ancient as this would hold a place of honour, but she digresses. Needs must.

She takes out her treasures one by one and lays them gently on the obnoxiously pink carpet. Some are dark, others light. Some flawless, other marked by scars and freckles, or splotches of acne threatening to burst forth. Admittedly, she's slightly less fond of those, but the anonymity that their typicality brings is invaluable.

"Dimples or no dimples?" she muses out loud. "Cleft chin or smooth?" Unable to decide, she turns back to her mirror and traces the line of her jaw until she feels the slightest seam, and digs her nails in. The skin makes a wet sound as she peels it from the muscle, but there is no blood. Her nerve endings twitch as cool air hits them. She stares at the red, faceless mess in the mirror as she sets down the little-girl face she stole months ago, resting it beside a grinning portrait of the girl and her happy family. Not so happy, or else completely oblivious.

But perhaps she is too harsh; they are, after all, at a great disadvantage. They know nothing of her, and she watched them for weeks before making her move when the daughter was home alone, sliding seamlessly into the family dynamic the moment the parents walked back into their house.

"Dimples," she says to the mirror. "Old enough, but not too old. I'll keep the eyes and the hair." She doesn't have the time or the patience to be replacing each follicle and fumbling blindly with a different set of eyes. Not here, in this stifling child's room. Her latest identity was an unrepentant homebody, forcing her into an endless cycle of school, library, home ever since she first wore it. By the gods, she needs some air.

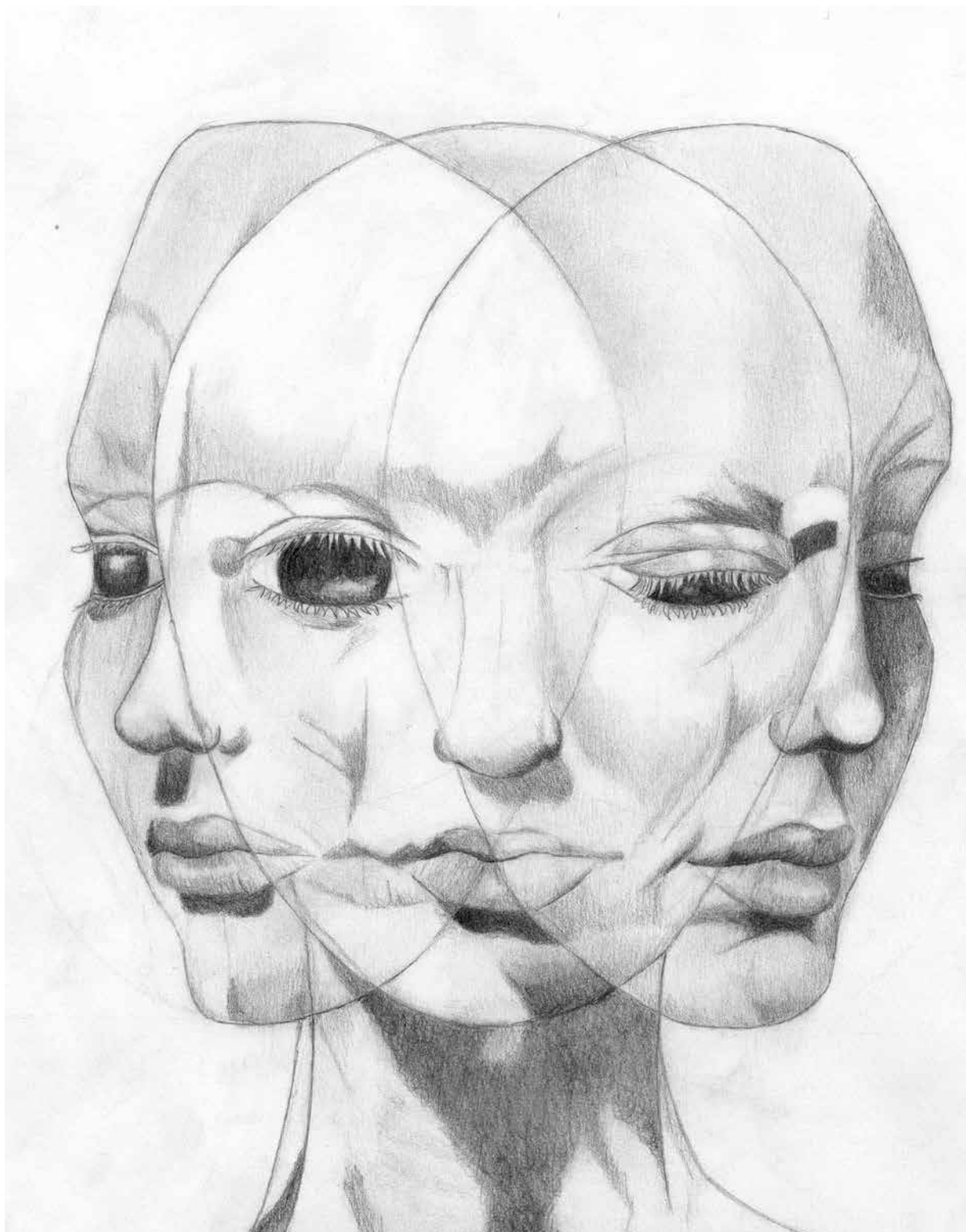
She picks up a treasure she hasn't used for a while; she got it off a waitress in Thunder Bay some twenty years ago, but the face hasn't aged past its eighteen years. It can pass for anything from sixteen to twenty-five, with the proper mannerisms. Particularly useful for nights on the town. It's not her oldest, not by any means, which is just as well. She despises putting on the hag faces. Pushing her hair out of the way, she squelches the skin into place. She blinks and winces as she tries to adapt to the new skin.

