

# Alternative United Voices – Volume 9

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A compilation of fiction, poetry and visual art from the students of  
Montreal's Outreach high schools

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An Alternative United publication  
Organized by Colin Throness



Find out more about Alternative United and read the publication  
online at [alternativeunited.ca](http://alternativeunited.ca)

## Acknowledgements

This year's judge is Gladwell Pamba, from Nairobi, Kenya. She was the 2022 East Africa winner of the International Literary Seminars (ILS), has been nominated for the Best of Net Publications and won the Afreada Contest in 2019, a competition across Africa. She was a recipient of the Oxbelly Writers' Retreat fellowship in Greece (2023) and the CC Adetula Fellowship for African Women in Creative Writing fellowship (2023). Her works have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *The Northwest Review*, *Waxwing Journal*, *The Offing*, *Tint Journal* and elsewhere.

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Most important, big props go out to all the brilliant students who participated this year, both in the Voices contest and publication and in the creative writing workshops at Concordia. Your passion and creativity will shine on in the pages of this anthology, in our memories, and out in the big beautiful world, wherever it leads you. We hope you keep these impressive artistic tools close at hand as you embark on your next adventures. Above all, don't be afraid to dream as big as you can.

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## Foreword

Aspiration is a relative term—at its root, it simply means the process of drawing a breath. Its more commonly held definition points to our tangible and intangible hopes and dreams, the interrogation of our actions and personalities, and making peace with past and future decisions. Our aspirations can keep us awake at night, planning, scheming, questioning. They can stalk us. Sit with us in class. Walk with us. This year, we invited the young creatives in Montreal's Outreach Network to explore the theme of aspirations, eliciting mind-blowing stories, poems and visual arts with broad interpretations.

The pieces challenge status quo and interrogate society's moral decay and the hope for homogeneity when it comes to access to resources; they highlight the complexities of immigrant experiences and their hopes for change; they explore familial relationships, the sacrifices parents make (or not) and the desire for reciprocal love. We have stories of killers tormented by guilt; of unresolved traumas that haunt characters, who struggle to find the courage to confront and overcome their pain; of teenage angst and questions of identity and uncertain futures; of a deep longing for one's home country and the cultural tensions between *here* and *home*. And at the same time, aspirations were even manifested in the stories exploring platonic relationships and daily mental health struggles. We witnessed a range of fantasy stories of mysterious creatures and worlds, science fiction stories about imagined futuristic worlds, and even stories told from an afterlife.

I was beyond impressed by the creatives' diversity, creativity, imagination and playfulness in terms of form and content, as well as their bold storytelling skills in the topics and themes they tackled.

It is with great delight that I present to you this brilliant anthology whose pages breathe with the awareness that the Canadian literary space continues to grow and that the future is bright!

– Gladwell Pamba

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Tomorrow  
By Prudence

The future is something I think of often  
but there are some points I would rather spend it in a coffin.  
When it comes to careers there are a lot of options,  
the future is far, it might not even come.

If there's no tomorrow  
there's no point in thinking what's going to happen tomorrow,  
what if it's filled with sorrow,  
tomorrow is a gift that's waiting to come,  
live in the present not the past or the future.

One step forward is another into the future,  
live life as is and not how other people want you to live. Living is a privilege and  
a curse.  
It can be a beautiful thing and an ugly thing, find the middle and you can get  
through.

Finish today because there's no time to think about tomorrow,  
tomorrow may never come, live life to the fullest because you only get one.

Good Morning Old Friend  
By Shylah Balcombe

Good morning old friend  
I'd like to say hello again  
I'd like to text you about the coldness in my bed  
Say the things I never said  
Rewrite old memories and pretend  
Be the person you knew me as  
I want to look into your eyes and see the light hazel glaze that appeared only in  
the gaze of sunlight that hovered over the dark sphere of your perception  
I miss when you held me with loving intentions  
I'd like to hold your hand and dance with you in the rain as if there is no  
tomorrow and we will never feel pain  
The pain of losing you that is much too strong  
The way you stroked my hair and said I could never do wrong  
That we would never be apart  
Because forever and always was always on our hearts  
We would get married and bear children as if we weren't children ourselves  
Yet the notes you've written me are now collecting dust on the shelves  
I'd like to say goodnight knowing that your face will be there in the morning  
I'm bad at goodbyes  
That's why your hellos are what I am mourning  
So hello again  
I'd like to call you anything but friend.

## Aspirations or Fear?

By Gabby

I have many aspirations but my main aspiration is to become something and leave behind a memory of me. I know this may seem really dumb to some people but it's important to me and it's something I aspire to do.

