

TRIANGLE

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NEHS Triangle No. 3

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FOREWORD

This year's National English Honor Society *Triangle* celebrates the creativity, imagination, and artistic voices of student members from around the world. This third volume of the *Triangle*, named in recognition of the shape's symbolism of strength, connection, and balance, represents our vibrant, worldwide community. Inspired by existing English Honor Society publications like Sigma Tau Delta's *Rectangle*, the NEHS *Triangle* affirms the enduring power of student writing and the limitless possibilities of young people's creative expression.

This volume showcases the breadth of our students' creative talents through poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and drama. Each piece offers a unique perspective on the human experience, inviting readers to encounter new voices, unfamiliar worlds, and personal reflections. Together, these pieces reveal that creative writing is more than an artistic endeavor: it is a means of exploring identity, building empathy, preserving memory, and imagining new possibilities.

With NEHS chapters active in more than 38 countries and territories, our community is enriched by the extraordinary diversity of cultures, languages, and lived experiences within it. The writing featured in this year's *Triangle* reflects that global community, revealing how storytelling transcends borders while honoring the distinct traditions and perspectives that shape each author's voice. Whether drawing from personal experience, historical events, fantasy, or everyday life, our writers remind us that great literature begins with the courage to tell a story.

The *Triangle* stands as a celebration of the next generation of writers. Thanks to the dedication of Chapter Advisors and the creativity of NEHS student members, the English language arts remain a vibrant force in classrooms, libraries, and communities around the world. As long as our members continue to write with honesty, imagination, and compassion, the future of literature is not only secure—it is extraordinarily bright.



Christopher Lockwood
Director of the National English Honor Society

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National English Honor Society extends its sincere gratitude to everyone who played a role in bringing this third edition of the *Triangle* to life.

We begin by recognizing our exceptional NEHS student members. Their thoughtful contributions serve as an invitation for us all to explore new perspectives through reading.

We are equally grateful to our devoted Chapter Advisors, whose guidance and encouragement have nurtured our students' creative journeys. Their unwavering support and passion for the teaching of creative writing has been instrumental in shaping the content and quality of this journal.

A special note of appreciation goes to Katie Mudd, our Director of Marketing and Communications, who served as editor for this edition. Her keen editorial insight and attention to detail have ensured that this publication reflects the high standards of NEHS.

Finally, we thank our entire international NEHS community. Your continued dedication, creativity, and belief in the transformative power of literature have made this publication possible. Thank you for your contributions and your commitment to our shared mission.

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Creative Nonfiction

Redefining a Role Model

by Charlotte Coggshall

Rumson Fair Haven Regional High School, New Jersey

It's a part of human nature to mimic behaviors that increase survival. In the neolithic period, this started as copying the hunting strategies that caught the most prey and somehow along the way it evolved into replicating public figures' trendy outfits on social media. Either way, role models have been an ingrained aspect of society from the very beginning.

Personally, I never struggled to identify my role models growing up.

If the question of "who do you look up to?" was ever presented, I always had an ever-evolving list in my mind. This included world renowned soccer players, such as Alex Morgan, as well as my cool babysitters or camp counselors with their driver's license and unrestricted access to Snapchat.

One characteristic of all my countless role models was their age in comparison to mine.

When the term "role model" is discussed, most people automatically imagine older figures with wisdom that accompanies their age. I was engulfed by this classification and for most of my life I believed that a role model needed to be someone you could look up to, not just metaphorically, but also in age. However, as I got older this definition has evolved so drastically that now, when considering the people in my life, the most inspirational one stands 4 inches shorter and 2 years younger than I do.

At first, it may be hard to picture my younger sister Emmy, with her chunky pink glasses and adorably freckled cheeks as an empowering role model. Especially not to the extent that she would be the person to shift my view of role models entirely.

However, to understand her qualifications, it's important to decide what defines the job. When considering the traits that should constitute a role model, a few phrases stick out: bravery, authenticity, and the ability to inspire.

At only a few weeks old, Emmy was diagnosed with a rare intellectual and developmental disability called Williams Syndrome. From that moment on, seeds of bravery and resilience

were planted. Those seeds were watered every surgery, every monthly blood draw, every recurring ultrasound, and throughout the countless other times she was expected to break down in defeat. However, instead, she took advantage of the copious amounts of time she spent in doctors' offices and her situation fueled her interest in the medical field. She built a tolerance to pain that is unfathomable. She insists on looking every time her blood is drawn and begs surgeons to explain to her each procedure, sparing no gory details. She shows her surgical scars to others with pride as if they are rare collectables desired by all. Somehow, Emmy learned to view medical complications as opportunities to feed her passion, and this interest has built her identity.

Watching my younger sister have a fearlessness that was foreign to me is what first sparked my admiration. At age five, I witnessed Emmy re-learn to walk after spending months in a hospital bed post-heart-surgery. I was in awe of the courage that she exuded and wondered if I could ever learn to harness the same bravery. From then on, my three-year-old sister inspired me to break out of my comfort zone and pretend to be as brave as she was.

Still, though, despite my newfound adulation for my sister, it wasn't enough to convince me she could replace Simeone Biles and her myriad of Olympic medals as my next role model.

But my mindset soon shifted as both of us got older and her authenticity became increasingly more evident.

Specifically, seeing the bold outfits she chose, her striking makeup looks of red lipstick and blue eyeshadow (or vice versa), and especially her loyalty to bracelet making (so much so that beads had booted out any other wishlist contenders since elementary school) all revealed not only her comfort with herself, but also her unwillingness to fit in.

Emmy had always cycled through friends but, notably, entering middle school proved rough on her self-esteem. However, her authenticity never wavered, and she still showed up every day rocking the same rainbow rolling backpack and pink sparkly mittens, even during the summer months.

I recognized her authenticity when the wheels truly started to turn. Suddenly, the title of role model didn't seem as cut and dry as it once did. I decided that amazingly my younger sister could share the title of my personal role model with icons such as Michelle Obama and Elle Woods.

But so far, as spectacular as she had proven to be, her qualifications weren't enough to solidify herself as my one and only role model. I was simply too dedicated to owning a mental collage composed of hundreds of equally spectacular women I decided to look up to.

However, Emmy's achievement of the final qualification, the ability to inspire proved both more complex as well as more monumental than the others.

Throughout my life Emmy had always "inspired" in extravagant ways. For example, she was a youth heart ambassador at her school in which she informed peers about overlooked heart conditions through her own experience. Additionally, she was starring in an upcoming short film about Williams Syndrome which sought to bring awareness to the unjust treatment of people with disabilities. She also built relationships with younger girls with disabilities and imparted her wisdom by sharing her personal experiences with bullying and other obstacles that affected her.

But beyond the remarkable, Emmy has managed to "inspire" by simply being herself. She has the purest heart and unwavering kindness. She is unafraid to offer hugs and strike up lively conversations with complete strangers. Most importantly, Emmy is never not smiling.

Witnessing this behavior daily and being a frequent recipient of her resolute kindness has only further cemented her as someone I look up to indefinitely.

But, earning the title of my singular role model was competitive and I was still unsure as to whether I was ready to abandon the list I cherished deeply.

Finally though, one conversation changed my perspective on this dilemma entirely.

This conversation occurred last month when I visited my old elementary school. I had previously reached out to the new principal asking to conduct a presentation on Disability Awareness and she had invited me to meet in person to discuss the details.

When I arrived I was immediately greeted by a familiar phrase, "You're Emmy's Sister!"

I instinctively smiled and nodded in response. This was a title I was both used to and proud of.

She followed up with, "After the one and only time I met your sister, I can confidently say

that everyone should be more like Emmy.” At that moment, it finally all clicked into place.

I was still allowed to have other women that inspire me, the same way that Emmy inspires other women. However, when choosing my own personal role model, I wanted someone I saw first-hand overcome and embrace the obstacles they encountered. I wanted this person to have the ability to impart and pass on this wisdom so that I could learn from it and follow in their footsteps. And for me, this wasn't someone with 50 more years of experience, this was 14-year-old Emmy.

Ultimately, I look up to my sister not because of her circumstance or her age, but because of her authenticity and desire to stand out. I idolize her resilience and strength that somehow accompanies the unwavering compassion and empathy that most adults lack. Each of these qualities explain why every time I see my beaming younger sister, I can't help but overflow with pride and admiration. I am endlessly lucky to have a sister who has redefined what it truly means to be my role model.

Beyond the Familiar

by Harsimran Rai

Live Oak High School, California

I used to think comfort was the same as safety.

It meant being in spaces where I knew exactly who I was supposed to be: a student, athlete, and older sister. It meant adjusting to routines that seemed predictable and controlled. I thought growth would be organic and almost natural to me. If I just worked enough and stayed consistent, it would all work out.

I was wrong.

When I developed Punjabi Night it all changed.

Initially, it sounded easy enough: plan a celebration to celebrate culture and unite people. I envisioned decorations, music, and a room packed with energy and pride. But when I started working on the plans, it didn't take long for me to realize that I was getting into something much larger than anything I had ever attempted or even planned to do before. I wasn't simply planning an event; I was entering into leadership and taking on responsibility at the same time.

Nothing felt familiar anymore. I felt lost.

Almost instantly, I ran into obstacles I hadn't anticipated. The dates had to be changed repeatedly, requiring me to re-do plans I believed were finalized. Venues that appeared set suddenly vanished. Every time I thought I had everything all worked out, something new had changed. It felt like a reboot that just kept going.

At first, it was frustrating.

I remember wondering if I had overextended myself. Maybe it would've been easier to stay in the lane of what I already knew, work on school, sports, and responsibilities that were familiar and manageable for me. But stepping outside of that comfort zone was intimidating and there were times when walking away felt like an easier route.

But this time, for the first time, I didn't step away. Instead, I adapted and accepted what I had signed up for.

I began to reach out, writing emails, making phone calls, asking questions even when I didn't fully know what I was doing. I learned to speak professionally and stand by my ideas. I started realizing it's not leadership if you have everything figured out in advance. It's about addressing challenges, finding new paths and going ahead even through uncertainty.

Stepping into the unknown required releasing control.

At the same time, this project forced me to reconnect with a part of myself that for some time, I hadn't always made public about my culture. My experience of being Punjabi infused my life growing up, but it was not necessarily something I felt comfortable sharing in school environments. That was something personal, something that didn't leave my family and community.

Punjabi Night changed that.

For us, it became something more than a fun little event. It was a way to insert my culture into a space where it hadn't always been present. It meant sharing traditions and music and experiences that influenced me. It meant giving other people the opportunity to learn about and engage with something that is meaningful to me.

That was scary in another way.

It required vulnerability.

The fear of putting something personal out into the public is quite significant. I was nervous about how it would be received, if people would get it or if it would live up to expectations. But part of me was also proud. Blackness came with a history but it didn't come with all the same cultural data as whiteness, but over time I realized there wasn't any reason to be shy about sharing my culture—it was actually something to celebrate.

Through this process, I started to see changes not just in the project but within myself, too.

I gained more confidence in the security of my decision-making. I stopped waiting for the perfect moment to do stuff. I learned to have faith that no matter what happened, I would find

a way to make things work. The uncertainty that had once frightened me slowly but surely became something I could cope with.

There were moments when I had questioned whether all of my effort was even worth it, when it felt easier to step back into what was familiar instead of moving forward. Each time I considered stopping, I reminded myself why I began this project in the first place. Punjabi Night was more than just an event; it was a representation of my entire identity and a chance to create something that is meaningful to others.

I began to understand that discomfort is not just a sign that I am doing something wrong, but rather it was a sign that I am constantly growing. The uncertainty that once made me hesitant slowly became something I could embrace since I knew that pushing through was shaping me into a stronger person.

But growing wasn't easy and it didn't go down smoothly.

Every hurdle pushed me to consider new ways of thinking. Every challenge forced me to rise up in new ways I hadn't. I realized setbacks aren't failure, but that they are all a part of the process of building something meaningful.

The thing that struck me most was how much my outlook on it changed.

I've always viewed challenges as obstacles in my way that will slow me down or prevent me from being successful. Now I view them as growth opportunities. With each problem, I had to be more resilient, to be more adaptable, to be more confident in my ability to lead.

Exploring the unknown doesn't mean abandoning all that you know.

It's about being more of who you are.

Punjabi Night is also a work in progress. There are details that still need to be worked out and problems that need to be addressed and uncertainty still to come. But I don't view those things as obstacles anymore. I consider them to be part of something worthwhile, a thing that takes work, strength and bravery.

And that, for the first time, excites me. Because stepping outside what is familiar didn't cause me to lose myself it helped me find a stronger version of who I always was.

Drama

The Great Decision

by Olivia Erspamer

Ursuline Academy New Orleans, Louisiana

Scene 1

(The stage is dark. A single overhead spotlight shines on an AIDE)

AIDE: What you're about to see is a dramatized portrayal of the landmark Supreme Court case Marbury vs. Madison, establishing judicial review and giving the Court equal standing among the three branches. Some of this will be real things said while the rest is more . . . creatively interpreted.

(AIDE crosses to JOHN ADAMS to start the show)

AIDE: You had a good run Mr. President, is there anything you want to do in the last moments of your administration?

ADAMS: Yes! Hear me out, but . . . I have some guys I want appointed to the bench.

AIDE: The Supreme Court bench?

ADAMS: Amongst others

AIDE: But . . . don't they have to be confirmed by the Senate?

ADAMS: Yeah, but it'll work.

(ADAMS gestures for AIDE to leave. Light out as another overhead spotlight shines on the other side of the stage, illuminating THE SENATE)

AIDE *(running over)*: Mr. Senator! I have some appointments for you!

SENATE: The Courts?

AIDE: Yes!

SENATE: Approved!

AIDE (*slightly surprised*): Oh . . . Okay!

(Light out as the AIDE runs off)

Scene 2

(Lights up. 5 MEN stand, facing away from the audience, in a spaced out row as the AIDE runs on and they turn around as he gives each of them their commission. A bell tolls midnight just before he reaches the last man, WILLIAM MARBURY. Lights out)

Scene 3

(Lights on as JOHN ADAMS and THOMAS JEFFERSON, accompanied by JAMES MADISON, meet in the middle of the stage)

ADAMS: Jefferson.

JEFFERSON: Adams.

ADAMS: Good luck.

JEFFERSON: Thank you. You, too.

(Awkward silence. AIDE runs in and hands ADAMS the last commission)

ADAMS: Oh, yeah. Can you guys deliver this last commission? We ran out of time.

JEFFERSON: To whom?

ADAMS: A one William Marbury, the Maryland businessman.

JEFFERSON: Sure . . .

(JEFFERSON hands the commission to MADISON while the two exchange a look).

(JEFFERSON hastily leads ADAMS out before turning to MADISON, who is looking around, slightly awkwardly)

JEFFERSON *(relieved)*: Finally.

MADISON: We did it.

JEFFERSON: Haha!

MADISON: So . . . should I go give this to Marbury?

JEFFERSON: What? No, of course not.

MADISON: I thought that—

JEFFERSON: Who's in charge now?

MADISON: . . . You are

JEFFERSON: That's right, and as long as I'm in charge, Marbury is not getting this commission.

MADISON *(skeptical)*: Alright

(They move to start preparing and lights fade out)

Scene 4

(Lights up on Madison's office with MADISON at a desk. A knock is heard on the door and as MADISON moves to open the door, WILLIAM MARBURY bursts through the door)

MARBURY: Where's my commission?

MADISON: What?

MARBURY: WHERE'S MY COMMISSION?

MADISON: Mr. Marbury—

MARBURY: I WAS TOLD I WAS GETTING A COMMISSION TO BE A JUSTICE OF THE PEACE IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA!

MADISON: Mr. Marbury be reasonable! That was an underhanded political maneuver by that shrewd Adams!

MARBURY: I don't care about your darned objections, I want my commission.

MADISON: I'm sorry, but I can't give it to you.

MARBURY: Then I'll see you in court.

(MARBURY leaves, slamming the door. Lights out)

Scene 5

(Lights up on a courtroom with MARBURY and his lawyer CHARLES LEE on one side and MADISON and his lawyer LEVI LINCOLN on the other. MARBURY is irritated and angry and MADISON looks unimpressed and vaguely uncomfortable.)

BAILIFF: All rise for the honorable court: Bushrod Washington, William Paterson, Ol' Bacon F—sorry, Samuel Chase, and Chief Justice John Marshall.

(JUSTICES file into the bench)

MARSHALL: You may be seated.

(All sit)

Alright, time for some historically significant judicial decisions.

(MARSHALL gestures to LEE, who stands and moves to walk around)

LEE: Your honor, William Marbury has been appointed to be a justice in Washington County. His presidential commissions never had been delivered, and he had not been permitted to take office. It was thought done once it was approved by the Senate, signed and sealed by the President, and delivered for entry to the Secretary of State. Delivery was simply a formality. *(beat)*

The executive branch had acted illegally in blocking this ascension, and the court should require Secretary Madison give him his position. This was a violation of the law, common courtesy, and the Constitution of our good country! *(going back to his seat)* Thank you.

(JUSTICES nod slightly. PATERSON gestures to LINCOLN.)

LINCOLN *(standing)*: Mr. Chief Justice, Gentlemen of the Court, a president can only execute his power during his time in office. Mr. Adams is no longer the president, so he no longer has the power to appoint judges in this Federalist scheme to pack the courts. *(sits down)* Thank you.

(After a beat, LEE stands and moves to the center)

LEE: I call to the stand Levi Lincoln.

(LINCOLN stands and walks to the stand. BAILIFF stands and meets him there to swear him in on a book)

BAILIFF: Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

LINCOLN: I do.

LEE: Mr. Lincoln—

LINCOLN *(interrupting, slightly smug)*: Wait, before we start, I'm just letting you know I'm not gonna answer any of your questions unless I have them in writing and time to look over them.

(JUSTICES quickly whisper to each other. One gesticulates wildly for a moment.)

MARSHALL: Yeah okay. Lee, give him the questions *(LEE does, very willingly)*. Lincoln,

take the night and get back to us tomorrow. And when we return gentlemen, let's keep it . . . productive.

(LINCOLN moves to exit as others stand. Lights out briefly. Music briefly plays.)

Scene 6

(Lights up with all back and LINCOLN on the stand with LEE questioning him.)

LEE: —Thank you, you've been very cooperative. One last question: What had been done with the commissions?

LINCOLN *(somewhat ramblingly)*: Yeah, so, um . . . I don't know that they ever came into Mr. Madison's possession or if they were in the office when he took it.

LEE: Sorry?

LINCOLN *(building up)*: I can't testify about what I don't know and you can't make me incriminate myself. You want to talk about rights, I have the 5th amendment.

LEE *(thrown off)*: Wait, what?

LINCOLN *(standing)*: Yeah, I think we're done here.

LEE: Okay . . .

(LINCOLN is already going back to his seat)

LEE: Alright, so . . . okay.

(having refound his footing and formal rhythm) Gentlemen of the Court, Mr. Madison is a high officer, but he is not above the law. It is not consistent with the policy of our political institutions that any ministerial office having public duties to perform, should be above the compulsions of the law in the exercise of those duties, and the Court is more than able to issue a writ of mandamus to him, it is compelled to. *(Beat. MARBURY looks smug.)*

This case may seem trivial at first view, but it is important in principle and, if the applicant makes a proper case, the courts are bound to grant it. They can refuse justice to no man.
(*returning to his seat*) Thank you.

(*As LINCOLN stands, LEE tries to have a moment with MARBURY, who is still in a mood and ignores LEE.*)

LINCOLN: I received no instructions to be here, so . . . (*Starts to sit again when MADISON stands and whispers something to him*) Okay, one last comment, Mr. Madison would like to remind the court that his name is spelled M-A-D-I-S-O-N, one “D.” There’s been some confusion about that in the past. (*returns to sitting*). Thank you.

MARSHALL (*standing*): We’re going to deliberate; don’t go too far.

(*JUSTICES stand and walk off stage in a stately fashion. Snippets of the deliberation [ad-lib] can occasionally be heard. LINCOLN and MADISON are whispering to each other. LEE vaguely paces.*)

BAILIFF: All rise!

