

VOL. 7

ALTERNATIVE
UNITED



VOICES

2022

Alternative United Voices – Volume 7

A compilation of short stories and poems from the students of
Montreal's outreach high schools

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Find out more about Alternative United and read the publication
online at alternativeunited.ca

Acknowledgements

This year's judge is Helen Chau Bradley, a writer and editor living in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal). They are the author of *Personal Attention Roleplay*, a collection of stories, and *Automatic Object Lessons*, a poetry chapbook. They are the fiction editor for *This Magazine*, an acquisitions editor for Metonymy Press, and the host of Strange Futures, a speculative fiction book club via Librairie Drawn + Quarterly. Thanks so much for your amazing work, Helen!

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Most importantly, endless respect goes out to all the students who participated again throughout this incredibly challenging year. Your creativity is inspiring, influential, and gives us so much hope for the future. Make it your superpower!

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Foreword

Identity is an elusive, multifaceted concept—easy enough to throw around as a term, but difficult to pin down in writing. The writers included in this anthology have all taken on the task with confidence, creativity, and emotional dedication. They tackle questions of belonging, self-image, and mental health, trauma, isolation, connection, loss and love, through a wide array of genres and literary techniques. Some chose to write revelatory personal essays, some wrote confessional poetry, others delved into fiction—realist, fantastical, mythological, and speculative; some ventured boldly into humour and absurd comedy, and others wrote courageously of darkness and despair. There are pieces that are short and sweet, pieces that are brief and devastating, pieces that meander reflectively, and pieces that surprise with a twist (or three).

In these pages you'll find perspectives ranging from that of an ant, to a school shooter, to a writer who can't control their disobedient main character, to an ex-gang member, to a comics reviewer, to two cats, and more. One writer generously describes a Cree Walking Out Ceremony, through text and photos. Another tells us their own version of the creation story.

You'll accompany these writers through heartbreak, the death of loved ones, interpersonal and institutional violence, anxiety and depression, but also through facing fears, finding strength, connecting with others, and reinventing themselves. There are passages that will strike you in the heart, pages that will get you laughing uncontrollably, and so many memorable poetic rhymes and lines.

Just as identity is an everchanging, kaleidoscopic thing, this anthology is as varied as sunlight bouncing off a body of water, or a searchlight bouncing off a skyscraper—there's something in here for everyone. And yet, if you do read every piece in here—which I highly recommend, you'll find that within the great range of perspectives and styles, there are many common threads—a longing for understanding and belonging, a desire to connect, and a stubborn determination to speak the truth, and to keep on, in spite of uncertainty and difficulty.

In hopes that we'll hear more from these writers soon!

Helen Chau Bradley

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The Creation of Creation
By Kulani Madhu Milardo Leduc

Once upon a time, there lived the earth. Or, more specifically, Mother Earth, or Gaia, or whichever one you prefer. Mother Earth was pretty bored, and one day, she thought, *Hey, I should create a little more pizzazz and pulchritude around here.*

So she did. Mother Earth concentrated, and an ordinary little leaf zapped into existence. This leaf fell gently from the sky above. The leaf fell, and fell, and fell, until, finally, the little green foliate laid itself neatly onto the earth below.

As soon the leaf touched the soil there was a rumbling sound, and suddenly, the leaf started to grow. It expanded, growing as tall and as wide as an elephant. As the leaf grew, a little door carved itself in the middle of the now-use-to-be-ordinary-leaf. Then, windows were carved on top of the leaf, a roof appeared, and the leaf expanded until a house the size of Mt. Everest was standing upon the earth.

Shortly after, it started raining more leaves. When those leaves touched the earth, they expanded and grew into more houses. Some of the houses were the size of skyscrapers, and some were as small as a little tree fort.

Mother Earth noticed that the leaf houses weren't getting enough shade (it was very sunny that day) and so she hatched an idea. With some more concentrating and magic-ey stuff later, Mother Earth transfigured some more leaves to grow into tall, wooden structures. These structures were held up by a wooden base that was topped with magnificent green leaves and flowers. She named these new assets *trees*.

When Mother Earth thought that there were enough leaf houses and trees, she concentrated until a substantial amount of mud appeared in the sky above, and it fell just like the leaves had before.

When the ball of mud connected with the ground below, a tremor ran through the slush ball. The mud started to expand and grow, just like the leaves had done before. The soil took upon the shape of a creature

with long antlers and a long, lean, furry body. It was pulchritudinous beyond belief. Mother Earth called this creature a deer.

Mother Earth concentrated, and more balls of mud fell from the sky, splattering across the ground, forming into different creatures. One formed into a furry animal with strong arms and a wide, muscular stomach. This was called an ape. Another took upon the shape of a long, lean creature, similar to the deer, except that it didn't have antlers. Mother Earth called this a horse.

More creatures and animals were created, such as crocodiles, chipmunks, lizards, aardvarks, hippos, dolphins, and many more.

When Mother Earth created dolphins, fish, and other sea life, though, she saw that they were gasping and flopping on the dry ground. They couldn't breathe the air, Mother Earth observed. So then, Mother Earth concentrated, and a substance that was see-through, wet, and oval shaped materialised in the sky above. She called this water, or, more specifically, a raindrop.

When this raindrop splashed onto the earth below, it exploded, sending droplets of water sailing through the air. When these smaller drops touched the ground, they expanded and grew until there was a massive body of water across the earth. Mother Earth called this, the Atlantic Ocean.

Mother Earth again concentrated, and another drop fell from the sky. This raindrop expanded, crawling across the earth. Mother Earth called this the Pacific Ocean.

When Mother Earth thought that there were enough oceans, rivers, streams, and other watery things for the sea creatures to live in, she thought of creating one more creature. Mother Earth concentrated, and she combined a leaf, a ball of mud, and raindrop together.

This new substance fell from the sky above and splattered on the ground below. The mud turned and grew, expanding into a shape with arms and legs. The leaf turned into bones and muscles, while the water droplet turned into blood, which flowed through the new creature.

Mother Earth called this creature a human. Mother Earth gave this creature intelligence and wisdom. This creature in turn created structures

and houses that were even better and more pulchritudinous than the leaf houses.

Mother Earth created more humans, and they thrived together as a tribe. They used the meat from the animals to eat, and the fur and skins of the animals as clothes. Thousands of years later, the humans' intelligence grew; they created stores, businesses, cities, and many of the things that we know today.

This is the end of my story, about how I think humanity was *obviously* really created. Thank you.

THE END

Grief Anonymous

Grief. It's a very complicated thing. It's very different for every different person who struggles with it. It can last for years or months, sometimes more, sometimes less. Loss in general is very hard. Here's my story.

My name is Samantha. I'm 15 years old and I struggle with the loss of my father.

I was 14 when he passed, in early December 2020. My father was very sick, he had a liver issue, called Cirrhosis. Cirrhosis is caused by alcoholism, Hep C, and other things. My father was a heavy alcoholic, to this day I still believe it's from his own trauma and grief.

After at least two decades of drinking he started to have issues in 2018. His doctor told him to stop drinking but he didn't drink anymore. Not too long after that, he had ascites.

Ascites is a common sign of cirrhosis; it's when your abdominal cavity fills with fluid. There isn't much of a place for fluid to go when it's in your abdomen. A doctor will tell you how to reduce it avoid salt and take diuretics. My father didn't listen, so the doctors opted for drainages. My father would go the hospital every week to get drained.

On October 26, 2020. My father started going downhill very quickly. I came home from school, and I saw him so weak he couldn't walk. He could barely drink or eat. He was conscious and able to talk though. That day was the day I thought he was going to die in our home. He didn't want an ambulance to bring him to the hospital, he wanted to stay home with his family. And we respected that at time. I didn't think he was going to make it through the night; but he did.

The next day, October 27th, I went to school; even if my father was very sick it was only him and my mom at home. Not too long after I got to school, my mom called and told me she called the paramedics on my dad. I couldn't stay at school like that, so I had to go home.

Little did I really know, that was the beginning of a long not-even two months.

It remained that way until December 2020. He would be in and out of hospital every week. When my father would be home, I would be

helping him out, helping him take his pills, making his food, helping him walk.

Not too long after those days of helping him, he went back to the hospital. After a few days of being in the hospital, he came home for the last time on December 6th, 2020.

He came home and wanted to just lay down and listen to his favourite songs; Jimmy Hendrix, The Rolling Stones, The Beatles, etc. Of course, we let him do that, not thinking anything of it. Two days after that I woke up at six in the morning hearing my mom cry and ask my dad if he could hear her. He was barely able to answer.

Days before my dad died, he was in a comatose state called Hepatic Encephalopathy. He came home for the last time on December 6th, and we called the ambulance on December 8th. They took him to the CHUM Hospital and tried everything. They had to let my dad go.

Me, my mom, my sister and grandma went to the hospital that night at five in the evening. He died on the morning of Dec 10, 2020, 1:30 am. After he passed, I couldn't stand seeing him dead on the bed, so I had to wait outside while my mom and grandma were in the room with him.

Naturally, after he died, it was very weird for the first month. I was so used to feeling the stress and anxiety when my dad was alive and sick. Now I didn't feel stressed or anxious. And I was in that denial stage for a long time. I thought my dad was at the hospital, going to come home like how he did when he was alive. Grief. It's a very complicated thing.

We Miss You Big Nanny
By Lucas Jackson

I knew that God had sent his light to guide you home
To all your friends and family
Who missed you and your voice.
We hope you're happy
With all your friends and family.
And your husband too,
Who's been waiting to see you for all these years.

To the family
That held my embrace for all these years:
I want to let you know that I miss you too
Even though I'm gone
I'll watch our family grow and make fond memories.

We hope that one day we come to see you
And all your friends and family.
And we hope you're happy to be where you are now
Even though we miss you too.
We love you Big Nanny and we hope you're having fun
In the new place you call home with your friends, and family.

The Awakening

By Ogetchi Ugochouckwu

It all began in a post-apocalyptic world. It was very grey, buildings were shattered from years of war, garbage littered the streets with a layer of soil covering everything. The people worked all the time in a radioactive environment. It was so miserable with no hope.

The dictator of this world has ruled the destroyed city for 300 years. He is evil, malicious, persistent, intelligent and heartless. Hiroto Kaiyo toyed with his citizens, killing them without mercy and ruling only for his benefits. Once he decided to destroy someone, they could not escape his hold. This is the story of the only two characters that fled his gaze and ultimately led to his destruction.

Fifteen years ago, Renji Maeko first came into Hiroto's interest. Renji still had hope and joy as he moved through the dark city. Hiroto wanted to break his spirit and so he started slowly tormenting Renji with malicious deceits. Instead of letting Hiroto extinguish his soul, Renji left the city to escape the madness. The forest was filled with life that lies beneath the shadows. He is 28 years old now and for the last 15 years he has lived a solitary life in the forest that surrounds the broken city.

Back in the present time, Renji has been forgotten by Hiroto and he is now focused on Ryuu, a young teenager that needs readjusting to the reality of the city and Hiroto's expectations. Ryuu and his family have been stepping out of line.

One night, Hiroto showed the Ryuu's family his wrath as an example to the other citizens. Ryuu was the only one to survive and he too escaped to the woods. He knew that Hiroto would keep looking for him and the forest, even though incredibly dangerous, was his only chance.

Ryuu did not expect to survive but someone was looking out for him. That someone was Renji Maeko, he always knew when something new entered the place beyond the shadows. Ryuu was so happy to see the tall figure that was looking down upon him when he stumbled across him, tired and scared. Even with Renji's intimidating snake-like furry

tail, sharp teeth and wings the boy wasn't scared, he was grateful for help.

Renji looked at Ryu and knew that the boy didn't have any skills to survive. He showed him some kindness and carried him all the way home, or at least what Renji calls home.

Renji said, "Make yourself at home I guess and do not go outside without my permission. The forest is dangerous." Ryu listened carefully and sat down. Being a loner, Renji did not know how to further comfort Ryu, so he left the home to prepare for the evening.

Renji went outside and started cutting some wood. While Renji was cutting wood, he had a flashback to his childhood encounter with Hiroto. "You will one day be mine." In Renji's gut, he sensed that this boy will bring Hiroto's prediction into reality. That thought terrified Renji. He paused for a moment and decided to prepare for Hiroto's arrival because he was sure that Hiroto would keep pursuing Ryu. Renji disappeared into the forest to set some traps, leaving Ryu to recover.

Meanwhile in the city, Hiroto was fuming. Hiroto never gave up and he wanted that boy to suffer because he had managed to escape. Luckily, Hiroto was blessed with heightened senses, in particular his sense of smell. Even after days of rain he could still smell the strong scent of spilled blood. He followed the scent of Ryu to the Forest of the Shadows where he accidentally stepped into one of Renji's bear traps.

Hiroto couldn't contain his scream from the pain of the trap. He pulled the trap right off himself. It hurt so much that he couldn't go back to the city without resting. So, he leaned against the tree waiting for the trapper to come to get his revenge.

Renji heard a muffled scream through the forest and he knew that Hiroto had found his trap. Renji wanted to go deeper into the forest but since it was night it was not safe at this time. He also knew that Hiroto was hurt and it was the best time for him to confront the hunter. So Renji grabbed his ax and headed towards the noise.

He snuck up quietly to where the trap was laid.

"I know you're here Renji...I can smell you. I remember your scent," Hiroto calmly stated. "Why have you come?"

“I came to ask why you’re hunting Ryuu? He’s only a boy,” Renji asked.

“I want his power. I need to stop him from destroying me.” Hiroto demanded.

“Destroying you? What do you mean?” Renji asked.

“What I mean is that I killed his family and need to stop him as well. I’ve seen that he will destroy me. And NO ONE is allowed to destroy me!” Hiroto stated.

“Well maybe if you didn’t kill his family, he wouldn’t want to take revenge. Maybe you started this destiny,” Renji answered. “And I won’t let you hurt him either. I could fight you Hiroto, but I know I can’t beat you. But now I know Ryuu is the key. I will keep him safe. I will train him, so eventually he can destroy you and set the city free from your power.”

Renji turned and walked away into the forest, knowing that he had a purpose. Ryuu meant everything. Now their journey together had begun.

Hiroto watched him leave. “Since Renji now has an apprentice, I must find one too, to take up my position. But first I have to get out of this goddamned forest!”

To be continued...

Darkness Is Real
By Reginald Anderson

I live in a world it is very dim and gloomy,
always unmotivated never wanna do new things,
it's always the same old,
without darkness there cannot be light,
but where I am it's only dark,
I wanna sleep, be left alone
I know that's not good for me
so I keep looking for the light
eventually it will all pay off.

We all want peace and love but this is reality
Disappointment and rage fills the air
We lose our path in the darkness
We all get lost along the way
but it happens often
Let the ones you love and care about be your light
And you will never be lost in the dark again.

The Disembodied Voice
By Lucas Arana

This is the story of a man named Jerry.

He was what you would call an average man, he had a simple life: wake up, go to work, come home and sleep.

This, you can imagine led to Jerry being lonely, not that he minded of course, he was actually quite content with his repetitive lifestyle, and enjoyed the confines of his quiet, lonesome office space.

Our scene shows Jerry typing away at his computer, a plain expression planted upon his face.

However, soon Jerry will be sent out on a journey that will change his entire outlook on life, faced with adversaries and dangerous puzzles. How will Jerry cope with the sudden revelations about his workplace and the dubious, mysterious people who run the company of Glenwood Daleshire?

We will find that out no—

“Who’s there?”

...

“Hey whoever’s out there, do you mind leaving? I’m kinda busy here, you know, doing my job.”

You... can hear me?

“Uh yeah, so do you mind leaving, whoever you are?”

B—but how? No one especially not the main character... this isn’t how any of my previous stories went!

“...”

Only tapping met my silence, my confusion evergrow—

“Do you normally narrate everything?”

Oh, I’m doing it again, well this doesn’t change anything, all I have to do is change the script a little bit and we’ll be back on track.

“Script? So you’re some kind of writer. I was never really into boo—”

Jerry was suddenly pulled from his constant typing and his nonsensical banter by the power going off.

“Again with the narrating, and also what was that about a power outa—”

BZZZZRT

“Ugh not again, now I have to get up”

And get up he did, for this was only the start of a very rigorous journey, where he would encounter dozens of obstacles, defeat the greedy managers and escape with his life barely intact.

“Escape, from what? It’s just a power outage.”

Deciding that the mature thing to do would be to ignore his incessant comments, the narrator proceeded with continuing the story.

10 minutes later

Do you have to walk so slowly?

“And run in the dark? What’s the rush anyway?”

This *is* supposed to be an action packed adventure, not a walking simulator.

“Listen I have no clue as to who you are but most people know me as the “boring” guy, so why you decided to have your “story” centered around a person like me, I have no idea.”

Uuugh, this is taking too long. Alright I guess I have no choice but to use a narrator’s time skip!

Uh huh let’s see here... *flips over page*

Alright so this goes... *scribbles*

Then here we’ll do this instead of this... *scribbles and erases*

And we’re done!

TELEPORTATION SEQUENCE

Here we are! Our first obstacle.

“...”

Are... you seriously not gonna comment on the fact that I just teleported you through half of this building just now?

“What’s the point, might as well just get this over with as soon as possible so I can get back to work and *you* can leave me alone”

Well, how will you get the power on? The fuse box is locked with a puzzle, and the only way to solve this puzzle is through the investigation of every...hey what are you doing?

“Turning the power back on.”

KERCHUNK *BZZZZRT*

B—bu—but how did you open it?

“All employees are outfitted with a key in case the power fails. It’s company policy.”

That doesn't even make sense! What if someone tries to shut the power down?

“Then someone else turns it back on, simple.”

Grrrrr... this man is infuriating!

“Listen, I'm going back to my office, if you can just not follow me that would be great.”

Y’ know what? Screw the story, I want action.

scribbles and as jerry started walking back to the stairs to get back to his office—dammit *erases* office he is stopped by two guards. HA! GET PAST THIS!

“Oh, hey Tom.”

“Jerry, good to see you. What are you doing out of your office? You're normally always in there.”

“Yeah there was a power outage again. I came down to fix it.”

“Man these new company issued breaker boxes are seriously messed up, I mean I get they’re cheap but they go off every hour sometimes, anyway you should come by sometime, man. I'd love to chat.”

“Okay...”

“Alright take care, oh let me just get outta your way.”

“Thanks, Tom.”

Oh, you gotta be...

Alright, there's no way you can get past this!

On your way through the stairwell, you notice another guard you don’t recognize, he’s new and doesn’t know who you are, and the only way forward is through the second floor.

Jerry proceeds to his floor anyway, not caring for what his annoying presence has to say about it.

W—what are you doing? You can't go that way?

“And who are you?”

hands the guard his company ID

“Hmmm, Jerry Mitchell, huh. Let me check the list here... Oh and there you are. Nice to meet you, Mr. Mitchell.”

“Likewise, now if you'll excuse me.”

“Oh yes of course, excuse me for the misunderstanding.”

Impossible... I—this... this is completely unprecedented. The character has never defied the writer this much. In fact we're going right back to the start of the story.

I—I have no words.

“Then why are you still talking?”

Jerry replies as he opens his office door

This—this isn't how this was supposed to go. Don't you want freedom? Freedom from this depressing job and your sad life?

“Why would I want to leave my job? My shift ends in an hour, and as for everything else you said, I just don't have those types of ambitions.”

“It's perfectly fine to be a recluse. I mean, I'm healthy. It's not like I have no life. Mine is just peaceful, in fact you're the only person here with a problem with how I live my life, but that's the thing, it's my life, and just because it's not as crazy as you wanted it to be for your little story, doesn't mean you can complain all about it to me. It's my life, not yours.”

So, that's it then? This is what you really want?

“What I want is for you to leave so I can work in peace.”

Okay... you win. I'll leave.

“Thank you,” Jerry says before closing the door to his office, dead set on completing his shift and going back home to keep his routine going, which may be mundane to me, but to him it was just right.

I guess I've learned a lesson today. I won't always be able to control people.

And maybe forcing people to do things against their will and then insulting them for their own personal choices is a bit immoral.

Maybe I should lessen my visions in favor of what others want. After all, the world doesn't revolve around me, I should give my characters a little freedom of choice just in case I end up with another Jerry.

Well, reader, I'm sorry if this story isn't what you were looking for in terms of action, but I think we've both learned an invaluable life lesson today. Oh well, take care and thank you for reading my story.

Now to work on something else. Maybe move on from writing to something a little more... free range?

Wooden
By A.S.R.

“If we’re going to do this,” he drawls, a tinge of doubt in his voice, “you can’t be made of glass.”

“I’m not!” She chirps indignantly, and bangs a fist against her chest, once—twice. Sure enough, the sound is thick and strong. “I’m wooden.”

He grabs his switchblade and her arm. “Just to be safe,” he ensures, and makes a deep cut. No blood seeps out. “Good.” He wraps it up with gauze. “Now, let’s go in.”

They turn back around to the oak grain door in front of them. The handle’s stuck, so she eats it open: bite-bite-bite until there’s nothing left but moss and sawdust. “Cannibalism,” she jokes, and picks at a splinter in her gum.

They step over the door's remains and creep into the dark, foreboding hallway, heels click-tap-click-tapping on the ancient marble floor. The air is thick and smelly. He sticks his fingers up his nose to block it out.

“Oh,” she says as they reach the giant melting pot. “Wood can’t melt. I’m gonna die.”

“Okay,” he says, and shoves her in with mucus-covered fingers.

“Oh,” she repeats, floating in the lava. “I thought you loved me.”

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Did you plan this?”

“No.” He scratches at his scalp, trapping sticky, crusty nose-juice in his hair. “It was a spur-of-the-moment decision.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Now flip over so I can use you as a bridge.”

She twists around in the shallow lava, flames lapping at her charry, burning skin, and contorts until she's long enough for him to cross.

“Well, aren't you going to say thank you?” She asks, offended, skin flaking off like paper.

“No.” He carelessly bounds across her, knocking her face down.

“Darn,” she says.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’ll see you around—or not. Goodbye.”

“Badbye. I ate a door for you.” But he’s already gone off into the shadows.