I feel like leaving behind something after I'm gone is important because I want to do something good, something that will leave an impact on people even if it's small and others may not find it important or care about it. As someone who comes from a long line of family members who are high school dropouts and people that didn't go past high school, I really want more for myself and my future. Finishing high school is one of my biggest fears and at the same time one of my biggest aspirations. I feel like I can't wait for it to be over but at the same time I don't know if I want it to end because I have no clue what I'm going to do after high school and what I have ahead of me. The more I think about it the more I get scared knowing I don't know what's going to happen.

I feel like if I don't finish high school there will always be this big "What if": I would be doing better in life if I would have just gone to school and stopped complaining all the time? Would I have a better paying job? Would I actually be doing something I like and wanted to do? At the same time, what if I finish high school and end up doing something I don't like for the rest of my life or I end up not doing anything with my life? I feel like I just keep going in the big circle with what I want to do and my fears of the future.

I'm slowly pushing my aspirations because I'm scared of messing it up or not being good enough and failing at what I want to do. The more I think about it the more I don't want to follow through with my aspirations but at the same time what if I don't follow what I want to do and I end up hating the fact I didn't do what I wanted?

I guess the big takeaway of what I'm saying is that you never know what life has for you in the future and even if it feels like you have nothing going for you and you're scared, you should keep trying and pushing for yourself. The moment you stop believing in yourself, you stop believing in everything else and everybody else. Even though your aspirations may scare you a little, that shouldn't stop you from doing something you want to do.



## Best Friend By Brook

Everyone says that they have a best friend, but do they really know what that means? The level of trust required of someone before you consider them your best friend is a lot. Arguments and disagreements with someone who doesn't care about how you feel tends to make you realize that they aren't worth your time and effort. Thankfully, I was able to meet my best friend this year.

When you start to commit to a friendship, you should expect some ups and downs in a connection; disagreements may actually strengthen it. To popular belief, disagreements surprisingly don't mean a friendship is over. It brings you closer together and helps you both recognize areas that need improvement.

My best friend and I met a few months ago. At first, we didn't really get along because of false rumors, but as we got to know one another, we quickly grew close, started hanging out after school every day, had sleepovers for three days in a row, and are now inseparable. We do disagree, of course, but we've never allowed it to get in the way of our friendship. We talk things out and listen to each other. I'm so happy that I've met someone who can handle my emotions and doesn't get upset with me. Rather than acting ignorant, we make an effort to talk to each other and find solutions.

Even when times are difficult, if you genuinely care about someone, you don't give up on them. However, if you don't feel that way, the friendship isn't worthwhile if you're not prepared to make an effort to maintain it.

## Filthy or Wealthy?

By TA

Most of the rich are avaricious, greedy, and self-centered. That is filthy. It is advised to assist those who are less fortunate, even in small ways. The truly wealthy, I suppose, make the most of their ability to give back in any way they can. My goal is to be the person who speaks up for those who have the power to drastically alter this dying planet for the better. That's what I want to do.

If the wealthy have the capacity to give, I want to be the one to impose knowledge so that I can use my voice, my passion, my vision, and my purpose. My aim is to motivate the world with a strong desire to be a social reformer.

I witnessed firsthand how many people suffer purely due to a lack of money, and there are plenty of individuals who tend to do worse than me, including my mother. She looked after me for a while until I was a little older. She then left my father due to some difficulties, went through trauma after, and got into jobs where it was more difficult for her to find employment and other necessities because she was Indigenous. She then continued to struggle financially and it was difficult to get in touch with her because she had become homeless. Due to depression, she tried drugs and started drinking. She found it difficult to enter a shelter, but she eventually did it with the help of my grandma. She reconnected with her mother. My grandmother became aware that she was ill and not feeling well. The healing progress was long and rough and still is but it's surely soon better.

I wish there were more opportunities for the world and more to be given if money was easier. My mother wouldn't have to work as hard to do that or would not have had to go through all that if surviving wasn't just based on numbered paper. I hope I can change the system, the economy... just something to make everyone's lives easier.

I Am  
By Menachem Mendel

I am Jewish and different  
I wonder: will I keep my friends or will they leave me?  
I hear the footsteps as my dad roughly comes down the stairs  
I see myself working hard and trying to get to the point I want to be  
I want to feel like I have the power to control my life  
I am Jewish and different

I pretend to be bigger than I am when I am weaker  
I feel love so I don't cry  
I touch grass to connect with the world  
I worry about death and if it's that simple  
I cry when I am alone so that someone might see me  
I am Jewish and different

I understand that I may never be the man I want to be  
I say, "For as long as it takes, I will wait,"  
I dream to be in a land of no machines and clean air  
I try to be the man that takes the first step so the rest can follow  
I hope we will all make it  
I am Jewish and different

Message to My Older Self  
By Mila

If you had three questions to write to your older self, what would you ask? The following is the letter I would send to my older “me” if I could connect with her.