(*JUSTICES return, again in a stately manner, to the bench. All sit but MARSHALL.*)

MARSHALL: We have made a decision. To keep this short, the full version will be available later.

(*more formally*) Since Mr. Marbury’s commission was signed by the President and sealed by the Secretary of State, he was appointed, and as the law creating the office gave the officer a right to hold for five years independent of the Executive, the appointment was not revocable, but vested in the officer’s legal rights, which are protected by the laws of his country. (*Pause to make sure everyone is following. They mostly are, though curious as to where this is going to go. MARBURY in particular looks smug.*)

Because he has that right and that right was violated, he is afforded a remedy by the law. The very essence of civil liberty is in the right of every individual to claim the protection of the law whenever he receives an injury. This, then, is a plain case of mandamus, either to deliver the commission or a copy of it from the record, and it only remains to be inquired: whether it can issue from this court. (*Beat. MARBURY looks over to MADISON.*)

It cannot. (*Surprised looks from the prosecution and defense. MARSHALL's rhythm is now building.*) The legislation Congress passed placing the issue under our jurisdiction was in direct contradiction to the Constitution, which must remain the supreme law of the land. The particular phraseology of the Constitution of the United States confirms and strengthens the principle that a law repugnant to the Constitution is void, and the courts, as well as other departments, are bound by that instrument. The rule must be discharged. Thus, as this legislative act is contrary to the Constitution, it is not law and this court cannot issue the writ. (*beat*)

(*back to loose*) Thank you!

(*JUSTICES stand and turn to leave*)

LINCOLN (*standing*): Wait! What? So he has a right to the commission but you can't make us give it to him? Who won?

MARSHALL: I suppose I did.

LEE: No national court has ever overturned legislation at this level before. Is that even . . . allowed?

MARSHALL: Well, yes.

(*Lights out*)

Fiction

The Shop Where Words are Weighed

by Angela Rodriguez

Jose Marti STEM Academy, New Jersey

The shop would only show up when someone couldn't recall a word. Little words like "and," "the," "but" weren't the ones that did it, because they disappeared into silence without anyone noticing. This shop only became visible for words that were important—words that stuck at the edge of your thinking, full of significance and determined not to be lost.

And that's how Lian discovered it.

She was in the kitchen with her mother, a thick smell of ginger and burnt rice in the air, and between them stretched a silence that was far too delicate to disturb. "I just feel . . ." Lian started.

She squeezed the countertop. "I feel—" and then stopped. The word was right there; she could almost feel it pushing to be said, demanding attention. But as she tried to grab it, it vanished, and all that was left was a blank spot where something crucial had been.

"You feel what?" her mother asked, with a furrowed brow.

"I don't know," Lian replied, much more softly. "I forgot."

But she hadn't forgotten, exactly. The word had gone from her.

And at that moment she saw the door. It was at the hallway's end, though there had never been one there before—high and thin and painted a dark red that seemed to soak up all the light around it. A wooden sign, with each letter a little off, hung on the door's handle:

WORDS BOUGHT AND SOLD

"Did we always have a door there?" Lian asked.

Her mother didn't look at her. "What door?"

When Lian looked at the hallway once more, the door was gone.

The next day, that absence bothered her.

In English class, her teacher called on her to interpret a poem. Lian had a perfect grasp of it—the tension hidden beneath the lines, the sorrow that quietly enveloped each image. She could see the exact words she would use. But when she actually spoke, the language deserted her.

“It’s like . . . the speaker is trying to . . .” She paused.

Trying to what?

The meaning was still there, as bright and clear as ever, but the words had dissolved before she could shape them. It felt like standing on the brink of something vast and being unable to step forward.

“I can’t find the word,” she admitted.

Laughter rippled across the room.

“Then describe it,” her teacher said gently.

Lian tried. She circled the idea, reaching for something precise and solid—but every sentence collapsed under its own weight.

“I had it,” she said. “It was right there.”

But it wasn’t anymore.

That afternoon, the door returned.

This time, Lian opened it.

The shop stretched impossibly far, its shelves rising into shadows. Glass jars lined every surface, each one holding something that flickered, shifted, or pulsed faintly with life.

Words.

She understood without being told.

A bell chimed softly as she stepped inside.

“Welcome,” said the shopkeeper.

Their voices seemed layered, as if more than one person spoke at once. Their form blurred at the edges, never fully still.

“What have you lost?” they asked.

“A word,” Lian said.

“Of course,” they replied. “People only come here when something essential is missing.”

They gestured toward the shelves. “Find what calls to you.”

Lian walked slowly past the jars. Each one hummed faintly, as if aware of her presence.

When she passed “regret,” her chest tightened. When she brushed against “belonging,” something inside her ached.

Then she saw it.

A small jar, its light flickering in a fitful pattern.

The moment her fingers touched the glass, the feeling returned—sharp, undeniable. It was more than a word. It was the shape of something she had been trying to say for years.

“Is this mine?” she whispered.

“If it calls to you,” the shopkeeper said, appearing beside her, “then it remembers you.”

“Can I take it back?”

The shopkeeper smiled faintly. “Nothing here is taken. Everything is exchanged.”

“With what?”

“With words.”

At first, the trade felt harmless.

Lian offered up small, unused words—ones that had gathered dust in the corners of her vocabulary. In return, she reclaimed what she had lost. Her thoughts sharpened. Her voice grew clearer, more certain.

She began to speak without hesitation.

At school, her answers came easily. At home, she found ways to explain herself that she never had before.

For the first time, she felt understood.

But the shop did not remain the same.

The shelves shifted. The jars rearranged themselves. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, something began to disappear.

One evening, Lian reached for a word she knew she had once carried with ease.

It was gone.

“Where did it go?” she asked.

“Someone else needed it,” the shopkeeper said.

“But it was mine.”

The shopkeeper tilted their head. “Words are never owned. They are only held—for a time.”

The loss came quietly.

At first, it was hesitation—moments where familiar phrases felt just out of reach. Then it deepened.

Her mother spoke to her one night, with a soft, familiar voice.

Lian stared back.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

Her mother repeated herself, slower this time.

The sounds were recognizable, but their meaning slipped past her, like something she could almost grasp but not quite hold.

“You used to know this,” her mother said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Lian felt something inside her fracture.

Because she did know.

Or at least, she had.

She returned to the shop the next day, breath unsteady.

“I want them back,” she said.

“That is not how this works,” the shopkeeper replied.

“You took them.”

“You traded them.”

“I didn’t know what I was giving up.”

The shopkeeper’s expression did not change. “Most people don’t.”

Lian’s hands trembled. “Please. I need those words.”

The shopkeeper studied her, then turned.

“Follow me.”

A weathered old balance scale sat in the back room, the metal showing considerable age and wear.

“Every word has a weight,” the shopkeeper said. “Some more than others.”

Lian stepped closer. “What do I have left to give?”

The shopkeeper did not answer.

She didn’t need them to.

The words she wanted back were not small. They held childhood memories, the sound of her mother calling her from another room, the language that had once felt effortless and whole.

There was only one thing heavy enough to match them.

That night, Lian stood in the kitchen again.

The same space. The same silence.

But this time, she did not reach for the easy words.

“I need to say something,” she started.

Her voice was unsteady.

She tore through the silence and sought out the language she had lost. It came broken and unfocused. The sounds were foreign in her mouth.

But she would not be silenced.

The words came unevenly, with an uncooperative spirit. Imperfect. Halting.

But they were, all of them, true.

Her mother stared at her, surprise flickering into something deeper.

Then, slowly, she stepped forward and pulled Lian into an embrace.

Lian closed her eyes.

The words had not returned completely.

But something else had.

The next day, the door was gone.

The hallway was plain again, as if nothing had ever been there.

Lian stood in front of the empty wall for a long time.

She tested her voice, speaking softly, searching for what remained.

Some words were still missing.

Perhaps they always would be.

But the ones that stayed felt heavier now. More deliberate. Chosen, not borrowed.

And for the first time, that felt like enough.

Because she understood something she hadn't before:

Fluency is not the same as truth.

And the words that matter most are not the ones that come easily—but the ones we fight to keep.

Yes, We Know

by Axl Domenech Gonzalez
PrepaTec Eugenio Garza Sada, Mexico

It began like any other day. I was watching my favorite football team play an important game. I had just sat down on the couch, with the lukewarm snacks and drinks Mom had left. On the television screen, the players stretched and warmed up, exchanging intense looks as they waited for the kickoff. The roar of the stadium and the commentator's confident voice on the TV filled the room. It was familiar, calming proof that nothing was out of place. My parents sat alongside me, like always, and from that moment onward, the world shrank to the TV in front of us.

By the end, the game had become a back-and-forth shootout. At the bottom of the screen, a brief news flash appeared. I didn't read it, I never did. It always had the same words, like: operative, incident, and authorities. They came and went like any advertisement. "What was that?" my mom asked. "The usual," Dad said dismissively.

Minutes later, the decisive kick sailed cleanly through the goal posts. It was good. The three of us cheered, the neighbors cheered, everyone did. I smiled. The world felt complete again, I sank back into the couch, satisfied. There was always something to watch.

The next day, nobody spoke about the match at school, which struck me as strange. Mondays were always the same: statistics, big plays, arguments that lasted until the final bell. Not that day. I entered the classroom and sat in the same cold seat as always, I took out my notebook, opened it to the correct page, and placed my pencil on the edge of the table. Everything was where it should be. Caleb wasn't.

I figured he was late, he often slept through his alarm or missed the bus. He would barge into class apologizing, get scolded, nod, and drop into the seat beside me. Five minutes passed, then ten. The class began, and the teacher never addressed the empty seat, never said his name. At recess, I searched for him, but he was nowhere. I even asked some of his friends nearby. "He must be sick," they said. I nodded.

After the last bell, I rode the bus home. As I passed Caleb's house, I saw a police cruiser parked out front. I didn't dwell on it.

At home, my mom was in the kitchen. “How was school?” she asked. “Good,” I said. “But Caleb didn’t come today,” I added. “It happens,” she replied. “Don’t worry.”

That night, I checked my phone. No new messages. I opened my chat with Caleb. The last text was mine, from the night before, about the match. Delivered. I turned off the phone.

The next day, his seat was still empty, and no one mentioned his name again. I finally asked my elderly teacher, Mr. Daniels. “It’s best not to worry about it,” he said quickly. “Focus on yourself.”

At dinner, I brought it up again. My parents exchanged a glance. “Again?” my father asked. “We told you to leave it,” my mom added. “If you continue,” my father said, “you’ll draw attention to yourself.”

It didn’t sound like a threat, more like a warning.

I went to school the next day, thinking about what my dad had said. During recess, I was called to the principal’s office, with no explanation. When I went in, Principal Delgado sat behind his desk. “Hello, Thomas, take a seat,” he said. I did. “We’ve received word that you’ve asked many questions about your friend, Caleb. Is that true?” he asked. “Yes, I’m worried,” I said. “We appreciate your initiative, but you have to trust the system,” he said. “Do your parents know you’re asking these questions?” he asked. “Yes they do, my dad said I shouldn’t draw attention to myself,” I answered truthfully. “Ah, I see, just remember to trust the system, it does what’s best for everyone. You’re dismissed.”

I went back to recess thinking about what the principal said. Maybe I should trust the process: Caleb is fine, we are all fine. I took the ride back home, the police cruiser was still at Caleb’s. I finally got dropped off at my house. The door was unlocked. Odd, but they must have forgotten. The lights were on, everything was quiet, “Mom, I’m home!” No answer. I went to the kitchen and found it empty. Weird, I thought. They’d be back home sooner or later.

I woke up in the morning and my parents still weren’t home. I ate breakfast from the fridge and took the bus to school, telling myself they were just busy at work. I got off the bus at school and walked into my classroom. Principal Delgado was waiting, “Thomas, please follow me to my office,” he said. I did. We sat.

“Just to confirm: your mother is Alexandra and your father is Abraham?” asked the principal. “Yes, they are,” I said. “They have been relocated,” he said. “When can I see them again?” I asked. “You won’t,” he replied. “Not until the investigation is complete.” He leaned back in his chair. “But don’t worry. You can trust the system. It’s always working, isn’t it?” I nodded. “You’ll be taken in for questioning tomorrow,” he added. “It’s just protocol. You’re dismissed.”

As I stepped into the hallway, his words echoed in my head. What had my parents done? They weren’t criminals. And why was he so cold about it? These thoughts ran around my head and I couldn’t react as Mr. Daniels yanked me into an empty classroom.

“Your parents are not coming back,” he said quietly.

“They are looking into it,” I replied.

He shook his head. “That’s what they always say.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been around a long time, Thomas, I’ve watched things change.” He hesitated. “You won’t be questioned, Thomas. You’ll disappear.”

The words settled in my chest.

“There’s nothing for you here,” he continued. “No answers. No justice.”

“Where, then?”

He lowered his voice. “North.”

“The neighboring country?”

“Things are different there,” he said. “They might listen.”

He handed me a map. “If you stay, you’ll be forgotten. If you leave . . . maybe not.”

I walked the halls out of school as if nothing had happened, but every door felt like it was

watching me. That night, I thought about how quickly everyone forgot about Caleb. I wouldn't let him and my parents remain forgotten. So I packed a bag and left home.

At the bus station, no one asked questions. They never did, as long as you didn't ask first. I bought a ticket in cash and kept my head down. The screen above the platform showed highlights of last night's match. Everyone was glued to the screen.

The ride north was long. I saw the industrial hum of the city fade in the distance, until I could only see the scorching desert around me. I looked at the sky as the sunrise came. The sky was blue, a blue I've never seen with all the haze back home.

Along the way, the bus passed a stretch of road where several black trucks were parked. No buildings. No signs. Just vehicles lined up in the middle of nowhere. A few men were standing outside as they opened the back of the trucks. I couldn't see what was inside, but it seemed like the contents were moving.

No one on the bus looked up.

Most of them were watching something on their phones. I recognized the sound of the crowd, the same rhythm of cheers and commentary in every football match. The light from the screens reflected in all their faces.

I kept looking outside. Something about it felt wrong.

"Doesn't that seem strange to you?" I asked quietly.

The man next to me didn't look away from his screen.

"What?" he said.

"Out there."

He glanced for a second, then looked back down.

"It's always like that."

“It doesn’t bother you?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“We eat,” he said. “We watch. What else do you want?”

I didn’t answer.

Sometime later, the bus slowed down. We were still in the middle of nowhere, empty. We stopped.

A few men boarded. Their uniforms didn’t match. Some wore badges, others didn’t. No one asked who they were. They moved down the aisle slowly, not checking documents, just looking. When they stopped beside someone, they quietly asked them to come. Some passengers stood up immediately, others hesitated, but they all followed.

One of the men stopped beside me, he looked at my face, then at my hands, then back at my face. I thought he would say something. He didn’t and moved on.

After they were gone, the engine started again and we went off.

Throughout the ride, this happened again. Until there were just a handful of us left.

The last stop didn’t look like much. Just a stretch of road ending in fences. People got off slowly, with what little they had. No one spoke, and no one seemed surprised. Ahead of us were layers of fencing, each taller than the other, with lights mounted above and cameras fixed in place. There were lines, though no signs explaining where they led. People stood in them anyway. So did I.

Time passed without anyone keeping track of it. Every so often, someone was called forward and there was a brief exchange. Then they were led away, not through the gates, but somewhere to the side, disappearing behind structures near the fence. I tried to follow them with my eyes, but they didn’t come back.

No one crossed, not through the gates. They opened from time to time, but never for us.

A man approached me while I was waiting. He looked at me for a moment and said, “You’re heading North.” I didn’t answer. He extended his hand. I hesitated, then gave him my phone.

He nodded and told me to follow.

We didn’t stay in line; instead we walked along the fence for a while, leaving the others behind. Eventually, we stopped. A guard stood there, slightly extending his hand. I understood and gave him my wallet. He stepped aside without counting it.

I walked past him and no one stopped me. Between the fences, a narrow strip of water ran along the ground. It was colder than I expected. I crossed quickly, trying not to stop. On the other side, everything looked the same. For a moment I turned back, wondering if this was worth it, but then I remembered what I did this for. I kept walking until I saw it, a large sign planted beside the road, clean and bright, it read:

WELCOME TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I stood there for a moment, looking at it. In the distance, a vehicle approached. This time, it didn’t pass me, it stopped.

They asked for my name, my origin, and why I had come. I told them everything. They wrote it down without interrupting, without telling me to stop, without telling me to move on. For the first time, it felt like someone was listening.

A few days later, they placed me in front of a camera. The lights were bright, but the room was quiet. The interviewer nodded for me to begin.

Outside, a screen was showing a football match. No one looked away. The problem wasn’t hidden. It just didn’t matter.

A Moment of Silence

by Emma Xing

Livingston High School, New Jersey

You were floating again, for the fourth night in a row. You drifted through blurry windows of consciousness, and all I did was watch—pacing back and forth in front of the guest room as you drowned out your stinging sorrows with can after can of booze. During those sleepless 4 o'clock mornings, those hazy midnights, something irrevocably ugly and twisted burrowed itself into the recesses of my gut, sinking my heart.

There's nothing like watching your best friend deteriorate.

A void had formed between us, ever since that day I'd found you kneeling by Maisy, her white body limply submerged in the tub. I still remember the screams that echoed from the blue-tiled bathroom, your sobs as you held her cold face and cupped her sallow cheeks as if it would bring life back into them.

I came immediately. When you burrowed yourself into my arms and wailed, I stroked your hair. Between desperate gasps and shudders, you uttered curses into the amber lamp light above.

"Take it easy, Layla," I whispered. "Take it easy." You couldn't respond.

Remember when we were just eight, and you told me that if you ever had a daughter I would be her fairy godmother? At the funeral, I stood and watched as your princess slept in her casket, a dark, bold frame that swallowed her delicate body whole. Stood and watched as your relatives came in one by one, even that cousin that you'd never really liked. And the whole time, my words remained stuck at the base of my trembling throat. What was there to say, now that we were already here?

In total, it was sixty-six minutes of blistering, wordless suffering. Yet at the end of it all, I was picking my way to the front of the room.

"I'd like to say a few words about Maisy," I said, staring at the moth-bitten carpet below my feet. Behind my back, my fingernails dug deeply into my palm.

“Maisy had the most beautiful spirit I’ve ever come across. She was such a joy to be around. And I . . .”

Words, more words stumbled out of my mouth. They tasted bitter on my tongue. Plastic. “I know that if anything’s for certain, she was taken far too soon. She was only four years old. She had a loving mother, a wonderful home, and a long life ahead of her.”

A loving mother. That was you, Layla—

That was supposed to be you.

My eyes flitted to the front of the room, and mistakenly, I caught your gaze. Your hooded, brown eyes—Maisy’s eyes—were wet with grief. Or, maybe, it was something else. I swallowed and continued.

“And even though Maisy and I were not of the same blood, she will always be precious to me, like a daughter. I would do anything for her. Anything to take back the tragedy, the accident, that happened that night. Every day, I wish I could’ve stopped it.”

But I didn’t stop it. And you knew this perfectly well.

That night—one of those times where your eyes went wild—I’d pressed myself into my couch, crumpled myself into a helpless ball. When you stomped up the stairs muttering to yourself, I said nothing. When I heard the sound of splashing water, the groan of something sliding against white porcelain, I squeezed my eyelids shut. Darkness. A moment of silence. And then the scream followed.

From that moment on, it was merely a game of pretend.

Now, the bathtub is empty. You are empty. Everything in you is drained of life and color, your mousy hair tangled in a mess that you haven’t washed for days. You stay bundled with your sheets, barely breathing. My silence, our silence, drifts like a winter wind through the halls, freezing everything in its place.

I’m ashamed to admit it, but this is home.

Empty Seats

by Gia Asteghene

Brookwood High School, Georgia

I look out the window of our minivan at the mountainous landscape rolling by, my chest heaving. The sun blazes down on my face as my husband drives us home, the seats empty behind me. My eyes burn with tears as the silence of the car buzzes in my head. We had just dropped off my youngest child at college, my other two kids having already moved out years before. The car feels weightless and eerily calm on the way home. No screaming, no arguing, no crying, no loud phones—only silence. I just sit in the silent car and am forced to wonder what life will be like now.