“Well, I guess this is it.” She spots a strip of melted, sticky gauze floating in front of her and pops it in her mouth. The remains of her jaw move up and down, attempting to chew.

At last she swallows. “Buh-bye,” she tells herself, words thick and gargled from her gauze-and-lava-coated throat. The devil pads its way towards her.

“Hallo,” it says, and pats her shiny skull. Its eyes are warm and welcoming. “Time to come with me.” It leans down to plant a fat kiss on her eye socket.

“Okay,” she says, and leans into its soft and careful touch. It scoops her up and holds her close like a mother.

“I thought this would hurt more,” She murmurs, resting her head on its narrow, skinny shoulder. She pets the fur there with what’s left of her hands. “This isn’t so bad.”

“Oh, it will be,” says the devil, lovingly, adoringly. “Just you wait.” It plucks a crispy eyelash off her cheek. “Now, let’s get going.”

Dangerous Waters
By A.S.R.

Now, finally, you open your eyes. The inky blackness is surrounding, engulfing, any and all light absorbed by restless shadows.

As you breathe in, cold steam infiltrates your lungs, chokes you on its condensation, freezing in your throat and dripping down your stomach.

The room is hot but you are cold, an iceman, a lone surviving soldier freezing in the snow. There's a tremble to your wrist as you feel around for the long-abandoned pack of cigarettes, perched carefully on the edge of the bathtub. You reach further still to grasp at the almost-empty lighter kept by the counter: a gift from someone you've never met. Your finger catches on the flame as it lights but you don't feel it, and you're much too tired to find it in yourself to care.

An inhalation, and one, two, three seconds 'til a bruised and pruney hand is reaching up out of the water to comb through short, tousled locks. Your vision, foggy and unfocused, strains to see in the faint flicker of your cigarette: it's a lost cause, and you give up on it, leaning back into the ice-cold water as silent shivers crawl down your spine.

Your teeth start to chatter but you force them still, tug at your scalp, relish in the sting. Your hair is blond - bleached recently, done twice so it almost glows in the sun, a halo made of keratin.

You'd liked it at first: thought it made you look pretty, delicate, like a modern angel. But now, as you tug at the strands, force clumps of hair loose from your head, they seem more white and grey than golden.

The cigarette slips from your mouth, soars for one, two seconds before it drops to the water, leaves ripples in its wake. Its ashes spread across the surface and you watch, transfixed, as greasy patterns form in the water, smooth and grey and elegant.

Until they're not.

Until they're knives, cutting through your scarred-up skin, scratching at your hollow ribcage. Your eyes snap shut of their own

accord, squeezing tight, tight, tight until ink splats burst behind your eyelids, but you can still feel them.

Can still feel as knives turn to daggers turn to sharks, eating you, devouring you, crunching through swollen muscle and porcelain bone. You want to vomit, desperately need to, but your stomach's empty and you can't recall the last time you ate.

Now, finally, as the pain starts to subside, you open your eyes.

Open your eyes to a great big looming shark, a great white, lovely in the way blood glistens from its gleaming rows of teeth, familiar in the stench of rotting kelp and tuna. It's massive, way too big for the smallish claw-foot, water overflowing, splashing everywhere. There's an all-too-familiar glint in its black, beady eyes, and you know exactly what it wants.

And so, you give in, like you always do: a tired lapdog, ever obedient to his master, never fighting, always loyal. Your hand brushes against sandpaper skin as you lean into it, surrendering. Let it take what it wants: nips at your shoulder, bites at the blood.

The soft, subtle swishes of its tail are what guide you out of your trance. It's a creature, a wild animal, yet so graceful in the way it moves, the way it glides in the newly shallow water.

Its languid movements cause your leg to brush against the underwater cigarette - a reminder - and your frostbitten hands fumble around the bathtub's rim for the pack before retrieving and lighting another.

You inhale, deep, deep, deep as you can, and breathe it out into the gaping, waiting mouth in front of you: white-hot smoke curls in the smoggy air, contrasts with the tremble in your digits. As you exhale the last of the smoke, it's a promise, almost, and a goodbye. No see-you-laters this time: you know better.

And then the shark is gone as quick as it came, and you're left alone, sinking deep, deep, deeper underwater, finally allowing yourself to rest as your vision swims with wetness and the ocean fills your ears.

And now, finally, for once in your life, you stop holding your breath.

A Place I Never Call Home
By AT13

Maybe the pain is endless.
Maybe there are endless lights down
this empty hall of mine.
Maybe there's a spear of death on its way
to stab me in the chest.
The weight of every gold brick blocks my way to
Breath as I'm slowly losing sight as my body
Gives in to its purpose.

The death of a mind of creativity and light
Turning into a bleak thought of desire and sadness.
Maybe these endless arms that carry me to my,
desired destination as I rot beyond their eyes
As this spear tears through my skin.
The invisible force of a broken heart as my bleak mind cannot
Remember a thought as I'm buried by sadness and the words
I was fed as a child. My words speak deeply about truth.
In the mindset of my exhausting youth.
With the power of my broken hands pick up a pen to write again.

I feel the spear dig deeply into my chest as
the inhuman body who carries me
to my wish of demand.
As my rotting body sits alone in
In this unbearable darkness, my eyes adjust.
the potent smell of my rotting bitter flesh.
I'm bleeding out in this bed of mine
As I see the light that may have died in my ears the sound
Of the dripping water.

My surroundings take over as nature shall take
the place I call home

The smell of mold in the decaying home makes
it seems as if buried beneath the
Rotting floorboards where I lay the last remaining.
Piece of my mind.

I cross the wounds and the scars
They left as I'm here seeking my ultimate death.
May the light never take me as my lost soul may never
Make me, wonder about this abandoned land I never call home.

Two Cats
By Maya Bagarallo

A park. On the top of the slide that no one had gone on in years there were two cats sitting. One cat was gray with green eyes and the other, black with dark brown eyes.

Every day they started a fight because they wished they looked like the other cat. Scratching each other for hours on end. Then one day while having their daily fights their souls left their bodies and for a minute they were confused.

“I wish I had dark almond eyes and black fur.”

“I wish I had eyes green as emeralds and fur as dark as yours.”

“It's just really unfair.”

“I think we should just accept what we look like.”

“Well I accept the way *you* look.”

“That's not what I mean.”

“Then what *do* you mean?”

“We shouldn't be fighting over something we can't control. We were born this way so we might as well learn to love what we are.”

“I guess you're right.”

“I am.”

They then both fell into the other's body. After that day no one was at the top of that slide. The children that would always play in that park after school would have to pass by a narrow trail. This trail led to three sections of the park, the slide on one square, swings on the second and on the third one was the huge sandbox where they all played. All of these kids were disrupted by those two cats. They were always so loud with their meowing that once they switched bodies the children were now at peace.

Being Lauren
By Maya Bagarallo

Lauren decided to schedule his yearly checkup appointment. When he dialed the numbers to call the front desk he was met directly by the sound of elevator music. No one had been put on the line to tell him he'd have to wait, just straight up music. He thought that maybe the office was very busy so the receptionists didn't have the time to check in with him first.

He sat on his velvet couch, alone, curtains closed on all windows, television off, and the loss of noise except for the dull music and his breathing. Lauren was an anxious individual, but maybe anxious didn't quite explain the level of intense worry he felt on a daily basis. For years, he'd had trouble calling people on the phone due to the thought that someone may be recording his external dialogue with the other person. So calling his doctor's office to know when he would be having his checkup was a big leap for him, though as of now he'd met with no one.

Five minutes passed and still no one got on the phone to answer him. The thoughts of "Are they listening to me? Are they trying to know what's going on on my end? Can they hear me breathing? Can they tell I'm alone in my house?" and finally "Are they out to get me?" filled his head. A flood of words and phrases of paranoia were all that he could think of. His palms began to sweat intensively and spread to his entire body. He set the phone down on his coffee table next to a bowl of popcorn that he was going to absolutely devour while watching the fourth Matrix. He waited a long time for this movie to come out and he was thinking that after he scheduled his appointment, he'd treat himself, celebrate his accomplishment.

After setting his phone down he got a large sharp pain in his stomach. He felt as though he was going to throw up and poop at the same time. He got up quickly and limped to the bathroom, about to turn the door handle. Then stopped abruptly when he heard a voice.

"Hello? This is the front desk at Honeymare Clinic."

Lauren gasped and tried to get to the phone as quickly as possible, tripping on the carpet his mother had quilted for him when he first got his apartment. He grabbed the phone off the coffee table nervously.

“Oh, hi. I—I’m calling to schedule my y—yearly checkup?” he said whilst stuttering.

“Yes okay, what's your name?”

“It's... umm... Lauren Linklin.”

“Okay, we’ll have to get back to you”, the receptionist hung up.

He set the phone down, let his body fall onto his couch and moved his long blonde hair out his eyes. He just sat there, with the feeling of no accomplishment being made and the loss of excitement to watch the movie he bought. The pain in his stomach had disappeared completely and if anything, he felt nothing in that moment.

Safety
By Kasem Bayram

Safety is a person
This one person
He is my safety net
He is my comfort person
He helps me feel joy
And warmth when it seems impossible
When I'm with him
I'm in my happy place
So to this one guy
Who stayed with me
No matter how annoying
Or dramatic I got
Thank you
You are my safety
Safety is YOU

Who?
By Tamisha Davy

The mirror is blurry,
Your eyebrows are creased with
Worry.

Eyes are droopy from sleepless nights.
And unmerciful fights.

Face has concaved in
With the fingerprints engraved

In my mind,
Only I see them, haunting me.
And taunting me.

Can't you see?
As I yell at you

Who are you?
No, who am I?

Are you my demise?
You're hard to recognize.

For a smirk has graced your lips.
Like you know you can let the answer I seek slip.

You left me with nothing to claim,
Not even my own name.

Who am I?

Am I still me?
Or the person I pretend to be.

DC comics' new villain *Syntax Steve* hates math
By Cynthia Hamel, Professional Comic Book Reader

Last week, DC comics introduced us to their new villain *Syntax Steve*. He is a secret agent and spy that can calculate the exact movements of his opponent. Although, that still leaves the question, who is he in his normal life?

According to the latest volume of *Syntax Steve and the Missing X*, we find out that Syntax Steve is just a normal math teacher named Steven Maxwell. Or that's what he wants you to think. He actually *hates* math. He is an undercover math teacher and most of his missions as a villain are mostly to abolish mathematics. He steals people's cheat sheets, breaks into schools at night and steals all the calculators, breaks all the rulers and even rewrites the times table.

Why do all this just for mathematics, you ask? This takes a dark turn, even for Syntax Steve. When little Steve was just 10 years old, he was fascinated by mathematics. He was actually a genius at it. He had photographic memory and math came easily to him. However, one day, one of his classmates came up to him and asked him to solve a math problem. Poor Steve didn't even know that it was a trick all along and that the problem had different answers.

Steve used BEDMAS and to his surprise, everyone started laughing at him. Ridiculing him. He used to be a genius math wizard and now he felt like a failure. How dare mathematics make him feel like this? From that day on, he *hated* math. He wanted *revenge*. He promised himself that he'd make every other kid feel like a math failure, just like he once did.

We also learn that later in the series that part of Syntax Steve's superpower is from his mathematical skills. He uses perfect coordination and uses calculations to know exactly where his opponents are at all times. He also quotes in volume ii of *Syntax Steve and the Missing X*: "I can feel the math in the air math is all around us, even in nature. The fibonacci sequence! I hate it."

I think it's safe to say that Syntax Steve is troubled in his own world and many of us can relate to him. I hate math as well and I think we can all learn something from him. Always stand up for what you believe in!

Father Freedom By Lex Jones

My father isn't a present guy. For as long as I can remember he hasn't been around a lot. He's everything I want to be but he's everything I would hate to be. He spends his life doing whatever he wants with not a care in the world about his family. I've always looked up to my father but have always been terrified of turning out like him, although his life is a picture perfect Pinterest board.

He has many wives and many children that need him but he would much prefer doing his own thing. He's always traveling with a new wife and always wasting all his money on parties and drugs. He lives his life free. No restrictions. Sometimes I wonder if he has any worries or troubles at all.

We all wish we could live as freely as him, with no worries or challenges, no pain or fear that we endure day after day.

We, as a society, envy a lifestyle of freedom, a lifestyle of happiness, and are jealous of those who have it all day everyday, but perhaps the challenges and difficulties I face, the consequences of my actions weighing down on me is what makes me grateful that I am not like my father, nor will I ever be.

My father might not have been around to teach me how to tie my shoelaces, or how to ride a bike, he might have put me through an endless cycle of disappointment and pain, but through his lack of actions and presence he was able to teach me how to take responsibility and ownership for my actions, how to enjoy the little moments of happiness and cherish the loyal and constant people in my life and that is something my father will never have the joy of knowing.

Beef
By Kris Katsoulotos

If there was beef, tell me who would slide for me
If I was in the ground, tell me who would ride for me
If I don't got iron, tell me who will shot for me
If I die tell me, who gon do what for me
And I was really in the projects I was really at my low
I ain't have no plans for college, but I had plans of making dough
Told my momma I ain't no scholar but I got rich when I was broke
My broski say he ain't got it so imma be there for my bro
Imma be there for my brothers we always had to have each other
We was grinding in that gutter I was disappointed by my mother
When I talk I cannot stutter I seen some shit that gave me trouble
I was stuck inside my bubble found out I was snaked by my own brother
He done me real dirty can't believe he was a snake
I was in the kitchen trynna bake but I had to get my head straight
Was on the corner everyday now I got these bills to pay
I was trynna chase the cake now I'm up in high estates

When he woke up it was white
By Christian Dimitrov

When he woke up it was white. He smiled and went back to sleep. A few years later.

When he wakes up it's black. He feels happy and sleeps. A few years later.

When he wakes up it's red. He smiles and closes his eyes. A few years later.

When he wakes up it's orange. He grins and rests his head. A year later.

When he wakes up it's yellow. He feels energised, yet closes his eyes. A few months later.

When he wakes up it's green. He's ecstatic and falls back into a slumber. A month later.

When he wakes up it's blue. He smiles and goes to sleep.

When he wakes up it's indigo. He smiles and goes to sleep.

When he wakes up it's violet. He smiles and looks around.

He sees everything. He smiles at it all.

Teen Romance
By Isis Redmond

I never thought someone could love me. Not for any reason in particular, I just always liked to keep to myself. That was until eighth grade, it started out like any other year.

I woke up to the sound of my alarm going off. “Ugh, maybe I can sleep in a bit,” I thought to myself.

“GOOD MORNING,” my mom ran into my room all excited. “Guess what. Remember that job that I applied for?”

“Maybe not,” I thought as I just lay there. “Yeah, I remember,” I said.

“Well I got it!”

“Cool,” I mumbled with my eyes still closed.

“Come on, Scarlett. Get up and get ready,” she said as she pulled me out of my bed.

“Okay, fine.”

She walked out of my room, and I slowly started to get ready.

“Breakfast is ready!” my mom yelled.

I grabbed my phone and went to the kitchen.

“Oh shit! Is it really 8:10 am? I start work in 20 minutes I got to go,” my mom said as she kissed my cheek and ran out the door.

“Love you,” I said as she slammed the door. I pulled out my phone to call my best friend Ash. “ARE YOU STILL IN BED?”

“Hey, leave me alone,” she said, laughing.

“I am going to leave in about 10 minutes, so you better get up and ready, meet me at school.”

“Alright see you,” she said, hanging up.

I finished breakfast and started walking to school. It was not that far, about a five-minute walk. I put my headphones on and blasted Tyler the Creator. I turned the corner and there it was—high school. I let out a huge sigh before walking in.

I pulled out my phone and called Ash. “Where are you?” I asked.

“I'm pulling up now. Where are you?” she asked back.

“I am in the cafeteria.”

“K, I’ll be there in two minutes,” she said.

I sat there waiting for her. It felt like forever. I heard someone call my name. I looked up and saw Ash. Almost perfect timing, just then the bell went off and we walked to class. I met Ash last year at the same school and since then she has basically become my sister.

We walked into our English class and immediately sat in our seats from last year. I started looking around the class to see if there were any new kids, I caught this guy looking at me but quickly looked away.

“Who are we staring at?” Ash said bringing me back to reality

“What? Nobody,” I looked at her.

“Good morning, everyone” the English teacher said as he walked into the class.

Everyone quickly got organized and the teacher began the lesson. “Since today is the first day of school, I thought we could do a small get-to-know-each-other game.”

“Great,” I said in a sarcastic tone, causing Ash to start giggling.

“I am going to pass this ball around and on it has questions. The one your thumb lands on is the question you need to answer,” the teacher explained.

He passed the ball around and everyone started answering. I wasn’t really paying attention. I was just on my phone until the ball fell into my lap.

“My turn, I guess,” I said letting out a small anxious laugh. I picked up the ball and read, “What is your name and favorite movie?”

“Oh, easy. It’s Cars and my name is Scarlett,” I said with my face starting to get red.

I quickly handed it to Ash and went back on my phone. The rest of the class went by pretty fast. I kept waiting for the bell to ring. I looked at my phone, “9:44 am. Come on one more minute,” I thought to myself. As soon as the bell rang, I quickly walked out of the class.

“Hey,” I heard someone say. I turned around and saw him. “I’m Mave. I just wanted to say sorry. I didn’t mean to stare at you earlier,” he said as he started to blush.

“Oh.” I let out a nervous chuckle. “It’s no problem. My name is Scarlett.”

“I don’t want to be so straight forward, but do you think I could get your Snap?” he said handing me his phone.

“Smooth,” I said typing in my username. “MATH!” Ash said rushing out of the class grabbing my arm.

“I’ll see you around,” I said, being dragged down the hall.

The rest of the day went by pretty fast. I found myself not really paying attention. Until the bell rang, and I basically ran out the doors and home.

“FINALLY!” I said as I entered my house. I sat on the couch and looked at my phone. Mave had texted “You should let me take you on a date.”

“Why would I do that?” I sent back.

“So that I could apologize again and get to know you.”

I texted Ash and asked her what I should do.

“I think you should go. What’s the worst that could happen?” she texted back.

“I guess,” I thought to myself. “Sure, let’s go out tonight” I texted him.

Almost instantly he texted back. “Bet. Want to go to the movies at 7 pm?”

“Sure, I’m down. Let’s meet at the movie theater.” I texted back.

“I’ll see you later.” I put my phone down and turned on the TV. I had four hours to wait so I put on a movie.

A few hours went by, and my phone lit up. “I am leaving now.” I read it.

“OMG, I need to get ready fast,” I thought. I checked the weather to see if I could wear a dress then quickly ran into my room to get changed. After about a million outfit changes, I finally found the cutest dress. I quickly did my hair and ran out of my house.

The movie theater was only about five metro stops away, so I wasn’t super stressed about time. When I got there, I realized how nervous I was. I had never been out on a date before. I opened the door and saw him standing by the ticket booth. I shyly walked up to him and said, “Hi.”

“Hey. So I got us tickets to go see the new Marvel movie. I hope you are OK with that,” he said.

“Yes, I love them.” I started to get more excited. We got our snacks and went to find our seats. “You know, you didn’t have to take me on a date just to say sorry,” I said.

“Yeah true but I really wanted to get to know you.”

We kept talking most of the night and found out we had a lot in common. He even dropped me off at home.

“Where have you been?” my mom said. “Oh, sorry. I was out with a new friend, but I am going to go to bed. Good night,” I answered walking to my room. I got ready for bed and put on the TV.

I got a text message from Mave saying, “I really had a good night tonight.”

“Yeah, me too,” I sent back.

“I mean, lowkey, I could see myself marrying you one day, you want to be my girlfriend?” he asked.

I started to blush and get butterflies. “Yes, I’ll be your girlfriend,” I sent back.

“We should do this every Thursday night,” he texted.

And we did.

Every Thursday he took me out and we would go to the movies. Until one night on our 10th anniversary he texted me, “Wear a dress and wait for me to pick you up.”

I texted back confused: “What happened to the movies?” and all he said was he had a “surprise.” I got dressed super fancy and did my hair and makeup. As soon as I was done, the doorbell rang. I eagerly ran to answer it and there he was in a tux. I was a little confused since we never really dressed up since graduation.

He walked me to his car and started to drive. I asked where we were going, and he just said, “To eat.” We pulled up to this super exclusive looking restaurant. He parked and we got out of the car. I was almost in shock and just followed him to our seats.

“I wanted to take you somewhere special for our 10 year anniversary,” he said.

“This place looks so cool.” We ordered our food, and everything was amazing.

“Scarlett, I have a question for you,” he said.

“What’s up?” I said looking up confused.

“Will you...” he said getting up “marry me?” he said, on one knee.

I started crying on the spot. “YES!” I said super loud, and everyone cheered.

Looking back, it’s crazy to think it started as a teen romance.