*Dear future Mila,*

*Did we make it? There's been a lot you probably had to work for, and you know how we hate working. I'm looking forward to finding this again and being a changed person with new opinions, and hopefully a job. Here's a little brief unravel of fifteen-year-old Mila; I am currently in secondary three. I am hoping to be a nurse who works specifically in the emergency room, and considering joining cadets, just like your aunt Jenny. There is currently a lot I struggle with and I'm praying I pull myself together sooner or later or else we'll be in big trouble.*

*For the first question, I think I'd ask about movies. I'm huge on movies and I think you can tell what someone is like based on which movies and shows you enjoy spending your time watching. My favourite show is currently Skins. I like it because it's relatable and humorous. And for movies, well let's just say I'm child-like. It's probably because I go around watching Pixar and Disney movies like Ratatouille and Rapunzel.*

*What do you do when you feel overwhelmed? This is one of my many struggles and I often don't handle stress very well. I often break down and spiral into a deep place in my head. I'm looking forward to the day I become stable enough and mature to handle myself well.*

*Lastly, what is one thing you'd change about yourself or your past? For right now, I'd try to change how I think about myself. I would do anything to be confident in myself and I think that would take a long time. And personally one thing I'd change about my past is when I shaved my head because it's been two years and I'm still growing out my hair!*

What would you ask your older self if you could?

Teenage Dream  
By Alyssa Abdoo

Life is so short  
Is always what people say  
But they never talk about how dreadfully long it is to be 13  
To have to do the same routine over and over again  
Every day being forced to let other people's decisions control your life  
Until you feel as though you have taken a backseat to the world around you  
No authority to stop yourself from being made into a background character  
In your own motion picture  
Let the people you have no choice but to surround yourself with  
Say things that you know aren't true  
And ask you questions that they don't want you to actually answer

You tell yourself it's not you, it's them  
That it's normal to not be present in your own life  
But most importantly don't try and fight it  
Accept that the world around you  
And the lives you have always seen in movies  
Are always going to be much more interesting than your own  
You're not going to have your "teenage dream fantasy"  
These aren't going to be your golden years  
Instead you stay at home  
Rotting away in the four walls of your bedroom  
With a melancholic feeling always at the bottom of your stomach  
Forming a ball of dread that threatens to come up  
Every time you see other people living the life you wish you had  
And think you deserve  
Causing another crack to fragment your porcelain heart  
Already another split threatening to form itself  
You try to convince yourself that nothing is your fault  
It's the people around that are the problem

Detach yourself from your friends for days on end  
Avoid them  
Even if they're the only form of consistency you have left in your life  
If they really cared and wanted to see you they'd reach out  
But they never do  
Who cares? It's not your fault anyway  
It's never you that's the problem  
It's almost impossible to cry now  
Keep all your emotions bottled up  
Trapped in your already self-destructive brain  
And then finally come up with about 100 reasons why you are in fact the  
problem  
Start to feel a need for someone to tell you what's wrong with you  
So you can fix it and fix yourself  
To feel hopeful again  
You must have done something really bad for your life to end up this way  
You simply can't imagine yourself happy again now  
Start to embrace your self-doubt  
Always expecting the worst for yourself in every situation  
Find comfort in the familiar melancholic feeling in the bottom of your stomach  
Teach yourself to drown it out with promises of a better self and hope for a  
better future  
Knowing that it's never going to come  
You never needed other people to drive away your loneliness  
You just needed to find a way to talk to it.

Darkness Life of Thoughts  
By A.W.

Comfort in the pain for that's all I knew  
I never got to be the average teenager  
I missed out on so much  
due to my mental health and poor state of mind

When my friends were out partying  
going to prom and getting high  
I was in a hospital bed wanting to die  
for years, I suffered so brutally and it never really occurred to me  
that outside the psych ward doors  
the world was still spinning  
the earth was still turning  
I was never able to physically go out and have fun

I'd stay in bed wilting away like a once beautiful flower  
that's now lost his petals and I don't know who or what to blame  
for missing out from my teenage years  
do I blame myself in my brain for trapping me in hospitals  
and pinning me to my bed  
or do I blame my old friends for not including me  
for not seeing therefore not asking to go out and have fun

I never got to be a teenager, my depression ripped me away from that lifestyle  
but the world kept going and I grew up

## Freddy's Frights By Elhadja Sow

Once upon a time, an abandoned amusement park called Freddy's Fright stood in a small town. Legend had it that strange and eerie occurrences took place within this park. Five kids went missing and they were never found until this day.