I shift in my seat and think about my oldest daughter, Julia. When she went off to college, two years ago, we were filled with anxiety. We scrambled her things together over the summer, and her first semester quickly approached. She packed her bags with all her dorm essentials and clothes, and we arrived at the campus.

“Please be careful; make good choices, okay? I love you so much, come home soon.” I said, my voice shaky and small.

“Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll be fine.” She replied, clearly trying to make me feel better.

We exchanged hugs, and a few tears were shed, but we left her there after setting up her room and getting tacos from a food truck outside her dorm. Though the anxiety flooded my brain, I was very confident in my daughter. She had always been a responsible girl, looking after her younger brothers throughout their youth. When I got home the day we dropped her off, I hugged my sons. I remember my embrace lingering slightly longer than usual when I realized they would be leaving soon too. Even now, I can’t grasp the fact that she actually left, the memory of things we would do together echoing in my every day.

Next to leave was my middle child, Jack, my oldest son. He was the athlete of our family. As a child he would play baseball in the front yard with my husband, throwing the ball back and forth before he broke the neighbor’s window. He sold lemonade in the driveway for weeks before he could pay for the damage. When it came time for college, we weren’t sure if he was even interested. However, when he received scholarships from top colleges for baseball, he became ecstatic.

“Mom, look at this one! My third offer this month!” He exclaimed, as he flailed and flaunted a letter in front of my face.

He ended up with a full-ride scholarship to the best school in the state, and we dropped him off a week before his sister went back for her sophomore year.

Every time we drove back home after dropping one of them off at college, the car got quiet, the air empty of any emotion. Luckily, I always had another child to keep me company in the car and at home. When my first son left, my youngest son was alone. He sat in his designated seat and stared out the window for a while, trying to hide his sadness. The drive home wasn’t very long, but it felt like a century as I waited for the chance to hug my son and get away from the silence of the car.

By the time my final son, Lucas, was a senior, I was a pro at the graduation activities. Senior night, Baccalaureate, Honors Night, Graduation—I’ve done it all. However, I had always dreaded graduation night, the 10-minute speech from a random Harvard-accepted student, the Yale-bound salutatorian who wishes they had done better on one assignment freshman year; it was painfully boring. I usually spent most of the time telling my kids, “Only two more hours; you can do it,” or, “Just be glad that’s not you standing there in the sun.” Somehow, this time was different. I looked at the empty seats next to me and closed my eyes for a second, listening to the applause of the other parents in the audience and the horrible sound quality of the microphone they use to mispronounce every name. I waited patiently for my son’s name and pulled out my phone to record him while he walked up to get his diploma. When it was over, we took him to get chocolate ice cream and told him we were proud of him before heading back home.

Summer flew by, and August came around like lightning. My son was finally going to college, only an hour away from home. He packed lightly, knowing he would be able to come home and get stuff when he needed it. My other children decided to drive themselves to their dorms, claiming they didn’t need help moving in, so we made our way to my youngest’s dorm, their seats remaining empty. We set up his dorm and said our final goodbyes before heading back home.

Now I’m back in the car, tears fighting against my eyes, my face growing visibly red. I breathe in the pungent fumes of my Little Trees freshener and squirm under the sudden tightness of the seatbelt. I just sit in the car and listen to the stupid radio playing stupid songs like “Dance Monkey” and “Despacito.”

I desperately want to turn around and bring him back with me, not let him ever leave the house. I am angry with their colleges for making them start so early. I am angry with my husband for getting us there so quickly. I am angry with the world for not giving me more time before they all left. Angry with myself for not spending enough time with my children before it was too late.

I arrive home and look around the house at the family pictures in the dusty picture frames and the little evidence that there were children living in the house. My daughter's clothes scattered everywhere, my middle son's empty cups, my youngest's books and magazines. Everything sat in place waiting to be claimed by each of them. The couch sat there with the pillows crooked and misplaced. I look at the kitchen, the three countertop chairs sitting, vacant, the dishes piled in the sink.

The next few days were rough. Walking by my children's rooms gave me an immense level of sadness until I had to get my husband to lock the doors to stop myself from sitting on their beds for hours at a time. My neighbors started asking me why I hadn't been going to their barbecues, and I just told them that I was feeling sick. I came back from the grocery store and put away my food before realizing I had purchased chocolate ice cream and lemonade yet again, and the last batch still hasn't been consumed. I stopped doing laundry because the lack of clothes made me feel sick. I slept less at night and more during the day, living off caffeine and ibuprofen, my stomach empty.

Suddenly, I can't take it anymore. My knees give in under me, and my head falls into my hands, hot tears falling down my face and sticking to my scarlet cheeks, my disheveled hair catching them. I begin to violently sob and shake on the floor of the kitchen. My husband runs over and holds me on the ground, trying to calm me down. Somehow, he knows. He knows exactly why I'm crying, and he lets me cry until I can't anymore.

"Do you think they'll be okay?" I ask him, still shaking.

"Of course they will be." He responded reassuringly. "You raised them."

Suddenly my tears start to stop, and I peer at my husband gratefully through the blur of my eyes. I am brought back to reality by a message on my phone. My youngest son sent me a message.

"Everything is set up in the dorm! Hope you guys are doing well."

A smile appears; the salty taste of my tears still lingering on my lips. My chest eases and I start to feel composed again.

It seems pathetic that a small text like that would bring me out of what I have been going through, but it did. The next few days I decide to pick myself back up and begin doing the things that I would have done, even if the kids were here. I began talking to my friends again, after apologizing for my absence; I returned to doing the dishes and laundry—I even started going to book club again! Along the way I got more and more texts from my kids. I have realized now that no matter where they are, they will always need me, because I’m their mother. However, I’m now learning to be okay with the fact that they are going to be just fine on their own.

Beauty from Within

by Ian Sessler

Brookwood High School, Georgia

From the minute we are born, society places us in a box: boy or girl. Although this box fits most people, it doesn't fit all. Sometimes that box feels like a brick that is pushing down on your chest with so much force you can't breathe. Sometimes that box feels like it is caving in and stabbing you from all directions. But the cost of escaping that box is rejection from those who are supposed to love you most, rejection from those who are meant to love you unconditionally. But as the box gets smaller and smaller, the only choice you have is to kick and scream, no matter how painful it is.

I grew up in a very loving household that always wanted me to be happy. When I was about eight years old, I transitioned from female to male, also known as being transgender. It came as no shock to my immediate family, as they had been suspecting it for years; however, it wasn't like that for my grandparents. My grandparents were not known to be the most accepting people, making their conservative, transphobic beliefs public.

I specifically remember the first time I visited my grandparents when I came out. We drove through the countryside, riding in silence. I could tell that we all knew how this was going to go, and it created a nervous tension in the air. Eventually, my grandparents' single-story, old-looking farmhouse came into view. I went through the front door weighed down, and my stomach twisted as I anticipated their reactions. Sitting on the plush couch, my body sank into the cushions. My leg bounced while I held my breath. After what felt like ages, my grandparents walked in, sitting perpendicular to me on the reclining chairs. My parents began explaining that I was going to transition and how I was the same person that I always had been, but I would be much happier now. I looked over to see my grandparents' smiles wash off of their faces, and turn to a scowl. My grandma didn't even let them finish before jumping up and proclaiming, "We raised you better than this! You are going to hell!" seconds before my grandpa chimed in saying, "God will not love you! What will the church think of us?" He reached into the compartment next to the chair, pulling out a bible and flipping through the pages, searching for words to justify his hate. It was almost as if he was standing at the altar, early Sunday morning, focusing God's words on the sinners below.

Rage filled his eyes and his face was steaming. I winced as he began to scream at me, holding the bible out, trying to convince me that I was "mentally ill".

Trying to protect me, my parents escorted me out of the room. I could still hear their muffled voices screaming at my parents for “forcing me to do this” and how “I just wanted attention” through the thin, wooden door. Any chance of having a relationship with them was shattered, right then and there. My heart felt heavy and I burst into tears. The tears were like fire, rolling down my face just as lava runs down the side of a volcano. It was as if my soul had been sucked into an abyss, leaving me hollow. After all, shouldn't they just want me to be happy?

As I grew older, their hateful words never got easier to hear; however, I became numb to the pain they inflicted. Instead of my grandparents degrading me in person, they would post about their “demonic family” online and would send vulgar text messages. From the minute my grandparents found out about my transition, it was as if a switch had been flipped. All those years of fond memories went out the window. They no longer made an effort to be in my life, and they no longer saw me as their grandchild, only as an imposter ruining their perfect family. It was incredibly difficult having to watch my grandparents spend all of their time, and energy on my other cousins, but not me. I realized that they were ultimately not worth it, not worth the pain, not worth the agony, and most of all, not worth the effort. Instead, I found other people in my life that could fill their role. People who were always there for me regardless of anything, and people who cared for me. THOSE were the people I wanted in my life: they were my chosen family.

This experience allowed me to realize that beauty and belonging is not defined by anyone else, but is defined by me. By accepting that, I came to love myself more than I could have ever imagined. I found people who loved me for me, regardless of any differences we had. I would like to end with this thought: as long as you are happy, no one else should get a say, and no matter how much hate people may spew at you, remember that you are beautiful and you belong!

In Memoriam

by Josephine Akomolafe
Ardrey Kell High School, North Carolina

The sun crept in between the shifty, bulky fabric of his uniform, sweat forming, slick as it bled from his skin. His eyes struggled to focus on the shape, but he screwed them shut after a moment, fingers itching to lift to his temple. The marching had borne itself anew into his skull as the beats of his comrades' boots swelled to a crescendo too deafening to ignore. It had become easy to ignore the tightness of his muscles and the whine of his lungs, but the marching would never leave him—not as long as it kept multiplying against the walls of his skull.

His teeth ground against one another as his eyes squinted open to the sight of the herds of blue uniforms moving around him; *he had to keep pace*. His muscles wailed in agony as he pushed them again and again until the feeling of moving felt as natural as breathing. Something salty dripped down his cheek, and his eyes drifted from the sight of his tattered laces blending with the grime beneath him to the trees lightly kissing the horizon, bleeding together in wondrous shades of evergreen and pale pinks that gave way to unceasing lilac skies. *So there was such a thing as too beautiful for this world*. A beauty he would've kept on his wall back home on a normal day, but as the war took his freedom, it stole those days from him, changing him into gruesome smog-stained beast. His breath still halted at the sight of the sun. Blinking back memories of his old camera.

His stomach dipped in inconceivable grief. His heart clenched and twisted at the thought of his old camera, which had been as beautiful as his mother had been when she gifted it to him on his sixteenth birthday. *An indulgence in your gluttony*, she'd called it.

He hadn't seen it in forty-seven days. His head panged. Had it really been such a short time? It seemed like years.

He had accepted the loss after a day. George had decided it was better to blur it with the other losses, turn it into just another casualty of war.

The words slid off his tongue with unsurprising ease. Being here—wherever that was, somewhere South of the Coalition's border—meant that once something was lost, there was

no finding it. Not unless you wanted to venture into No Man's Land. All the cowards died there, venturing in to never return. He was no coward. Chalky air filled his lungs; *all that was asked was that he keep pace.*

And so the camera was gone. Four—or five—years of his life, depending on what day it was, had drifted into those memories he was ordered to let slip from his grasp. More salt-stained streaks fell, *replaceable, all replaceable.* The weight of his new camera seemed heavier now; it was one without stickers or carved smiley faces. But one that was bland and cold in the way that was different from nothing else here—if he managed to claw his way through the trenches and heaves of bodies accompanied by the never-ending orchestra of marching and make it out, he would return the camera to the Coalition Office and his military service would cease.

His body shuddered, air moved in and out in a stream of panic. An end to his service? Bile choked his airway. *Wishes like those were meant for cowards and traitors.* His breath steadied as the blue of the uniforms around him solidified. George wasn't like that. He kept his pace. He took his candid; that is what this new camera was for—it was all it was ever for.

It wasn't a difficult job by any means: *take candid*s, job done. Nothing that he hadn't done before. After all, his bedroom walls at home? Weren't there candid's there? *I used to like them,* George thought absentmindedly. The constant crunch of footfall grew as he tried to think back to that splotchy wall he saw in his nightmares. He'd willed it away from his memory to not let this old version of George Brunswell taint the new one.

Now they did nothing but disgust him.

Was he allowed to even think that? The candid's were saving his life, keeping him useful and away from the only other alternative—a gun.

His heart skipped a beat as he thought of those who had traded. The way they screamed in the middle of the night or flinched when George took their picture—hands grappling at their gear, yelling about how he only captured the dead men.

Something that was probably inherently false. Do the men in the infirmary count as living? He thinks of their wounds, unquantifiable in their horror. The gaping caverns of blood and guts spilt from them as they wailed for their mothers. Like swine calling for a meal. Even if those calls are disregarded by lying nurses who promise salvation that will never come.

He had hundreds of those, the ones of blood and gore—the ones that always made the front page. Instead of horizons like before. Something that he intended to be a laugh sagged from his lips at the thought; he doesn't get to capture horizons unless there are hundreds of human carcasses that block its view.

There's no peace on the horizon in war, only fear, which the war never lacks in supply.

By the end of the day, there are dozens of pictures for every dozen dead.

By the end of the week, they'll be printed in every paper and sent to every news station. Sometimes he sees them on the rare nights when the television works. The hour reserved just for the In Memoriams; it's not enough, it's never enough. By the end of the night, there are names being pushed back till tomorrow *ad infinitum*.

The war demands nothing if not time. There are moments when his comrades fall and never get up; traitorously, his heart beats a little quicker at the thought; he would love that rest. *Lucky dead soldier, he thinks.*

That's what his little sister used to say when they would see the In Memoriams come through while their mother occupied herself with the gurgle of the kitchen sink and piles of dishes. For a moment, he's sinking into the couch, a calming shade of brown, his sister pressed into his side, the hum of the sink far away as the names are rattled off . . .

"Jose Aguleria, James Arrend, Julian Barnes, Henry Bates, William Bauman, Oliver Clove, Lillal Drummond, Fabian Druxley . . ."

His genius little sister, right once again, the girl who won the spelling bee competition in the sixth grade with the word: Machiavellian. She learned it from a book because, of course, he has a sister who reads. Does she look for his name in the In Memoriams at school? Do her eyes search for Brunswell? Do her shoulders sag, like the last breath of a dead man, in relief when it's not there? Or has she forgotten him in the two—or three—year period he's been away?

His mouth twisted into an uncomfortable downturn; he's forgotten her. Her laugh, the way she says Machiavellian, her height, her eyes, her favorite food, the way the blends of her blue school uniform flapped in the wind with her hair, her face.

His bitten nails traced over a spot next to his heart where her silly origami crane lies, her name written on the faded red paper: Anastasia Monica Brunswell. It's a name that will never grace an In Memoriam.

It's one of the only things that brings him—

Fear.

It ran down his spine like rain on windows, fast and tearing through fragile tranquility. It flowed through him and his comrades as they all took a knee, eyes on the sky. Ears craned to hear it, the whirl of a helicopter, not one of theirs. They'd been promised clear skies. The soldiers around him aimed their guns; the sound of them loading in near-perfect synchronization reignited an urge, as for a moment, the hammering of the marching was put to rest. And suddenly George is aiming his camera at the helicopter too, frantically searching for whoever is in the helicopter. He saw several soldiers clad in deep green muddled with assuredly undeserved medals of honor, but it's what was behind them that he took note of: a black camera, cold and waiting.

His heart jumps at the sight. In recognition, it's been such a long time since he's seen another like him, another Shrike.

Oh, and this new photographer's eyes are such a striking shade of blue. *Such a shame*, He thinks, *to have to rid the world of something so bright.*

The click of his camera is what dooms those above. "Eyes in the sky!"

Immediately, he regrets it. The gunfire that fills every sense, rips holes in his mind, and his fingers rush across his camera, hundreds of pictures in barely a minute, as the enemy falls.

Through the feeble clouds the helicopter plummets, its blades spinning into the ground, threatening to divide the lumps of earth in two as bullets hail through the windows, lodging themselves in their targets.

George captures it all: gunfire, signals, screams, flames—oh, and even a horizon. He cracks his first smile in what feels like a decade at the realization.

He moves without thought, charging into the carnage like a real soldier. He needs more. Despite the gore and the screams and fire, he needs more pictures, *for the Coalition*. The wails of the red-headed soldier before him deserve no response, and neither do the burned men—or women, their heads are so brutally deformed that it's difficult to tell who or what they are from the angle at which he stands.

A small smile creeps up his face. He knows what the people will say about them, what the posters will say, what every news station in the Coalition will be saying by the end of the day. It will be turned into another household staple, another more subtle form of attack, only this time on home turf, delivered to them by George Brunswell himself. *Such a great service to the Coalition*.

He moves through the bodies, every photo balancing his scales of service and guilt.

In the final shot lies the blue-eyed photographer. Eyes once so striking are dull, open, and aghast.

Vomit rises in his throat. Tears tumble down his face until it's twisted into a scream. The other photographer was practically a baby, now torn in half; his camera was just inches from his fingers. Him or me. His fists clench as he dashes the tears from his face. *Him or me*.

The next photo is only the boy's face, just to imagine him without the uniform. A blissful fate it would be to finally be rid of it. Instead George carries on.

Proximity

by Joshua Wolman
Chelmsford High School, Massachusetts

It was the eyes.

It had always been the eyes.

They unraveled me that night, though I would later blame the quiet, the hour, the weight of absence throbbing through the room, the particular loneliness that gathers when grief intrudes upon two men loving each other. I told myself it was the circumstances—the suddenness, the surprise—but first it was the eyes; wide, blue, unmoored. Tears pooled without permission, without announcement, falling efficiently, as if even grief had learned the economy of suffering.

They reminded me of water stretched flat beneath a dead sky; no wind, no surge, just depth.

I was aware, distantly, of my own hands; they had forgotten what they were for, and so I looked at him instead.

I had seen those eyes before: across crowded tables, across long conversations where Julien's hand rested casually against George's wrist. I had watched them soften when Julien spoke, watched them hold that quiet certainty people wear when they believe love will remain indefinitely. It had been impossible not to notice—impossible not to measure myself against him, the way men do when they find themselves orbiting in the same gravity.

Julien had always been the man George reached for without thinking, the one whose presence settled him. I learned the shape of that preference by watching it happen: the angle of George's body turning toward him, the quiet ease that came from loving another man who already knew how to stand where he stood.

His body betrayed him now. His breath snagged, his shoulders jerked in rhythm with sobs that had long since exhausted words, his hands fluttered like leaves caught in some indecisive current. He collapsed into me when I reached out, weightless yet impossibly heavy, as if so much of him had already slipped into another world. I had seen him radiant once—the way his glass hung forgotten in his hand, his smile arriving slowly, like something he hadn't

planned on, and I had looked away before his face turned toward Julien as though nothing else in the room had existed. He felt unfinished, as if something essential had been interrupted mid-sentence.

The room had gone quiet in a way that felt deliberate, as if it were holding its breath along with us. Every shift of fabric and every hitch of lung landed with impossible clarity. Silence pressed against my ears until it rang.

His eyes stayed open—not accusing, not searching, not asking. Just watching something beyond me, beyond the room. I waited for the human fracture that might make him knowable again. There was none. Grief had burned through every register; only vacancy remained.

On the floor between us, the ring box gaped open. Black, tilted, empty—a relic of a future erased too fast, a future he could no longer inhabit.

I had known about the ring for weeks. George had told me in the hesitant, excited way of someone rehearsing a future aloud, asking whether the timing was right, whether Julien would laugh or cry. He had spoken to me because I was safe. I had listened the way I'd learned to—carefully, warmly, asking whether Julien would want the question asked privately and where they first said I love you, and beneath all of it, running like water under frozen ground, the understanding that no man would ever rehearse that future and mean it for me. I smiled when George smiled. I let his happiness move through me like light through a window—present, warm, touching nothing as it passed through.

He had loved Julien with a certainty that assumed continuation. In speaking of him, George had drawn maps of their future I could trace with my eyes—where they would live, how they would fill their days, the quiet rituals that make two men a home for each other.