Last Hug with You
By Marwa Ahmad

If I could do it all over again, I would
Go back to the good memories we had
Relive our tight hugs and that warm feeling in my heart
Relive the moments when I felt so happy that I had to tell you how
happy I was
Go back to the times when I would feel pure joy when I saw you across
the street

Though I would never want to relive that last hug of ours
During our last talk, my throat felt so tight from holding in my tears
Now every day feels like one of those gloomy rainy days without you
Laying in bed with my mind empty while my eyes are filled with my
salty tears

Our last talk, my chest pounding so fast it hurt
The impact of you leaving hits me harder each day
Those looming thoughts made me realize it was gonna happen one day
Feeling like I wasn't good enough for you

The calls from people telling me to forget about you
Moments when I cry my heart out for you and you still don't come back
I felt safe with you because you made me feel how I've never felt before
It feels as if I've been torn from feeling blissful
Now I just think about you and our moments I wished never ended

Blank Canvas
By Destiny Akinlade

Born Blank
Paint splatter hits the page
Strokes and patterns form
Much to your dismay
Uneven you might say
So you scrap it for a clearer page

You start again, deep breath this time
An intensely focused mind
As the brush grazes the page
Splashes, shapes and features materialize
Your face too blurry to be seen
Under all the gray
You're so focused on getting it right
You lose track of time

Spending most of your life hiding behind a blurry frame
Nearing the end
On your last can of paint
You realize you were the masterpiece
This whole time

Naturally
By Destiny Akinlade

Born into this world
Grasped by screens
You pop up in my feed
You look so pretty
Hair, clothes, accessories
Oh, but why can't it be me
I guess I'm not pretty enough for society
To accept me for me
I'll go out and spend my money
To change myself drastically
Fit into a box with a lock
Throw away the key
What a fantasy
Trying to be more like you
and less like me
I've hit a wall
Society swallowed me whole
Now I can't breathe
Under all the pressure
Sinking deeper and deeper
I start to chip away
Leaving me raw and plain
At least I'm not fake

Naturally pretty
All my imperfections on display
But the thoughts don't go away
Not till you realize one day
You're prettier this way

But who says you must be what they say
Who are they anyway

We're all the same
Time made us focus on a face
Dig deeper, and what do you see
Personality screaming from underneath

Millions of us don't see
We're naturally pretty
No need to hide yourself away
All your imperfections on display
The thoughts fade away
You realize one day
You're prettier this way
No need to change

Who am I, When I die
By Destiny Akinlade

Who am I, When I die
Will I float up to the sky
Runnin from my life
Relinquish all my pain tonight
Just hoping to float on by

Who am I, When I die
Runnin from the lies
Who will I encounter on the other side
I'm afraid for my life
Don't know if I should stay tonight

Who are we to decide who stays or dies
Everyone has their time
Who did they leave behind
Whisked away to the afterlife
Without a proper goodbye

Who am I, When I die
Do I leave this earth or stay for the night
Indecisive mind
Agonizing pain keeps me awake
Enough to see my life go to waste
Burn down in flames
Crumble me to pieces
An easy way to hide

But who are we to decide who stays or dies
Who did they leave behind
What a precious waste of life

Who am I, When I die

Will I float to the sky
Or be trapped in pain for eternal life
Where will I stay the night

Spirit's Journey
By Abbilongo Bertley

I am learning to flow with the wind,
To feel the comfort in their breeze
To gain their power and learn their independence
I am learning to be free
Just like their friends, I am learning to fly
I'm collecting my seeds, to feed & learn by
To chatter and let my song soar high
Just like the birds, I'm learning to glide
The spirits!
Their whispers are filled with such wisdom!
They guide towards strength & magic through word
The Gods, I've yet to hear their tale
Of prosperous adventures, through strength & loud words
My soul gives creativity
My mind, lengthy maps
Many thoughts, many paths
Too many words to leave tracks
These energies,
They steer me towards jagged mountains & bumpy hills
Through many valleys that bring scars & plenty tears
But towards the end, though my soul has been blundered too many
times
My wings come back,
& I remember I can fly.

My Love
By Abbilongo Bertley

Loves

Their kindness is known across worlds
Along with their sincerity & strength
Their knowledge pulls at the heart & head
Overwhelmingly beautiful, but hauntingly painful
Evening hours full of longing,
But for what?
Want is just another one of their tricks,
Bringing so many feelings & thoughts you never knew you had
That are aching to be remembered
That pull to connect, that pull to feel so much but if even a bit is taken away,
It hurts
Their godlike status overwhelms me, paining me from wanting to move
forward.
Stopping me from wanting to fall into their embrace.
Fear is the demon that pulled me away from love.
It's haunting tongues took me in when love let me burn at the hands of that
man.
Just like love, fear has many layers.
Its tendrils pulled me through every whole, making me crawl deeper &
deeper into myself.
Letting me walk freely into its cage.
Now that my heart is healing,
Now that I've stopped digging my own grave
My mind feels empty, and I yearn for their presence again
I want to fall for their tricks, I want to feel their sincerity & gain their
strength
I want to be loved.
But as someone that never felt that, or has but my mind was too blind to see
it.
I want to be free.
Please help me be free.

Dark souls
By Lost Ink

Numb

Feeling void of care in the world

I stare into emptiness.

Lightning full of emotion, everything in slow motion.

I am a fusion of different cultures.

Now religion tears people apart.

When faiths clash blood spills.

It has an ominous feeling

.

Always keep your weapon upon dawn.

She, the dark angel, will fill you with fear.

As she sickened, a love spell arose in its dark hours.

With power to instill terror into hearts.

I was in deep pain.

Fueling my anger and my cry the night upon us right now.

The mystery of the future haunts us.

Torture of my screams purified by the fire that I walked through.

First midnight dawn is saving us.

On a Journey
By Laurie Kelly

Identity is a journey
One that is blurry
It can be unclear
And it can be filled with fear
But all the trauma and stress made me stronger
It gave me the strength to conquer
On my journey I switched many schools
And I met many fools that I thought made me cool
This led me to the wrong crowd
And looking back I'm not very proud
I started using drugs to feel more confident
But eventually I just felt like a disappointment
I started fighting with my friends
I started fighting with my family
I started fighting with myself

If you're still fighting with yourself now, please don't give up
You're worth more than other people's perceptions
And one day you'll make better connections
I know that it hurts to feel misunderstood
And not every day is going to be good
There will still be people who let you down
But you just have to keep going, and pick up your crown
Please don't give up

Fears Are Unclear
By Laurie Kelly

I feel like I'm trapped in a place of fear
And I know that everything in life is unclear
Seeing the positive can take many years
And eventually our lives become more severe

Fear can be positive and negative
And all of mine can make me seem sensitive

Even though I'm tough I have many fears:

Change
Because leaving high school makes me feel strange

Abandonment
Because losing people feels like a car accident

Disappointment
Because letting people down makes me feel unimportant

Hurt
Because people made me feel like dirt

Judgement
Because people always wanted to make adjustments

Trusting
Because people treated me like nothing

Every day I face my fears
Even though it can be unclear

What Judo Taught Me About Life

Isabella Callari

When I was about ten years old, I began martial arts as a way to learn how to defend myself, so I could become stronger physically and mentally. My first ever *Judo* competition was an amazing time to remember, it made me feel anxious, excited and exhilarated all at the same time. It took a lot of training and determination to improve my skills in classes where I trained three to four times a week. By the time I quit, years later, I had my orange belt.

The day of my first ever competition, I remember waking up to a very loud and irritating sound. I jumped out of bed, I felt like my ears were going to explode. It was just my alarm that woke me up every morning, but it was six in the morning, too early for me! I headed to the kitchen. All I could see outside was the sun rising from my balcony door. Such a warm day and beautiful weather; my eyes began to water and tingle because of how bright it was. I was still half asleep and beginning to wake up.

I sat at the kitchen table and I could smell the delicious breakfast my grandma was making. French toast with eggs and bacon. It was so tasty, the French toast was sweet and buttery, the eggs were seasoned right with salt and pepper, and the bacon was crunchy and salty. I ate super well. Each time she made it for me, it always tasted better than the last time.

Once I was done, I headed over to my room and I started getting ready. I put on my *Judogi*. That is what they call the suit you wear for *judo*, it's a pair of white pants with a heavy jacket and a belt. I was a white belt at the time. I prepared my bag with everything I needed, my water bottle and a change of clothes.

Finally, it was time to go and my dad was already in the car, starting it up. I hopped in and we were on our way to the competition. It was not so far away. The competition was happening in my area at a high school gym. Everything was perfect, the only issue was that I was feeling exhausted.

I signed up and my name was added to the list. I was pretty heavy for my age and since my weight fit the heavier group, by just a bit, I was put in a category with way taller and stronger opponents. My family went to sit on the bleachers, while I went downstairs to the gym trying to find my section.

The gym was humongous, but I was able to see my coach. I headed towards my section and I sat on the mats. I felt the roughness of the mats against my sweaty hands and feet, as I nervously waited at the edge of the mat for my name to be called for my first round. In a judo competition, there are three rounds with a podium finish ceremony at the end. After waiting patiently, I was finally called. I got up and walked over to the center of the mat. At that moment I felt confident and I was so ready to compete.

My first opponent was a boy who was way bigger and taller than me. I realized during the round that he used his weight as an advantage and wasn't actually very skilled in the sport. He was very aggressive, but I was able to see weakness under his attitude. I used the skills and tricks as a tactic to win. I was so happy and proud of myself when I was able to beat him.

Next, I was matched with a girl who was super tall and almost double my size. She was an excellent *judoka* and had tons of strength. A few times during the fight, I noticed that she was generous, she gave me chances when I was down because she saw that I was not as strong as she was. It was impossible to beat her. She was able to throw me on the mat; it was at a considerable force and speed. It led me to falling on my back which had me in an *ippon* by the second round, which meant that she had immobilized me in a grappling hold on the ground for twenty seconds, therefore defeating me.

My final opponent was a boy who was massive compared to me. I'm very petite and only measure five feet two inches. He was at least six inches taller than me. He reminded me of my first opponent because they used a similar strategy. Many people use their weight and height as an advantage, this is how they believe they can overcome someone who is smaller than they are. I learned how to not let people using those tactics defeat me. I relied on using the skills my coach had taught me,

unlike them. My coach had instructed me that as long as I learned the judo techniques properly, step by step, I would be unbeatable.

All of the training and advice from my coach made a big difference in the end. I started thinking smart and using my skills as an advantage. It was actually easy to beat my third opponent and win the round. I can still hear all the clapping from the crowd in the bleachers each time they felt the need to clap. I was feeling so confident and positive. It made me so happy.

Next came the podium ceremony. I was full of snacks and cold water, my favourite drink! Finally, it was our group that was up. I will never forget my name being called for second place and how stoked I was walking to the podium. My first ever competition and I was in second place with a silver medal!

Looking back, I realize that what I learned at the competition is something that has helped me grow ever since. It doesn't matter how tall you are or how heavy you are, as long as you work hard, you can accomplish anything. You can become as powerful as someone twice your size, as long as you use strategy, think smart, stay positive and tell yourself that you can do it.

The Colony By ADL

The daily march, taken kindly by peers before me, is a yearly continuation of this industrious colony, never stopping for a break, all to serve our queen, our existences just brief flashes in comparison. We walk ceaselessly, our tarsi exhausted, our steps a beat in this never-ending, revolving world, but what difference does our trivial existence make? Though as one we cannot see the difference; as a whole we change ecosystems.

Step by step, I march with my group lined up like a ceremony. We step on this hard soil as we stride in a direction so far unknown to us. We leave as a group of ten with me placed in fourth behind my sisters and with my other sisters behind me. Instinctively we follow Number One who had been our eldest by a year.

The clear bright skies and optimal temperatures have made today what seems to be a perfect day to forage for a new food convoy to the hill. Though the regular dangers are endless, we mustn't worry about those sorts of things for we have a much bigger colony to think of, one that we must help thrive. For if we go then, our younger sisters succeeding us will get to rest further.

But, as the endless hike continues I wonder to myself if in the end this will all lead to the satisfaction of our queen or, even greater, our absolute colony. Many hours later now, the breeze crisp, wafting us. Nonetheless, we stride as a pack when the trail speeds up, all of us seemingly understanding what this advance means. Continuing in the unruffled single file line, we can all now detect it, the aroma of an abundance of fructose in our vicinity, though the origin is still unexplored. Slowly we come into contact with the pure and delicious aroma a few steps before us, thus being a shorter journey than usual, which has been a pleasant surprise to us all.

However, the sweet smell is quickly replaced by the rancid smell of another colony in the distance, one that quickly overtakes us all as we begin to charge forward. It seems that we were also detected, as on the opposing side we see a different, bigger group of ergates that has begun

to charge forward in similar patterns. The imminent collision brings both groups together in a halt, gripping on to any of those who produce different aroma from those we had been around since birth. My mandibles clutch onto a conflicting head, the grip tightening until instinctively sending blows of hits, with my antennas each leaving marks and impact until that opposition that has seemed like such a threat has nothing left to contribute into this battle. I look around at the worker caste genocide that has been still ongoing—a dynamic clash. Detecting my kin, I surge to protect them. Looking around, only four remain of our original group. Recollecting them, I attempt to guide us towards a safe haven, assisting throughout and passing every obstacle. I cannot let the rest of us end up like them, though their sacrifice was for a greater cause and I shall never forget them. Once we are a far way gone, I redo a head count assigning myself as the new leader of our pack; Six, Eight, Three and Two and myself makes five remaining.

As we explore our newfound territory with determination, we quickly experience a new sweet pheromone that takes over our every sense. We line up once more in order: Myself, Three, Eight, Two, Six and march forward. I begin leading as now I am the most mature with the most developed senses. We come into contact with a bush, bright green and red, the same fruit we had discovered earlier, seemingly now the original source of the fruit. Delighted, at last we found a discovery worthy of praise. With a clear coast, we begin to pick at the leaves of the bush hoping to rattle the plant. As we proceed to pick a strawberry each, except for Eight, who has been injured in the previous battle fought.

Looking up to the remaining sun, we use our internal navigation to set back on the way towards home. I am ecstatic as ever at how lucky we have gotten to get these four full fruits. I believe this will earn us multiple days of feed as our colony is still growing in numbers. Our trail continues now passing by a small waterhole where reptiles have lived, a dangerous final route but a necessary one if we want to make it back before dark. I am sure we can make it; luck has been so fair to us now, why wouldn't it continue. The water reflects yellow light all throughout the grass; it makes my vision blur more, losing sight of my family. I must use my scent fully to navigate and track them, which has become

more difficult with the strong scent of the high fructose on my thorax. I just began to sprint forward at my highest speed hoping that my sisters still follow. At this point, this is all I can do, if I want to at least feed the colony a while more. Reaching the dirt pre-anthill, I look back to see simply myself and Three, with two full strawberries.

I cannot believe we made it out with such honourable gains. It's like a dream. I can even see the queen emerging from the hill to come greet us. Her presence only means we have done an extraordinary level of work.

I can now feel a swift breeze passing and a shadow now looms over the hill. A pressurized wind forces over us, down to the hill with a thud—and then... BLACK.

I'm just that: Zaynab
By Zaynab Alade

I care too much so I put the wall up to keep people from getting too close to me
No one knows the real me, some know my secrets
Some know my heartbreak
Some know my past
Some know my success
Some know my failure but no one knows the actual me
Not every house is a home
I run from any friendship that physically and emotionally abuse me
I run to change the narratives
As long as you stay true to yourself and embrace what makes me unique
Being unique is what makes me beautiful
I don't need to be fake and pretend to be someone else but *me*
Being myself is the best way to live my life
Even if that means losing some friends

Partner in Crime
Anonymous

I hate you
I hate that I have scars to remember you
I hate that you scared me
You told me you don't recognize me
But you invented the person I am now
You put me to bed every night
Not by love
It was the tears that shut my eyes
I hate you
I hate that you lied to me
I hate I loved you
You made me think this was normal
You made me think that was love
Staying up till 2am with you was my favorite
But between everything
I won't ever forget the tears you've caused me

That one time at Disneyland
We went when we were 6 and 8
Remember?
We were scared of nothing...
Maybe only the guy dressed as a big dog.
It seemed so sunny then
We seemed so happy
Looking back at those big smiles
I wonder where they've gone
Running and holding hands
What a positive memory
Running and holding hands
Trying to keep up with mom and dad
Running and holding hands
Chasing after cotton candy

Our little legs
We couldn't get very far
But I remember that smile we had
I remember how excited we were
When we went on mom and dad's shoulder
We were so high up
We could see the whole world together

Not Really
By Kaylen Cruikshank

I began to lose control
Don't know how to grasp hold.
I'm falling to pieces
Trying to put myself back together.
I don't know what to do.
Life is like a maze.
Don't really know where to go
An empty void, no way to fill it.
Darkness everywhere
Nothing to grab hold of.
Falling but with no end;
Just wanting it to end.
There is no light at the end of this tunnel.

Addiction to the world
So much to see,
To feel connected,
To be able to relate,
But not really.
To feel not left out,
And to be seen,
So we post and we post
So people can see
I am like you
But not really.

Nowhere to go
Just keep scrolling down the road
To find a place to go
Somewhere I belong
I think I know,
But not really.

But to find light
From far away
There is still a chance
But far away
It'll take some time

Three Reasons Why Butterflies Dance
By Ilyes Hamri

The butterflies in my stomach are dancing.
As the plane goes nose down.
People around me are screaming and crying.
The pilots are fighting.
My son is whining.
The echoes surround.
We're about to hit the water and all drown.
What goes up must come down.

The butterflies in my stomach are dancing.
When I walk into the crowd.
People are pushing and shoving.
I'm just trying to make my way around.
Everyone is looking and judging.
At least I feel like they are.
Everyone is pointing and laughing.
I don't think they know who they are.

The butterflies in my stomach are dancing.
When I see her face.
I need her embrace.
It's not always good though.
Sometimes it's bad.
It helps me grow.
Even if it makes me mad.

Just a Couple of Buddies
By Fiona Luu

He was just my best buddy
Who made all my problems seem tiny
He was funny and a bit of a cutie
Others thought we were lovey dovey
But in reality
We were just two dummies
Scared to be unlucky
I got to meet his family
And even his pet bunnies
We didn't have much money
But we still managed to stay happy
Even through bad talks
I still hoped you were the one to mess up my gloss
You still cross my thoughts
But I know I can't afford the cost
Of my heart to get shot apart
I have to play it smart
And keep my feelings unmarked

Time Flies
By Fiona Luu

Let's go back to summer 2020. My high school had just emailed everyone to come pick up the rest of their belongings since Covid-19 put a pause on everything. Everyone I had been texting during Corona blew up my phone asking to meet them all at the same time. That's when Luke and Junior asked me if I knew somebody who could sell them cannabis. I of course said yes and met up with them later that day. Little did I know that was the start of something new.

Ever since that day, we would always be out together. They're twin brothers, so if I was with one the other would tag along. I was never really allowed to go out for long so I had to come up with lies to tell my mom, like, "I'm at the library" or "I'm at work."

We got to know each other more and more. As my sec 3 year went by, our lives were like a routine. The first thing I'd wake up to in morning is a text from either or saying, "So, uh, what are we doing today?" as if we didn't know already. We would go to the movies high, or out to eat stoned. Our go to a spot was usually in their area because I couldn't risk getting seen by my mother. Especially not with two grown, old-looking hooligans. Not going to lie, they were good-looking guys so there were always girls that were jealous of me just being around them. Even though I wasn't the best looking at the time with my acne that just started and my hoodie up, that made me feel good, having something others wanted. People always had assumptions but our friendship was strictly just friends. Even though I did have a tiny little crush on Junior. We would always argue over the dumbest things but make up the next day. They were always so mean to others but had a soft spot for me so I knew that they actually liked me as a friend.

Fast forward, the school year just ended and I passed with bare minimal grades. My mom wanted to treat me to a room makeover because my room used to be colourful and had kid-like decor. I just had to get an upgrade so that I could have people over and not be embarrassed by the Dora the Explorer bed sheets.

After getting my new room I let the twins in my apartment for the first time. My mother never let me have my friends over so this was my first time having anyone over. I let them in an hour after my mom left to go to work. We were just chilling and rolling, ready to go outside to smoke. Then Junior asked if we could just smoke in my room since I had a big window already open, thinking it would just air out later. I hesitated a lot because I do indeed have a mother, but I was somehow convinced.

We proceeded to make the room smoke proof, as in putting a towel at the bottom of the door and lots of lit candles. We smoked like usual but I was out here stressing and hoping I didn't get caught later on.. Through all that, I still kept it cool. The day went by, they left and my mother came home. She barged into my room and started yelling at me asking if I smoked in my room. I of course was in denial and trying to lie my way out but she eventually gave up and left the room.

The next day the twins came over and we did the exact same thing we did yesterday. I had a plan for later to hide the smell better. As we were smoking and having a good time, I got a call from my mother.

“WHAT THE HELL!! WHO ARE THOSE BOYS IN MY HOUSE!! PACK YOUR THINGS AND LEAVE!!”

She yelled with her heart and soul. At first I was so confused because how did she know? She then told me she put up a camera. At that time I really had an “I don’t care” phase where I literally didn't care about anything but myself. I didn't want to argue back, so I proceeded to pack a bag full of clothes and headed out. We went and sat at a park bench while finishing the joint. We sat there quietly. I'm spaced out trying to process what just happened. The twins looked at me with concern the rest of the day. I was texting my brother telling him that Mom kicked me out. He told me I could stay at his old apartment because he had just moved and still had the lease for the old one. He told me I needed to find a job so I could pay for my own food and whatever else I needed.

I went out with a couple resumes to go apply to workplaces. On my first try, A&W hired me on the spot. I was kind of excited at first because so many new things were happening. I finished the day by going

to the supermarket to buy groceries with the money I already had. Later that night my brother came by with a deflated air mattress, a blanket, a pan and a single fork, just the basic necessities. On his way out he told me: “Good luck and don't die, and if you need anything I'm three blocks away.”

My brother and I were never really that close. Maybe it was because we were seven years apart or that he finally sees me as a teen and not a kid.

Of course I smoked in the apartment every chance I could get. I had the city view, 11 floors high. I could still faintly hear the music and people down on Sainte-Catherine. Hearing that over and over made me fall in love with the city. Hearing the happiness of everyone. That first night alone there felt peaceful.

During that whole month of August I worked full-time and still took more shifts because of how understaffed they were. I even worked overnight even though it's illegal for my age. I needed the extra cash either way. On the days I didn't work, I'd have the twins over. They would stay late but I didn't mind. I enjoyed their company. We would watch movies together and bake edibles. Sometimes we would Uber Eats food.

After a month of not speaking to my mom, I get a text saying I started school on September 4th. As the day got closer I started to pack and clean the apartment. I slowly started to bring things back home while my mom was at work.

First day of school rolled in, I met up with Luke before school started and we smoked up. Junior had already been sent to a different school pre-Covid because of his “bad behavior.” When Luke and I walked into the auditorium all eyes were on us—we didn't realize we were late. We sat down and they assigned us to our groups. What were the odds that Luke and I were in the same class. You could tell in our faces how excited we were when we heard our names come up. Deep down I knew this wasn't going to be good for either of us.