One cloudy night, four high school friends, William, Evan, Vanessa, and Jah, decided to fulfill their curiosity and explore the haunted amusement park. Armed with only flashlights, they stepped cautiously into the darkness.

As they ventured deeper into the park, they could hear faint whispers and sounds of kids giggling echoing through the halls. Suddenly, one of the flashlights flickered and died, casting the group into deeper shadows.

They stumbled upon a room filled with old animatronic creatures; their glassy eyes staring lifelessly. The friends exchanged uneasy glances as they noticed the name tags on the animatronics: Freddy, Bonnie, Chica, and Foxy.

The remaining flashlights began to dim, causing their hearts to race. Panic filled the air as the animatronics seemed to come to life. Their rusty joints screeched and their animatronic voices crackled through the silence.

At first, the group thought that the animatronics were friendly until Freddy's eyes turned red. He let out a deep malicious laugh and lunged at Jah. Luckily Jah was a star basketball player and had quick reflexes and dodged the bloodthirsty animatronic.

Desperate to escape, the friends scattered, each running down different corridors.

Bonnie cornered Vanessa, his mechanical teeth snapping maliciously. She squeezed her eyes shut, preparing for the worst.

Just as Bonnie lunged forward, a strange noise reverberated throughout the park. The animatronics froze in their tracks, their eerie presence temporarily suspended. A mysterious figure appeared, wielding his trusty old flashlight. IT WAS THE LEGENDARY NIGHT GUARD!!

Foxy lunged at the night guard but he dodged his attack and pressed a button on the side of Foxy's neck disabling him. With a loud *thud* Foxy's body dropped to the floor. The Nightguard proceeded to do the same with the rest of



the animatronics. After deactivating the rest of the animatronics, he ordered the friends to follow him. They sprinted through the old amusement park, their hearts pounding, until they reached the exit.

Gasping for breath outside, they turned to thank the Nightguard but found the figure had vanished without a trace. They knew at that moment they had encountered a true hero.

To this day, the friends never forget the horrors they faced in Freddy's Fright. But they also always remembered the bravery of the Nightguard, who saved their lives and put an end to the cursed animatronics once and for all... or did he!?!

A few days later the group of friends were reminiscing about what had happened in the old creepy amusement park and one by one they had nightmares about the animatronics in their dreams. When they woke up, there would be scars on their arms and legs.

They were all confused and scared about the new scars on their bodies. When they were at school they asked each other if they had been having these weird dreams about the animatronics and they all said yes. The dreams would always end up with them seeing a golden version of Freddy just sitting right in front of them with an eerie look.

The group boldly decided to go back to the amusement park and see if the animatronics were still there, so they decided to meet up at dawn at the amusement park. This time they were more prepared and aware of the park and what was within it.

The group of friends slowly lingered in the depths of the abandoned amusement park searching for the animatronics. As the brave group ventured further into the eerie run-down amusement park, they started hearing these weird scraping sounds. They looked back and one of the friends had disappeared with a trail of blood behind them. Just as they had time to process what happened to their friend, the golden Freddy that they were all seeing in their dreams lunged at William and bit his head off, with blood spewing all over the golden bear's fur as he lingered back into the darkness. The other two friends were in absolute shock. Now, two of their friends were dead which left only Jah and Evan.

The two friends couldn't handle being in this lingering death trap of a place, so they decided to leave their two dead friends there and never talk about this day ever again.

In a local news story, two teenagers were found dead at an abandoned amusement park after a whole month of searching for them. According to the police, the bodies were scarred and dressed up in the old spare mascots' costumes that the amusement park would use to dress up employees to bring joy to the children that would come to the park.

The Haunted One  
By Kalista Tsapekis

It's all over. Was this meant to happen? Could she have done anything differently? How did she even get here?

It was a warm and sunny day in Feyland on the day it happened. A day like any other. Nellie, the fairy and aspiring healer, was coming back from her healing lessons and was eager to get home. She was a hardworking girl, but extremely antisocial and shy. This made it hard for her to make friends. Luckily for her she already had a best friend, her twin brother, Neil. Neil was almost the complete opposite of Nellie, being lazy and mischievous, while also simultaneously being adventurous and confident. He did not have any aspirations or goals, compared to Nellie, who had planned the majority of her life out, and dedicated it to enhancing her healing abilities.