Now the map was burned and every line of it pressed against my chest.

Eventually his sobs thinned but never stopped. Mine began to replace them, quietly, almost resentfully. I held him because my arms were there. Because letting go felt indistinguishable from leaving. Because I had already begun to realize how effortlessly people disappear.

His body fit against mine in a way I had imagined before and tried not to.

I wanted to be the thing that remained.

I told myself it was about presence, about being what grief could lean against, but there was another truth I granted no air: I had spent years watching George love another man. I had learned the shape of that love from a distance—the ease of it, the quiet language that grows between men who know each other’s bodies and histories too well to need explanation. Julien had occupied that space beside him so completely that it was impossible not to imagine, now and then, what it might mean to stand there instead. And now Julien was gone, and the terrible arithmetic of absence had left space where none had existed before.

I felt his warmth where our bodies touched, the simple fact of being chosen registering before I could refuse. The want was raw and immediate and ugly—the want not to save him, but to be wanted by someone who had lost everything else.

And there it was, that sudden recognition, unbidden: my body leaning into his. I told myself I was anchoring him. That my presence had meaning. I let myself become still in the way land does—something solid enough to cling to, dangerous only if mistaken for home. I did not examine how badly I wanted that mistake.

He shifted, almost imperceptibly. Something behind those vast blue mirrors twitched awake, then sharpened. *Panic*. Raw, blind need. The look of a man surfacing without knowing where the shore might be. He looked at me as though I could prevent his sinking, as though I were a shore and not the panic preventing him from remembering how to swim.

He leaned in.

It happened too quickly for me to claim surprise, too slowly for me to excuse my stillness. The reflex to withdraw surfaced, unmistakable, and I felt myself refuse it—not in defiance, but in acquiescence. My body remained where it was, held in a posture pretending neutrality yet offering itself intact. I knew, with a clarity that burned, that this was not paralysis.

I remember the precise second when I acknowledged what was happening—the moment when intention became unavoidable—and the equally precise second when I chose not to intervene.

Breath caught against my mouth. Mouth pressed to mine. Urgent, uneven, insistent. Not violent and not gentle but reaching for the nearest thing in a world suddenly barren of land. His hands trembled against my back. Salt and grief radiated from him; every movement was

a plea I could not answer. And I, standing at the edge of that plea, had more power than I should have. More than I deserved.

I did not move.

I told myself stillness was neutrality. That stillness was mercy. That refusing him outright would fracture something already broken. And in the same heartbeat, I understood the lie: I wanted him to need me. Not as a friend. Not as a witness.

I was taking and he was giving. Both of us knew it silently. That was the cruelest part: grief had stripped him bare, and my desire—quiet, shaming, greedy—met it and lingered. Mutual harm carved its initials into both of us. He needed someone. I needed it to be me. Neither of us would leave that night untouched.

The kiss was jagged, tasting of brine and despair, of pain not meant to be conflated with pleasure. And still I let it continue because to interrupt would require words, and words would expose the truth: that he was reaching for a ghost and finding my mouth instead—the wrong man occupying the space where the right one had always been.

When he pulled back, the silence fell again like a hammer. His eyes found mine, and the vacancy was gone, replaced by mirrors. I saw myself there with awful clarity; the small hunger that had lived quietly in me for years and had finally found its moment. I saw how easily I stepped into space carved by someone else's love; how much I had taken, how much he had surrendered without knowing.

And I understood, in a single cold instant, that neither of us would ever untangle it.

He folded back into grief. I could not reach him. My hands lay still, useless. Words crowded my mouth—explanations, confessions, apologies—but each dissolved before forming, undeserving of air.

I left.

Not for compassion, not for conscience. I left because staying required facing the full weight of what we had done to each other. Because his eyes reflected my own failings too sharply for me to breathe. Because the shore I offered was never land at all.

The Space between Panels

by Lisanne Carvalho

Ardrey Kell High School, North Carolina

The first time it happened, it was easy to ignore. A line where no line should be. A faint outline just outside the edge of a finished panel—too deliberate to be accidental, too subtle to be intentional. It curved along the margin like something trying not to be seen. Evan erased it without thinking. Graphite smeared, but the impression remained, pressed lightly into the paper as if it had already decided it belonged there. He turned the page and kept working, convincing himself it was nothing more than a lapse in attention.

Evan trusted panels. Panels made things understandable. They separated one moment from the next, gave structure to something that would otherwise feel shapeless. Within their borders, everything had a place: expression, movement, meaning. If something felt too complicated, it could be broken down. If something felt too fleeting, it could be held still. Nothing spilled over unless he allowed it to. That was the rule he worked by, the quiet logic behind every page he created.

He noticed the second time. A character he had drawn—mid-conversation, mid-gesture—looked slightly different in the next panel. Not dramatically, not enough for anyone else to immediately point it out, but enough to make him stop. The posture shifted. The eyes weren't focused in quite the same direction. The expression carried something extra, something that didn't match the dialogue written above it. Evan frowned and flipped back a page, then forward again. The difference remained. He hadn't drawn it that way.

At first, he blamed himself. Fatigue, distraction, carelessness—simple explanations that didn't require further thought. He redrew the panel. Then again. Each time, the difference returned. Not identical, but consistent in its inconsistency, like something quietly adjusting itself just beyond his control.

It spread slowly. Backgrounds stretched between panels. Hallways grew longer without explanation. Objects shifted slightly out of place, as if nudged by an unseen hand. And always, somewhere near the edge, that second line—faint, persistent, impossible to fully erase. It wasn't part of the drawing, but it wasn't separate from it either.

Evan started noticing things he usually ignored. The pause before someone answered a question. The way people's expressions didn't always match their words. The subtle shifts in tone that couldn't be captured in dialogue alone. Real life, he realized, didn't follow panels. It didn't divide itself into neat sequences. It overlapped, blurred, contradicted itself constantly. That realization unsettled him more than the drawings.

One afternoon, he sat at his desk, staring at a blank page. Usually, he began with structure—lightly penciled boxes, evenly spaced, carefully measured. A framework before anything else. This time, his pencil hovered. The habit was there, familiar and automatic, but something held him back.

Then, deliberately, he didn't draw the panels.

The empty space felt wrong at first, too open, too undefined. He hesitated before finally placing his pencil down and sketching a figure. Someone sitting at a desk, head slightly bowed, pencil in hand. The posture came naturally, almost without thought. It was a position he knew well, one he had drawn countless times before.

The lines came easily. Too easily.

The second figure appeared a moment later.

Evan froze. It stood just behind the first—similar, but not identical. Its shoulders were less tense, its posture more open. Its gaze wasn't directed at the page but angled outward, past the edge of the drawing, as if it were aware of something beyond the scene itself. He hadn't planned it. Hadn't even felt himself draw it. He should have erased it. That was his first instinct, the same instinct that had guided him through every other inconsistency. But this time, he didn't act on it. Instead, he leaned closer, studying the lines.

The second figure wasn't wrong. It was . . . alternative.

Like a version of the same moment seen from a different perspective. Not a mistake, not a correction, but something parallel—existing alongside the first without replacing it.

Evan added more detail. The room around the figures began to shift as he worked. The desk in the foreground remained steady, clearly defined, but behind it, the walls curved slightly. The window stretched wider than it should have, light entering at an angle that didn't quite

make sense. The space felt both familiar and altered at the same time. Two versions of the same place. Both real in their own way. For the first time, Evan didn't try to fix it.

Days passed, and his sketchbook filled with variations—moments doubled, expressions layered, environments that refused to stay consistent from one panel to the next. The changes no longer felt like interruptions. They felt intentional, even when he didn't fully understand them.

At school, conversations began to feel different. Not more difficult, but more detailed. He noticed the hesitation behind casual answers, the slight disconnect between what people said and what they seemed to mean. It was like seeing the rough sketch beneath a finished drawing—the structure that existed before refinement smoothed it away.

“Your stuff’s changed,” someone said one afternoon, flipping through his sketchbook. Evan looked up, immediately tense. “How?” The person paused on a page where two overlapping figures occupied the same space, one faintly offset from the other.

“It feels less controlled,” they said. Then, after a moment, “In a good way.”

Evan didn't respond right away. He wasn't sure if that was something he was supposed to want. For so long, control had been the goal—the thing that made his work feel complete, polished, finished.

Now he wasn't so sure.

That night, he returned to his desk again. This time, he drew panels—but they weren't the same as before. They overlapped, their edges uneven and sometimes incomplete. Some frames bled into others, while some remained only partially defined, as if they didn't need to be fully contained.

In one panel, a character spoke. In another, the same character—slightly altered—remained silent. Both versions existed side by side. Neither replaced the other.

Evan paused, looking over the page.

He realized then that he hadn't been making mistakes before. He had been removing them. Every inconsistency, every distortion—he had treated them as problems to fix, interruptions

to smooth over. But they weren't errors. They were part of something larger, something he hadn't allowed himself to see.

His final piece came together slowly, without a strict plan. A series of ordinary moments: sitting in class, walking through a crowded hallway, pausing mid-conversation, staring out a window. Nothing dramatic, nothing extraordinary. But each moment appeared twice.

Once as it looked. And once as it felt.

In one scene, a student laughed with friends, the moment easy and bright. Beneath it, faint but present, the same figure sat quieter, the expression softer, the distance between them and the others just slightly more pronounced. In another, a hallway stretched long and full of movement; layered beneath it, the same space felt narrower, heavier, the end just out of reach.

Evan didn't explain the differences. He didn't label them or try to guide the viewer toward a single interpretation. He let them exist together, trusting that the tension between them was enough.

In the final sequence, the panels disappeared entirely. No borders, no divisions—just open space. The two figures stood side by side.

Not merged. Not identical. But no longer separated.

Evan studied the page, waiting for the familiar urge to return—the need to refine, to correct, to bring everything back into alignment. It lingered at the edge of his thoughts, but it didn't take hold.

For once, he let the lines remain as they were. Imperfect. Inconsistent. Real.

He closed the sketchbook slowly, aware of the shift that had taken place—not just in the drawings, but in the way he saw them.

For so long, he had believed that understanding came from control, from clean lines and defined spaces. But somewhere between structure and distortion, between intention and accident, he had found something else. Not clarity. But depth. And for the first time, he didn't feel the need to contain it.

24 Hours Before

by Madison Boykin

Mills E. Godwin High School, Virginia

I remember the day my skin matched the color of my bones. The frosted air entrapped my blue-tipped fingers as my disfigured father hung on a noose like a strangled bird. He was a builder in District 252 who planned a workers' protest against the Makers, the controllers of society. He lost all my respect that day, choosing to be a martyr of a reckless cause.

The same bitter cold strangles me as my eyes move to the brown-tinted sky, dark puffs emerging from smokestacks. I drag drowsy footprints on the sooted concrete as I walk to Station, the ashy snowflakes tingling like fire sparks against my skin.

In the 232nd district, our task is counting. Each counter lists a set of three digits out of one thousand; mine are 3, 4, 5, which I chant until my shift ends after one clock rotation. We huddle in flocks outside the rumbling Station as we wait for it to open.

“Is the Station down again?” Richard asks, clomping into my section. He shakes the grime out of his fiery red hair like a cardinal rousing its feathers.

“Yeah,” I groan.

“Damn! I wasted all this effort being here time,” his voice is wheezy and I can’t tell if it’s from being winded or the polluted haze. Richard pops out the collar flaps of his baggy uniform so they don’t poke into his neck even though it would make no difference with the potato sack fit.

He cracks his knuckles before stretching his arms upwards, “Y’know, Magnus, the other day I was talking to this old man on my street that used to be a counter.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he also smelled too,” he brushes his hand upward. “But anyways he was a counter for numbers 100-103 a while ago . . . he was complaining all about it when they fired him for going old and mad.”

I swallowed a thick pellet of saliva in my throat and choked out a laugh, “Well hopefully you didn’t say anything stupid and get yourself in trouble. He may be fired, but you’re—”

“—I don’t get it,” Richard continued to talk to Magnus without expecting a response. “All we do is list numbers anyway, not even count ‘em. Who cares if I’m a minute late?”

I look around, and to my horror, others are peering into our conversation. My mouth feels dry as I stammer, “Well, it’s what we do.”

Richard lets out a breath, “Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say.” The doors whistle, and workers shove forward, “I’ll see you after work.”

“See you,” I let out with tightlips. I’ve been working six clock rotations a week just to meet my quota. Last month, I missed it by four ticks and was low on rations for three weeks.

I inhale deeply in frustration, which I deeply regret as it sets off in a coughing fit.

I wheeze a puff of smog, and my mouth tastes like rust; droplets of blood add a pop color to my drab handkerchief. By the time I’ve entered the Station, my throat feels like I’ve swallowed a lump of hot coal.

Flocks of men herd into position as the daily announcement plays on the speakers above. The robotic woman’s voice speaks chipperly:

“Greetings, United Citizens of District 232. We welcome you to another productive day! Please ensure you are in position. No distractions. No stating others’ digits. No touching the items ahead of you. You are not permitted to report or record the inventory to those you see. You will be monitored by security for all intents and purpose . . .”

I glance at my scuffed shoes and the muted laminate floors. Richard’s shoes are nearly ripped at the top; it’s shocking that his feet haven’t fallen off yet from the pain. The daily announcement echoes in the background of my mind. The Station is a rotunda, with layers of men stacked from the single digits at the ground and the thousands on the top floor. Speakers line up under each conveyor, and the convex shape heightens the volume of each digit said.

I'm twenty-three years old, and I know that every morning until I die, I will hear the words: ". . . The Makers are proud you have pursued your purpose! Have an excellent clock rotation, United Citizens."

With a click, the conveyor belt begins to squeal. The dark, torturous snake winds around the mass of men and scrapes with a loud hiss as it brings the next batch of metal scraps down the sequence. Entrapped counters darted their eyes to gauge the inventory sprawled across the belt. Echoes continue down the sequence in squiggling layers.

A dull sheen from a metal plate bears a murky reflection of myself: pale hair, a sharp nose, and a cowardly version of my father's spirited gaze.

The neon green numbers on the sequence board tick back to me. "3 . . . 4 . . . 5," I count.

12 HOURS BEFORE

The domed structure of the Station looms in shadows on the concrete walkway, like a phantom following the workers as they exit.

I perch myself against the Station gates, waiting for a bright red splotch of hair. I spot him in the distance, fluttering between the traffic of counters.

"Gosh, you look like a ghost," Richard babbles.

We walk away from the Station gates and to the Mobility; mist creates a thick haze over the sky, creating murky silhouettes of skyscrapers. His clomping steps reverberate around the empty cityscape, and the distant factories behind us hum. I can't get myself to say anything as he mumbles about taking a nap.

Richard crumples his nose, "Why're you so silent anyway? Is it because of my comment earlier insulting the job? 'Cause—"

I smack him across the face, and he plummets to the ground.

"What the hell?" he wheezes and crimson surges from his nose. His body shudders like a shivering bird as he supports himself with his elbows, trembling on the ground.

“Is everything a joke to you?” I yell. Warmth surrounds me and entraps me, and I pick him up like a rag doll by the collar. His eyes are wide, and his lips are trembling.

“Magnus?! What—”

“Why are you doing this, Richard? They will kill you if you keep running your stupid mouth.” I push him back aggressively as he stumbles on his toes, “You’re so stubborn that you’re gambling your goddamn life!”

A whoosh of wind approaches us from the distant tracks of the Mobility, casting a doubtful breeze.

Richard’s eyes finally meet mine, and instead of wide-eyed excitement, they’re narrowed. I realize how weak he is without his animated features; his smile lines look distorted without their use. Richard shuffles to his feet and wipes his nose.

Bubbling guilt eats at my flesh like acid, and my heart turns circles in my chest. Silence overcomes us, with distant rumbling and the faint wheezing from Richard filling my ears. I try not to say more and I clench my teeth to control my anger.

“Did they ever tell you what a plane was from the Age of Chaos?” Richard speaks in a dejected tone.

“A plane?” My voice cracks in confusion. He’s a mad man. I’m so tired of him. He stares up at the sky, giving a wheezy chuckle, and a dazed smile perches on his face. “A plane was a winged metal machine that flew in the sky, kinda like birds do.” Spreading his arms wide and letting his eyes close, “Well, when I was a kid, I wanted to pilot one of those. I wanted to fly.”

My eyebrows furrow at this confession. It wasn’t unlike Richard to make up random stories, and this one was absurd.

“But what’s the bother in that?”

“Exploring the sky without being locked to the ground.”

I frown, “All the brown smog in the sky would be about the same view as the underground

Mobility—a waste of time and a death sentence to fly.”

“Do you know that for sure, though?” His gaze tilts upwards with awe at the murky distance. I shuddered at the thought of entering the abyssal sky and grounded my gaze.

Richard tears his gaze away from above, “At least if I were a pilot, useless or not, I’d be doing something. If I died, I’d be having fun. Not listing three stupid numbers and rotting my life away.”

“But you can’t choose that,” I say with an elevating tone. “You don’t choose what you do in life. You accept it and move on.”

“And where has that left you, Magnus?” he snaps. “Accepting the crap, we go through to not end up hung like your father?”

My heart rattles against my chest, and I feel the air pull out of my lungs. A subtle breeze from the Mobility lands cold on my feet, chilling up my spine.

His jaw clenches, “You just want to sit and rot like a coward like every person in this goddamn place.”

“I value my life, Richard,” I exclaim. “I don’t spend my days living in a fantasy land of a role I want. I work to survive, and you can’t seem to get that.”

“You breathe, swallow, eat, and that’s about it. It’s not surviving, it’s waiting to die.”

“I do a job, which you clearly don’t know how to do,” I throw my hands in the air.

“Oh, really?” he grits his teeth. “What is it? Listing the same three numbers?”

“Counting inventory. Government inventory,” I blurb out.

“No, it’s to kill you,” he steps closer and tilts his head up. “You know it, you fear it, and you will never admit it.”

I stand there as I wait for him to say more, and I’m almost disappointed he doesn’t. Richard scrubs the blood that fell onto his collar, but it’s already stained.

The Mobility sends another soft breeze, a gentle calling like a siren. The air feels thicker than before, and I feel exposed; discomfort washes over me. My feet freeze in place as I watch Richard walk into the foggy abyss ahead.

0 HOURS BEFORE

The rumbling of the Station feels louder today with reverberations like a gong. I didn't get a lick of sleep yesterday, thanks to Richard's comments. A pang of guilt surges through me as I remember the crimson drip down his face. I shiver from the frosty air and stick my hands in my jacket pockets.

A huddle of men piled around the doors, with hushed murmurs, in a circle. The usual ordered lines were in disarray; all attracted to one center point in front of the Station.

"They got another one," said a hushed voice as they all muttered in fear of being heard. I nudged through the crowd and my heart dropped as I saw a pair of shoes with holes and rips on the top.

My teeth chattered, but not from the cold. Warm tears ran down my face as my head stared at the pavement. Why do my eyes already know to cry? I can't look. This couldn't be true. I really can't look.

But I did.

The rope wrapped around Richard's neck as he swung from the air. It was tightened, digging into his ash covered corpse and greyed flesh. His head didn't snap clean. He was strangled by the rough texture and angry red marks wrapped around the base of his neck.

"R-Richard . . . you . . . idiot." I muttered trying to speak. He was a fighter. Even in death.

The doors screeched open and men hurried into lines. I stood there. I waited. As more heads emerged out of view, each gash and bruise and gory form of punishment became clearer. The doors whistle, and the line pushes inside. Everyone moved on. Everyone walked inside. Everyone turned away.

But could I?

Richard's wrists snapped backwards, like bones poking under a thin rotisserie chicken skin. It took everything in my power not to vomit.

"R-Richard," I stammered as warm tears flooded my eyes. "You're finally flying."

The Heavy Silence

by Peyton Bradley

Poquoson High School, Virginia

Thousands of fans held their breath, gazing hypnotically at the performer before them on stage. Andromeda Redgrave, one of the most well-known pop stars of the twenty fifth century, was playing her final notes. They thought she meant this to be the last encore of the night, but Andromeda decided it would be the last one ever.