Every morning, every recess and every lunch we would roll up and smoke. I always kept the pack of weed on me. Some teachers actually called me out in class because I smelled like marijuana. Luke and I

would skip the last period because we knew they wouldn't do attendance. Then I got suspended for the first time for smelling like weed and all I can say is that my mother wasn't too happy about it. Mid September, Luke and I were walking back from lunch when we got the same idea.

“You tryna skip?”

“I'll do it, if you do it.”

We then proceeded to walk the opposite direction. We ended up just chatting and walking pretty far until we both get a call from our moms. They both yelled at us for skipping and told us to go home. So we did.

Whenever I got in trouble my Mom either yelled or ignored me. Lately she hadn't been talking to me that much and I preferred it that way.

The very next day I came in late like every other day with my Red Bull in hand. This time the vice principal called me into her office. I sat right across from her. She asked me why I skipped yesterday, so I shrugged it off. She told me that she was making me switch schools to an alternative school. She thought it was for the best.

I was laying in bed staring straight at the ceiling, my phone was on DND and it was just me and my thoughts. I was realizing my actions lately hadn't been the best. I tried to think of a way to ease the rest of my thoughts. But all I could think of was:

“What... am... I... doing? Did I really just get expelled from school. Is this going to ruin my future? I had the biggest argument with Mom and got kicked out after that. She is completely done with my shit.”

I started the new school on the first day of October. I had just dropped everyone but the twins. I thought that if I stopped talking to most people I could start fresh. I really needed to start focusing on myself. I felt like my life was going downhill.

For about the first month I was there, I completely hated it. I had no one to talk to mainly because the school had like 50 kids total. My options were very limited and I was very picky with who I talked to. It was okay though because after school I would hang out with one of my

mutual friends, I called him GG. He's the older brother of one of the people I dropped. I love being around him. He was always so cocky and always thought highly of himself. He taught me to be confident and love myself more and more. Once I started to hang out with him, I saw the twins less and less. Anytime I would try to talk to them I'd get a dry response. It felt like something was off. Our friendship started to seem like we were just smoking buddies. It wasn't like I dropped them, I just didn't smoke up with them as much. So I asked them what was up with them, and all I got in response was "okay." I took a second to think and I dropped them too, blocked on everything but their number. I always kept people's numbers in case of anything.

It's December, about three months into the new school. I've learned to accept the fact that this is my new school. I haven't heard from the twins in a while. I wasn't too butt hurt about them either. I knew that they weren't good for me and that this was for the best. I tried to talk to some other students but if I did it would only be at school. Lately I've started to get into makeup. I got a new job at Maxi, but that didn't last too long until I quit. I hung out with GG here and there. He honestly really inspired me to be more open about myself. He was never the type to talk shit. He always said, "If you wanna talk shit, say it with your chest."

And that really stuck with me. He was just a good person to be around and I love him for that.

Fast forward to February, at this point I'm doing good in school, I think. I haven't seen GG in a hot minute. Our friendship was good because I didn't have to actually be with him or talk to him 24/7. This whole month was just me doing things to love myself even more. I cut and dyed my own hair and it wasn't even that bad. I got a nose piercing, it hurt so much that only one tear fell. I went on a date for Valentine's with me, myself and I.

Anger
By Jacob Magera

Day after day I lose control.
Every wall in this house is littered with holes.
Blood and cuts all over my knuckles.
If I can't get rid of this burden,
I just might buckle.

Going to therapy because I smashed my head into the wall.
Each and every time I hate myself for dropping the ball.
Living in a constant state of regret,
This can't keep going.
My mind is a threat.

The therapist teaches me how to handle my feelings.
Over time, my mind and soul start healing.
Learning how to stop myself from reaching the crest,
It seems that finally
I am able to rest.

Tug of War in my Brain
By Jacob Magera

It's rare to see me with my mind not racing,
Hands which tremble like an earthquake are not good for tracing.
Walking down the hall it's hard to breathe.
There is a pair of invisible hands giving my chest a tight squeeze.
Trying to assure myself that everything will be okay,
I remember that this happens to me every single day.
My throat is dry.
So is my mouth.
An overwhelming urge to cry,
You can't let it out.
Like a looming dark shadow,
It begins to chime in.
Filling my mind with thoughts from the bin.
They come pouring down like acid rain,
A constant struggle,
Tug of war in my brain.

They are all judging you, it says.
No, they're not.
They're watching your every move.
You're just a thought.
They all hate you.
Please just stop.
You're nothing but a loser.
That's NOT TRUE.
You will always be alone.
SO WILL YOU.

Who are you to show up
Out of the blue?
Causing havoc and fret,
Affecting my mood.

You are a coward
Sitting in the back of my head
Polluting my thoughts
Making me feel lots
Of anxiety and stress
You turn me into a mess.
You're at fault,
Making me walk the line,
Day in and day out.

Trying my best to balance
Struggling not to fall
While you are slicing me with your talons,
While you are tossing me about.
I can't *believe* your gall,
Making me feel this way.
Stay away!

Do not come back again.
I'm done with the constant struggle
And with the tug of war in my brain.

Backpack Kid
Luca Martire

[Content warning: depiction of violence in a school setting]

The boy held a black backpack
School is not for him
He never had any snacks
He was always getting picked on 'cause he was slim
Wasn't his fault his mom was poor
7:00 am time to leave for school
Left his house locked the door
Always had to walk
He didn't like to talk
8:00 am he arrived at school
All the kids were mumbling stuff about him
One kid said that he smells
Another said that he doesn't know how to spell
A little girl even said that the boy should go to hell
He always ignored what they had to say
But when he heard go to hell he was done
He got home he was furious
He wanted to go to school with a gun

Friday morning
The boy is excited last day of school
He took his famous black backpack
Started walking school
In the backpack there was a heavy item and a snack
He finally got there
His first period was track
He forgot his gym clothes so he had nothing to wear
He sat on the bench
A kid called him a weirdo in French
The boy reached in his backpack
Took out the heavy item

The kid screamed gun
The boy never liked him
The kid tried to run
Aimed the gun and shot
POW POW POW

All Talk No Action
By Jahmaal Roach

On my way home,
Bussin' a manz in his dome.
He's a phony, he's a clone.
He's a menace to society.
Caught that boy,
Made him have anxiety.
Now he gets me actin'
without propriety.
Kid wants smoke,
Made that boy choke.
He wanted to box
But be all talk.
He claims I switched up,
He doesn't know what's up.
Now he's telling people about me
But I uppercut him with my knee.
He wants to beef
He be talkin' on the net
So I claim that as a bet
He is only 5'3 but can't even breathe,
The only thing on his mind is weed.

Heartbreak Feels like a Disaster
By Maria Rocca

Her hair was red like fire
It goes into flames during summer
Heat going through her red hair
While her red nails are basic
With just a splat of sparkle
It was the hottest day of the summer

Heartbreak feels like a broken mirror
Heartbreak feels like emptiness inside
Heartbreak feels like it never ends
Heartbreak feels like a disaster

Now I feel ugly
When I'm sleeping I don't think
My friends bring me happiness
Always and together forever
But when I'm alone I overthink

Heartbreak feels like a broken mirror
Heartbreak feels like emptiness inside
Heartbreak feels like it never ends
Heartbreak feels like a disaster

Now I feel
Numb like turtles
Sad like dead animals
Overthinking like my brain explodes
Slow like an ant
Weak like a fish

Heartbreak feels like a broken mirror
Heartbreak feels like emptiness inside

Heartbreak feels like it never ends
Heartbreak feels like a disaster

I wanna feel happy
Until I jump up and down
Excited until I get butterflies in my stomach

The Truth We Hide
Anonymous

I think if the whole world couldn't handle some tough love sometimes
This universe would be a big lie
Friends, wouldn't be friends
They'd be in disguise
Built to hide others, from the truth that lies
Beneath,
Beneath the sighs
The rolling of the eyes
Because you know their attitude needs to be corrected,
But speaking up would cause too much pain to try.

In Sickness and in Health
By Annabelle Tarantini

Wanting to stay up all night afraid to face tomorrow

Afraid this will loop on end until I no longer am myself
Felt better than ever last week but with the snap of a finger here I am
again

Isolating myself from the world, wanting to be alone as I crawl into a
ball and stare into my blank walls for what feels like hours on end.

This isn't the first time but I'm always scared it's the last.

Will I ever be in control again?

Is this it?

Am I finally losing myself to the point where there's no way back?

Everything seems so different, so foggy, so unreal.

I want it to stop.

I just want to escape reality until I am myself again.

I feel I am going insane.

I want to scream but nothing will come out, I want to cry, but although I
feel it coming, not a single tear falls down my skin.

I feel sick. I feel physically sick.

I can't move, nothing interests me

No energy to do a single thing.

Zoning in and out more than ever.

Where is reality?

Where am I? Where the hell am I?

Am I as alone as I seem to be?

Surroundings are blurry.

Thoughts are quiet yet louder than they've ever been.

I look at my hands as they don't even seem to be my own.

Overwhelmed.

Fear I'll lose control.

Mind Games
By Christopher Vincelli

My mind doesn't stop
Always thinking of the wrong stuff.
I kinda get annoyed but it helps me when I'm stuck in the wrong world
And when I'm about to say the wrong stuff.
Sometimes I question myself for overthinking the unjust,
Not loving myself.
People always have their hands out
Acting like they're helping but then let you go.
I never asked for a hand
But I sure never asked to fall.
My mind doesn't stop overthinking.
How did you let me fall?

Summer
By Nathan Wilken-McGinn

Oh summer
How hot you are
How short you are
But how fun you are

Every day it's nice and hot
T-shirt and pants get you out of the house
Don't come back in until the sun is down
It's still hot when I get in
And then I get in trouble for being too late

“DO YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS, BOY?”
I drop my friends off at home
I was having fun
Just give me a bit more time
Oh summer...
How I wish you were always mine.

Earless Eric

By Brett Jackson

[Content warning: depictions of gang violence]

My name is Eric, however my nickname is “Earless Eric.” People call me that because I’m missing an ear. Honestly, I think I should be called “One-Ear Eric” since I still have one ear. I guess Earless Eric is more catchy anyways. Now, I bet you’re wondering why I only have one ear. It was back in 1999 when I was gang-affiliated. In that type of life, people lose their lives all the time. I got lucky and escaped the gang life alive, but not without cost.

I grew up in a poor neighborhood where there was a lot of gang activity. As a child you would see drug deals happen right before my eyes. This type of environment forced everyone who lived there to grow up much faster than everyone else. Being a parent definitely isn’t easy here but my mother still managed to raise us. It was stressful for her. Every time my brother or I went out my mother would be worried sick wondering if that was the last time she would see her sons. When I was 19, I used drugs all the time, mostly pot though. I would deal drugs on almost a daily basis. Robbed people often too. My life was pretty bad.

One Friday night my crew and I were chillin’ at our hangout spot. We called it “Da Block.” All of a sudden, three black cars pulled up and guys wearing masks and bandanas hop out of the car and sprinted at us. They pulled out glocks and started aiming at us.

“GET ON THE GROUND!” one of them shouted at us.

I was young and wanted to live, so I complied. Even with my compliance, I still ended up getting pistol whipped in the head and knocked out. I woke up in a dirty kitchen that stank. There were plenty of people. I recognized their bandanas from a couple of hours ago when they ran up on us. I looked around for my crew only to find them being tied up to chairs. The men wearing the bandanas were carrying machetes and other large knives. My boy B-Dog told me we’d be okay. Since I was in shock about the situation, I only realized B-Dog was there when he started talking to me.

“Yeah, alright,” I sarcastically said. Of course I didn’t believe him.

“I’m serious, man,” he said with a determined look on his face and with a shaky voice.

He explained to me that he called backup from the ’hood and that they’d be here any minute. I believed him and thought that we’d all actually be okay. I shouldn’t have because right as I was thinking about how I’d get home and tell my mother how much I love her and change my whole life around. I start to hear screaming. They were cutting up my boy Clarence with a machete. I knew I had to get out of there as quickly as possible, but there were too many people and if I tried to pull a fast one, I’d be immediately killed.

One by one they killed each of my crew. I still don’t know what the beef was. B-Dog was next. I watched him bring back his arm with the machete in his hand. In slow motion, he swung the blade down, cutting off B-Dog’s head. I knew it was my turn now. I started to hear my heartbeat. When the man looked at me my heart would start to beat faster. I could hear it. The way he brought back his arm with the blade in his hand to cut off B-Dog’s head was the same way he was doing it now. I was about to die, but I wasn’t going to let myself die without any resistance.

In slow motion, he swung the blade down. I moved around violently, as the blade came down. My life flashed before my eyes. I swore I was dead, but I wasn’t. Instead the left side of my head felt really hot and there was blood coming down the side of my head. I hovered my hand around where my left ear would’ve been and realized my ear had been cut off. I looked on the floor and there my detached ear was. All of a sudden, the door that one of the men was guarding busted open, knocking down the man who was guarding it. It was the backup B-Dog had called, but they were too late. Everyone had already been killed and I was the only one left. They shot and killed all the men who kidnapped us and brought us there, then rescued me and brought me to the hospital. I had to get surgery to get the hole in my ear closed.

After this entire ordeal I realized that the only thing that awaits gangsters is either death or incarceration. I decided to get out of the gang

life and turn my life around. Still maintaining the relationships with the people I was close with, but not engaging in the dangerous activities they would engage in.

My name is Eric and that is the story of how I lost my ear and escaped the gang life.

The Lost Boy

By Major

[Content warning: depictions of gang violence]

I woke up one day in my bedroom and went downstairs to get breakfast. There was not much to eat in the kitchen. I was not privileged like other people. My family struggled because Mom left when I was young and my dad was drunk and barely around. My older sister Scarlet took care of me and my two brothers, Kyle and Jake. So that morning, I didn't eat anything, I just left for school.

My school was not one of those fancy schools. It was more ghetto—the school had broken windows. There were always a bunch of kids lined up for detention, the walls were dirty and paint was peeling. So I was basically always around trouble and I struggled with my grades in school.

I was walking to class and heard a group of kids talking about joining this gang. I wasn't really thinking but I walked over anyhow. I knew one of the guys in the group and asked what they were talking about. They told me that they were talking about this old gang that they heard of and how in order to get in, they must jump somebody. After school, I went to the westside part of my neighborhood and I walked up to this group of guys that were part of the gang. I then asked them, "Hey bro! I want to join this group. How do I get in?"

"Hey kid, come here!" one of the guys answered. So, I went closer.

"You want to join our gang?" he questioned.

"You have to pass a test before we let you in. You have to jump a person that I choose. If you jump him and don't get caught while taking his wallet, we'll let you in."

I agreed. We started walking down the street and took a right.

"You see that guy right there?" he pointed at a teenager about seventeen years old. I thought to myself, this guy is seventeen and I was only fifteen at the time. I decided to do it anyway.

I walked up to the guy and said, "Ay yo! Give me your wallet!"

"Yo bro, I don't want any problems," he said.

I told him, "I don't care. I want your wallet."

He wouldn't give it to me, so I jumped him and grabbed his wallet and ran back to the gang members that wanted me to get the wallet and handed it to them. They were happy and agreed for me to join their gang.

After that, I went home and ate supper, then went to bed. The next day I didn't go to school. Instead I went to the boys' house. I walked in and they were planning on transferring drugs across the border to Mexico. They wanted me to sit in the back of the truck with all the drugs to guard them from other gangs. It was night time and the plan was together so we all got in the truck, me and three guys. Two in the front and two in the back. We were on our way to Mexico. I was feeling kind of nervous and scared, this was the first time I was ever doing this. I had never done something like this.

We were an hour into the drive with about 30 minutes to go until the border. Everything went smooth for the next 30 minutes, until we got to the border. We pulled up to the border agent and he asked everybody for their passport. I handed him my passport. Waiting, for what seemed like forever, I was in the back of the truck shitting my pants.

The border agent asked, "What's in the back of the truck?"

I replied, "Nothing."

He asked us to pull over to the side. Our driver got out of the truck and I heard footsteps coming around the truck. My heart was beating fast. Next thing I knew, the doors were opening and the guy to my right in the truck pulls out a gun. The border agent that was next to the driver got closer and the guy in the back next to me decided to shoot the agent. All the agents began firing at the truck. The driver got shot in the back and fell to his death. I jumped behind the drugs. Luckily I didn't get hit. Then two officers hopped in the truck and said, "Whoever is back there, put your hands up and don't move."

I got arrested and went to prison for six to seven years.

Fast forward to my release. I was 17 when I went in and 24 when I got out. Everything was so different, I couldn't handle it. I didn't even recognise my own neighborhood. There were bigger buildings, new roads and even the house that I grew up in wasn't there. I couldn't get a

job after what I did. I had a criminal record that wouldn't be erased anytime soon. I couldn't find a relationship after what I did because I didn't want to lie about my past. I struggled to find housing and was living on the streets all alone. No one was helping me. So I ended it all and killed myself soon after.

Labyrinth
By R. R. S.

I lay in my sheetless queen-sized bed for another five minutes before mustering the strength to get up. I lay there watching the ceiling, listening to the sounds around me. I hear cars bouncing against the concrete of a road with seemingly infinite potholes, I hear a baby crying in the apartment next to mine, I hear the sirens of the city's police in the distance. I wanna just keep laying there and forget about my problems, let the sounds of the inner city carry me back to sleep, but I can't. I have to get up.

I sit up slowly. The late morning sun is peering through the cheap white blinds that don't actually block any light. It's a small room—the bed takes up over half of it. I don't mind, though. I still have an Xbox set up with a small TV, sports memorabilia and posters line the walls so much you can't tell what colour the walls are. It may be tiny, but I still love it. I open the old creaky door that separates the bedroom from the rest of the apartment.

The apartment is small. A 3.5 with four roommates whom I don't know. The hallway is illuminated by a single dying lightbulb with a slight electrical hum. The walls are supposed to be white but have a slight yellow tint to them. I wonder if anybody's ever going to clean them. Probably not. But hoping someone will helps me cope with the fact that we'll never actually clean it. I enter the bathroom to brush my teeth. When I turn on the light, a couple of roaches scatter around the wall to escape the light. I open the steam-stained glass mirror into the full medicine cabinet and grab my toothbrush. Suddenly I start to feel light-headed, very suddenly. My vision starts to go black as if I stood up too fast, but this felt different. This was different.

I wake up suddenly—my eyes hazy like when you get woken up from a deep sleep. I feel a light drip on my face, which is the first thing I notice. As I sit up to take in my surroundings, I realize something. I'm not in my bathroom anymore. I'm in, I don't know. It seems like almost some sort of office space, devoid of any office equipment or people. The only sounds that fill the empty space are a slight electrical hum from the

yellow tube lights, bouncing off the flower wallpaper. The air feels stale, like it's not ventilated. It's just a bit too cold, like some malls in the summer where they crank the air conditioning all the way up.

As I stand up and take in my surroundings I notice something even more peculiar. The rooms appear to repeat. No matter which way I go, the same electrical hum, the old wallpaper, the tube lights, ceiling, floor, everything. Except for one key difference: the rooms seem to change shape. I am in a maze. With no food, no water, no nothing.

I have to get out of here, I think to myself. I have no idea what's going on. All I feel is my instinct to survive. Maybe I should just start going in one direction? And that's exactly what I started doing. I decide to hug the left wall of the maze and work my way around it.

About an hour into my navigation of this labyrinth, things slowly start to change. I'm not sure what, but something feels off. I feel like something is watching me. But I just brush this feeling off as anxiety and thirst. Fuck—I'm so thirsty. Hopefully I get out of here. I really hope I get out of here.

My feet ache from the countless hours I've spent walking. I don't know what time it is. What day it is. How long I've been here. How long until I get out? I can't think about that right now though. I need to find a place to sleep, but everything's the same so I'm just going to set up shop on the same carpet I started on. With the same flower wallpaper. Same electrical hum. Same smell. Same look. Same everything.

I suddenly wake up. I don't know how long I've been asleep, but something feels different. The same feeling of being watched is back. But much worse. I have to get out of here. So I start off back on my journey of sorts. Hugging the wall just hoping I find a way out of this labyrinth.

Jessica and N'Meysha's Life Story
By N. R. J.

This morning, a girl named Jessica was walking and saw this massive round bubble-looking object. The object looked like the size of her father's stomach floating peacefully in the air. She was a little skeptical, so she ran fast like the Flash.

Jessica then suddenly stopped to catch her breath because she saw a green man with green skin. She heard a rumor that he used to be a construction worker who fell into a chemical waste ditch. He looked at her, smiled and waved. She quickly looked away and was scared because she had never seen this green man before.

As she walked off, she saw a moldy sandwich on the sidewalk. She went around it and continued walking. She found a notebook and she opened it, and it said, "I see you, so don't run or hide because I know where you live."

Immediately, she dropped the journal, as if her hands were on fire. She ran home like the wind, but on her way, she was suspicious of everyone around her. She saw a female around her age, wearing black clothing from head to toe, get into a car that was following Jessica as she ran home. She ran home in no time and quickly locked the door behind her, but the person had a spare key and went into Jessica's house.

Jessica said, "Don't ever scare me like that again! You really scared the shit out of me!"

The next day, N'Meysha went to Jessica's house and they spent the day together. They laughed, talked and watched Moesha together. The two of them made plans to go to the Foot Locker to get some new shoes. N'Meysha bought some pink Jordan Retro 1's and Jessica got the same shoes but light blue. They also got the same outfits so they could match at the party, which started in eight hours. They went back to the house to take a shower, do their hair, and get dressed.

N'Meysha sang for a living so that's how she was able to have a personal driver so that they all could arrive in style. Her driver pulled up in a white Rolls Royce. Time for the party to start.

When they arrived at the party, N'Meysha's cousin Aaliyah came over and she said, "I see you and I'm loving your outfit and your friend's outfit too. You guys are matching. That's cool!"

They went and grabbed a drink. Jessica got a Sprite and N'Meysha got a ginger ale. So, Aaliyah, Jessica, N'Meysha went to dance. They saw Nyla and N'Meysha's other cousin so they talked with each other. Nyla saw two people fighting then one of them pulled a gun and shot it up in the air and everybody ran out the house. N'Meysha and her cousin and friend ran out of the house and got into the car and they went to N'meysha's house and started talking about what had happened.