Eventually, Nellie made it to her house. Her home was comfortable, cozy and decorated with flora. It had a warm atmosphere fit for a small family of fairies. When she got home, Neil was there waiting for her excitedly. Without even saying hello, or asking how her classes went, he animatedly exclaimed that they just had to see what the commotion was about in the forest behind their house. Nellie was surprised at her brother's energy, but before she could comment on what he said, he continued. Neil elaborated that apparently, from what he heard, there was a magical being that could grant any wish that lived in that forest. She narrowed her eyes, unconvinced. She knew her brother could be gullible, but this was surprising, even for him. She wanted to gently explain that he was somehow tricked, but she could not bring herself to do it. In the end, Neil persuaded his sister to explore the forest after dusk, when their parents went to bed. The plan was that Neil would leave first, and after a few minutes, Nellie would meet him in front of the forest. Nellie was filled with anxiety at the thought of adventuring at night, but she pushed those feelings aside, knowing this is something her brother wanted to do. After a few minutes, she took a deep breath, and left the house and headed towards the forest.

When she stepped outside, the atmosphere was tense, and Nellie shivered slightly due to the coldness of the night. She was mildly fascinated by the shiny stars visible in the dark sky, but she pressed on, not wanting to be by herself any

longer. After some time, she found herself at the place they were supposed to meet up. As she approached the entrance of the forest and meeting spot, she noticed that her brother was nowhere to be seen. She looked around in the general vicinity, not straying far from her spot, but there was no trace of him. Nellie's mind, clouded by worry and anxiety, started to panic. She tried to keep her worries to herself, but she started pacing. Many frantic thoughts began going through her mind. She was anxious about being alone in this dim, unknown area all by herself, but she was also troubled by the absence of her brother. Nellie had no idea where Neil was, or even if he was alright. She glanced at the looming entrance to the forest. It seemed to be taunting her, calling her to venture inside. She stopped caring about the wish-granting entity long ago when her brother was nowhere to be found. Now, she just wanted to find out where Neil went, bring him home, and scold him for running off. Nellie, summoning all of her courage and confidence, took her first step into the forest, determined to find Neil.

The small fairy began adventuring through the gloomy forest, trying her hardest to keep a lookout for any signs of her brother, while trying to be as quiet as possible, in order to not disturb any creatures that resided in the area. The forest, while being beautiful in the morning, seemed to take on a sinister aura in the pitch-black night. Nellie, though afraid and uneasy, maintained her fearless front as she continued through the somber trees and flora.

Ultimately, just as she was about to concede and call for help, she saw something that would change her life forever, and not in a good way. Nellie gasped in terror as she was met with the horrifying sight of her brother on the ground, blood seeping from his wounds and wings broken. His face was contorted in pain, and there were faint tears in his eyes. Nellie was frozen in place, but only for a moment, as she then ran up to him and leaned him up against a tree in a sitting position. She frantically reassured Neil with tears rolling down her face that he would be alright. Nellie had never been this scared and afraid in her entire life. She had to do something to stop the bleeding and help him. Then, she got an idea, a risky one, but it just might work. She tried to remember what her healing lessons had taught her, and attempted one of the

spells. She hoped and prayed it would work, as Neil was in critical condition and desperately needed this to survive.

But the world was not on her side today. The spell failed, her healing magic not strong enough for the sheer amount and severity of his wounds. She hopelessly sobbed, begging for her brother to try and stay with her. She did not want to lose him here, she would not let this happen. Nellie cried hysterically as Neil eventually closed his eyes for the final time, passing away.

The next couple of days were a living hell for Nellie. But as her life went on, Neil went along with her. He would remain by her side as an entity, feeding on Nellie's guilt and regret. In the end, it was as if he never left at all. The siblings would be together forever.

Misted Memory  
By Naya Chowdhury

Up in the autumn mountains, a gray sky above us, with the foggy forest below, my dad and I walked through the rocky concrete that lead to the top part of the mountain. We passed by some beautiful architecture: it was like living in a mystical land. Statues of angels and fairies, with vines draping from their wings and garden temples, with flower pots sitting on the ledge. We found a pathway of rocks that went past a stream of water. My dad held my hand, as we went across to the other side. He was scared that I would fall into the water, since I was an adventurous little girl who always loved to run ahead of him. *Abby the Adventurer* he used to call me. We continued to walk, hearing the crunching of the leaves that came from our boots and the distant chirping of birds from the trees ahead of us.

A flight of stone stairs caught my eye that seemed like a short cut from the path we were taking. I started climbing up the flight of stairs, my dad being behind by a bit. As I was walking, I tripped and scraped my knee on one of the stone steps. It hurt quite a bit, but I didn't cry. I was used to getting boo boos from outdoor adventures. Dad came prepared, and took out a first aid kit from his bag. After patching my knee, I got back up again and continued going up, with my dad holding my hand once again, but I got why he wouldn't want me to run off ahead of him again.