The light from their monitoring watches mocked her as the overhead LED lights contrasted with the empty darkness. Her manager told her they were rainbow colored, not that she had ever seen a color in her life.

Why are they here if they're not going to watch?

The threatening presence of Andromeda's handlers took the air out of the stadium as her platform heels hit the stage. Andromeda silently begged herself to slip on a puddle of sweat. Hitting her head against the stage would make for a long and well needed nap.

Her fingers bled as the sensitive skin got caught on the guitar strings again. She gritted her teeth as she played the solo and counted down the seconds until she could get out of here.

The guitar vibration felt like it was going to overpower her body as another tremor surged through her body. Andromeda felt as if her body was shutting down from exhaustion until her watch lit up, shooting a vial of adrenaline into her veins. She hated it when her manager did that, claiming he wanted what's best for her as he ordered the drug in bulk every month.

Her vision blurred as her body adjusted to the shot. Her skin felt like it was vibrating as the watch buzzed on her wrist. Some people assume it's a timer or a text message coming in when they see it. Sometimes, Andromeda pretends that's what it is. It's easier than admitting she had given up her freedom for the last thing in the world she wanted to do.

DOPAMINE LEVELS RISING

At the beginning of her career, the message displayed on the screen of her glasses would've made her heart soar. But now, it made that hole in her chest a little bit deeper. The stupid glasses her PR team had demanded she wear to cover the bags under her eyes had gotten more insulting throughout the years. Having advanced tech to tell you how to feel is more annoying than not feeling better.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up as they silently ordered her to add more energy to her dancing.

But then it hit her; if the audience didn't care enough to listen, they didn't deserve to hear the rest of the song. Turning up the amp volume, the dial passed the safe zone as she made her decision.

Nobody will ever hear the end of a song again.

Andromeda watched as her managers and bodyguards' eyes widened, sprinting toward the stage. Their usual intimidation tactics failed. Andromeda ripped her glasses off, throwing them to the ground and stomping them with all her might.

The feedback wasn't the usual screech at rehearsal. This time, it felt like the error shook the world as the power from the chord literally stripped the color from everything.

The glasses went berserk on the ground, flashing red as the words *ERROR* covered the lenses. You could hear a pin drop in the stadium as everyone held their breath, watching her as the adrenaline surged through Andromeda.

But Andromeda wasn't thinking about the silence; she was too awestruck by the color to care. She had never seen color before; she had only read about it when she was a kid.

An array of colors ran down the walls of the stadium. It looked as if this was a huge reveal that the public was finally deemed worthy of seeing.

But to Andromeda, it was a reckoning.

In a second, Andromeda made a run for it. Her heels clashed against the ground as she jumped off the stage. The security guards screamed her name, demanding that she finish her

set, but she didn't listen. She ran. She ran just like she had fantasized about doing it for years.

The billboards around her changed, instead of reading how she was the voice of the century, she was now a wanted woman. Every time she glanced at a new sign, the reward for her capture went up. But the adrenaline was making its way into her nervous system, pushing her to run faster: the only thing she could hear was her heart pumping in her ears. Everything around her was now a graveyard: newly updated labs on main street were reduced to rubble, the hover board rental shop was now ash, and there was no technology in sight.

Lifting her wrist, Andromeda wasn't met with the usual notifications from her watch. There were no reminders to smile, no warnings that she was getting too slow, just a black screen with her reflection. The lock on the wristband had broken and Andromeda didn't hesitate to take it off .

Her legs became heavy as the shot began to wear off. She found a piece of rock. She slumped down. With shaky hands, Andromeda ripped out the blonde extensions her stylist insisted would add a "much needed edge" to her stale look.

The silence was deafening as the air thickened, oddly comforting in contrast to the resting feeling of dread she'd been plagued with for years. Instead of having her heart rate monitored and her dopamine levels counted, she was just existing; not for fans, not for publicity, but for herself.

But then, Andromeda heard a voice. Not just any voice . . . *hers*; they were playing her albums. Her body slumped when it hit her, even if she had physically escaped; they'll always have a part of her. They already changed the beat and the tempo.

When she passed the city limits, it was like she had entered a new world. There were no more billboards that reminded her of photoshoots that made her want to disappear. Now, she was surrounded by nature and untouched land.

Andromeda stood among the trees, just existing. The silence here wasn't deafening but calming. It felt like a whole new world. Andromeda had escaped the city and all the boundaries that came with it.

"This is a song I could get used to," Andromeda whispered.

Escape

by Ritika Chandiwala

Livingston High School, New Jersey

5:52—The world was silent.

Amara unbraided her hair, working her fingers methodologically as she hummed a tune. The quiet sound reverberated around the room, a haunting echo that made passerby's stomachs drop as they paced past.

As the final lock was released, she stood, walking toward her closet, adorned with silks and fine jewelry—presents from her husband. Amara walked steady, yet there was a tremble in her hands as she grabbed the nearest pearls, packing them away into her satchel.

The clock reads 5:57.

Her heart thuds so violently she felt it shake the room. One hand held her hair at the base of her neck, the other clutching for her scissors. With a calculated cut, a weight was removed and she stared at the ground with a sense of finality. Her eyes fell onto the nearby mirror—with her face scrubbed raw and boyish hair, Amara couldn't identify the person before her. She threw on a simple kurta, covering her head with a scarf and quickly discarded any evidence of her presence.

The clock strikes 6—the world erupts.

Knocking and chatter filled the peaceful silence, as the husbands began to return after their day of labor. Amara stared at her own door, warily watching, waiting for a sign.

She continued to clean, now with more urgency than ever before. Grabbing the broom, Amara swept the smallest specks into her dustpan, watching the dust slowly fall into the trash. As she dusted the top shelf, the small brush sent a box clattering to the floor. Wincing, she bent down to examine the damage. As she opened the mysterious package, a beautiful bracelet emerged, a silver chain encrusted with deep green emeralds, matching the earrings she had received a few months ago. Turning the box around, she noticed the note left in messy handwriting, the scribbles of her very own husband:

To my Amara, my love for you transcends all time and space, I will love you even after the final star burns out.

Amara dropped the box, letting it clatter to the floor. Without warning, her breath paused, eyes watering as a sharp pain spread through her chest. Her home was in order, the dinner prepared, it all seemed normal. Yet as she stood at the side of the bed, slipping off her wedding ring and placing it on her husband's pillow, it was clear things would never be the same.

As she took one last look at the apartment she'd called home for 6 years, she was filled with neither rage nor joy. In these last moments she let out a heart-wrenching sob, holding the walls to stop her knees from giving out.

Amara's love for her husband was unquestionable—from their dinner conversations to weekend trips, each moment fulfilled a part of her that had been missing for so long. Yet every night Amara laid awake in bed, a feeling of despair filling her being at the thought of continuing her life this way. Closing her eyes, pushing past her lovely husband and wonderful community, she remembered her 18-year-old self, attending university to become an engineer.

Yet as her parents came to talk to her on her 23rd birthday, fresh out of college, Amara knew her dream was soon to end.

Amara lived in regret. Her own being had been lost as she centered her life around her husband. She had gone through with the marriage on behalf of her family, yet she could no longer remain in the confines of her home.

She wiped away the tears, standing straight and quietly approaching the door. Amara slipped out and headed down the stairs. The sweltering heat engulfed her immediately, yet she felt more refreshed than she had in a long time.

Walking through the street, she called for a cab, adjusting the scarf to conceal her identity. With the leftover money given to her for the week, she requested the driver take her as far as he could toward New Delhi. He driver obliged, eyeing the strange woman but unable to refuse such an offer.

Amara rested her head, the cool window calming her down. Staring out the window,

Amara saw her world rush by her, the tired mothers dragging their hyper children as they ran to the local candy store. At the red light, she watched a little girl timidly reach for a lollipop only to be smacked by her mother, scolded for asking. Her brother taunted his own lollipop in her face, quickly running away before she screamed.

Amara sighed, remembering fights with her own family about their bias toward her brother. She felt pain for the little girl, wanted to reach out and give her the lollipop and tell her mother to let her enjoy her youth. But she must remain hidden, at least until she left town. An idea sparked. She whispered something to the cab driver, and he grinned, leaving the car with a couple hundred rupees crushed into his left fist. He strolled to the candy shop, and came out with a handful of lollipops. He gave them to the mother, motioning to the young girl and saying “I think we all deserve a lollipop, no?”

The girl's wide grin lit up something in Amara, and she was silently content for the rest of the ride. Three hours in, the AC long broken, Amara felt a faint smile spread across her face as she glanced down at the paper in her hand, a job offer at a startup engineering firm. Her whole life she'd been living for others, pleasing her parents and her husband, promising them all her devotion.

But as she embarked on her uncertain journey, Amara knew she was finally fulfilling her promise to herself.

6:30—The world is so much more.

ಸಂಧಿಯಾ – Saanidhya

by Siri Patil

Livingston High School, New Jersey

1. 1948—

My walls were always more than walls, and my roof had always been more than a roof. I held the blood and sweat her husband and father poured into making me. Slippery red mud lined cracks of brick walls, leaving me a brooding red that stood out amongst the wheatgrass and holy basil behind. Despite finishing me a month ago, they waited to name me until the sun saw and recognized my beauty. Sharada had always been very shrewd, and as soon as she looked outside, she beckoned her husband to come as she spoke my name: Saanidhya. Her voice wrapped around each syllable in my name as eloquently as she wrote it on the nameplate, pressing it proudly against the wall. She loved my name just as much as the sun; you could taste her joy in her chai, her lips dripping jaggery syrup into each cup as she chatted with each of her relatives over lotus biscuits and tea. Soon after our visitors left, she fell to the floor in namaskar. I could hear her recite an old-fashioned prayer for prosperity and protection; it struck me harder than I'd like to admit. I'll follow it for as long as she lives.

2. 1972—

I didn't mind getting dirty. The cracks that coursed through my alabaster floors looked more like banyan trees than mistakes. The chips of paint picked off reminded me more of the culprit than my patchy walls. Sharada had a beautiful family, with lovely daughters and sons that enlivened my rooms. I started to smell like jasmine incense and warm sandalwood in the living room and ghee in the kitchen. I didn't mind these dichotomies in me; they weren't at odds with Sharada's prayers or contradicted my name. My existence amplified the family, bringing them closer to one another regardless of any man-made boundaries they held.

3. 2026—

My roof has been haphazardly patched up with cardboard by uncles who rarely visit. They don't smile at my golden name plate or my garden; in fact, they both were taken away by feverish descendants when she died. Really, I know what these men want; I shouldn't act like I don't hear the sounds of revving Suzuki's or car horns in the distance. Their brows furrow as they speak to one another in urban drawl, hurriedly barking at each other as if their time is worth a crore. They're both young, though with full, dark mustaches that make them years

older, harder. I can see Sharada's fiery passion in their eyes, only tinted with veiled green and yellow. "Kaallake takkanthe nadiabeku, tallake takkanthe kuniabeku." One should change with time and dance to the tune. If time demands change, let it be thoughtful. If one must dance, let it be in step with memory. I'm still listening to her prayer.

Poetry

A New Beginning

by Ailani Nelson

Pennsauken High School, New Jersey

A New Beginning

For far too many years we've been talking and talking about what we're going to do.

Talk is cheap.

Let your feet meet the words your lips speak.

Let the power within you subdue you.

Focus on what's in front, not behind you.

Get wise.

Pick your head up young black boy.

Let your eyes meet the sky.

Better look up, not down.

Make your knees kiss the dirt.

Send those words up to Heaven, let Him heal your hurt.

Your prayers will surely come to pass but you must,
give Him all you got.

Stop chasing what's hot.

You were created to be a leader.

Don't let the world consume you.

Show them the real you.

Like Me

he was seventeen like me
on the verge of adulthood
taking small tastes of the independence
that would soon come

he was seventeen like me
going out to the convenience store for a snack
just like I do

like me
he was returning home
entered his room and took his headphones off
and ate his snacks

wait, no
that's what I did

unlike me
he did not make it home

unlike me
he did not get to call his friends again

unlike me

he does not get to fully experience seventeen

unlike me
he does not get to reach adulthood

at seventeen
just like me

trayvon martin was shot and killed
for being black

seventeen like me
black like me
easily could have been me
murdered
simply because of the color of my skin

I will not sugarcoat it
I will not twist the story for your comfort

you will hear my words
my words that speak only the truth
the truth that many can't accept

our nation is not just
it is racist
and prejudice
and stratified

adults refuse to acknowledge
the wrongdoings of this country

claiming
they don't see color
not realizing how truly distasteful that statement is

because
if you don't see color
then you don't see me
and I deserve to be seen

I will continue to say their names
those who are black like me
were kids just like me

Emmett Till
Sinzae Reed

Fanta Bility
Vincent Belmonte
Trayvon Martin
and so many more

The Pawn's Strings

by Anvesha Sachan
Clarksburg High School, Maryland

The Pawn's Strings

The first line of defense
But I'm first out of mind
No one's priority
Always being left behind

Offer me up to die
Distraction in disguise
Only thing I am is
Just a sacrifice

I'm not a person just one of the pieces
Something to push around as She pleases
Doesn't bat an eye, sending me to die

I feel so small in the grand scheme of things
A pawn in a game of queens and kings
Only thing I do is dance to Her whims
As She moves me like a puppet on strings

I might die first cause I'm expendable
Or die last cause I'm not that valuable
What's worse? Dying first? Or being left for last?

Wanna be left alone
Stop playing with the pawn
Wanna be like the queen
Powerful, free and strong

My ticket to freedom;
The power of the crown
One day I'll have it
I'll make Her bow down

I don't wanna fight in this endless war
Don't know why or who I'm attacking for
Infinite cycle, death and revival

Don't want a part in the grand scheme of things
I'm tired of this game of queens and kings
I've had enough of dancing to Her whims
Won't be treated like Her puppet on strings

Gonna break free and prove that I'm stronger
Not gonna listen to Her any longer
Weaving, my strings, of fate, destiny, I'll create

PAWN D FIVE!

Stop controlling my life!

PAWN D FOUR!

I won't take any more!

PAWN D THREE!

I won't let you use me!

PAWN D TWO!

I will break free of you

PAWN D ONE!

Have . . . I . . . won?

Times are changing and I am not the same
I won't be a pawn in anyone's game
It's time for my reign, power in my veins

I'm important in the grand scheme of things
No longer a pawn, I'm next to the king
But even though, I still dance to Her whims
I'm a queen, not Her puppet on strings

There is no escaping the grandmaster
She's my jailor; there's no getting past Her
She's holding the reins, the queen is in chains

Puppet on strings
Dance to Her whims
Puppet on strings
Dance to Her whims

Broken Machine

A line of code is all it takes
One flaw and everything breaks
You must be perfect, no mistakes
You have to understand these stakes

No one can know I'm broken
Or I'll be scrapped forever
It's a promise unspoken
There shouldn't be an error

There's no need to debug or repair
Just shove it in a corner somewhere
Or throw away the faulty software
This is a failure; no need to share

Need to become one of her close few
I can't let her see the exposed view
That's not working how its supposed to
If this keeps up I'll be disposed too

There's something wrong with my system
An anomaly in the algorithm
I have one function, one singular purpose
If I can't do that, does that make me worthless?

A virus has broken in through my firewall
CPU's overheating trying to fight it off
Burning up, feels like I have a fever
Is my user here, why don't I see her?

She is who I exist to serve
Can't do that if the glitch gets worse
E-every time I l-l-lag
It's another red-red flag

Every problem with my input or display
Is a second closer to getting thrown away
I really can't afford another delay
I want her attention but not in this way

My system is going to power down
Every program is crashing now
If I can't fulfill her every need
She'll throw me out like I'm a weed

Who wants a computer that can't compute?
Who wants a speaker that's completely mute?
Nobody would want a broken machine
Look at this pixelated, shattered screen

Whatever I do, I can't fail
Perfection in every detail
I'm unnecessary, a waste of RAM
If I can't be of use, I don't know who I am

Songbird, Songbird

Songbird, Songbird, in a cage
Why don't you cry? Why don't you rage?
Songbird, Songbird, with clipped wings
Why don't you fly? Why don't you sing?

Songbird, Songbird, sing for me
I provide everything you need
Yet you're still never happy
I've given you every luxury
Songbird, Songbird, why so down?
You live in luxury, you wear a crown

The gilded cage shimmers in the light
Blinding those who are inside
Break my wings then ask me to fly
Punish the truth then ask why I lie

All that glitters is not gold
All that's silent is not untold
Poison in the air, smells like perfume
Poison in the golden food I consume
Every inch of place is poison to me
Rotting from the inside, will they ever see?

Pretty and perfect; placid and tame
My anger's a beast I must contain
Noise that's not song, does not belong
Must be their songbird, always on display
No feathers ruffled, no sadness or dismay

But if the cage opens, I don't know what I'd do
I want to leave, but I fell the last time I flew
These golden bars have been my definition
Who am I without them, that is the question

Though it's poison, I know every inch
I know the dangers here, but not out there
I would rather face the devil I know
I'm a willing prisoner, I'm aware

The Anatomy of Incompatibility

by Daniella Makoko
St. Andrew's School, Turi, Kenya

Love Conquers All

If my life were a planet, you would be my gravity
The force of nature shaping my world
You came blasting through the atmosphere
Yanking me from my purposeless floating
Pulling me back to the ground.
Breaking my sound barrier,
Bringing peace and order,
Chaos and destruction
A collision so potent it sent shockwaves through the universe
That was when I first fell for you
Bled for you
Hit the ground, and on the brink of death,
I learnt what it means to be alive
They say Love conquers all
And just as so you invaded
An attack so well calculated the first city fell in seconds
And just like that you won the first battle in this War
They say Love is a battlefield
One we have fought on more times than I can remember
The first time we met, you hit me so hard I forgot how to breathe
An impact so powerful I coughed up butterflies
My heart stopped dead in my chest, and for a second, I couldn't even speak
Then the full force of reality tumbled onto my shoulders
Wormed its way up my neck,
Squeezed itself into my ear and infected my mind
They say love conquers all
That the never-ending fight of lovers reaps rewards
Yet there are days I'm not sure my foe is real or imagined

Times when I know I can't trust my mind
The silence too loud, too vast
I wonder if you ever spoke to begin with
These mind games blur the lines between reality and fantasy
Question my sanity, doubt my better judgment
Make me believe this pain,
These scars, this mental infirmity
Was nothing but chemical reactions
The art and tricks of my mind
They swindle
They spiel
They speak
They say love Conquers all
They say love is a battlefield
They say love is worth the wait
Worth the pain
Worth the fight
And yet my love shone so bright I got burnt
Blinded
Bound
Broken
But in the end,
Love did not conquer all
I did

I Would Like to Say

I would like to say I know you
I know you like I know home
No matter how much time may pass,
or what form you may take
I will always belong to you
In that sense we can never be strangers
Just two intertwined souls with varying degrees of familiarity
I would like to say I hate you
But I am learning that even in past tense,
love is a very powerful thing
I am haunted by the ghost of our past
Tormented by what once was and will never again be
I would like to say you know me
But you only know the parts of myself I deemed worthy for you to know
Shards of my fractured soul that are forever lost to you
In that sense I will never be whole again
I would like to say I regret you
Regret breaking myself apart just so we could fit together
But I would relive every single second of unrelenting agony
Because there is nothing more beautiful than being loved by you
Fleeting though it may be
I would like to think that one can have more than one home
That even when broken something can be whole
That what we had was but a fraction of the real thing
That it would be a shame to never fully, truly be known
Wholly known
Every jagged edge, smooth curve
Crevice, nook and cranny
I would like to say many things
Pierce through the void of silence that separates us
But wounds have become scabs and scabs scars
And deep down I know we are no longer a perfect fit
So, I mourn the parts of me that are forever yours
I would like to say I know You
You are my home

One that I can never return to but yearn to see
No matter how much time may pass,
or what form you may take
I will always belong with you
But I like to think I have found a new home now
Without having to sacrifice pieces of myself
I would like to say I am known now
But how can I be when all the best parts of me are with you.