The next day they went on a trip to Jamaica to see family. They told their families what happened at the party. They were asking a lot of questions and they were like, "I'm glad you guys told us because something could have happened to you all."

They stayed in Jamaica for a day and they took N'Meysha's private jet to go back home. They left at one o'clock in the morning and got home at six o'clock in the morning. They we're so jetlagged so they went to bed and got up at eleven o'clock in the morning.

After everybody took a shower and got dressed, N'Meysha said, "Do you guys want to go get lunch?"

Everybody else said, "Yeah, let's go."

Nyla said, "I will go get the car." So everybody went to A&W. Everybody got a Mama Burger and N'Meysha got a Beyond Meat Burger because she was a pescatarian.

At the end of the day, N'Meysha's cousin Maverick invited them to go to a different party and so they all said, "Yeah. Why not?"

They all went to their own houses to get themselves ready. They had fun but what they all didn't know was that the place they were going to had people been murdered inside it. They arrived at the party and were drunk laughing and talking so Nyla went looking for the bathroom but she opened up a closet instead because she thought it was the bathroom. So she opened it and saw a girl named Mayah Amber Rose, dead in the closet, so she called her friends and they came running. They were horrified so they called the boys in blue.

The boys in blue never found out who the killer was. They guessed the killer was still at large, which meant N'Meysha and her cousin had better watch out for themselves and each other.

The Black Samurai Power
By Goldman

One day a new teen named Thomas came to the Valley but he had a secret. He met some new friends named Sam, Devon and Magill. Thomas had a sister named Tory but he had not seen her in five years. Sam, Devon and Magill went to karate named Miyagi Do but Thomas' sister also did karate at Cobra Kai, who is Miyagi Do's enemy, but what Thomas' friends didn't know is that Thomas knew karate and Thomas was also a 15 time champion at the All Valley Karate Tournament.

One day at school, Sam Devon and Magill were talking to Thomas and then Tory, Robby and Stingray walked towards Sam and Devon and Magill.

Thomas saw this so he stepped in front of his friends and said, "What do you want?"

But Tory told Cobra Kai, "Let's go," and they all left.

Thomas went back home. His dad was the strongest karate teacher in The Valley. He said, "Where did you go?"

Thomas said, "I was at the dojo training."

Sam and Miguel and Devon went to Thomas' house and his dad opened the door and said, "Can I help you?"

They said, "Can we talk to Thomas?" He said okay and they went inside.

Thomas' dad said that Thomas was in the basement and they could see all the karate championships on the wall. They asked Thomas' dad if they belonged to him and he said no they are all Thomas'.

They then also saw Thomas doing karate and they said, "We didn't know that you know karate."

Thomas said, "Sorry that I did not tell you that I know karate."

They said, "It's okay," and asked, "Are all those championship awards yours?"

Thomas said, "Yes."

They said, "We need your help with Cobra Kai."

Thomas said, “Okay, I will help you, but you have to let me teach you the skills of karate that I learned,” and they said okay. So Thomas started to teach them.

Then the time came. The All Valley Tournament was here. The announcer of all the new and old dojos said, “Here comes Blade Karate!” and everyone was nervous because Blade Karate was the most vicious dojo in The Valley and the world. Everyone had seen Thomas training and they were all scared because they knew that they were going to take the loss and Thomas was going to win all the time.

Thomas won his sixteenth championship and everyone was mad that he got the win. But after Thomas won, all his friends were so happy that he won but then people started to disappear and only ones left were Tory, Sam, Devon and Miguel but they did not see Thomas.

Then they got teleported and they saw someone and he said that them four were the only ones that could save the world and get extraordinary powers. He said they would be called, “Blade Super Strength Karate” but they couldn’t find their friend Thomas. They met someone named Sensei Cruger and he said he would find their friend and that they could count on him. He did find something, but it was not Thomas.

The thing that they found was Thomas’ family but Tory said that she was his only sibling.

Sensei Cruger said, “No. You have a little sister.” Tory was shocked.

Then Sensei Cruger said, “It is time.” So Tory, Sam, Devon and Miguel got their powers. Tory got super strength, Devon got super kick and Miguel got invincibility powers. Sensei Cruger said that there was one strong power left called “Black Samurai Power” and that one is the strongest power in the world. The leader of Blade Super Strength Karate had it, but the power was too strong for anyone to absorb or to gain but what they didn’t know was that Thomas already had the black Samurai power!

Thomas told Sensei Cruger not to tell his friends and Sensei Cruger started to tell the team about Wolfe Master, how he would want to take over every karate dojo in the world because he had the second strongest

evil karate power in the world. Miguel would be the leader of the team until the black Samurai came back. The Black Samurai Power was the leader of the team.

One day, Sensei Cruger called the team to the command dojo and said that they forgot something. The team asked what he had found. Sensei Cruger said he didn't know and the team said they could go see what it was. Sensei Cruger said no because they wouldn't know what it was, but the team got a video call from the future and it was Thomas. He said that they were not safe because Wolfe Master was not who they thought he was. He said they would find out but the video was from the year 3000 but the actual date was 2929, so everyone asked how that was possible.

Sensei Cruger said, "I don't know how that is possible either!"

Then Thomas came into the command base and everyone was so happy. Then the whole team left to save the world. Thomas got injured, but Devon and Thomas fell in love and lived happily ever after.

Being Placed
By Crazy Coco

[Content warning: Offensive language towards police and social workers. Reference to suicide and self-harm. All names are fictional.]

On February 10th, I got taken out of my house by the police and I was placed in a shitty place full of girls.

I was sleeping, woke up, went to the bathroom and I saw two big, fat racist pigs with a white chipmunk in the backyard. I was in my kitchen and I was near the window. They went into the backyard, in the front yard, and the parking lot. They were everywhere. If they hadn't been, I would have ran.

There was like 50 police cars. They had the freaking swat team too with their fucking guns. Pig guns.

I heard them banging on my door yelling, "Open the door or we'll break it down!"

That's when I told the pigs to get the eff out of my house. I was having a panic attack. These police had eff-in B.O.

"Do you have anything to wear?"

No shit, Sherlock. They wouldn't even let me go get my own sweater. They just kept threatening to put me in handcuffs. They searched me and took my phone. It was supposed to be a woman who searched me but two ugly, fat boys touched and searched me. When they came near my face I wanted to say get your nasty coffee breath out of my face. Who wants to smell coffee breath?

The Refuge. This place is so stupid. They don't even provide tampons. I don't want to wear a fucking diaper like I'm a baby again. If they say I have to stay there for another six months, I think I'm going to run away. I only said I was going to kill myself because I was having anxiety. Obviously I'm not going to kill myself. I have a grandmother who would cry if I killed myself. I am not going to do that to my grandmother.

The social worker Jerksica looks like a momo with her little chicken legs and chicken feet and chicken hands.

I didn't know what was happening and the police wouldn't let me see my mom because I was freaking out too much. I kept trying to get up to go see my mom and the police said, "Sit down or I'm putting you in handcuffs!" I told them to fuck off and too not touch me.

When they arrested my dad, I heard them call my dad the n-word and I called them a racist bitch. It wasn't cool of them to call my dad that and there was a black police girl there and she didn't do anything! She allowed them to call him that.

After that day, my mental health has been messing with me and I cut myself because of it. I can only talk to my mom once a week and I can only see her once a week, but I'm able to talk to my grandmother every day.

I shouldn't be at the Refuge. I should be at my house with my family and spending time with my friends and going to bed whenever I want and not having to go to bed at 9 to 9:30. I used to go to bed at 10 or 11.

When I was at home, my social worker didn't care about my mental health and she wanted us placed for six months with me and my three sisters. This is honestly not fair to me and my sisters. We should be having a good time together. Not being separated and placed in different homes or units.

My five-year-old sister asked me when we would be able to go home and I really didn't know what to say to her, so all I said was that I didn't know. It really breaks my heart knowing that I can't see my little sisters. I miss them a lot. Because I can't visit them, I don't understand why Jerksica put me in The Refuge just because I threatened her and I said I was going to kill myself. I only said those things because I was mad and having anxiety.

It's gonna be five weeks since I've been at the Refuge and it's been really hard on me because the beds there are really not comfortable. They are hurting my back and my neck. I can't swear or I get sent to my room. If I don't go to school, I'm stuck in my room for 24 hours until the next day—it's called the "sick program." When I don't get back on time, I can't go to school the next day and if I'm not good or if I don't follow the program, I'm going to have to stay there until I'm 18.

There are three people that work there. Their names are Christopher, Emma and Jennifer. I like how they are always there for me when I'm having anxiety and they talk with me and hang out with me. We like to make jokes and play around. They're more fun than all the other staff.

I miss my kitty and my dog. I have pictures of them in my room and some pictures of my baby sister. I will get to see her soon. If I don't listen or if I'm rude, I get sent to "The Nest" for three hours. The Nest is like a cell where you can't get out because you can't open the door. It really sucks there. I can't even have my phone on me so I can talk to my friends. I miss watching Tik Toks and Snapchat and Instagram. My next court day is coming up and hopefully I get to go home soon so I can see my cat.

I've been back to school for three weeks since I've been at the Refuge. I'm trying my best to listen and to get the eff out of there because I'm going to end up losing my shit because there are so many rules I have to follow in order to get out of the Refuge. I don't wanna be there until I'm 18 because that's just messing up my childhood and that's not fair to me or my little sisters. We're supposed to be enjoying this time but I'm clearly not. I mostly end up crying myself to sleep.

My grandmother almost died on the Tuesday and Thursday I was taken out of my house. I've been through so much shit nonstop. My social worker is messing up my life. It's like she kisses my older sister's ass because she's better behaved and I'm like the bad one because I yell and I like tell my mom to shut up as a joke. But my social worker thinks it's rude but I like to play around with my mom. We always joke around. I never mean what I say to my mom. That's how we joke. I love my mom and my mom loves me. We may have ups and downs, we may fight, but at the end of the day, she's still my mother and I'm still her daughter. We are still family no matter what we go through.

I was kind of excited for my court date on the 28th because I'm finding out if I'm going home or staying in the stupid-ass Refuge, but court didn't go as planned and now I'm at the Refuge for six to nine months. I was only supposed to be in the Refuge for 60 days now they changed it to six to nine months and nine months is almost a year.

I still remember
By Blue

I remember when my friend brought you up to me
I then texted you
I really thought you were cool
I loved how we talked

We talked for weeks
We obviously liked each other
We always talked about hanging out but we were so busy at the time
We ended up hanging out

I loved how you were around me
I loved how you looked at me
I loved how you hugged me every time we met up
I loved how you made me feel safe

I asked you out and you said yes
I was so scared to ask you
I remember just being on top of the mountain when I asked you
It started raining right when I did
We ran to the metro
Then you kissed me saying goodbye...

I asked if you wanted to sleep over and you said yes
I remember holding you while I fell asleep
I remember how I saw your beautiful face when I woke up
We spent that whole day together in my room playing Minecraft
We kept taking naps all day
Then you had to go home
I was a little sad and so were you

We eventually had sleepover 24/7
We hung out 24/7

We facetimes 24/7
We talked 24/7

Then you said you loved me.

I spent my whole summer with you
I spent everyday with
I even brought you to my cousin's birthday party
I loved you

But then we started seeing each other less
We talked less
We called less

Then you called me
I knew it was gonna be bad
I remember you didn't wanna say it
But you did.

You wanted a break
For mental health
And I understood
But it still hurt

We ended up meeting up to talk
It was hard seeing you
I remember seeing your beautiful eyes
I remember seeing your beautiful face
I remember seeing you

Then you lied about me

You said things about me
You hurt me

We broke up

I feel as if sometimes things aren't meant to be
And maybe that's true
But it still hurts
It still hurts knowing the person you loved the most
Lies to you
Hurts you
Doesn't feel like they ever really loved you

But at the end of the day I still
Remember.

A Friend Alchemist By Aaron Gourarii

Bob and Jack were best friends since elementary school. They were also the most intelligent in school. They worked together for ten years on scientific technologies and one day they decided to create their own company called BoJack Enterprises. In their warehouse, they made two different rooms; each had their own laboratory and worked on their own project. Bob was a scientist and Jack created technology. Both were happy about their tasks and responsibilities. Jack was working hard on his project day and night.

One day, he finally accomplished his most ingenious invention. He designed a machine called “X” allowing humans to get any abilities they wanted. Jack categorized the different abilities into colourful diamonds and connected them with a metal ring that touched the floor and reached all the way to the ceiling. There were six colourful diamonds: The Space (blue), the Philosopher’s (red), the Power (purple), the Mind (yellow), the Time (green), and the Soul (orange). The person who wanted to receive these abilities had to stand in the middle of the circle.

All this time, Bob was secretly glancing from time to time at Jack’s project. Jack presented to people his new era of technology, which was not yet tested and could be deadly. Also, he made a bunch of money. He was in all journals and he was interviewed and became popular.

For a year, Bob tried to create at least something worthwhile and started to become jealous. He was constantly thinking and overthinking the fact that he was not as good as Jack, so Bob decided to go into Jack’s laboratory during the night, where he started X for the first time. He was so upset that he programmed all possible parameters to extreme power, but did not notice that the machine became overloaded. At the last moment, Jack opened the door holding a cup of tea, and he saw Bob inside the running machine. Without thinking twice, he rushed in and jumped to help Bob, pushing him out of the field and Jack took the hit himself.

Bob woke up feeling dizzy, disoriented and with a ringing sound in his ears from the blast wave. Everything around him was on fire and in

thick fog. Everything was blurry and he saw big dots moving towards him, and they got closer and closer. He didn't recognize that it was Jack. He looked weird, like a demon with big red eyes. Before he disappeared, he told one last thing to Bob with a creepy voice, "The world is going to die."

What had he meant? A warning? A threat? It was unknown how X affected Jack, but with those abilities, he could do anything. Bob realized that the only way to stop Jack was to re-assemble X and use it on himself. The problem was that only Jack knew the X plan.

Bob looked for Jack for many years until he found his hidden hideout, which was located on the highest mountain in the dark forest. It was really difficult to find since Bob relied on a family picture he once saw at Jack's office. In the picture, there was a family, behind which was an old house. Bob figured the house might be Jack's hideout. Bob thought to himself: "If he shows up, I just have to put him to sleep, so I will have more time to get the X design plans".

He thought a lot about Jack's last words. He didn't know what would happen and he was really confused about it. He was sure that the end of the world would happen because of Jack.

When Bob finally found Jack's hideout there was nobody there. Everything was tranquil and creepy—dark walls with spider webs, old and smelly wax on the floor and bats hanging from the ceiling. He looked at every single door of the room until he saw a giant green writing board. On the writing board, there was a lot of drawing and writing about machine X. Bob couldn't understand what Jack wrote. It had a lot of strange symbols. It was a kind of Inuktitut Syllabic. It was used in Canada by the Inuktitut-speaking Inuit.

By using books about the Inuit language and his knowledge of science, he was able to understand and make the connection between the mysterious sentences. Amazed and surprised, Bob realized that Jack didn't only use technological methods to create machine X, but he also knew alchemy. To make X, Bob would have to know alchemy.

Then, he noticed something bright on a table in the left corner, and on the table. There was a pocket watch with a dragon drawing with a star in the middle. Under the lid, there was a scratched address. Someone had

tried to erase it. He was curious to know where it came from. By the logo on the lid, it reminded him of Jack's school named Oxford. It was an alchemy school owned by the state military as part of an elite government-mandated program and every alchemist who graduated from Oxford school was given a pocket watch, which they usually carry with them at all times.

Then, Bob went to school with the badge. The security from the front door of this school let him in just like their students, because he had the pocket watch. He went to the most important place in the school, the library. He read a lot of books and wasted a lot of time on them trying to understand alchemy. Furthermore, he got a head rush. He couldn't understand and he was mad. After everything, he finally found the author of the book who could help him learn alchemy. He asked the librarian if this woman is still alive.

She said, "Yes. She's one of the professors in this school. Her name is Christine." Then, he found her in an isolated place in the library. He asked her to teach him alchemy.

Christine taught him everything for a year about alchemy, and they studied day and night together. He learned all about alchemy and felt confident that together they would find Jack and help him return to normal. Although the process could be dangerous, he was determined and nothing would stop him.

Bob started to practice alchemy to find Jack. The practice of alchemy involves the process of taking something simple and turning it into something extraordinary. It also involves teleportation in order to complete the mission.

When Bob found Jack, he teleported himself to Jack with the help of a tattoo on his left hand, which was a magic tool. At this moment, Jack was doing something dangerous that would destroy the whole planet. He made another machine that makes deadly plasma, like a laser, which creates high temperatures allowing for almost any type of waste to be destroyed. Jack started the loading and on the left side, there was a red button to activate the deadly plasma machine. Bob came right on time, he pushed Jack to stop him from pressing the button and they started to fight. Jack tried to press the bottom, but Bob didn't let him.

He tried to push Jack away, as far as possible, to avoid him from pressing the button, but the machine got so overcharged that it destroyed itself; all lights shut down, the buttons fell off, and it started to shake loudly. Finally, it exploded, and there was lots of smoke coming out of it. Bob, by using his magical left hand, touched Jack, which caused an explosion, and Jack got caught in a cage. Bob then teleported him back to the school where he came from.

Following Jack's transformation into a demon, Bob wanted to rid Jack of his evil soul. Bob and his teacher put Jack in the middle of the circle of alchemy. There was a problem. In order to bring a person back to normal, called transmutation, he had to trade something. For example, if a vase was broken, to fix it you had to take all the broken pieces and remake them. The same applied to Jack; however, his soul was stolen by the gate of alchemy (Truth), which was making trades to ensure that alchemists followed the right laws and rules. When Bob started to conjure in order to save his friend, he had a vision in which he appeared in a big white area. In front of him, there was a giant dark gate, behind which there was a boy named Truth. Truth appeared as a faceless young boy. Bob traded his left arm and right leg, which were the equivalent exchange for getting Jack's soul back. Anything to save his friend. Truth accepted the trade.

Bob then had a white spark in his eyes and he came back to himself. He was lying on the floor in a big puddle of blood. He came back missing his two limbs. Jack came back to his normal self, with big amazement. With shocked faces, the teacher and Jack quickly took Bob to the hospital to save him; however, he was bleeding a lot. He became pale and his lips were blue. There was blood dripping everywhere.

After a couple of days, Jack gifted something special to Bob when they came back to their industry. He made a full length of metal arm and leg with aluminum and a high percentage of carbon fiber. Jack, with appreciation, said that he didn't realize that Bob could save him by using alchemy and that he would do anything to save his friend. Jack understood that Bob would always be there for him no matter what; even if Jack was not himself, Bob would never give up on him.

The moral of the story is that a good friend will never quit on you, no matter what.

The Gang Celebrates Halloween

By Nathan Herz

[Content warning: use of alcohol, weed and glue to get high]

The gang! Charlie, Mac and Dennis are at their bar Paddy's Pub in Philadelphia serving some drinks and hanging out. Charlie realizes after three hours that Frank and Dee, their friends, are not there.

Dennis asks, "Charlie, where is Frank? He was supposed to give me money."

"I don't know where he is. I've lost track of him at this point," says Charlie.

"He's probably doing drugs with those bridge people," says Dennis.

"Guys, who cares about Frank and Dee and those weird bridge people? It's Halloween. Why don't we go do something fun? You know, like egging someone's house, throwing rocks at trains or like starting a riot," says Mac.

"We can also maybe look through some garbage and you can find a lot of goods. Remember the last time I went through someone's garbage?" Charlie adds.

"Yeah, I'm not in the mood to loot garbage and I don't think Mac is either and all that stuff is in the garbage for a reason, Charlie."

"Yeah, let's not look through a bunch of garbage, now I suggest that we egg someone's house!" Mac demands.

"That seems immature, Mac," says Dennis. "C'mon guys, were better than that! We're classy. Well, I mean, maybe not Charlie."

"Yeah, Charlie you gotta stop looking through trash. It's not very classy. It's actually pretty trashy," Mac adds.

"Shut up, dude! I'm not trashy! Look at you, dude. You're white trash, you can't fight, you can't do karate and you can't do backflips. You're white trash!" Charlie shrieks.

"DON'T YOU SAY THAT, CHARLIE!!!" Mac screams.

"Guys, SHUT UP! We're getting off topic. Okay, what are we doing for Halloween?" Dennis screams.

“Why don't we just get drunk and high? Isn't that all we like to do anyways?” says Dennis.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Charlie responds.

“No, c'mon guys we always do that. Let's do something different,” says Mac.

“Dude, what are you talking about? You don't wanna get drunk and high?” Charlie replies.

“No, Charlie, that's not what I'm saying. Of course I wanna do that but I just think we should change things up a bit. You know, like let's make things interesting.”

“I like that, Mac,” says Dennis. “What do you suggest?”

“I don't know,” Mac responds.

“Well, that was helpful,” Dennis sarcastically replies.

“Wait, guys, why don't we watch a scary movie?” says Charlie.

“You know what, Charlie? That's actually a good idea,” says Dennis.

“Yeah, I agree. Good one, Charlie,” Mac adds.

“What movie should we watch?” Dennis asks.

“Umm... I don't know. Let's see what movies I got at my house,” says Charlie.

“No, I refuse to go to your one bedroom, rat-infested, garbage apartment. We'll go to my apartment, okay?” Dennis demands.

“Actually, our apartment,” Mac adds.

“Mac you better shut up before I slap you in the mouth,” says Dennis.

“Relax dude,” Charlie demands.

“Now we're still getting drunk and high, right?”

“Of course,” Dennis replies.

“Okay, cool. I'm gonna get some glue,” says Charlie.

“Woah, dude. What are you doing? Why are you getting glue?” Dennis asks.

“What do you mean? You said we're getting high so I'm gonna sniff some glue.”

“No, dude. No glue,” says Mac.

“What the hell, man? You guys never let me sniff glue. How about a sharpie?” Charlie asks.

“No.”

“How about gasoline?” Charlie replies.

“No.”