We finally reached the highest point of the mountain and admired the view of the trees from afar. Some seemed to be covered in mist. Dad brought some sandwiches and juice boxes and found a bench for us to sit on. After having my snacks, I was looking around to find anything interesting nearby. I ended up finding a bush full of monarch butterflies, one of them landing on my finger. I slowly walked back to where my dad was sitting and showed him the butterfly. He smiled and pulled out a mini camera to take a photo of the butterfly and myself together. The butterfly flew away shortly after, and Dad and I sat down on the bench, noticing that the fog was becoming thicker. As we were about to head back down the mountain, Dad told me to wait, because he had something to give me. He told me to close my eyes and to hold my hand out, while he grabbed something from his bag. I felt something soft touch my hand and my dad told me I could open my eyes. In my hand was a bunny

plushie, which was white and fluffy, with a mini heart necklace. I reached out to give my dad a hug, and then all of a sudden everything faded to white.

I take the headset off my head, as I adjust my vision and look at my surroundings. The memory simulation has been completed. I look over to my right. I see the psychologist sitting on a chair, with a clipboard and pen in her hand. She has been documenting my body language and is able to see my memory with a projector that is connected to the headset. She asks me how the experience was and how I'm feeling now. I tell her that the experience felt so real and I am feeling pretty emotional. I'm 32 now, my dad passed away from a car crash when I was 10 years old. I was 8 years old in that memory, visiting my grandmother's cottage in the woods. My dad and I loved going on walks together, exploring the forest and mountains nearby. I had forgotten about that specific memory until revisiting it during this simulation session. Tears slowly start to fall down my face, ones of sadness but also joy. I'm happy I got to relive that moment, even if it was not reality.

After speaking with the psychologist for a few minutes, I thank her, grab my belongings and leave. On my way back home, I think about the bunny my dad gave me. I remember how attached I was to it. It meant so much to me and I'd cuddle with it every night. Even when I got older and stopped sleeping with it, I still kept it on one of my shelves in display, but eventually it just disappeared. I didn't let it bother me and just moved on with my life. 15 minutes pass, and I arrive at my place. My mom is visiting me for the weekend, so at least I have some company while I'm processing the session I had. I walk into the house and see Mom laying on the living room couch, taking a nap. I go upstairs to my room, put my stuff down and return downstairs to make myself some lunch. When I walk into the kitchen, I see that there is a box on the counter with my name on it. I walk to it, feeling a bit confused, but curious to see what's in it. I open the box, and a small smirk appears on my face. It is the bunny plushie my dad gifted me all those years ago, in decent condition, with some stains on the fur. I hold it close to my chest, smiling as I reminisce about that day with my dad. I feel like I can feel his presence in the room and that his spirit will always remain close to my heart.

Something's Missing  
By Oleg Delgado

Sometimes I get lost inside your eyes  
But sometimes in the rain I cry  
Yet you can't see because it's hidden deep inside  
And yes, I might hide a smile, but I'm hurt inside  
I just don't understand what's missing deep within me  
So why can I not see who I am

I don't have an answer, not just yet  
I asked the ocean, I asked the wind  
I got no reply, so tell me why  
Despite having everything something is missing  
A part of me is saying, I'm on my own  
But the other half says I need someone  
I am spit 50/50, why can't I just be me

I think I lost sight on what I was  
Sadness took over my mind  
I think I was lying saying I'm alright  
Maybe through age I drift off course  
Sitting by the water all alone  
Perhaps someday I'll be brought back