Strangers

We were meant to be strangers—Made to be strangers
A carefully crafted artificial hell we only discovered we were in once we got out
There were no ‘Meant to bes,’ no convenient series of coincidences that brought us together
It was us against the world
Against all odds, laws, and constants
Locked in a game of chess against Fate himself, fighting for the smallest fraction of a chance
Doomed to lose but too stubborn, too stupid, too naive to quit while we were still ahead
Sacrificed pieces of ourselves we were not yet ready to give up
Wrote you into my DNA, made you the most essential part of my existence
Learned to live with a patchworked body,
had to breathe through your lungs, see through your eyes, cut out my own heart just so you
could keep your own
But our blood was not compatible, our bodies recognising a foreign entity, fought to expel it
And just like that the second front was opened,
I was killing you and you were killing me
We were killing us.
We ripped each other apart,
Only to realise we’d been in checkmate for the last seven moves
That we were meant to be strangers—Made to be strangers
A carefully crafted artificial hell we only survived because we got out
So now we’re just two people
Never meant to mean something to each other
Never made to make something together
Never fated to fall for each other
I’ve learned how to breathe with no lungs, survive with no heart, live with no love
I am but a fraction of who I was before I met you
Before I knew how it felt to go to bed excited to wake up and talk to you
How it felt to matter, to love and to be loved.
So now, I scream through a phantom throat
Howl at the hollow, curse the cells that betrayed you
Rebel against the very biology that keeps us apart
I defy you, refuse surrender
We were meant to be strangers—Made to be strangers
But still I loved you.
So, I demand a rematch.

A Collection of the Things I Love

by Diego Morgan Vazquez

Fundación Colegio Americano de Puebla, Mexico

The Wooden Box

The chamber is filled with waves which
slowly crawl through the innermost parts of one's body,
Where solitude, despair and joy intertwine,
Where our mere existence starts to make sense.

From that wooden box, a world of emotions appears to come through,
From that wooden box a gateway seems to open,
a gateway to a dimension which unlocks at the
sound of the banging keys.

Bam! Clack! Trrrr! Boom!

Those are his words
His hopes
His yearns
His soul.

For every time I sit in front of you I appear
to lose all consciousness, for now both our bodies,
my fingers and mind succumb to your voice
and your cry only.

To say you were my first love would be an understatement,
for you, you with your sweet lullaby,
you and your singing, your shouts and tantrums,
you showed me the way to heaven.

Man is not he who invents,
Man is he who feels the unfeeling.

So please, continue! Go on! Keep on shouting!

Keep lighting my life with your charming melodies,
For I know that the moment I stop listening to you,
A part of me will turn off.

And there you were . . .

And there you were.

I could see how the lamppost's light reflected over
that curly autumn hair of yours
(one I can't see without the butterflies coming).

And there you were.

I could hear that lovely melody of yours,
Ringing through my ears and bringing me joy
(one I can't hear without the butterflies coming).

And there you were.

I could smell that fragrance of yours,
whose pungent scent tore through my delicate nose
(and still I leaned closer).

The dark night tried; it really tried.

It tried to make you invisible,
It tried to turn off your light,
It tried to stop me from seeing you.

But he who guards us, and guides us had other plans,
For he intended me to catch a glance of you, my dear.
He wanted us to meet, and uncover even the
most obscure parts of the universe he himself created.

There you were.

If only I could caress that knitted silver wool,
That cardinal mess of yours,
Or that smooth, almost polished marble that
Michelangelo could only dream of.

There you were!

I want to taste those strawberry lips,
And savour even the wildest of your dreams!
The sounds and cracking in my chest are heard everywhere now,
for the heat and light burning in my ribs has surpassed
Even he who stole from Zeus and played with clay.

And so I walked,
I approached with the determination of a soldier willing to give his all,
Because for love to flourish, my love, not even
the parting of the seas may be enough.

My conscience was flooded,
For every step forward, I was commanded to take two steps back.
Why! Why can't I do this?

But still, as my lungs suffered from that imaginary chill,
And as my cords failed to produce one satisfying sound,
I jumped off that mighty and horrendous cliff.

...

Your curly threads now fall over my face,
The soft breeze of your cry sends shivers down my spine,
Your smell, everhurting, intoxicating.

The clouds above me haven't faded,
But at least it is not dark anymore.
I don't need lampposts to see the emerald in your eyes.

Why?

Because here you are.

Three giants and a flock of flying creatures

A giant lies on the other side of my window.
You stare at him, he stares back.
His snow gown is slowly melting, as it gives life
to those beneath him.

The giant's wife is sleeping next to him,
Her snow blanket disappears at the hands of Tonatiuh
who indiscriminately shines upon the cobblestone passages
of this charming town.

A deafening whistle makes you run out,
After all, the blades won't be sharpened by themselves.
You step out with a bag full of knives and . . .

No! You missed it.
That squeaking sound is now heard from afar, much to your despair.

Anyway, the day has started.
Tonatiuh continues to grow bigger and bigger,
and a horde starts following a distant sound with divine admiration in their faces
and so like a bird falling behind its flock, you run.

One, two, three, where are we going?
You turn left, where a tower of . . . meat? A tower of meat is being sliced
You turn right, you witness art.
But not art like Monet or Picasso, but rather the art of words.
A tianguis? That is more like hell impersonated!
Street vendors masterfully play with equally experienced buyers, who will win?

Ooh! The crowd is stopping, finally!
A forest rises in the middle of this town,
Lavender coloured branches shelter little singing creatures,
Their shade guards the continuous flow of water in the middle of the . . .

Wait! What is hiding behind the trees? A castle? A tower?

Clang! Clang!

The source of the sound!
You follow the people, crossing through the forest,
The floor is intermittently darkened by their steps.
And rising beyond the canopy is yet another giant.

A stone giant.
Two massive golden crowns ring through its towering structures.
Indeed it was a giant, or the home of giants?
Heaven was right after those soaring wooden gates.

But you don't step in,
You sit back, watch, admire.
You witness how a flock of birds fly above you,
But are they birds?

No, they have legs, and arms.
Are they human? Impossible, their white wings are definitely not human

A strong whiplash hits you, you close your eyes.
The world starts spinning, and eruption starts brewing,
What is going on?

Suddenly calm, stillness.
You are floating in the clouds, literally.
Tonatiuh stretches out his hand, you slowly embrace him.

You look in front of you, and there they are.
The giant and her wife, glancing at you.

Language & Identity, as told through Poetry

by Ednakayi Martin

Livingston High School, New Jersey

Beyond What She Loves

She loves when her Hair is parted into box patterns;
travelling across her scalp and down her back.

The black Afro that grows out but never down;
stretched into kinky waves and
stained out of a shadow through fluorescent hues.

She hates when her Hair is
molded into a single mass
straight and untensed
breathing unrestrained in the air
unburdened by long tresses
tugging throughout her head
and She longs for order.

Box patterns, organization, Afro splashed out of a shadow
and into the light.

Tension and suffocation are agreeable tradeoffs,
if it guarantees rest and comfort in what She loves.

She loves when her Family gathers on holidays, birthdays, or any other celebration
that calls for indulgence in large meals enjoyed together.

The aroma of Jollof and Egusi Soup permeates the warm space of the home,
the pop of oil in a frying pan or a wok as golden Plantain and browned Goat meat
simmer and crisp into flavorful, rich perfection.

Her Mother and Grandmother bask in the foods warm but
wistfully recall all that is truly
missing from the meal,
the home-grown authenticity of the
egusi seeds and rice grains
and the plantain is grown with

some odd ingredients that
rob the fruit of its starch and
overbloats it with sugar and also
the quality of the meat
just doesn't taste the same
and She longs for understanding.

True connection with the food she appears to love, but still held back by the chasm
between her countries and inside herself.

Unfamiliarity and distance are difficult conditions,
if it leaves little else but loneliness in what She loves.

She loves when She learns new languages and their intricacies,
Different systems of written word and the unique ways they change the spoken voice,
French and Portuguese, unique to her own learning and curiosities
Japanese and Korean, for connecting with friends
and understanding language that comes in characters.

She struggles when it comes to her own,
when the flow of Yoruba and
its speed, its sayings,
how my Mother shares with her friends
words of affection and love
in a language I cannot
understand or comprehend
and left to admire at a distance
but all the while She yearns for connection,
to learn, to practice, to speak, to convey all her emotions
and feelings in Yoruba, to join in the fundamental method of voice
that joins her identity with her self expression.

Willingness and determination are powerful feelings,
if they allow for resolve to flourish,
so she can find the strength to go beyond
merely what She loves,
and into who She wants to love.

When Stacking Books

This is Not the End reinvigorated your love,
for the trauma and the grief
and the rising and the soar,
all that makes humanity worth experiencing.
she is placed first
yet remains at the bottom.

Anything but Fine found you at your lowest,
when life suddenly came to a
standstill, numb to the
indifference of time
and the irrevocable instant of tragedy.
He took you by the hands,
talked of his despair, his hope,
and gave you reason to
keep moving forward.
he is placed second,
just one place away from the lowest.

Now you swipe your fingers
across the pages of newfound stories,
invigorating adventures in imagined jungles,
fantasy and thriller woven throughout spines and pages,
pouring past each instant rush
of satisfaction, of suspense, of stimulation.

they follow one another at the top,
the first when reaching for the stack,
the highest to catch your eye,
as they stand on the spines
of the lowest books dusting at the bottom
lying dormant, untouched,
unloved as you were when
you first reached for them.

When stacking your favorite books,
you reorganize, reassess your collection
and find yourself tired.
fatigued from the nonstop rush of
dramatics, anxiety, instant pleasure
that lies in what is familiar.

Glance at what lies below, further,
at the very bottom, and
rediscover what once lit a fire
in your heart, in your mind.
Reacquaint yourself with the old narratives,
that fostered your love for storytelling
and take it with you as you travel
into the still undiscovered, unfamiliar yet intriguing
never-ending landscape of human strife and love.

How Should I Speak to You?

How should I speak to you?
Should we converse in our usual speech;
relaxed, so much that most of our words are
careless, without meaning? Merely pushed
out of our mouths as we speak with a disconnect
from our words to our hearts,
How should I speak to you?

Perhaps we should communicate with silence,
slight nods or shakes of our heads,
shrugging our shoulders, faint hums
of agreement or disapproval.
Perhaps we mask the extent of our emotions,
no matter how fervent, or passionate, or vigorous
they may feel. Perhaps we omit our truth
and instead appear despondent, uncaring and unfeeling
toward one another's true intentions,
building walls between ourselves
instead of bridges through our speech.
How should I speak to you?

Maybe I try to speak in your preferred tongue,
the language you use amongst your family and beyond this space,
sliding easily into the language of your identity
that feels like a "welcome home," a calm return
into what is constant, unchanging in your background.
Maybe I try to mimic such comfortability,
and stutter, hesitate, disarrange the language
you find so easy to convey
while I struggle to adapt it as something of my own.
Maybe my attempt to create a meaningful bridge between our speech
falls unsteady, unbalanced, trembling
with the effort and stress that has failed
to properly communicate to you.
How should I speak to you?

I should still like to try,
Returning to our preferred speech when casual
and trying my hand at your unique language when intimate.
I will allow my mouth to stumble through your valuable speech,
my mouth ignorant yet my voice and heart genuine,
authentic with the desire to understand all of you,
even through a method so simple and complex
as language.

Three Poems About Venturing Beyond Fear

by Eve Lewis

Academy of the Holy Names, Florida

Paranoia

What does the barista think as I stutter through my coffee order?
Does she even care? Or is this just another stutter of the hundreds of that day?
Does she see my shake and laugh to herself about my clumsiness?
Or is she worried that I've had too much caffeine, and this cup will do me in?

What does the ocean think as I splash along its shore,
Or as I trip on a mound of seaweed?
Does it see how I panic as a fish touches my foot,
Thinking it's a jellyfish?

Did the River whisper my secrets to it?
Or was it the Sparrows?

The River and Sparrow are good friends, you see.
Both are free to roam as they wish.
The Sparrow, quickly but for short times.
The River, slowly, carefully carving new riverbanks, as long as there is water to flow through them.

People may worry about what the Sparrows sing about.
Whose secrets are they lobbing over our heads, through melody?
Is it my credit card number, or that my neighbor tripped up his stairs last week?

While yes, they are throwing secrets around,
They're not human secrets.
Instead, it's where the best nest-making materials are.
How to dance to draw up the worms from the earth.
The tune to hum to remind humans to replenish the bird feeder.

Maybe Universal

Maybe the universe is nothing more than the manifestation of all our hopes and dreams—
crashing into one another, tearing each other apart
molding and separating over and over again,
creating and destroying every work of art,
from a finger painting to all of Picasso's work to the work of an artist who has yet to exist,
all in an instant.

And then creating a million more combinations
of color, contour, a trillion unspoken words, echoing like a splatter of paint.

Maybe if we listen closely enough,
If all of humanity holds their breath for a moment,
Maybe the universe goes ch-ch-ch
Like the beads in a kaleidoscope as it twists and turns into and over itself.

Maybe the universe is just a bunch of space dust swept under a rug.
A weird but essential cloud of dinosaur farts and star corpses.
A combination of the perfect amount of materials we'd later stack together in a table
A soup of gas, sprinkled with liquids, a glass of solids to wash it all down, and a mint of
plasma on the way out of the restaurant.

Maybe the universe is nothing more than a bunch of tiny things called atoms
By statistical miracles, existing on a rock hurtling through space
Who can't stop hating and hurting one another and the rock and everything else they can find
for more of something worthless
Only having meaning because everyone thinks it does.

Maybe the universe is reading poems off a page, in a universe, about potentially universal
things, proposing questions about what is universal.
Maybe the universe is our very existence—despite the odds predicting otherwise.

Maybe the universe is someone soothing a child to sleep, reassuring them that the darkness
has no teeth.

Maybe our universe is infinitesimally small, fitting into the grooves of a well-loved record.
Maybe the universe is the muttered 'thank you' after someone holds the door open for you.

Maybe the universe is that sharp feeling of embarrassment felt after the waitress ‘enjoy your food,’
and you respond ‘you too.’

Maybe we are the universe. Maybe we are that kaleidoscope of colors and noises, covering our tiny rock with color and sound, throwing bits of metal off our planet in the hope something else is out there. Maybe we are the monster that lurks in the shadows and the lullabies that soothe us back to sleep, the manners and the regret, the wound and the bandage.

If we are the universe, then what drives us into space is self-discovery.
Why we yawn after thinking about it, why some people sneeze when they look at the sun.
Humanity has billions of little oddities,
The almost fifty different blood types.
How, despite language barriers, a set of golden arches is still recognized and named.
Do we hurl bits of metal into the universe to find answers about the universe,
Or about us.
The Where, the Why, the Are We Alone—questions thrown around almost as frequently as there are stars in the sky.

The Dark

When we jolt upright in the middle of night,
The pang of fear still fresh in our hearts and on our tongues,
It's easy to look into the dark and see a set of fangs
Sharp and gleaming,
Gnashing away, craving any and all blood.

But with a quick flick of the lights,
A light rubbing of the eyes,
Gone are the bloodlusting teeth.
'Twas merely a blanket on a chair,
Or a cat staring meekly back.

You see, Darkness has no teeth—only threatening gums.
It tries to gnash its teeth, but instead it just makes a gross, wet, fleshy sound.
Darkness, thus, has a lisp.
Not the vampire 'I want to zuck your blood, bleh bleh bleh' lisp,
But the kind, gentle grandparent who forgot to put their dentures in lisp.

Darkness is a gentle creature.
It lets the owls and the raccoons and all their friends see without pain.
It shoos away the light with a broom
For those who forgot to close their curtain
And are already in bed.

Darkness is a tired creature.
Our eyes grow heavy around it,
Unwilling to leave the warm blankets of our bed
After it tucked us in what felt like merely minutes ago.
We're now unwilling to face the light right then and there.

Darkness is a shy creature.
It follows the light like an overeager puppy,
Always at a distance,
Engaging in a celestial ballet.
Both parties are too shy to touch.

Darkness is an imaginative creature.
It does not sit by and twiddle its thumbs
Instead, it paints the sky with a rainbow of colors
Painstakingly using a fountain pen to cover it all with dots
And lets us sculpt fire to soothe our fear for long enough to gaze upwards, past the artist
itself.

Darkness does not beckon us
Into its arms for a malicious reason
It wants us to lie and rest
And if rest eludes us, it wishes for us to
Gaze to the cosmos, to write stories,
To just exist with it

Darkness seems like a lonely thing.
For millennia, humanity has been hiding from Darkness
Telling stories of sharp, gnashing teeth
Something that will swallow you whole
And spit you back out limb by limb.

Maybe we should get comfortable tonight, let's bundle ourselves in blankets,
Take a deep breath, and flick off the lights.
Now, don't panic—
Darkness wishes to talk to you.
It wants to know how your day went.

My Collective of the Ever-Wandering Mind

by Gigi Kans

Huntingtown High School, Maryland

My Secluded Paradise—My Piece (Peace) of Mind

My own little secluded paradise,
Where I can have my peace of mind
Secret to those who even enter
And unknown to all who don't

The only place I think I've ever been able to really feel bliss,
Where nothing's wrong, even if it is
Slowly, my coming-of-age summer soundtrack will make it fade away
And I'll lean further from who I was the previous day

Find me drowning on the surface,
Watch me rise up to the sky
Fall to the sharks or
Fly with the doves
I've done both here in my secluded peace of mind

With blossoming buds, dragonflies
The Warmest sun that lights up the water as it shines
And of course, the music
Oh God, the music
Well, the music is what feeds it
Those summer songs of my late nights and mid-afternoons
And the birds' melodies accompanying

And I'll float past the sun high now in the sky
But even when I'm brought back down,
it is never the same girl who entered that goes away.

Upcoming

Every Sunday's a week closer to inevitability
The numbness builds up till it all washes over me
A sense of familiarity
I dread what I'm excited for
And I put things off, stacked in a corner on my bedroom floor
The running question keeps my eyes wide shut at night
I don't want to know what my mother might be thinking

The cherry trees, well, I forgot they bloomed
But March springs on you till one day you wake up to find yourself in June
I wonder if all this time has allowed me to find more life to live
And hope I've got everything in check enough to keep allowing myself to live it
But I prove it to myself more and more as I lace up my own shoes now
So that when the day comes I'll know I'd been a fool
For assuming I knew what the end of the world felt like

What I should have done is someone else's promise they kept
I'm afraid I'd blame a rose for a thorn in my side
And "Rose" is my middle name
But seasons of thriving would be nothing without seasons of growth
Bittersweet petals blossom bringing forth good omens for the months to come
But ever-evident of the past which is soon to come

Ponder

Ponder my nature-given woe and worth
That not even the Earth itself could shake
The mother tries to take away what she's sorry she gave us
But does not realize the simple uncomplicated origins of pain
Which are birthed from the same place as love

The Eyes of My Dream

by Ha Lam Nghi Tran

Brookwood High School, Georgia

The Eyes of My Dream

I sit alone and dream, and dream,
And dream of eyes so bright,
That shine like stars in endless blue,
A beacon in the night.

If they were mine, how grand I'd be,
How loved, how seen, anew—
No more the shadow in the dust
No more the feeling blue.

But mirrors tell a different tale,
A face too dull, too plain,
The marigolds that bow their heads,
Their roots so parched, so strained.

The luring dimples on Shirley's face,
They twirl, they spin, they gleam,
Yet still my own reflection fades—
A shadow lost in dream.

Blue-eyed girl, are you still blind?
Did I become like you?
Or does the mirror laugh and twist,
And split my world in two.

And so I close my weary eyes
And dream, and dream again,
For only in that endless blue
Forever and ever, Amen.

The Exile of My Voice

by Kelly Tenempaguary

Jose Marti STEM Academy, New Jersey

The Exile of My Voice

Fingertips pressing against the keys
Hunting each line for a flaw
One comma missing, one run-on—shame

A line—surpassing my reach, they say
Accused—words leaving my lips seem muted
Scolded—hands fidget, body sinking ever deeper
Exposed—the walk of grieving shame

Several eyes digging into my back
Searching for secrets—there are none
Creativity exiled to the domain of technology
No spark may grow, for all is suspected

Watching as it burns
Until nothing remains

Flicker

Hidden in a corner.
Barriers in between.
A thought trembles,
Unsure. Terrified. Worried.