“C’mon, man. How about paint?” Charlie asks again.

“Charlie, paint is probably the worst of them all,” says Dennis.

“You know what? Screw you guys! You’re not the boss of me. If I wanna sniff glue, I’ll sniff it.”

“Shut up, Charlie. No one cares,” says Mac.

“Yeah, whatever. I’m gonna go find some toxic glue. There’s gotta be a bit left in the basement,” says Charlie.

“Okay, man, so what movie are we watching?” Mac whispers.

“I don’t know. Why are you whispering?” says Dennis.

“Because, dude, we’re plotting against Charlie,” Mac whispers.

“What are you talking about? We are not plotting against Charlie. We were literally just picking a movie to watch,” says Dennis.

“Oh, yeah, right,” Mac replies.

“I swear sometimes you’re just as dumb as Charlie,” says Dennis.

“No way, dude,” says Mac.

“Okay, can we finally get on to the topic of what we are watching?”

“I don’t know, dude,” Mac replies.

“Well, goddammit. We’re nowhere with it,” says Dennis.

“Calm down, Dennis. We’ll figure out how hard it can possibly be to think of a movie to watch,” Mac replies.

“Yo, guys! I got the glue. This is awesome,” says Charlie.

“I’ve never seen someone get so excited about glue,” says Dennis.

“Charlie, what movie should we watch?” Mac asks.

“I don’t know,” Charlie replies.

“Alright guys, listen up. We’re going to our apartment and we’re gonna see what movies we got,” says Dennis.

“Okay,” Mac replies.

“Alright, Mac, get some beers. We’re bringing them to our apartment,” says Dennis.

“Why doesn’t Charlie get them?” says Mac.

“Dude, just shut up and get them. It takes five seconds,” says Charlie.

“Yeah,” says Dennis.

“Fine whatever,” Mac replies.

“Wait hold on guys. You said we were getting drunk and high and we got the beers but now where’s the drugs,” says Charlie.

“Oh yeah! I almost forgot we’re getting weed, but you’re gonna have to get it, Charlie, and we’ll just go home and look for a movie to watch, then we’ll wait for you to get back,” says Dennis.

“Why do I have to get it?” Charlie replies.

“Well, because I don’t have change on me and me and Mac are like two feet away from the door and you’re like ten feet away so we’re closer, so goodbye!” Mac and Dennis sprint out of the bar.

“Hey, what the hell?” Charlie screams.

“Just get the weed, Charlie,” Dennis screams as he’s running away.

“Goddammit” says Charlie

Ten minutes later...

“Dude we literally don’t have a single scary movie” says Mac.

“How is that even possible?” says Dennis.

“Well, apparently it’s possible,” Mac replies

“Dammit! Charlie better be here soon,” says Dennis.

Meanwhile...

“Hey! Hello Smokey!”

“Hi,” says Smokey.

“Hey buddy, wassup? You got any weed?” asks Charlie

“Hey, remember Charlie, don’t look at me in the eyes. Look up,” says Smokey

“Oh yeah, right. So do you have any weed?” says Charlie

“Yeah, of course,” says Smokey

“Oh shit, I just realized something,” says Charlie.

“What?”

“This is non-toxic glue. Goddammit, dude!”

“Okay, I don’t care. You want weed or what?” says Smokey.

“You know what? I’m gonna change my order. You got some toxic glue on you, buddy?” says Charlie.

“Yeah, I think so. Hold on,” Smokey replies

Two minutes later...

“Here’s your toxic glue. Also, stop making eye contact with me,” says Smokey.

“Oh, sorry Smokey. So how much will the glue cost?” Charlie asks.

“Ten dollars,” Smokey replies.

“What? Ten dollars? That's pretty expensive, man! What the hell?”

“Well yeah, but I know you’re using it to get high, so I think it’s worth it,” says Smokey.

“Okay, fine. Whatever, man.” Charlie angrily passes him the ten dollars.

“Okay, here’s your glue. Now how much weed do you want?” says Smokey.

“Oh, no, I’m not getting that. I'm only getting the glue now,” says Charlie as he’s sniffing the glue.

“I would suggest you get something else,” says Smokey.

“Dude, no. I'm not made of money. Fuck off,” says Charlie.

“What did you say to me?” says Smokey. Immediately Charlie runs off and Smokey chases after him and eventually catches Charlie and they begin to fight.

Meanwhile...

“What is taking Charlie so long? I’m totally gonna roundhouse kick him in the face!” says Mac.

“Yeah, we don't have a single scary movie in this house,” says Dennis.

“Goddammit.”

“Charlie’s taking forever and we can’t find a single scary movie this house. This whole plan is ruined dude!” says Dennis.

“Yeah, I know and I called Charlie like 20 times,” says Mac.

“Yeah, I know. Everytime I’m gone for longer than 20 minutes, you call 20 times.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s awesome.”

“No, Mac. It’s not awesome. It’s annoying. Stop calling me all the time.”

“Dude, shut up. It’s for safety purposes. I’m just trying to check in and make sure everyone’s okay” Mac replies.

“Dude, what do you think can possibly be happening to Charlie right now?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s getting beat up right now and I wouldn’t know because he’s not answering his phone.”

“Why would he be getting beat up?” Dennis replies.

“Well, he is buying weed from Smokey and Smokey isn’t the safest guy,” says Mac.

“Well, okay, that’s a solid argument. I’ll give you that,” says Dennis.

“Yeah,” Mac replies.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

“Yo, it’s Charlie! Open the door, dude,” says Charlie.

“There he is,” says Dennis. Mac opens up the door.

“What took you so long, dude, and why are you all bruised up and bloody?” says Mac.

“Oh yeah that. Umm... I got into a fist fight with Smokey,” says Charlie.

“You see, Dennis? This is why I tried to call him 20 times. I was right,” says Mac.

“How is this possible? What are the chances that you just get beat up?” says Dennis.

“Whatever. Who cares? Wow, let’s just all remember that I was right like I always am,” says Mac.

“Okay, Mac. Whatever,” says Dennis.

“Now, Charlie, let me ask you, who won the fight?” Mac asks.

“Dude, he obviously lost. Look at him! He looks like he just got hit by a truck,” Dennis adds.

“What? Shut up, dude! I’m fine and I totally won the fight,” says Charlie.

“Yeah right,” says Dennis.

“What do you mean? I totally won the fight,” says Charlie.

“Okay, shut up, Charlie! I don’t care,” says Dennis.

“Well, no, Charlie don’t shut up. Tell me what happened. Did you roundhouse his ass?” says Mac.

“Yeah, totally dude! It was sick,” Charlie replies.

“Okay, Charlie. Shut up or else I will attack you! I swear to god!” Dennis screams.

“Okay, dude. Jesus. Relax,” says Charlie.

“Now did you get the weed or what?” says Dennis.

“Umm... well... uhhh... no. I got glue instead,” says Charlie.

“What?!” says Mac.

“Dude, are you kidding me? I told you to do one thing,” says Dennis.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry, but at least we have beer and glue, right?” says Charlie.

“Unbelievable. You already have glue, dude,” says Mac.

“Yeah, but I realized that it was non-toxic glue, so, yeah,” Charlie replies.

“So we ask you to get weed and you come back beat up and with glue?” says Dennis.

“You know what? Shut up, dude! That was my money and I can spend it on whatever I want,” says Charlie.

“Goddammit Charlie!” says Mac.

“Shut up Mac! I’m gonna go sniff some glue now,” says Charlie.

“Yeah, go sniff your glue,” says Mac.

“I will.”

“Goddammit,” says Mac.

“So what now?” Dennis asks.

“Well, I guess now we drink some beers and try to find something to watch,” says Mac.

“Yeah, definitely. I haven’t had a beer in like two hours,” says Dennis.

“Yeah, let’s get some beers,” says Mac. Dennis and Mac get some beers from the fridge and start looking for another movie to watch.

“Hey, what’s going on?” says Charlie.

“Just looking for a movie, Charlie,” says Dennis.

“Oh and you got beers, huh?” says Charlie.

“Yeah, none for you,” says Mac.

“What do you mean, dude?” says Charlie.

“Well, you screwed us over and you didn’t get the weed so you don’t get any beers,” says Mac.

“What do you mean I can’t have any beers? I haven’t had a beer in like two hours! I’m going crazy, man,” Charlie responds.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have gotten glue,” says Mac.

“Yeah, screw you, Charlie! You’re not getting any beers,” says Dennis.

“Well, if you give me some beers, I’ll give you a couple of sniffs of this toxic glue,” says Charlie.

“No,” says Mac.

“Well, okay then. I guess I’ll get my own beers,” says Charlie.

“Whatever, Charlie,” says Dennis.

Charlie goes to the store to get beers.

“Thanks,” says Charlie.

“Hey, Charlie.”

“Oh, Jesus! What do you want, Cricket?” says Charlie.

“Wassup, buddy?” says Cricket.

“Your face gets worse every time I see you,” says Charlie

“Yeah. This time a random street dog mangled my face real good so that’s why I look so ugly,” says Cricket.

“Oh, okay, cool,” Charlie responds.

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool I guess,” says Cricket.

“What do you want, street rat?” says Charlie.

“Umm... are those beers?” Cricket asks.

“Yeah, these are beers, stupid,” says Charlie.

Okay, well don’t call me stupid but can I have some?” asks Cricket.

“Well don’t you have some kinda weird street drug or something?” says Charlie.

“No, I don’t. I’m completely dry,” says Cricket.

“Okay, well, that’s not really my problem,” Charlie responds.

“Well, guess what? If you don’t give me a beer, I’ll shank you,” says Cricket.

“Are you kidding me, dude?” says Charlie.

“Yeah, give me all 12 beers,” says Cricket.

“Goddammit! Fine. I hate you!” says Charlie.

“Yeah, whatever. Thanks for the beers, dumbass,” says Cricket.

“Shit!” Charlie buys another pack of 12 beers and goes to Dennis and Mac’s house.

Knock, knock, knock!

“Is that Charlie?” asks Mac.

“Ay, what’s going on?” says Charlie.

“What’s up, buddy? Guess who’s here,” says Mac.

“Who’s here?” Charlie responds.

“Ay, wassup, Charlie,” says Frank.

“Ay, wassup, buddy?” says Charlie.

“Oh yeah, Charlie. I saw that dirty street rat that mugged you, so I mugged him,” says Frank.

“Oh you did and you took the beers?” says Charlie.

“Yeah,” says Frank.

“Well, can I have the beers?” says Charlie.

“Well, I’ll give you a couple beers, but not all of them,” says Frank.

“Really, dude?” says Charlie.

“Yeah, really. I mugged Cricket to get these,” says Frank.

“So you just saw this scenario as a way to get free beer, huh?” says Charlie.

“No, that’s not true,” says Frank.

“Yeah, it is. You could’ve stopped Cricket from mugging me in the first place but you waited until he ran away with my beer so that you could take my beers,” says Charlie.

“Shut up, Charlie! I’ll give you two beers and I’ll have the other ten,” says Frank.

“Fine. Give me the beers,” says Charlie. “Now we got our alcohol and we got our glue so what are we watching?”

“Well, we don’t have any scary movies and we don’t know what else to watch,” says Dennis.

“Oh, wait guys! I know what to do,” says Mac.

“What?” asks Charlie.

“Let’s just get our computer and go on some pirating website and just watch any movie we want for free,” says Mac.

“Oh, awesome, dude! Good idea. I should’ve thought of that before,” says Dennis

“Yeah, let’s do it,” says Mac.

“Hey guys, do none of you know where Dee is?” says Dennis.

“No one knows and no one cares,” says Frank.

“Yeah, let’s just watch something now,” says Charlie.

“Yeah, you guys are right. Who cares?” says Dennis.

“Yeah, let’s watch something and get drunk and you know what? I think I’ll try some of that glue, Charlie,” says Mac.

“Okay, cool! Let’s sniff some glue,” says Charlie.

Charlie, Mac, Dennis and Frank all get drunk and watch a scary movie then finally they all pass out at five in the morning.

Escape

By C.A. Mendoza Reid

[Content warning: sexual and physical assault, substance abuse]

As I am screaming for mercy, I plead for him not to do what he is about to do. He tapes my mouth shut. How long has he been planning this? What did I do to deserve this? As he vigorously throws me into the corner of my room, I try to scream but the tape is holding back my calls. I feel a sharp pain but it goes away fast. I can feel my own father's anger submerged inside of me. All I want to do is die. I have given up; it feels like the end for me.

Once he finishes, he leaves my lifeless body on my bed. Once I get strength, I go to touch my bruised-up area and I feel something wet. As I go to look, I see my blood. My father just beat me to death's door. I'm back at this point again. This vicious loop is recurring; it's going to keep happening repeatedly.

I try to get up even though I'm in so much pain but I can't stay like this. I quickly throw on a loose shirt and some new shorts to not agitate my bloodied parts. I sit at my broken desk and I look at myself in the mirror and I can see my ocean blue eyes fill up with tears. I take a deep breath and hope to calm myself down.

POP

Not again. Did he seriously just open another bottle of beer? I should leave before anything escalates.

I know things are just going to keep getting worse but I do not know what to do about it. I am but a little boy and there is not much I can do. I want to run away. I want to be free like a bird, not having to worry about my father hurting me but I don't think that is an option for me. I would not be able to support myself. I just do not think I am one of the lucky ones.

The next morning as I am just lying in bed, I can hear him stomping up the stairs. I bounce up, run to my door, and lock it. I put all my weight on my door in hopes I am heavy enough he cannot open it and gives up. I am hoping and praying he won't be able to get in but I am screwed. He has an advantage on me; he is bigger and stronger.

As that thought is going through my head, he shoves my door in and sends me flying across my room. All I can do in this situation is curl up and take cover and pray to not get hurt. As he thrashes me, I could feel the air leaving my body. I try to stay calm and relaxed but I cannot while he is beating me black and blue. He grabs my hair and smashes my face into my own desk, which just breaks it even more than it already is.

POW

My tooth goes flying out. As he witnesses my tooth shooting out of my mouth, he freezes. He releases me from what he was doing. He finally lets go of me and drops onto the floor and starts sobbing while begging for my forgiveness.

I finally just tell him I forgive him to make him leave me alone when truly I don't forgive him. This happens way too often. It's obviously going to happen again no matter how much he apologizes. I will never forgive this jerk. He's an excuse of a father and even bigger of an excuse of a human. He deserves to pay for what he is doing to me. And just to think all of this started on my 10th birthday when my mom walked out on us. I thought the beatings and the locking up would eventually stop but here we are two years later with the same patterns. *Six more years, six more years, I repeat in my head, six more years until I can move out and be out of this toxic, abusive household.*

No 12-year-old should have to deal with this kind of pain and abuse. No 12-year-old should have to go to bed worrying about their father coming in at the middle of the night and attacking him or her.

When I learn why my mother left, I feel betrayed. I feel lied to. I just want to end it all right there and I start looking around the side of the cliff and finally I find something sharp. It's an old rusty nail. I pick it up to take a deep breath. As I take the nail to my fresh clean wrists, I slowly submerge it into it until I strike blood. As I start hyperventilating, I take it away from my wrist and decide to just go for it, to end all the pain I'm feeling. I take the nail and start running it down my wrists. As I sit there trying to breathe. I can see the two pieces of skin separating and my warm thick blood runs down my arm.

Once I finally come to my senses, I throw the nail away and start bandaging my arm. There is a better way of doing this fast and easy. It might be painful, but it is efficient. As I run into the bathroom, I take an orange bottle out of the drug drawer. I look at the label and it states *Pantoprazole*. I do not even bother reading what the recommended dose is or what it even does. I just take the bottle and run to my safe space up so I can watch the wind whoop against the mountains before I go.

Years have passed since that moment, since the moment I was betrayed. I still go up to the mountains feeling the moments of being free. That night of being overdosed, the feeling of not being able to see tomorrow, why did it feel like that after being beaten to death's door countless times? I still sit there and wonder why it feels like I wouldn't be able to see the mountains and the winds whoosh across my body. I'm now 17, just one more year away, and I'll finally go away. My scars still show but my body has become sturdy and muscled over, after years of working on myself and getting stronger so one day I'll be able to fight back. So I'll be able to be free from his harsh environment.

BAMMM

As my door flies open my father is standing there, fist tucked in. As he comes closer to me I smell the scent of Corona off him. As I'm about to be beaten, my father tells me I've changed. I've never understood his choice of words.

I barely see him anymore after going through all the foster homes. Some of the foster homes I've been through were either worse than my father or better. The Alasaig family took care of me and helped me clean up my bruises the day I overdosed. They weren't rich nor were they poor. They didn't have kids either because the wife couldn't bear a child, yet they still treated me as one of their own.

"If only you didn't look like your mother." My father finally uttered his last words to me, maybe then I would've understood him. Maybe then he would've shown me love or even cared for me. But he still took care of me in a way. I was dressed and sheltered. I was thankful for those small and simple things.

Wake Up Call By Olive Yew

Issa and I have been inseparable ever since we were two years old. We are both the same height, she has long, wavy, dirty blonde hair. I have short, curly, copper brown hair. Growing up together, we liked the same music artists and enjoyed the same comedy shows, scary movies. Our facial expressions when we're together are so comical and facetious. Sure, we went to different high schools but we still lived in the same neighborhood ten minutes away from each other. We stayed best friends and still made time to see each other when we didn't have school.

On a windy cheerless Saturday night Issa called me at 7 p.m.

The wind was whipping through the trees, creaking like an old rocking chair, as I answered the phone.

"Hey Draya," said Issa.

"Hi Issa! I thought because of the weather you were going to be home babysitting 'til tomorrow morning," I said.

"Well, that was the plan 'til Mr. and Mrs. Smith cancelled on me at the last minute, so now I'm bored calling my best friend to give her a wake up call 'cause we're going out," she rushed out.

My first logical thought was who goes out driving around to go places at midnight?

"Hello, you there?" she said.

"Yes, I'm here Issa, but do you really think it's the best idea to go out on a night like this, when we could stay in and have a girls' night?" I said. By her 15 seconds of silence I just knew that she was about to tell me how I need to stop being a baby and watching horror docs in my free time, blah blah blah.

"You have to stop watching things that will make you paranoid to live life to the fullest. Our time on this earth is so limited so don't waste it living someone else's life."

The next 25 minutes I spent getting ready to go meet Issa at her house. It's a 15 minute drive with traffic but at this hour, the roads should be empty.

Driving to her residence I had a foreboding feeling that wouldn't shake no matter how many times I would think of ways we could still have a good time with each other without anything bad happening. We planned to go to this house party two streets away from Issa's but then the plans changed and we were now on our way to a mansion party.

Blaring "Like A G6" by Far East Movement came playing out of the doorway while we were being let in. The last 40 minutes were a blur after we were served with drinks upon our arrival, even though we were under the legal age of 21. Even now, I replay those moments in my head over and over again, wishing I could change anything and everything about that night. We had 25 shots each and laughed as we took silly selfies with one another.

Since Issa hated driving I drove 30 minutes there. Knowing what I know now I shouldn't have accepted those drinks knowing I was the one driving us home that night. For some reason, I thought it wouldn't have that great of an effect on me.

By the time we were leaving, it was 5 a.m., after dancing for hours I was genuinely feeling sober. It never actually occurred to me or anyone else that I was unfit to drive us home that night.

On the ride home, we had the stereo blasting and we were singing and laughing. Those are my last memories of Issa.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up in the driver's seat. The roof and sides of my car were sunken in and mashed up so badly to the point I'm surprised I wasn't compressed into the car. Internally, I felt like my eyes were previewing a horror movie scene, the shattered windshield inches from my face, with my sticky face and arms drenched in blood.

Looking over to the passenger seat, I saw Issa but she was facing away from me. "Are you okay?!" I cried. But still she didn't answer me. I tried to open my door, but it was jammed shut. I tried and tried for what felt like hours to get her attention and see if she was okay but no reply ever came back that night.

"Help her!" I screamed before I passed out.

When first opening my eyes it took about a good 60 seconds for my vision to clear up from being so foggy. There was a paramedic

kneeling by my window. I couldn't understand why everyone was fussing around me but no one was helping Issa. They cut the roof of my car, and pulled me from the wreckage. I could feel the huge gash, my right ear would have been severed if I was an inch closer to the door.

While being rushed to the hospital, I was treated upon arrival. I heard a police officer describing Issa's bag that she brought out with her everywhere that he'd found at the scene of the accident.

"THAT'S MY BEST FRIEND'S BAG!" I said. Memories started to flood back in me like my whole childhood and adult life flashed through my eyes at that moment.

"Is she okay?" I exclaimed.

"When can I see her?!" I rushed out.

Looking around at them trying to find any of the answers I was searching for. They all looked at me with saddened eyes and that's when one of the officers informed me about Issa.

My mom was trying to comfort me once she arrived after they called both of our parents, but I was hysterical.

"I killed her!" I shouted at the top of my lungs with all my breath. "I killed my best friend," I repeated above a whisper.

I have no memories of how the crash happened, but apparently my car had veered off the road we were driving on and slid down a slope and crashed into a huge tree. Although Issa and I were both wearing seatbelts, the roof of my car caved in at such a rapid speed killing Issa instantly because of the impact.

My blood sample was taken at the time and showed I was nearly one and a half times over the legal limit. I was released from the hospital on my 21st birthday, the day of Issa's funeral.

I desperately wanted to see my good friend one last time and to say my final goodbye to her, but both of her parents that once had all the love in their hearts for me said I wasn't welcome. I wrote letters, I called them and apologized over and over, but they could never really forgive me for what I did. I didn't even blame them.

I couldn't even forgive myself for what happened.

Six months after the accident I was charged with manslaughter while driving under the influence of alcohol. I pleaded guilty for myself

as my first step to taking responsibility in Issa's death. I wanted to spread awareness for my friend and our experience that happened to us.

Not only was this a huge wake up call for me in my life. Not just move on and push forward with my life. At some point in life you have to accept that some people can stay in your heart, but not in your life.