Benny's Barn  
By Mikhael Guzman  
Content warning: sexual abuse

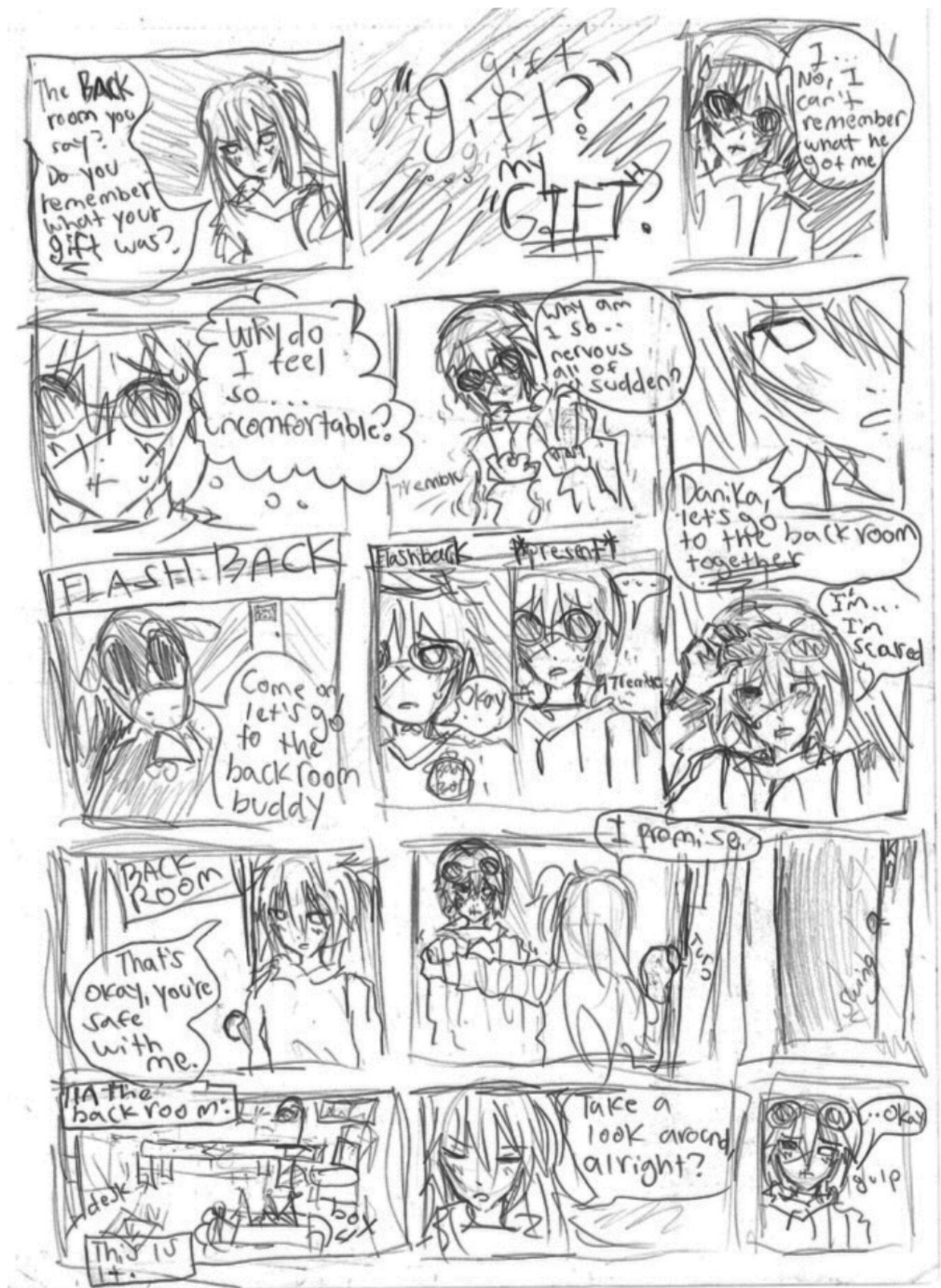




FLASHBACK MOMENT

HAPPY BIRTHDAY











My Time at the Camps  
By Addison Jordan

*My step grandmother shared with me the experiences she had in a concentration camp during the holocaust when she was a young girl. Though she is no longer with us, I still remember what she told me. And today, she will tell you.*

I've been on the train for three or four days, I think. I miss my mother and father. They have been dead for nearly two years, but I remember them like it was yesterday. It hurts sometimes to think about my time at the camps. But I can't let that time of my life control my life forever.

I was five when I was first captured. It was also when they separated me from my parents. The following day they strapped me down to a table and tattooed me. Shortly after being tattooed, I was shoved into a large, gated pen with many other kids around my age. I was so scared. Everywhere I looked there were men holding guns; they were ready to shoot us at any time. I was terrified. At least I wasn't the only scared kid there. In sharing our fears, I made friends with some of the other kids my age that day.

For the next couple of days at the camp, I spent the majority of my time with my new-found friends. We didn't do much during the day at the camp; they just made us stand outside all day. So, what I did was stand outside with my friends.

We did a lot of talking during that time, and we got to knowing each other very well. My parents were in the pen next to me, so I was able to talk to them often. However, four or five months later my parents were moved to a different camp a couple miles down the road. The day they were moved was the last day I saw them before they were killed. The day I turned seven, I was moved to a working camp and was made to work on the farm.

Working on the farm meant I was able to sneak fresh veggies for my friends. I just had to make sure I wasn't caught, or I'd be in big trouble. A week later my friends joined me on the farm to work, which meant we could sneak more fresh food back. It was well worth the risk as all they fed us at the camp was cold canned beans and stale bread. At least we were fed at all.

We stayed at our job 'till we escaped. It took three months to come up with a plan. During that time, we farmed and gathered food to take with us. The day we escaped we made sure no guards were looking and made a run for it. We ran for miles before reaching the train station where we boarded a train to safety.

I took a ship to Canada, where there was a family waiting to take care of me. And that brings us to today.