It rises, and rises, and rises,
Quiet, almost consumed by doubt.
Unexpected, yet it yearns to be acknowledged,
To be heard.

It evolves rapidly,
Determined to be seen.
The barriers begin to crack.
No longer can it remain in the shadows.

It Has Risen

Freed from the confines of the shadows.
No longer buried.
No longer hidden.
No longer trapped.

No barrier can hold it back,
For it has gained its fire,
That will not be stripped away evermore.

Permanently Damaged

by Lian Cohen

Jewish Leadership Academy, Florida

Permanently Damaged

your eyes haven't shut,
they haven't opened,
but there's already an image
dug deep beneath the lid
the scratches unhealed,
bleeding
seeping,
soaking up your sockets
until they erupt
with thick, red drops

a reflection
triggers a reflex
far beyond the muscle and skin.
it's within your organs,
surrounding the nucleus,
manipulating your mind
from miles below

the skin once touched
with love
is scarred with red—
tugs and scratches.
your own hands are all it knows,
the only ones
who have control.

eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds,
fourteen hundred forty minutes,
twenty-four hours,

three hundredand sixty-five days,
the clock runs
despite your echoes.
all the breath
left in you
wasted on a clock
out of control.

you've lost.
your home
stolen and shut.
close your eyelids
let go
lose yourself
you just might
wake up
different,
healed.

the red is covered up
with chunks of skin,
days wasted
in front of that once
feared blue light
but it will never heal
it's etched too deep.

control begs,
sobs as you stuff
it away.
the thoughts
hidden beneath
globes of thick stew.
bubbles boil beneath the body
blistering your flesh.

the fearful sun
shines
forced to think
and see
each scar left behind

wrapped around,
gripping tight—
not for support,
for solace
mourning its old pattern.

your fingers
trail across,
new rips and tugs
red rushes through each stretch.
each cell
wrapped so tightly
they could pop at any moment

you will never wake up
to see that same stranger
looking back at you.
never will existing
feel the same.
never will your steps,
your hair
walk as weightlessly,
blow as beautifully
permanently damaged.

Things of Lilt

by Matthew Witten Selfa

Fundación Colegio Americano de Puebla, Mexico

To: a friend crying through my telephone screen Consolation

I gave a heartfelt compliment
yet, this only seemed to add to your lament
through soft and teary eyes, you simply say
thank you so,
you make me cry,
and though you cry no longer
for your hopeless, dire scenario
I haven't made you feel much better

and furthermore,
the only thing I think to say
is that it's all going to be okay
when we both know
that to say so is naivety
I did not once properly convey
all the things I truly meant to say

my puny attempts
to comfort and to validate
have all come to naught
and still, you are fraught
with tears, distraught
and this truly breaks my heart
because I love you so
because I know
that if ever I was in a dire, hopeless situation
your words of consolation
would lift me from my bitterness
would lift me from my tearyeyedness

your embrace would comfort me
oh so very easily

so the best that I can do
completely undeserving of you
is this poem
just to let you know
that I wish I could console
just to bring some comfort unto you
to remind you that I care for you
that you'll always have my infinite affection
and in hopes that it will offer you
some minor consolation.

To: regret, idealization & recollection
Till the very end of days . . .

I once knew someone
who could turn my mind to haze
whenever in the pleasure
of her unrelenting blaze

whenever in her presence
my days would always turn
into an intense swirl
pure rejuvenation.

when captured in the confines of her gaze
held by the ceaseless nature of her praise
I could live till the very end of days

yet when my moment came
cowardice took the reigns
I hid within the comfort of my den
when I should have kissed her. There, and then
now, what could have been
comes fleeting by me once again
watching possibility
furl its golden finger at me
gives rise to burning pain
my thoughts only beset
with self loathing and regret
and all of this in vein
for I can only think and say
I could've lived till the end of days

To: thinking too much
The buffoon.

There's a little idiot in my mind
he's such a riot
I quite like him when I need to unwind
I can't deny it
I can never really seem to keep him quiet

A small buffoon burrows in my brain
when I think too much
He's my lone constraint
sometimes in his clutch he drives me insane
for uncomfortable truths he does ordain

A small buffoon resides within my mind
he just tells me lies
but sometimes he's my soul's only gate
he speaks a fate innate
but I hope he never dies
for when nothing seems to find me in the silence
when I become a victim to compliance
when darkness swells and renders me blind
it's him I find

To: brokenness and warmth (when you're leg's broken)
In your brightness and your blues

You belong among the flowers
so much depth within your hues
like a rose that's bathed in starlight
In your brightness, in your blues

Like a tulip bright as day
such beauty you convey,
in your radiance, in your fears
all throughout your years

Like a blossom before winter
the cracks begin to show
you're fragile and you're cold
you move from to and fro
you're broken and your wilting
but despite all this you grow.

So if you're fires been fed
and swashed asunder
when you're spirit's carried over yonder
and all that's left to ponder
is the nature of your dearest
take comfort in my warmth.
For I am here.

To: shaking it off (the bad thoughts that is)
A Rusty Scythe

The heft of rusty scythes gives way to the reformed
seething sentiments are put aside
for all feelings of delight
gave way to pain and passions not forthright
adoration to the side is lain
and dismay shaken off
so the soul can stay tame

but sweet melodies bring memories
of old regrettable refrains
the remains of all not meant to be
are the tears and heartstrain
brought on by memories
and thoughts that stain
my peace of mind.
the thoughts that weigh.
that weigh.
that weigh.

they're all old rusty scythes,
Tinged
with nostalgia at their tips
Rusty
with false promises of paradise and bliss
Teeming
with sorrowed, longing wistfulness
Laced
with imposed flaming feelings of disgrace
Lavish
in bittersweet disdain and
Pain
Pain
Pain

The rusty Scythes impale me,
I drag them in a field of grain they cannot cut
they are embedded in my frame
they are a fervent need for Pain
They are my Bane
that must be ripped out
then from the bleeding wound
meaning must be sift
so I may be endowed
with scars
such precious gifts!

La Migra

by Natalia Esparragoza

Fundación Colegio Americano de Puebla, Mexico

La Migra

My dream since I was little is not what I imagined,
I am not respected even though I work like no other,
My wife is so ashamed, but not as I am of myself,
I can see it in my eyes, as I pray to the mirror at night.

My kids don't know me, nor do they understand me,
They all speak English, and I hate that it was my doing,
They go out to parties with their dyed hair to blend in,
And they blame me for not belonging there or with me.

I resent the children that I have brought into this world,
They have a father to blame and to ignore every Sunday,
They don't have an accent and can step over our Spanish,
And they get to live their little lives as I always wanted.

But I also know that I am a bad father,
I am taking away what they should have,
Without any opportunity to get to know me,
So they can only sit alone every morning,

My children will go to college with my pain in their essays,
They will talk about my suffering as if it were theirs,
About how close and different I feel when I speak,
What it is like not to belong and to always be afraid.

Even though they will never be afraid of a word,
They will never just freeze at a sentence,
My kids will grow up just as I wanted them to,
Fearless when someone screams 'La migra.'

The Creek Flows, but the Path Widens

by Paige Lane

Western Albemarle High School, Virginia

If Only You Were Like Them

If only you were like them,
Like those people who have what you want, hold what you wish you held.
You wish you could change, but you can't.
Because what if you make the wrong choice? What if you ruin your life with this decision?
You mustn't change. It's too risky.
The unknown is too dangerous, too uncertain, too slippery, like a flooding creek after a storm.
And you do not want to be swept away in that storm.
You are stable where you are, and although you dream, any thought is quickly shot back to the depths of your consciousness before it comes to light.
But some thoughts may slip through the cracks of a forced focus.
They will whisper to you, but you will ignore them. They hold no value.
You see others do what you want, but you will not join them.
Avoid the distraction of a different life. It's dangerous to think of such a shift.
You'll lose focus on your future, the future that you surely know is arriving soon . . . soon-ish.
The future that you know will be yours, because that is what everybody has told you.
They've told you how to act, where to go, and how to live your life.
And that's okay, because there are so many of them, so they must be right . . . right?
But seeing others make it farther than you, spending a life full of excitement,
Makes you anxious. Because maybe that could be you one day. Maybe you could change.
But you won't. And you must.
You will not change. For one reason or another, the time will never seem right.
And your feelings will fade away, only the sparse remnants of hopes of change will stay.
You'll see the others do it, but will never make the jump to the other side of that flooding creek.
If only you were like them.

The Surge

When you wake up that one morning, you will feel a great surge
The sun will not yet be awoken, and the birds will not yet be chirping their tune,
But you will be.
You will immediately recognize this surge, and understand its meaning.
Although you may not want to understand it, or try to block it out,
It will not go away.

It will remain in the back of your mind, for the rest of the day, until you believe its presence has
been crushed, and now you can move on with your life.
Ticking like a clock, it shall return, only growing larger by the hour.
It mutters, it whispers, it speaks, it yells.
You want this surge to vanish, only a nightmare, a brief moment of discord,
But it will not disappear, no, not until action is taken.
You do not want to change.
Your life is good. It's stable. It's okay. It could continue like this. . . . Maybe.
But the surge says to change.
It says that you must go, escape this "okay" life.
And it's not letting you free.
No, it's fighting like a trout making a journey upstream, up that flooding creek.
Fighting like it knows that you must reach a better life.
You're tired of living a life full of maybes.
A life full of wishing you had changed earlier, but never changing now.
A life of looking at others, comparing, wishing as though you were like them.
Maybe . . . the surge has a point.

They Might

But what shall they think?

For they only know you as one thing. Not this new character.

And what if they react in such a way that you will doubt your entire decision?

And they might tell you no, can't be, you must go back.

But will you go back?

Because you feel good. You feel great. This is where you were supposed to be.

But is it?

Because they might tell you that you've lost your path, it goes a different way than this.

Your path doesn't involve this change, because it's your path, for you. And you don't change.

But you do.

You were tired of your old life, it had too much consistency.

Not much to remember, not much to expect.

This new life brings color back to the world. There is music once again.

But they don't know that.

They will yell to turn back. The journey ahead isn't safe! It's uncertain where you will end up!

But that is the point.

They will discourage you. However, they don't see what you see.

They don't see the vibrance returning to your vision. The sound returning to the Earth.

They don't know any of it.

But that is okay.

And maybe they will support you in your journey.

Give you advice, push you to keep exploring.

Praise your efforts in your new hobbies, your new interests, your new identity.

For if they don't,

Then were they ever truly there in the first place?

Beyond What You Dreamed

And now that you have changed, you understand it.
You do not feel limited anymore.
Your new personality feels like you.
Like this is how it was supposed to be.
And whatever you changed, no matter how large,
It has left you different. A good different.
You no longer find yourself in a constant state of comparison,
No longer gazing through the window of possibility.
There may be challenges, however these will pass,
And these frustrations should not discourage you.
You have escaped your life of consistency, now having found a new way to enjoy life.
Your perspective has changed, and maybe things aren't so bad.
No, things aren't so bad anymore.
For you no more find yourself comparing yourself to the others.
You've become the person you once thought impossible.
The days have grown longer, and the path has grown wider. Maybe there is more out there.
So why stop here? Why limit yourself? You know how that ends up.
So you don't limit yourself. You keep going. Until you become the best you can be.
Which is never. Because this implies a finite end, which does not exist for you now.
The world has opened its gracious arms for you, and only you, my friend.
The world is restlessly awaiting to see what you will become.
And it knows you are ready to see it too.
So, come on, do not wait any longer.
Do not hold back your future anymore.
Become the person beyond what you dreamed.

Drafts of the Unfamiliar and Other Discoveries

by Rose Blackman

The Woodlands College Park High School, Texas

In Five Years

In five years, where will you be?
I suppose I'll be off at some expensive university pretending to love my life
Maybe you'll be married to that girl of yours
She's sweet, I guess
Maybe you'll have a nice apartment
A nice job
One that pays well
Just like you're supposed to, always planned to

I hope you'll still make stupid jokes
Reference long-dead vines
Keep your Star Wars posters up
I don't think I'd be able to recognize a version of you that isn't a nerd

I bet you'll forget about me
Had enough of me by now, that's for sure
My endless insults, hateful words
Ungrateful
Certainly something to leave behind when you grow up
But I hope you don't

Leave me behind
It would be better for you
But as always, I am selfish
You've been my constant
Fleeting friends, homes
Boxes stacked up in emptied rooms, long flights

Still, you remain
In permanent residence

Until you leave
To live the life I dare to dream of
I have never thought it was fair
To me, to you
Not sure you do either
But I suppose, with all we've done, with what has passed

You deserve it
Maybe I never will.

Tan Walls

when you've been everywhere, there's nowhere to go
nothing new to explore
when no imagination is necessary
to picture every piece of the land, it becomes bland
a plain room
tan walls
gray furniture
dust settling along the singular shelf on the northern wall, home to
a half-burnt bath and body works sea salt coast candle and an ontario snow globe
there is no other room, there's nothing new to see
you lie on the stained couch, exhausted from nothing
scrolling, watching, maybe even reading
waiting
what are you waiting for

for more?
more to explore
more to see, but there is no more
it's a square room
a popcorn ceiling
there's a crack in the floorboards by the tv
what are you waiting for

you keep living
are you living
living requires a purpose
to reproduce, to move, to die, to create, purpose
purpose is to explore
explore the world
explore the mind
the mind
where are the cracks in the logic
stains on the emotion

dust on the memories
are the walls tan?
plain
what are you waiting for

Optimism is for losers

What if I told you the truth.
If I said the depth of the matter, didn't lie.
They aren't lies, just, *protection*.
I tried once, I really did.
Through tears and terror, I spoke the indescribable.
I regret that now.
Maybe this time it will be different.
Maybe I can explain it better, you could understand.

I think you could understand.
But I don't know, how could I.
I'm not sure what I thought would happen last time.
That you would cry with me, ask me what I need.
Thank me, for giving up the truth.
I guess that is what I thought.
Clearly, I was wrong.

I'm not sure why I am still holding onto the hope of change.
The chance, the possibility, no matter how slim.
It's inspiring.
The unknown is the undecided, so maybe you *can* change.
Or I will.
I don't know, and that makes me feel invincible.
Optimistic.
Not a word I am called often.

Optimistic.

What if I didn't need to protect myself from my own heroes, my demons.
I could carry my terror with comfort.
There's only so much comfort in possibility, maybe I will keep trying.
Don't *lie*.
There's nothing loose, right?

Home is where the air is clean

For years, home was a foreign idea
There was no place, no country I could return to
None were mine
I found pieces of home in my family, in my books, in school
In the only things that stayed constant across the world
But as more time passed, I began to notice other constants
The breeze on a warm day in the Ulsan parks
The clean smell of ferns and trees in Taroko
The peace of the dry wood in Huntsville
The living and dying of all things as they should be
And the older I got, these became my home
Whenever I felt out of place, unwanted, the forests were there
I could sleep under the stars, real stars that I could see
Covered in dirt, inhaling smoke from a small fire, alone and away from everything
Free to sing loudly with the birds, to dance poorly in the breeze
No strangers to judge my voice, my body, my words: my broken Mandarin, Korean

But here there are no stars
Here it is loud
Loud, loud all around, tense with too much
Too much light, too many words, too many expectations
No green in sight
I want to go home
To the woods
To run and never look back
To live and to die as it should be
Every time I go, it's harder to leave, harder to let go
But I will wait
For years, I will wait
Not lost now that I know where I can return
So, when the time comes
I'll find my home.

Water of Life

by Sophia Botea

Livingston High School, New Jersey

Tinumatua's Story of Vai

The breeze of the palm trees that sweeps the warm sand
Waves crashing rhythmically on the serene beach
A little girl rushes to her tinamatua's^[1] house, awaiting her warm aura and wisdom of experience
The elderly lady's voice whisks the little girl away to the past . . .
She tells of the commotion and laughter that had once echoed throughout the villages past the calm lakes of Samoa
These lakes used to be remembrance of the past
Every warm breeze and every soft splash of a red-headed parrotfinch taking a drink
Reminded of the past, where the gods were worshiped and sacrificed
Water that cleansed them all was the gift of Atua^[2]
But soon the cleansing water was taken from them
They no longer were able to protect and control the source of their faith
Debt slowly increased and the minds of all were wary for the future
Contamination was brought along with the deafening blaring of the cyclone alarm
Worries of disease rather than disaster
Demolished houses were not the overlooming dread on the horizon
But "Vai! Vai! Vai"^[3]!
The expenses added up and destruction toiled
Sanitation was not accessible for 70% of the citizens
The minds of all wandered with possibilities
Unstable finances meant unstable access to the God given right of water
The culture slowly diminished, along with the rights
But it will never be forgotten

The little girl listened in wonder
And she believed

^[1] grandma; ^[2] God; ^[3] water

Water

Water is life

It holds the key to all life

The breeze is shifting as animals graze the prairie, their breath quickening

As night approaches

It is dark

Too dark to see the face in front of you, but you hear the crashing of the waves

On the beach splashing against the shoreline

You know

that underneath the waves their lies

The unknown.

A Collection on the Eternal Journey: Yourself

by Thomas Du Fief
Hebron High School, Texas

The Sidewalk

My business-casual attire clings
to my chest in a funny way;
my black, boxy shoes scrape across
the crumbling sidewalk,
because god knows I can't
even afford a bike.

But still, I scuttle
alongside the millions of others, like
ants to their hill, toward the
concrete obelisks that loom over
us each day as we pass, known best as
skyscrapers.

buzzzz

The thick glass doors swings open,
all thanks to my standard issue
company ID card, with a snapshot of
me, ten years ago and full of light
the strength of a candle,
plastered on the front.

And in the haven of
middle management
laid out before my eyes,
I find safety.

It is in this bliss,
a feeling not unlike the one
derived of ignorance, that
I stay until

buzzzz

my watch alerts me, like
a gentle lull, to exit this
palace of comfortable conformity,
but rest assured
that my absence will only last
until tomorrow. And so,

My same black, boxy shoes scrape across
the crumbling sidewalk as
I route myself back to the
brick-lain wall that leads, like
a river to the ocean,
to the door of my
apartment complex.

BUZZZZ

A commercial yellow concrete mixer
stands perfectly fixed in my way, surrounded
by two stewards of the rocky concoction,
clad in a neon greenish mesh.

They stand there, watching
the concrete mix and preparing
to pour it as just another slab of sidewalk,
and I wonder if anyone will miss
the crumbling sidewalk
that I trample every morning.
probably not

And I wonder if even after those
crumbled shards of sidewalk are
pummeled into powder, will the wind
scatter that dust to anywhere more
grandiose than the life it already lived.
probably not

And I wonder if the concrete's life
would have changed if it had chosen
to build a coliseum instead of the sidewalk.
probably not

buzzzz
My landlord texts me instructions
to enter the building without
interfering with the construction.

And before an epiphany can come,
the next day brings its usual routine.
Once again, my black, boxy shoes scrape
across the concrete, choosing to take the sidewalk,
and forgetting to stumble in the cracks.

The Bull

Here I must stand,
nestled between these blades,
eternal in this porcelain field.
Its wooden roots cursed
to be a decrepit, chocolatey hue.

This tiled dirt beneath my trembling soul,
is a beaten path that must only be tread
by the meek and cowardly.
Requiring a delicate dance performed,
so as to not shatter this field.

As I stay cushioned between the porcelain blades,
a bell rings its clear, golden pitch:
a visitor has arrived.

A monstrous creature, branded with a
callous ferocity, chooses the path unbeaten.
I shiver as this beast continues,
its form unwavering through the fragile field.

In a fitting rage and without
warning, the beast stamps an eager hoof,
the snow pottery demolished.

As suddenly as this unwelcome guest appeared,
the bell rings its clear, bloody pitch:
the creature has gone, leaving in its wake,
the porcelain field in fragments.
A sharp and shattered wasteland,
the beaten path long gone.

The delicate dance I once performed in this field is
no longer essential.