First Steps into Nature By Saige Diamond

Walking Out Ceremony

A walking out ceremony is a very special moment and a very big day for a toddler. You're putting your roots on Mother Earth. It's important because it's a way of teaching our Cree ways of life. A baby must not touch the ground before the ceremony. What usually happens is the toddler wears traditional clothing. They have to have a bag for gun shells, wood shaped and painted like a gun, and a bag for food. It's different for boys and girls. The girls carry chopped wood and an "ax" (wood ax painted like a real one) and a backpack or bag made of moose hide. The ceremony starts in the tipi. The gookum (grandmother in Cree) will place out food for the child. They collect the food and put it in their bag with the father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, or any relative. For boys, it's always a man who walks out with them and for the girls, a woman. They walk out of the tipi. A tipi is tall. It has moose hide around it that smells so good and sometimes it's tied or nailed down. If it's a boy's walking out ceremony, they walk toward a little tree, pretend to kill a goose and take the goose back to the tipi. For the girls, they walk out and pretend to chop wood and bring it to the tipi.

The First Kill

What you do with the first kill is you wake up really early in the bush and you eat breakfast. You have to make sure to eat a good breakfast so you have energy and strength for the day. It's different eating in the bush. The food just hits differently, it comes naturally and comes from the earth. Sometimes my gookum would make moose meat with our breakfast.

And then once you finish eating, you start your car, but usually it's a Ski-Doo, and go to the blind and wait for the geese to land but first you have to prepare. Put the decoys, make sure they look okay, get your shotgun ready, make sure it's loaded and the safety is on. Then you turn

it off once you see the geese. Once they land, you stay very quiet, point your gun, take a deep breath and pull the trigger.

When a kid gets his first kill, it's very special. It's the day you know they've become a hunter and that you can provide. They are usually about 10 or older. Anyone can hunt: a girl, a boy.

My dad always lets me go hunting with him and always tells me that anyone can hunt. He told me this story. His gookum, my jaban (great grandmother), was the oldest and had no brothers, so she had to help her dad out a lot. She did everything a man can do and everything a woman can do. She's my inspiration, I love her so much. Even though I never met her or knew her, my dad tells me all about her.

Once you kill your first goose you take it back, pluck it, gut it, and start the fire and cook it over the fire and enjoy. These moments are very special and important.

I remember getting my first kill, the smell of coffee and cigarettes in the morning, the snow, the clean air, the cold, ski-doo, wet wood. Hearing the geese, hearing my gookum cough from a deadly hoot always having a little sesh in the morning. Happiest moment of my life, pulling that trigger. Just knowing that I'm able to provide makes me happy. I'm a hunter and I always will be, I'm gonna teach my kids stuff that I learned, like plucking, gutting, cleaning, making a tipi. So, they can pass it on to their children and keep our ways of life alive. I'm always going to speak in Cree to my kids, just like my parents always do.

Keep Cree Culture Alive.



Boys walking out.



Girls walking out ceremony (1).



Girls walking out ceremony (2).



Girls walking out ceremony (3).



Tipi that was made in my community.

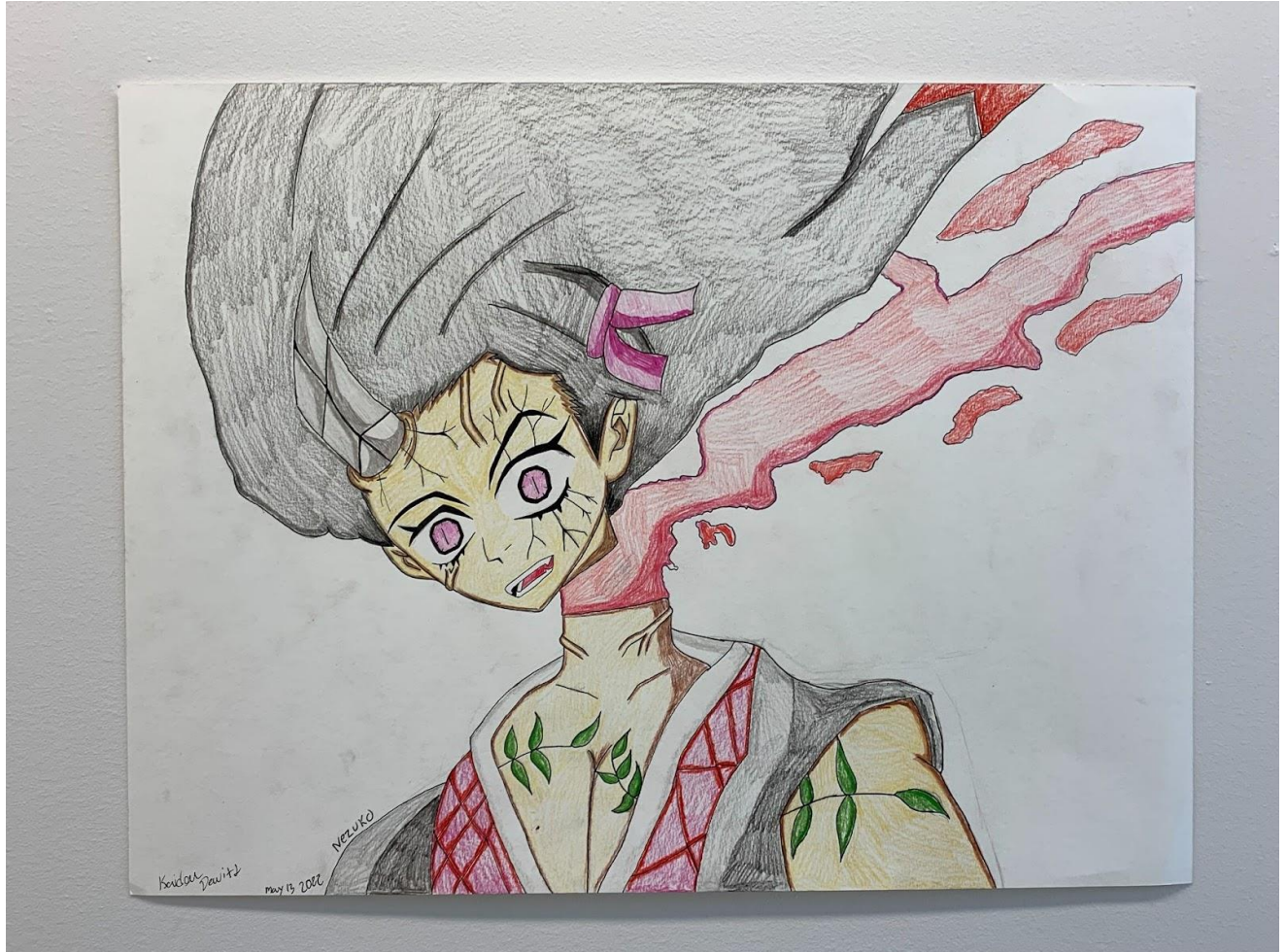
Lilly



Lilly Roy
Ink on paper



Rahshiloh Fujiyama-Browne
"Micah"
Dedicated to my friend Ab who passed away



Kaidon Dewitt
Pencil, pencil crayon, pen on paper



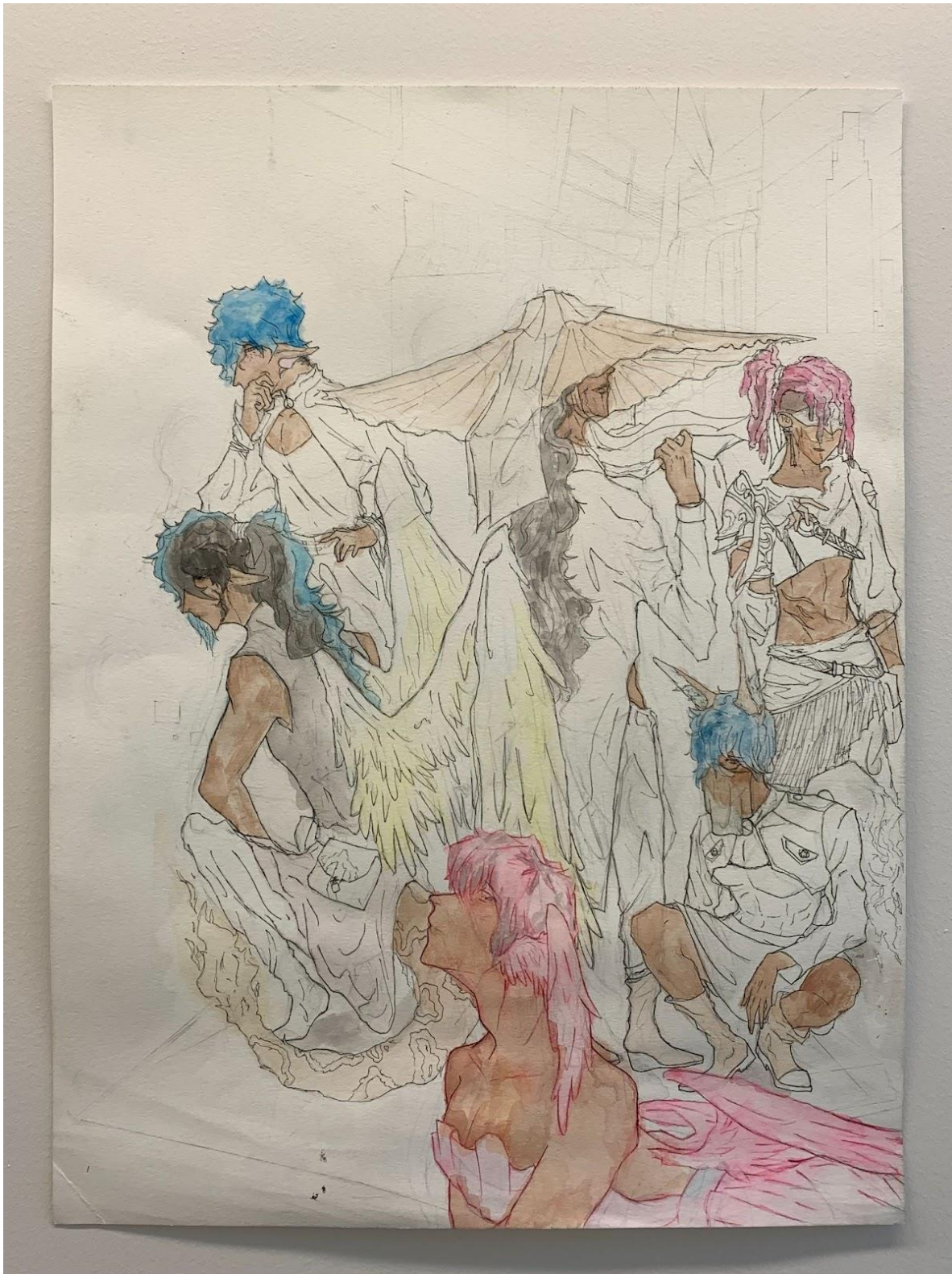
Kaidon Dewitt
Pen, felt on paper



Marcos Doucet-Jackson
Pencil Crayon on Paper



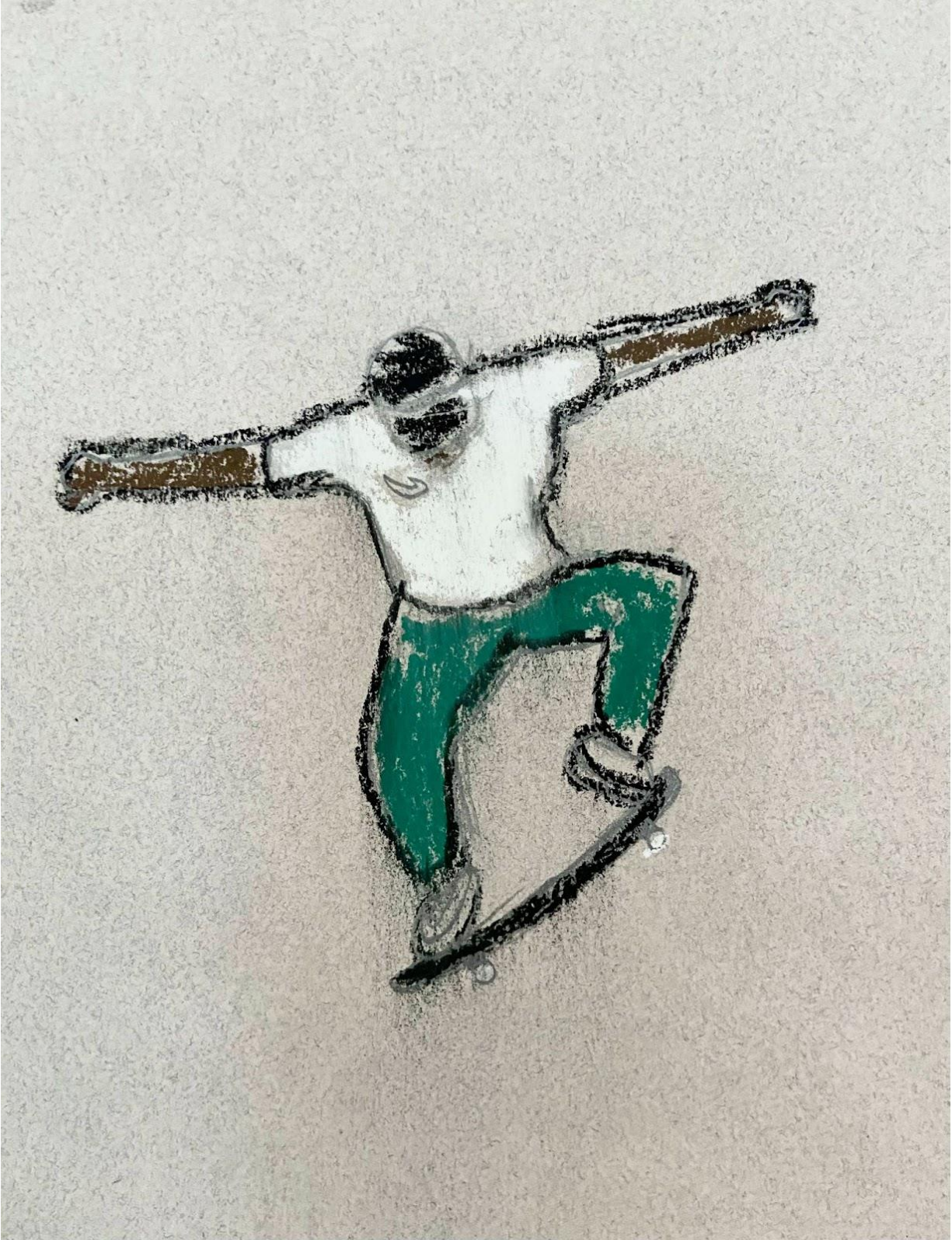
Marcos Doucet-Jackson
Pencil Crayon on Paper



Ogetchi Ugochukwu
Pen, watercolour, pencil crayon, pencil on paper



T'Shawn Hinkson
Bleach



T'Shawn Hinkson
Oil pastel on paper



T'Shawn Hinkson
Acrylic on cardboard



Kyanna Nangreaves Brown
Hand beaded earrings



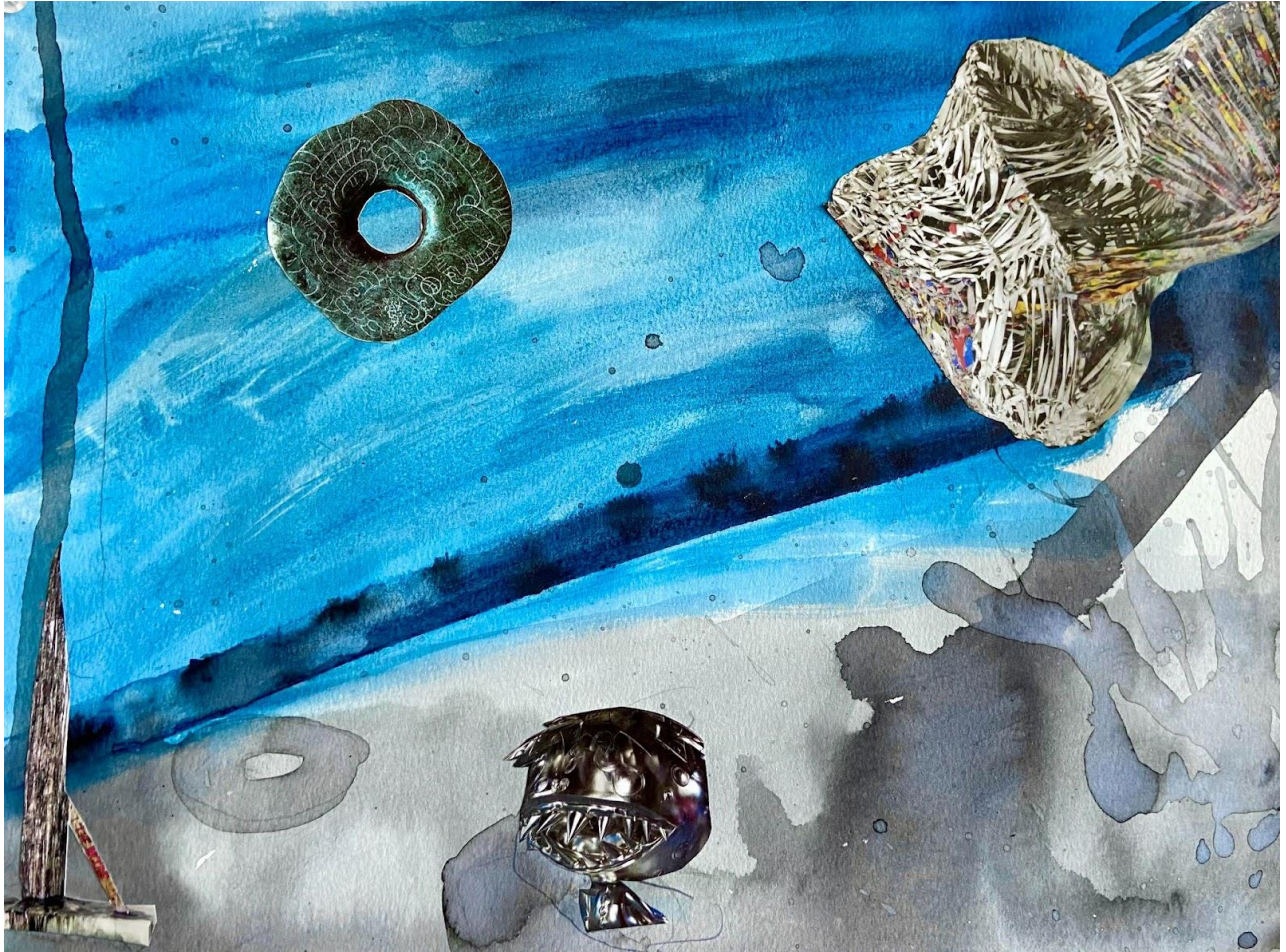
Anndraya Gero
Mixed media (candy, acrylic paint on cardboard)