She flashes a winning smile at the mirror, and the skin holds without tightness. Good; she's had them rip on her before. She places the others back into the box, her most recent on top. She'll need to put it back by morning. The girl's parents are dull, but even they would catch on if their daughter came to breakfast wearing the wrong face.

Pressing the seams of the skin down one last time, she slides her window open and crawls out into the night air. The air feels so good on this skin. Perhaps she was remiss in boxing it for so long. Or perhaps she'll return with new treasures, and this one will be forgotten for another decade. There's no need to decide quite yet. The night is young; she has so many things to do, and so many pretty, pretty faces to see.

Leah Duarte, age 17

Contemplation



Michelle Ng, age 15

The End: A Meditation on Materialism and Mortality

This is a hospital, just not one you would ever want to be in. A tiny, filthy glass window separates the scrub room from the operating room. Inside the O.R., the surgical lights are dying, flickering in their journey to oblivion. Underneath the lights sits a kitchen table and a man on top. The doctors and nurses wear a ragtag assortment of colourful scrubs: pink, blue, grey, orange, whatever they could afford off of Taobao. There are no surgical gowns, only masks and gloves, and when the operations are over, the surgeons will have to scrub the stains out of their clothing with bleach.

The thin walls of the converted house do little to prevent noise from seeping between the rooms. The ghosts of donors rustle through the hallways. "Pity yourself," they whisper, "pity your living world. Do not pity the dying." Their cries are useless. They mean nothing.

The man on the table will be dead before morning.

His eyes are closed and his hands are folded over his chest. It looks like his life has already ended, and, in a sense, it has. His battered brown suitcase lies in the corner of the room. It arrived filled with junk, and it will leave filled with the equivalent of junk. This is the end.

At dusk yesterday, Lao Ban called me into his office.

"Qian Jie, I want you to operate on a young man at sundown tomorrow. You're our most experienced doctor and I need you to ensure the organ harvest's success."

"Yes, Lao Ban." My boss looked almost proper, dressed in his custom-made suit. Only the scar that ran across his face betrayed him. Lao Ban was the leader of the largest crime syndicate in the organ market. His life was in dealing with the business of death.

"You will meet the donor after dinner. His name is Chao Fu."

I was a doctor, once, but I no longer see myself that way. Formerly Doctor Qian, now Thief-Executioner Qian. I side with neither Good nor Evil, but with Money. My scalpel severs the connection between the church of our bodies and the state of our minds, destroying the sanctity of our beings. We have desecrated our craft. I know I should be ashamed, but I am too ill to feel it.

That night, I met Chao Fu. He hailed from a village along the river. There was no next of kin; no parents or wife or kids.

"Are you going to do it?" he asked Lao Ban once we had entered his room. His eyes shone with avarice.

"Yes."

"And you're paying the full three million yuan?"

I looked at Lao Ban in alarm. "Three million? Which organ are we taking?"

"Everything." The man met my gaze. "I am selling you everything."

I'm not the only ill one. Most of us are sick nowadays. We use banknotes as prayers and surround ourselves with shrines of possessions. We leave our false gods offerings of cash, and the only dreams we have are to shed our mortal status and ascend to the heavens through the accumulation of our worldly goods. Everybody, from the highest of the high to the lowest of the low practises the religion known as Wealth. Deep inside, we understand that our realities are just delusions, but we choose instead to listen to the charlatan beliefs promising happiness that accompanies extraordinary wealth. The true gods marvel at the extent of our societal illness. There is nobody left untouched.