What is only essential is that I
stand firm in this space unknown,

even if my feet become scarred
from the shards of what was.

The Sun

The walls around me creak
with a sigh of apathetic sorrow.
It is a numbing hush that rattles from this
bland wooded floor
and echoes through my sleek, muscled body.

It is this hush that shackles my soul to
this desperate tower. A prison sentence made far
worse by these expansive windows,
forcing me to peer upon the
shore I will surely never walk upon
and the dawn I'll never reach.

It is this daily motif
that makes my waxen wings so
utterly enticing. Fused on my back
rests a promise to
hush the silence of my soul and
bare witness to the symphony of the sun.

I leap.
Willing my feathered contraption to flap behind me,
I bask in the warm arrays as
this ethereal melody grows louder.
Without realizing,
I soar higher, entranced by the star's
siren song.

The sea is cold.
An apathetic cold that reaches into my lungs
and suffocates my soul.

The current is calm.
An unsettling calm that deprives me
of the melody I was once enamored with.

Thrashing in this uncaring sea,
my last morsel of life reaches my soul
and suddenly the symphony roars a cacophony
of angelic euphoria.

My mind slips away, taxed
by these godly sounds.
And it is with one last thought that I realize:
death is a low price to pay
to behold the symphony of the sun.

The Stars

My whole body seizes
and all of the world seems to
crash to a halt;
I'm but an inch from the tracks as the
metal beast before me
comes from out the departing sun and
roars its demanding horn.

Jerked from this scene,
I am surrounded by a
bubbling energy, ripe with
a harsh, white excitement.

My eyes, clawing away from the sudden light,
are forced open due to the scene before me.
From out the surrounding energy,
an ethereal view of our
Blue Planet unveils itself.

I am among the stars.

The combusting gas that
I am now able to understand,
radiates a love
that glows through generations before me
and the millions after.

Every soul that has ever loved me
and every soul I have ever loved
surrounds me in this warmth
that I've become a part of.

My soul stretches.
my eyes drawn like a magnet
to the death before me,
where my eyelashes brush the dust off
the reaper's metal shell.

My soul,
still cozy from the radiance of the
stars, breathes,
for once in this sickly life,
fresh air. Somehow fresh against
the torrential steel.

My mind wills my heel
to creep backwards, leaving
a scrape across the mud
no more than an inch.

An inch seems such a small distance
to represent a planet's worth of bravery.
But an inch in the mud becomes two,
and one heel can only labor such a large burden,
so my other heel takes two more.

And a grueling inch after inch,
I finally arrive to a quaint
park bench, a fortress of
black glossy metal, warm somehow
against my shaking bones.

I sit atop my fortress, and notice
that the star we find most familiar
has finally departed from view.
And it is in this glittering indigo sky
that I ponder:

Has my body not walked this world,
and my soul not splashed in its mud,
as the world revolves in this solar system
and cruises across the Milky Way,

always among the stars?

CONTRIBUTORS



Josephine Akomolafe is a sixteen-year-old high school junior attending Ardrey Kell High School in Charlotte, NC. She has a twin brother and two cats that she loves to play with. Outside of that, she loves reading all types of fiction and writing short stories as well as books. Apart from writing she is a part of a robotics team that helps advocate for black youth and empowerment. She wants to be a lawyer to help marginalized people as well as an author to bring her creativity to life.



Gia Asteghene is a high school senior, and is planning on going to college to earn a communications degree. After taking a new Creative Writing class that her high school started, she learned how to write more proficiently. Her graduation quickly sneaking up on her inspired her to write this story and express the feelings she and her mother have about her moving out and learning how to be independent outside the safety of her hometown. After her older brother graduated, she went through the same feeling of abandonment and isolation, and writing was a way to express these feelings and help others who relate to loneliness after newfound independence.



Rose Blackman is a junior at the Academy of Science and Technology at The Woodlands College Park High School with a passion for poetry, music, and the environment. She is an officer for her school's NEHS chapter. As an active member of her school's varsity choir, a dancer at Boni's Dance and Performing Arts Studio, and a Gold Award Girl Scout, she is dedicated to the arts and her community. Beyond the arts, Rose is committed to environmental volunteering, primarily working with The Woodlands Township Environmental Services, and is pursuing an academic degree in environmental science. Rose was a winner of the Fall 2025 NEHS Creative Challenge and has completed a two-week creative writing course at Boston University under Chase Culler.



Sophia Botea is a dedicated young woman who strives to assist her community through medicine, following in the footsteps of 5 generations of her family. She currently spends her time keeping patients company in the pediatric unit at her local hospital and cherishing moments with her family as her sister welcomes a new baby. She is actively involved in her community, working election polling locations, and fostering young literacy through a novel library program. After winning the girls' soccer state title this past year, she emphasizes the hard work, discipline, and dedication it takes for younger athletes to combine thriving athletic careers with challenging course work, passing down her experience through advice and support. Research will continue to fuel her professional growth in her future career.

CONTRIBUTORS



Madison Boykin loves to write, and is an avid reader herself. She joined her school newspaper and writes in a variety of categories from arts and culture, opinion, and news. Her goal is to evoke skepticism and curiosity in her nonfiction-based writing, and encourage her readers to learn more. She writes fiction once in a blue moon, where her work often presents commentary on societal issues globally. In her free time, she loves studying art history, reading from fictional worlds, baking cookies, and partaking in anything arts and crafts related with her cat at her hip.



Peyton Bradley is a current senior at Poquoson High School and a rising freshman at the University of Mary Washington. She grew up in the Hampton Roads area where she lives with her parents in Poquoson, VA. Peyton plans to major in Business Administration and minor in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Her path has been paved by an ongoing struggle to get her creative works recognized and published, which fuels her urge to work in publishing. Peyton hopes to work with teenage authors and bridge the gap between chicken scratch in a notebook and publication. One day, she strives to be the mentor for her authoring journey that she's craved her entire life.

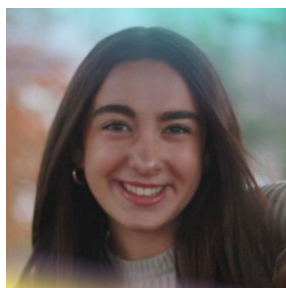


Lisanne Carvalho is a student and member of NEHS with a strong interest in visual storytelling and narrative art. Her work often explores themes of identity, perception, and emotional experience, combining written and visual elements to create layered stories. She has a particular interest in how small, everyday moments can reveal deeper truths about how people see themselves and others. Through sequential art, she aims to capture the complexity of internal thought and external interaction. In addition to her artistic pursuits, Lisanne is actively involved in academic and extracurricular activities at her school. She hopes to continue developing her skills in storytelling and illustration and to use creative work as a way to connect with others and explore meaningful themes.



Ritika Chandiwalla is a senior at Livingston High School with a deep passion for writing. Her style centers around capturing heartbreak and societal pressures, and how different characters navigate their situations. Coming from a very cultural focused family. Ritika has worked to build rich backstories for each of her characters, helping to guide their reactions, behaviors, and ultimately decisions in each piece. Her writing aims to combine fiction with common examples of heartbreak and loss, often utilizing monumental moments in many people's lives to make it more understandable. Through her exploration of grief, Ritika delves into what impacts people's emotions and response to trauma.

CONTRIBUTORS



Charlotte Coggshall is a junior in high school, attending Rumson Fair-Haven Regional High School. Charlotte enjoys both writing and reading and is an active member in her school's National English Honor Society chapter. Charlotte's favorite school subject is English due to the amazing teachers and classes she has experienced throughout her high school years. When she is not in the classroom, Charlotte enjoys running and is a co-captain of her school's Girls Cross Country and Track & Field teams. Charlotte always enjoys going to the beach, shopping, baking and most importantly spending time with family, friends, and her new puppy.



Lian Cohen is a high school student in her junior year. She has always taken an interest in English and has grown both into her voice and potential throughout her high school years. She has been an active member of her school's NEHS committee since its inception, running three annual "Open Mic Nights," tutoring students in literature, and engaging in meaningful literary competitions. Lian hopes to continue deepening her English education and possibly pursue the subject as she moves on to college. Leaving behind a well-established NEHS is of utmost importance to her as one of the pioneers of her high school, and for that reason, she will never stop improving and learning.



Axl Domenech Gonzalez comes from the city of Monterrey, northern Mexico. He's in his second year of high school in PrepaTec Eugenio Garza Sada, and this year he joined his campus's chapter for the National English Honor Society. He just recently became a book enthusiast after being fascinated by the works of other authors, like *The Hunger Games*, written by Suzanne Collins. Apart from that, he's very keen on academics in general and watching sports like Football, both of them. His interest in creative works has led him to participate in the *NEHS Triangle* Journal Submissions by creating *Yes, we know*, A short fiction story detailing a young boy's journey that goes beyond the world he's familiar with.

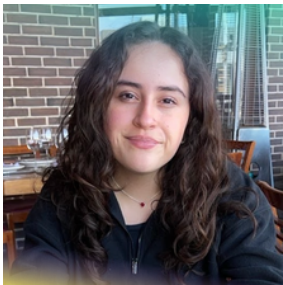


Thomas du Fief is a junior at Hebron High School in Carrollton, TX. This is his first year as a member of the National English Honor Society, and he is already excited how his membership has helped him grow his passion for literature. Starting his passion for reading at an elementary age, Thomas has always had his nose in a book since he was little. Thomas is now dedicated to the service and leadership of his peers, serving as a Drum Major for the award winning Hebron High School Marching Band. Thomas also has a twin sister, Caroline, who hates poetry almost as much as Thomas loves it.

CONTRIBUTORS



Originally from Virginia, **Olivia Erspamer** is a senior in Louisiana and most of her non-school related time is spent bowling, student council-ing, quiz bowling, or theater tech-ing. She loves history (especially American), politics, baseball, reading thrillers, learning Welsh, and building with Legos. In the future she plans to study political science and economics to then pursue a life of public service through policy and government. Having grown up in a loud, competitive, and loving family, she doesn't shy from a challenge and a good laugh when a game gets chaotic. She lives by the philosophy that you should always put in a good and honest effort and keeping a positive attitude inside and out is better for everyone.



Natalia Esparragoza is a Mexican senior high school student at the Colegio Americano de Puebla, who likes to explore literature where pain and beauty meet. As a member of her school's NEHS, she uses literature to understand human thought and the mediums in which feelings and events can be expressed through language. Natalia is drawn to stories that confront both grief and endurance with truthfulness, believing that the act of writing can make even broken things feel whole again or just honor them. Esparragoza enjoys film, music, and long, reflective moments on her surroundings. She hopes to continue exploring literature and use storytelling to make sense of what pain is through reading and knowing different perspectives on it.



Gillian (Gigi) Kans is a rising senior at Huntingtown High School. She is Secretary of NEHS, a member of Tri-State Music Honors Society (Tri-M), and is also a part of the Earth Avengers club, which raises awareness for environmental issues in our world. Additionally, she is involved in Huntingtown's Eye of the Storm Productions in which she was a stage manager during the fall show of *Nicholas Nickleby* and acted onstage during the spring show, *Cinderella*. You can often find her in her room playing guitar, reading a new book, or writing in her journal with music always playing in the background. She is excited to continue exploring her passion for writing, music, and film as she flows on in her life's journey.



Paige Lane is a Junior at Western Albemarle High School, and loves to write poetry. She enjoys running and mountain biking, as well as anything outdoors, which inspires most of her writing. She loves to write about her surroundings and experiences at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which are always a source of creative inspiration for her. She enjoys playing/listening to music, and spends lots of time creating things other than writing. She is very excited to be a part of the National English Honor Society, as she has been very fond of reading and writing since she was very young.

CONTRIBUTORS



Eve Lewis is a senior in high school who has had a fluctuating relationship with poetry and literature in her English classes. She has always loved to read books, but struggled with some of the in-class literature in her classes. However, one year she was challenged to write poetry, and found it rather fun. Thus, she has now thrown herself into more types of literature, reading, writing and reciting poetry, finding interest how so few words can be so full of meaning.

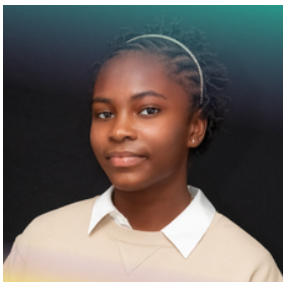
Daniella Makoko was born in Uganda and is currently a student at St Andrews Turi in Kenya. She believes that the English language as an art form has the power to change lives, perspectives and the world. She believes that there is nothing more beautiful than a well-written piece of literature, which is becoming a rare occurrence in our world today. She hopes to keep growing as a writer and cultivating her skills whilst hoping to foster a community of writers who value depth and precision in their work.



Ednakayi "Edna" Martin is a driven 12th grade student at Livingston High School, whose identity and purpose are largely driven by the stories she experiences from others and tells by herself. Finding strength in her African American identity, she walks through life with a desire to uplift herself and others through storytelling, creative expression, and video media. In her free time, she can be found reading, watching movies or television, editing her news stories, or spending time with her friends and family.



Diego Morgan Vazquez is a senior currently attending the American School Foundation in Puebla, Mexico. Born and raised in Puebla, he has a strong sense of community and belonging with the city and country that have shaped his identity. He loves the arts, and is a firm advocate for greater artistic awareness across communities. He likes to think that if he were President, the first thing he would do would be to "triple Mexico's cultural budget" and transform it into an international powerhouse.



Ailani Nelson is a senior at Pennsauken High School and student-athlete ranked in the top 10 of her class. Ailani is a member of NEHS with a passion for writing. She is a two-time New Jim Crow Social Justice poetry contest winner who also completed manuscripts for two short stories and a cookbook. Her commitment to service includes organizing projects for children in homeless shelters and supporting community events. Ailani plans to pursue occupational therapy, with a focus on helping children with disabilities thrive while also supporting parents on their journey to advocate for their children.

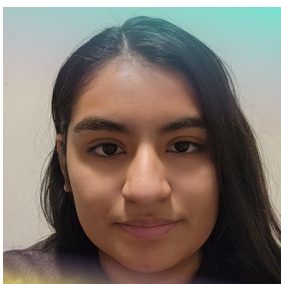
CONTRIBUTORS



Siri Patil is a student from Livingston, NJ. She is dedicated to her academic studies and works diligently to achieve her goals. Known for being responsible, motivated, and eager to learn, Siri consistently approaches her work with focus and determination. Outside of school, she contributes to literary editing for *Polyphony Lit*, where she strengthens her passion for writing and collaboration. She enjoys working with peers and exploring creative expression through language. She hopes to continue growing academically and personally while preparing for future opportunities.



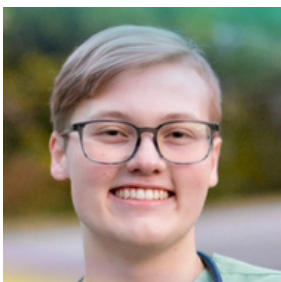
Harsimran Rai is a junior at Live Oak High School and an active member of NEHS. She is involved in leadership, athletics, and community service, including coaching youth sports. Simran is passionate about cultural representation and is currently organizing a Punjabi Night event to celebrate and share her heritage with her local community. Through her writing she enjoys exploring themes of growth and resilience. She enjoys creative design and working on projects that bring people together.



Angela Rodriguez is a junior at Jose Marti STEM Academy in Union City, NJ. An accomplished writer and scientist, she has earned recognition from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, including a Gold Key for flash fiction, and placed third nationally through NCTE. Her writing has also been recognized by the *New York Times* Open Letter Contest and the Horizon Academic Research Essay Competition. Beyond writing, Angela conducts scientific research as a paid intern at both Liberty Science Center and New Jersey City University, and serves as a Governor's STEM Scholar.



Anvesha Sachan is a sophomore at Clarksburg High School, MD. This is her first year as a member of NEHS. She's a writer and editor for her school's newspaper club, a member of her school's mock trial team, and a member of her school's forensics public speaking team—all of which she greatly enjoys. When she's not writing or speaking, you can find her reading fantasy books, crocheting, listening to music or doing a sudoku. Her favorite books include *Project Nought*, *Sofi and the Bone Song*, and *The Society for Soulless Girls*. A fun fact about her is that she loves making origami butterflies.



Ian Sessler is a high school senior at Brookwood High School who plans to eventually become a veterinarian specializing in exotic animals. His favorite class he's taken is AP Biology. He has two siblings, one older and one younger. In his free time, Ian enjoys dancing, cooking, learning German, swimming, and spending time with his pets. He currently works as a veterinary assistant and has 9 pets of his own. Ian enjoys spending time in nature and trying new coffee spots.

CONTRIBUTORS



Kelly Tenempaguay is a junior at Jose Marti STEM Academy in Union City, NJ, and a member of *The Eaglet* as Managing Editor. She actively participates in NEHS, Robotics Club, Student Council, and Society of Women Engineers, and has conducted research through Project SEED. Kelly is passionate about reading and exploring literature, which inspires her writing and creativity. She enters writing competitions and hopes to further develop her skills as she continues her journey through high school. She is committed to studying engineering and building a career in the field.

Ha Lam Nghi Tran is a high school senior with a passion for weaving her heritage into everything she creates. Having moved from Vietnam to the US seven years ago, she has dedicated her time to fostering community as an officer in the Vietnamese Association Club, where she bridges the gap between her two cultures. Outside leadership, she is an avid artist who finds balance through sewing and drawing, often blending traditional aesthetics with modern design. After graduation, she plans to continue her creative journey, fueled by the vibrant traditions of her roots.



Matthew Witten Selfa is a student at the Colegio Americano de Puebla. Writing has been Matthew's strongest and most fervent passion since he was in his first year of middle school, since then he has written a 75,000-word novel and a great many poems and short stories. He hopes to pursue his passion at the University of Texas in Austin. He dreams of his unpublished novel one day becoming a *New York Times* bestseller and, after that, pursuing a multitude of careers including writing, producing movie scripts, journalism, and perhaps one day becoming a college professor.



Joshua Wolman is a young gay man from Chelmsford, MA, with a lifelong love of reading spanning contemporary fiction to the literary canon. As NEHS President at his school, he brings the same passion to his academic community that he brings to the page—whether he's working through Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, or the latest Emily Henry. A multi-instrumentalist and composer, he plays both piano and bassoon, and has put his musical talents to work scoring his school's theatre productions.



Emma Xing is a senior at Livingston High School passionate about sociology and cultural history. Dedicated to amplifying Asian American experiences, Emma has interned at the New York Historical, where she has curated a digital exhibition on the Chinese Exclusion Act. As a Teen History Ambassador at the museum, she is also currently developing an oral history project on AAPI women. In addition to her work at SLAAYLabs, Emma is in the process of publishing an independent research paper on acculturative stress and food habits among Asian American immigrants.

ABOUT NEHS

The National English Honor Society (NEHS) is the only discipline-specific high school honor society for students excelling in the English language arts.

NEHS was founded in 2005 by Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honor Society. Since its inception, NEHS has grown to boast over 1,500 chapters across the United States and in 38 countries and territories beyond. This growth reflects the Society's success in increasing recognition of the importance of English language arts in schools. Rooted in the tradition of academic university honor societies, NEHS continues to build a legacy of excellence and community engagement.

NEHS offers a range of programs and activities designed to enhance the educational journey of its student members. Creative Challenges encourage creative expression and allow students to showcase their talents on local, national, and international stages. The NEHS Scholarships program requires student members to submit high-quality critical and analytical writing. Service projects enable members to give back to their communities by promoting literacy and education, thus extending the impact of NEHS beyond the confines of the school. New projects include the Convention Presentation Award, allowing student members to present at the renowned English Honor Societies Convention, and the Poets Laureate Award, focussed on recognizing the written skills and community-focused dedication of our students.

These activities reveal some of the ways in which NEHS works toward its mission of recognizing and celebrating the achievements of its student members. The Society is committed to nurturing a love for literature, writing, and the arts among its members. By providing a platform for students to excel and showcase their talents, NEHS aims to create a community where academic excellence and creative expression thrive. The NEHS mission is not just about honoring individual achievements; it is about cultivating a collective passion for English language arts that can inspire and influence entire communities.



NEHS

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