Anndraya Gero
Mixed media collage



Anndraya Gero
Acrylic on cardboard



Théoni Raphaël
Mixed media collage



Théoni Raphaël
Light painting photography



Théoni Raphaël
Light painting photography



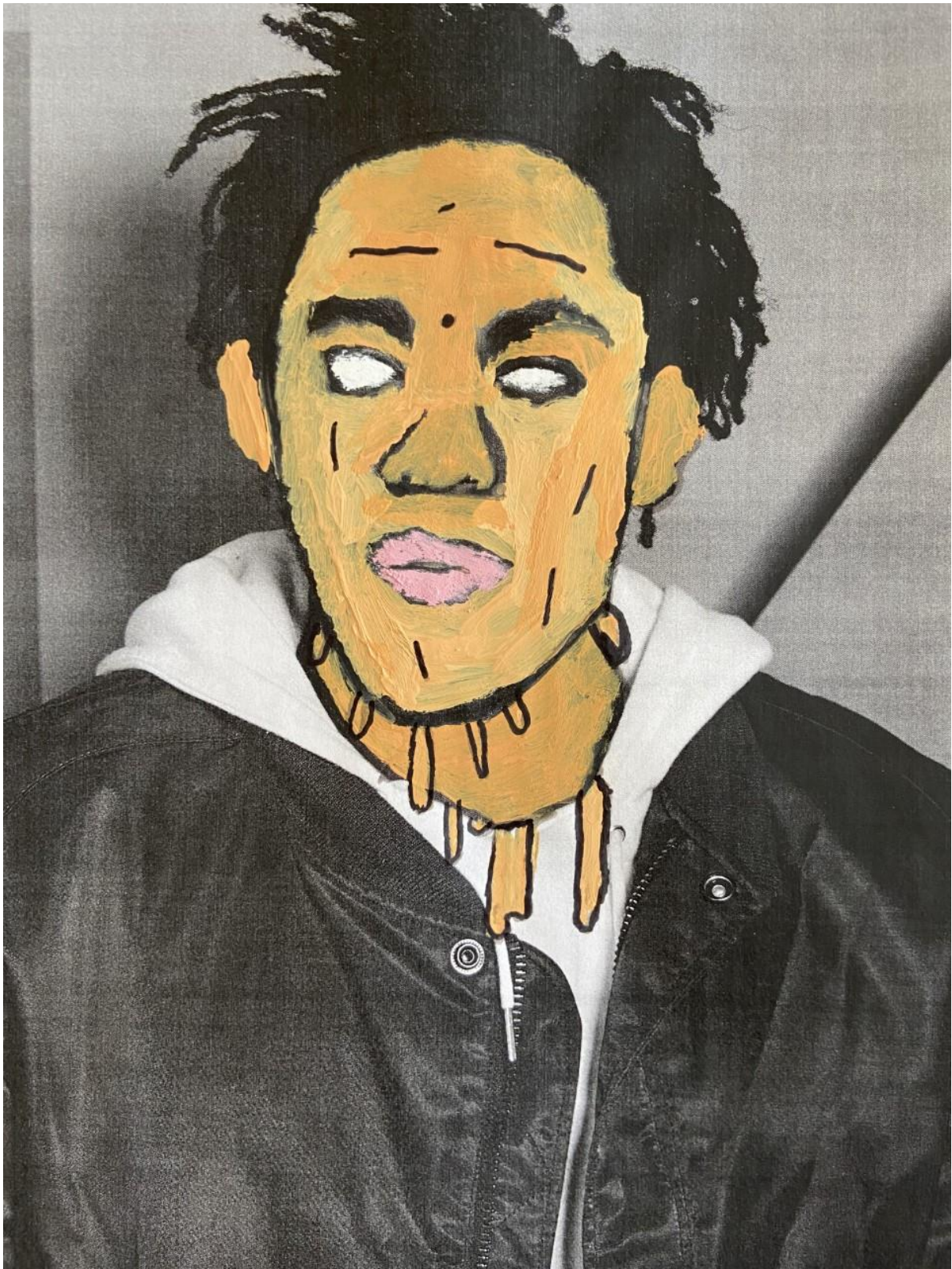
N'Meysha James
Mixed media collage



N'Meysha James
Acrylic and ink on paper



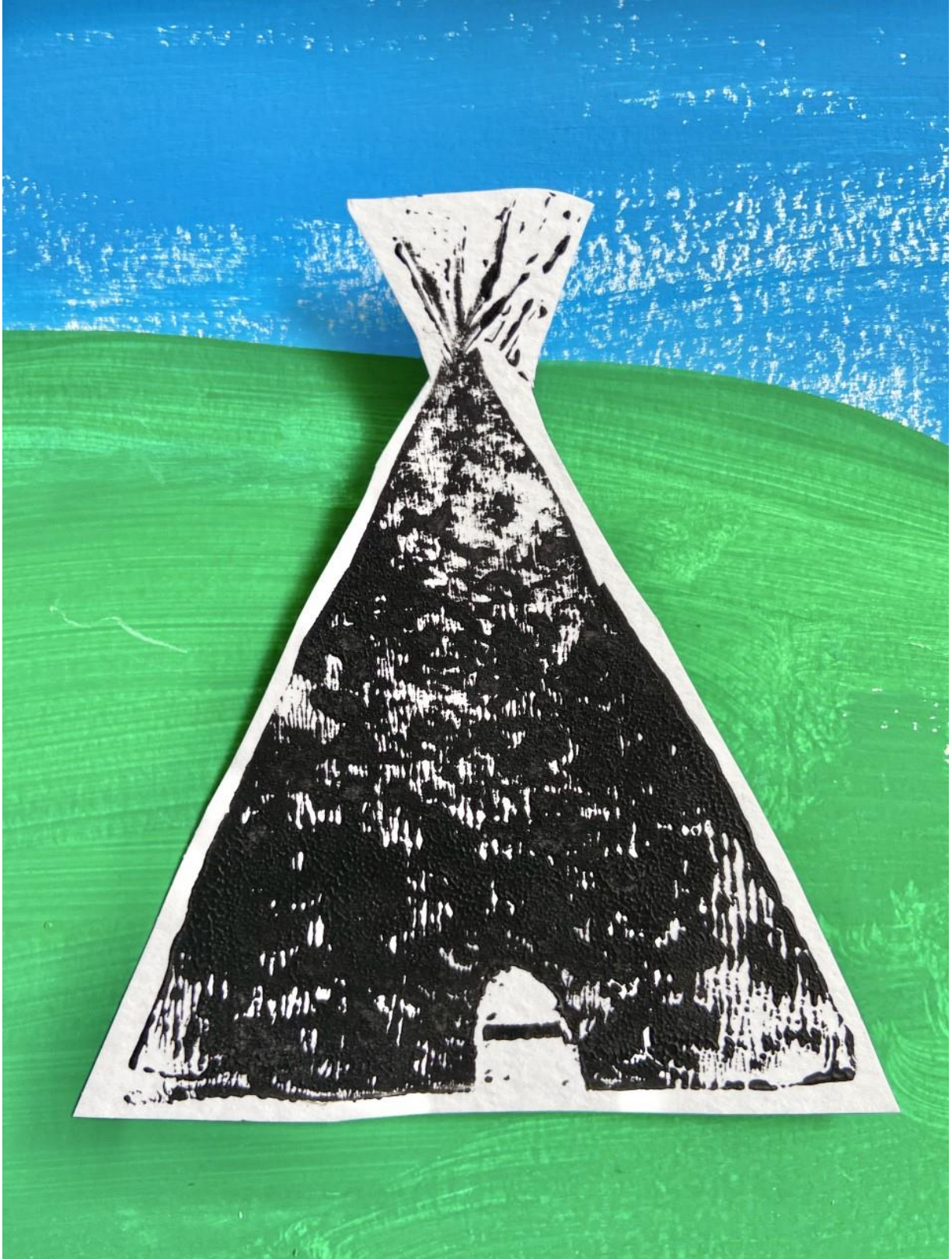
Andrew Whittick
Acrylic and ink on paper



Nathan Herz
Acrylic and ink on paper



Nathan Herz
Acrylic on cardboard



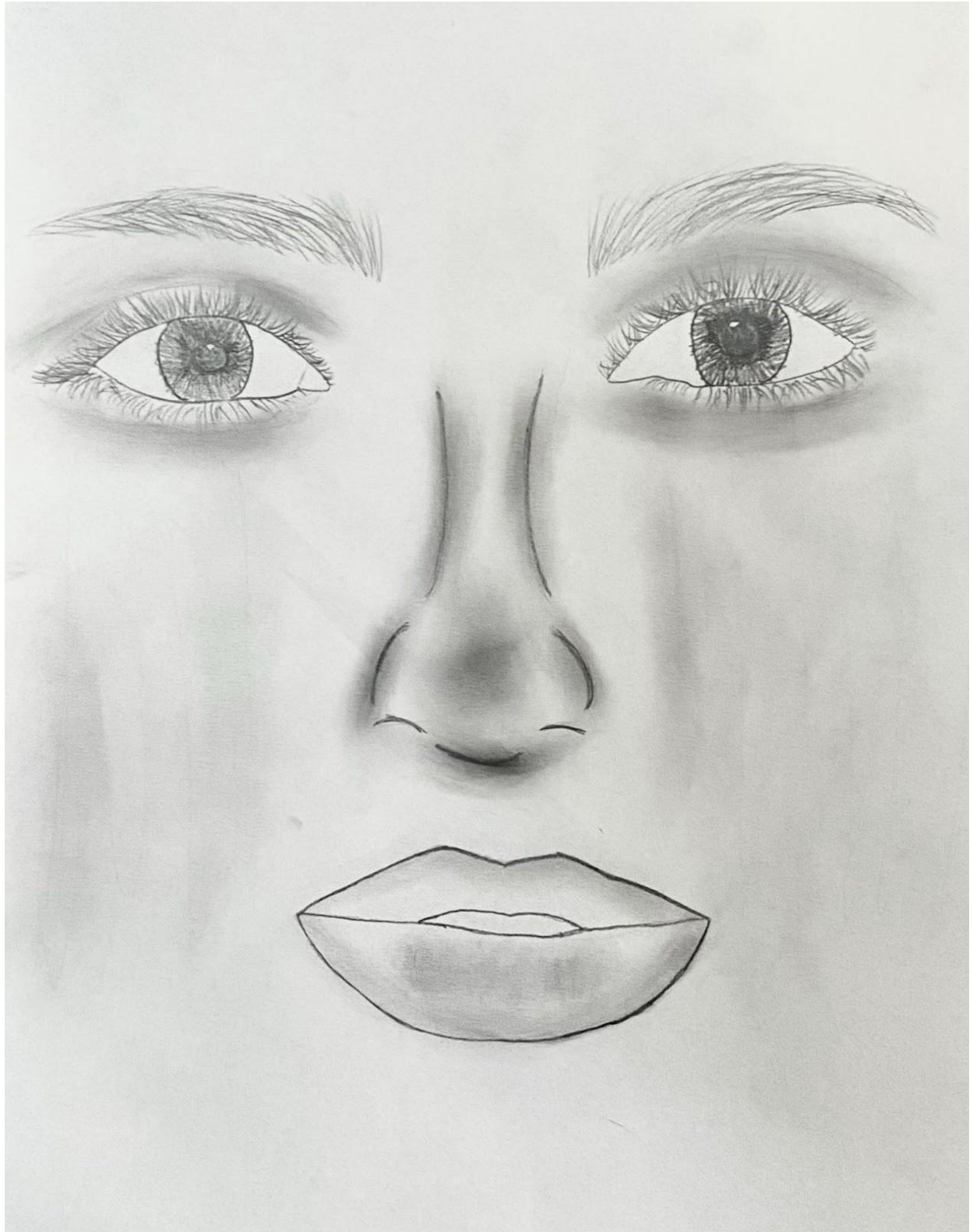
Dennelle Jolly
Linocut print



Aidan Pratt
Acrylic on cardboard



Shobi Lewy
Acrylic and ink on paper



Angelina Blackie
Pencil on paper



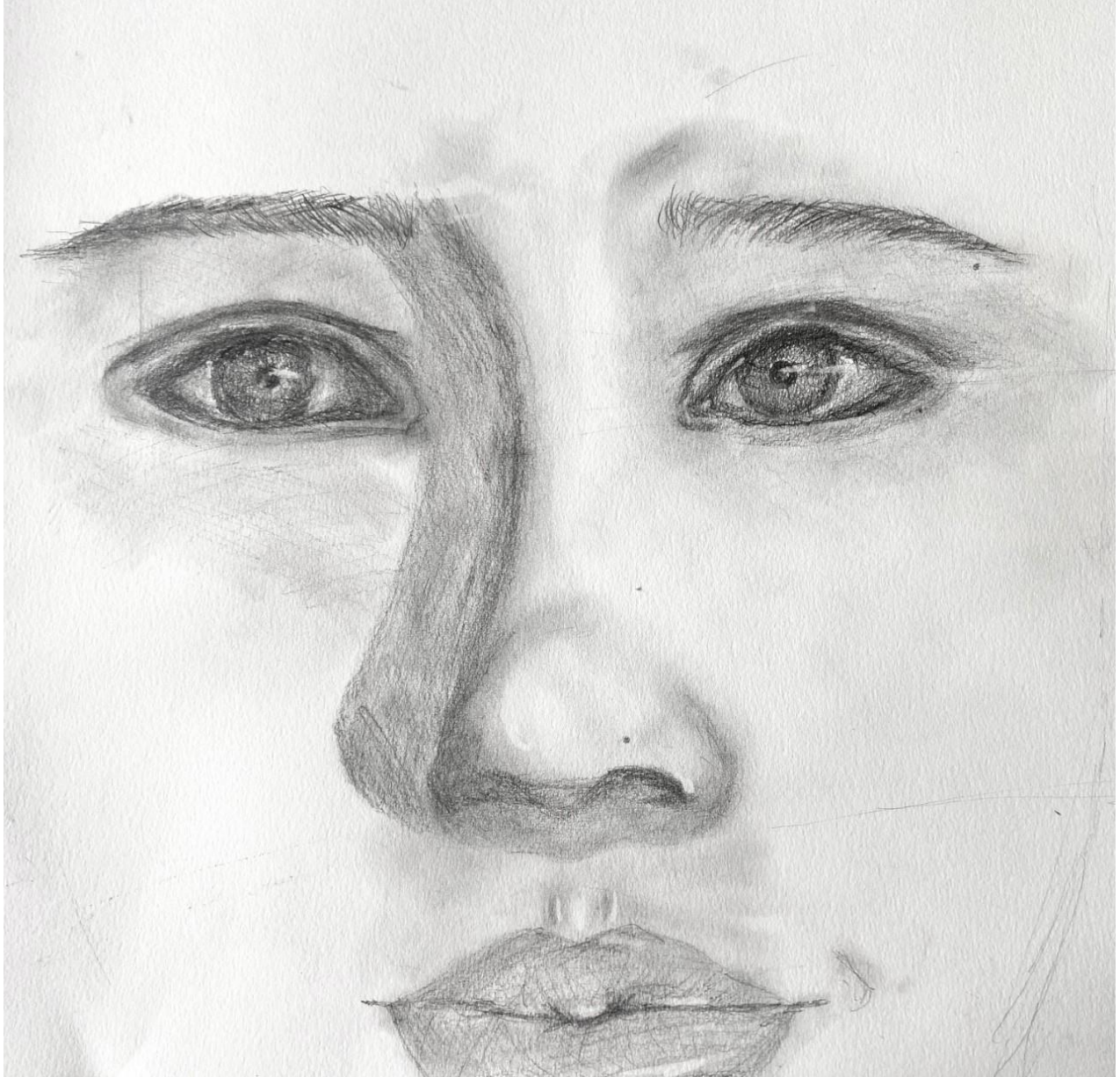
Angelina Blackie
Mixed media (popsicle sticks, glue, felt, found objects)



Kimora Ottereyes
Bleach resist on cotton



Kimora Ottereyes
Chalk pastel on paper



Kimora Ottereyes
Pencil on paper



Hal Cohen
Cyanotype (solar sensitive printmaking)



Jared Hodess
“Self Portrait”
Cyanotype (solar sensitive printmaking)



Jordan Demaine
"The Camp"
Cyanotype (solar sensitive printmaking)



Christian Dimitrov
Cyanotype (solar sensitive printmaking)



Canela Viereck LaPaix
Acrylic on paper (5' x 3')



Jamal D'Andre Primus
Acrylic on canvas



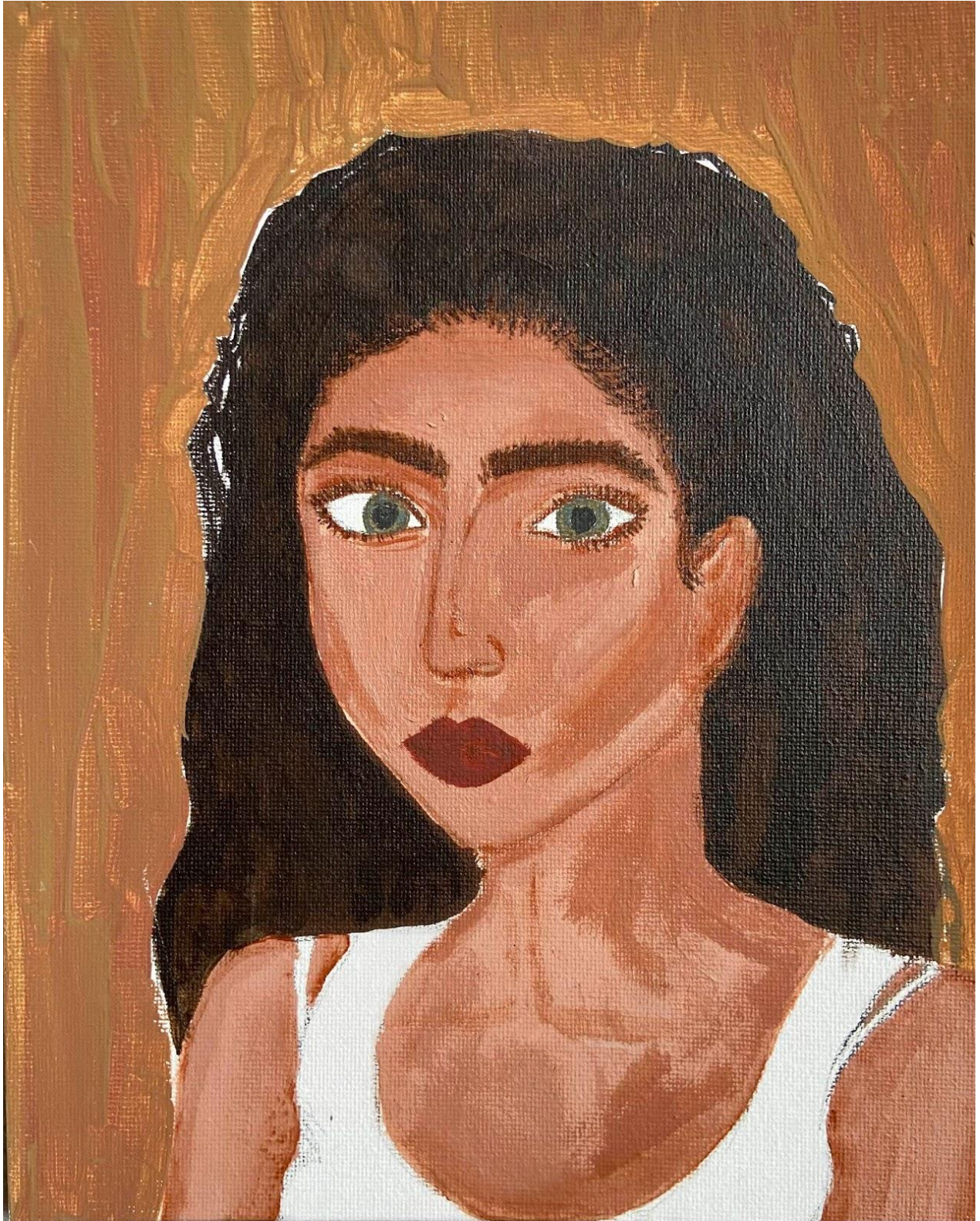
Jamal D'Andre Primus
Acrylic on paper



Jamal D'Andre Primus
Fabric, polyfill, glass cabochons, paint, felt



Jamal D'Andre Primus
Cardboard, plaster strips, acrylic paint



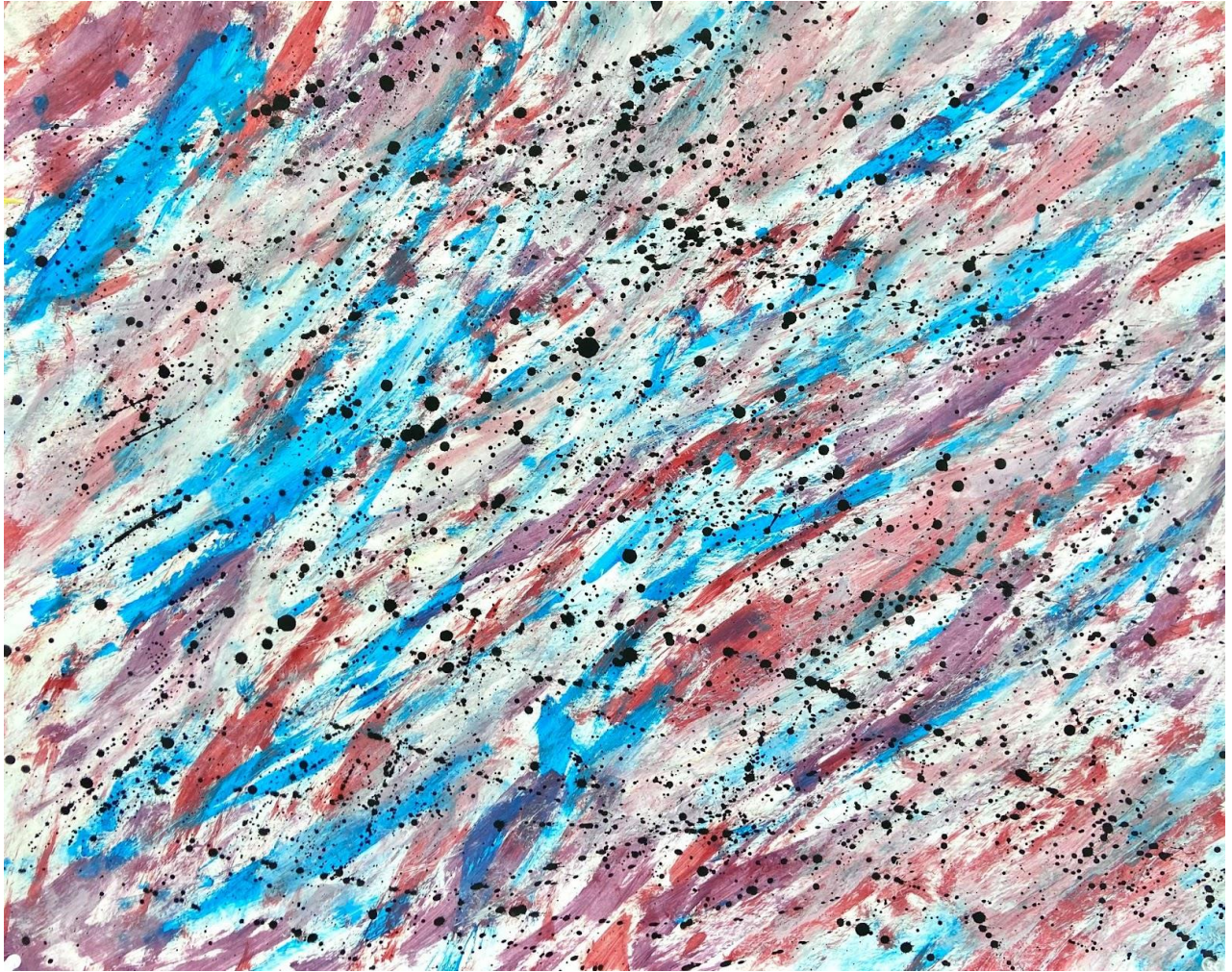
Rosie Nikitara
Acrylic on canvas



Keiarah Smith-Coombs
Acrylic on canvas



Keiarah Smith-Coombs
“LLJ”
Photo transfer on canvas



Sky Ross
Acrylic paint and ink on paper



Sky Ross
Mixed Media (styrofoam, paint, yarn, sticks)



Tyler Demaine
Acrylic on paper



Tyler Demaine
“Dog”
Cyanotype (solar sensitive printmaking)



Robyn Angilirq
Cyanotype (solar sensitive printmaking)



Robyn Angilirq
Acrylic on paper



Robyn Angilirq
“The Sun” tarot card
Pencil, marker, and ink on paper



Joel Ross-Raitano
Pencil, pen, marker on paper



Shauna Caine
"The Moon" tarot card
Pen, marker, and ink on paper



Aryn Robertson
Acrylic on canvas (3' x 6')



Aryn Robertson
Acrylic on paper



Tamisha Davy
Coloured pencil and ink on paper



Devon Karras
Plasticine on cardboard

**A COMPILATION OF POETRY, CREATIVE WRITING,
AND VISUAL ART EXPLORING THE THEME OF**

IDENTITY



**created by students across the
EMSB Outreach Network**