"Don't you want to live?" I asked Chao Fu the next morning.

"The human life is made up of choices." He had the smile of a madman. "I want to be rich. Living comes secondary to that desire."

"What will you do with the money?"

"I will die with it."

"Once you are dead?"

"I will be cremated over a pyre of my wealth."

"What?"

"Don't be so surprised, Qian Jie. Some people think there is only oblivion after death. But I know the truth. My wealth will be meaningless here, but if I take my goods into the heavens, I will become a god. At my funeral, shark fin soup will be served and professional mourners will be hired. The villagers will wear white to my rites, and light incense, and see me in my finest blue suit. Then, I will be laid on a funeral pyre of all of my worldly goods. My house will be dismantled, my furniture sawed apart. My dog will be killed and placed to my right. I will have two suitcases to my left. The first will be filled with my possessions and the second with thirty thousand hundred-dollar bills. I will be cremated a rich man and I will become a god in the afterlife."

I was not fond of meeting with Lao Ban. However, this time, it was necessary. The sun was beginning to dip in the blood-streaked sky. We were near the end.

"Why are you letting Chao Fu do this?"

"It is not our role to judge the motivations of our donors. Business is business, no matter the consequences."

"Does life mean nothing to you?"

"No." Lao Ban turned to face the setting sun. "I value life. But life will never come close to money."

Why do we fool ourselves? Psychiatrists tell us that our obsession is fine, even healthy to have these desires. News anchors show us the winners of this game and make us believe that if they can do it, we can too. The wealthy appeal to our grandest aspirations and the homeless to our deepest fears. We are the only ones we are fooling.

This is the end.

"Are you operating?" a nurse asks me.

It isn't a decision anymore. There is no other choice. I know what I must do so I embrace the truth. I will never be strong enough to resist the pull of money.

"Yes."

Chelsea Cao, age 16

The Window

Tired after a night of gaming, I shut my computer, turned off my bedroom light, and went to draw the window shades. As I did so, I noticed a figure standing in the luminescence of a flickering street lamp. I was a little confused; it was, after all, two in the morning. As I turned to my bed, I saw his head tilt, looking in my window. Although something was wrong with the way he moved, I felt no shiver, nor menace as he faced toward me. He looked down and pulled what looked like a cellphone out of his pocket. I looked away, disinterested, then shut the blind and fell into a shallow sleep.

The next morning, I woke unreasonably early and rubbed my eyes with irritation. It was my own personal curse, once I woke, that I could not sleep, no matter how tired I felt. Cursing under my breath as I powered up my MacBook Pro and saw that it was 5:30 a.m., I idly glanced out the window, as my favourite game loaded. I met the eyes of the same stranger. I shook my head in surprise. He looked down at his phone and a minute later I heard a beeping from the corner of my room. I opened my phone to find a message from private caller.

"Check your messages."

I sighed. Truth be told, I was sick of my brother and his lame pranks. I opened messages and found three messages. The first read: "Check one." The second read: "Check two." The third read: "Surprise."

I sighed. Random nonsense. I went outside into the cold to get some firewood, and collect the chicken eggs, my chores. My parents wanted to "get back to their roots" and embraced the burgeoning organic movement. Anyways, it made for good eggs in the morning and I didn't have to work much, so I didn't mind. I opened the shed and grabbed three good-sized pieces of wood. I walked into the chicken coop and found the chickens all unbelievably quiet. I found that strange, as they usually made an unreasonable ruckus in the morning. I walked into the coop to find it completely empty. I was surprised. I shook my head and left, deciding to ask my parents if they had sold the chickens. As I closed the door, I noticed a '1' scrawled on the door. The message flashed into my mind. "Check one."

I walked back toward the house, fuming at my brother. He seriously scared me this time, and I would give him his due. I stomped up the stairs, and as I opened my brother's door, I saw a '2' on it. I shook my head, disgusted. He wasn't fooling anybody. I opened his door and he was not in his bed. Figuring he was just hiding, I checked his closet and everything. He was nowhere to be seen. I was beginning to worry. I ran to my parents' room to tell them. I stopped midway in the hall. A number three was on their door. I had but one thought. Please be there, please be there, please be there. I opened their door and was met by nothing but the sound of my parents snoring. I almost cried with relief. This was just a prank by my brother, I was sure now. I felt a tap on my shoulder and spun around. There was nobody there. I turned back to look at my parents once more before giving chase to my brother. But they had disappeared, and as I stood there dumbfounded, there was a whisper in my ear, "Surprised?"

Tristan Vena, age 13

young voices 2017

magazine of teen writing and visual art

Call for submissions

GUIDELINES

Express yourself!

1. Submit art, photos, comics, stories, poems and other creative writing.
2. Toronto Public Library has one-time print and electronic rights to all work, as well as the right to excerpt from the work, both online and in print, for purposes of promotion.
3. Written submissions will be selected from each of the following age categories:
12–14; 15–16; 17–19.
4. Related pieces (i.e. artwork submitted in conjunction with writing) may not be considered together.

WHO CAN SUBMIT

Teens 12–19 years who live, work or go to school in Toronto.

WHAT CAN BE SUBMITTED

You can submit two pieces each year:

- One piece of writing per person
- One visual piece per person, either a piece of artwork OR a photograph OR one single-page comic

Written Work: poems, stories, rants, reviews...

- 1,000 words maximum
- Typed entries preferred, but not required

Artwork:

- 8 ½" x 11" preferred
- Black and white artwork only

Photography & Digital Art:

- High resolution (300 dpi) for electronic submissions, minimum 2400 pixels wide and maximum 3000 pixels high
- Black and white only

Comics:

- 8 ½" x 11", one page maximum

HOW TO SUBMIT

In a Toronto Public Library branch

- FULLY complete the submission form
- Attach the form to your work
- Drop your work off at any Toronto Public Library branch
- For hand drawn artwork and comics dropped off at library branches, originals are preferred, but if you submit a copy **you will be required to submit the original should your work be selected for publication**

Online submissions

- Submit work online using the submission form at tpl.ca/youngvoices

Artwork & Comics

- **You will be required to submit your original hand drawn artwork OR comics should your work be selected for publication**

Photography & Digital Art:

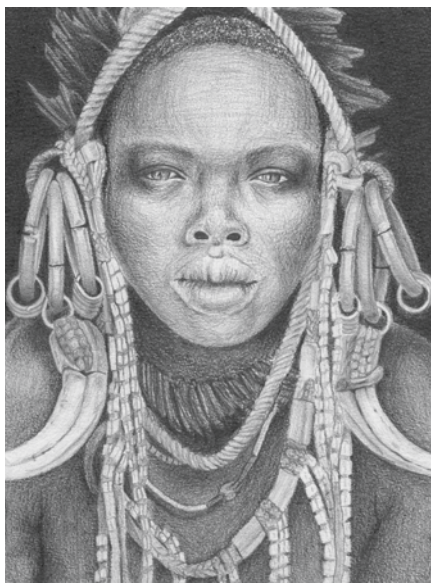
- Submit high resolution (300 dpi) black and white photographs, minimum 2400 pixels wide and maximum 3000 pixels high

SELECTION TIMELINES

Submission deadline:

Tuesday, April 4, 2017

- Editorial teams meet to make selections during spring 2017
- Contributors selected to be published will be contacted during June 2017
- Only those with work to be published will be contacted
- *Young Voices* magazine is published once every year in October
- Questions? Contact Ken Sparling ksparling@torontopubliclibrary.ca



Identity

Jane Li, age 16

YOUNG VOICES 2017 Submission Form

Please fill out this form fully and attach it to your submission.

Submissions with incomplete forms may not be considered for publication.

Submission Deadline: Tuesday, April 4, 2017

Last name _____

First name(s) _____

Address _____

Postal code _____

Email _____ Phone number _____

Age _____ ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other

Today's date _____

Title of your submission _____

Genre of submission:

☐ Poem ☐ Fiction ☐ Rant ☐ Review ☐ Art ☐ Photograph ☐ Comics

☐ Other (please specify what type of work you are submitting) _____

Name of library branch where you submitted _____

I heard about *Young Voices*:

☐ At the library ☐ From friends ☐ At school ☐ At a shelter ☐ Online

☐ Other (please say where) _____

tpl.ca/youngvoices





Flowers for Mom

Teresa Han, age 18



The Stone Age

Cameron Bartlett, age 13

The Young Voices program, including the publication of *Young Voices* magazine, is supported through the generosity of the Daniels brothers in honour of their mother, Norine Rose, through the Toronto Public Library Foundation.

torontopubliclibrary.ca