Moonlight  
By Henry Roy

Hi my name is October, I'm a 5'3 female with long orange hair. That's why my name is October, orange like the fall. Anyways let's get back on topic. I'm going to be telling you the story of how I died. I know you guys are wondering how I wrote this if I'm dead. Well, I'm writing this up in heaven. Anyway, here's my story.

I just finished my shift at Rockaberry on Monkland. It was 12:34 in the morning, and the moonlight was shining real bright so that you didn't even need street lights. I was walking down to my car right around the corner when I saw him, or it. We made eye contact, but his eyes were not normal. He had big pitch black eyes, the darkest eyes I've ever seen, it felt like he was staring into my soul. He had a hood on so it was hard for me to see his whole face. But I knew it was his eyes because of how bright the moonlight was.

"Hello, do I know you?"

"MOONLIGHT."

"What?"

"MOONLIGHT."

"Moonlight?"

"MOONLIGHT."

"Okay, is this some prank? Ha ha ha, it's real funny."

"MOOOOOOOOONLIGHT."

I felt uneasy, so uneasy that I ran to my car, but every time I looked back he would be there, looking at me. Until I arrived at my car. I got in and locked my doors.

"Screeeeeeeee..."

"What was that. It sounded like something was scraping my car?"

"MOONLIGHT."

"Oh shit, not him."

"MOONLIGHT, LOOK AT THE MOONLIGHT."

Then it all went silent.

I turned on my car and drove the fuck out of this parking lot. I felt uneasy and scared. Every second I looked at the rearview mirror to make sure he wasn't following me. Until I heard him again.

"MOONLIGHT."

But it wasn't like before. This thing was full on yelling now, so I called the cops.

"Hello 9-1-1!"

"Hello, what is your emergency?"

"There is a strange person or thing that keeps following me, and he keeps saying moonlight."

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhheeeeeeeeeeeccccccccccccc..."

All I heard was static.

"MOONLIGHT"

"Oh no, he's back"

"Get away from me"

"MOONLIGHT"

"AHHHHHHHH"

I saw flashing colours through my eyelids. Red. Blue. Red. Blue. Were the cops here?

My bones where aching and my flesh was peeling.

"What happened?" I told myself.

"Why am I upside down? Why is there glass everywhere? What the fuck is happening?"

I crawled out the broken window and got up. I saw there were medics and police cars, but no one was in sight. I looked behind me and there...

"MOONLIGHT."

A Sweeter Faith  
By Phoenix Coombs

He didn't know his biological father, he could never picture his face. A blank image of clothes on a worn-out body, a distorted mess where his face should be. Static filled his head every time he tried to picture the man who helped bring him into this mess of a world.

"I didn't know him," his mother would say, a cigarette caught between her lips like she were a hungry rat, chewing on the edge as she breathed out its smoke. "Donors are weird that way," she scoffed.

She had wanted a child, yet the child she spawned seemed to never work up to her standards; what she had hoped for in a boy was wrong, incomplete. His hair was too white, his eyes too blue, unfitting for someone as dark as he. She blamed the man who offered his sperm for her child's disfigurement, his weakened mind and constantly panicked state.

"If I would have known I would have *this* for a child, I would have prayed for stronger genes." She was talking to herself, taking another drag of her cigarette; partially ignoring the child that sat at her feet. "If only I could get rid of you." She was a woman of faith, who stuck to ideal morals.

Unlike her unfortunate child, her hair was neatly done up in micro locks, tied back in an unkempt ponytail. Her eyes were sunken and black as midnight. You could barely tell they were related.

The only solace the boy could find was the sweet blonde woman his mother had brought along. Despite his mother's bitterness, they were good together. This woman made her happy, happier than the boy had ever seen when she was with him.

"Sweetheart," she would call him, "I'll tuck you into bed. Your mother's out back, taking some time to herself." But he could tell she didn't ever want to see him.

It had stopped bothering him as he got older, putting up with his mother's bitter words and harsh smacks as he devoted himself to something new. Something he could hold onto, something of his own. A sweeter faith that seemed to appreciate him, all the right things he did. Putting his devotion towards becoming a beacon of hope for the community, a job he hoped would fill people with more peace than he had when he was young.

Splatter Pitter Patter  
By Lily Jolie Hausknost

In this painting, colours drip like they are raining.  
It's pouring pain, their tears water what we're making.  
Looking closer, your hypnotized eyes search for closure  
in the raw and crude, reliable truth  
captured in pieces going back to our roots.

In this painting, towers lean like they are fainting.  
Unstable power, leaking from the buildings they're sustained in.  
Look too close and you'll find cracks, a number of bruises from every attack.

When my mask peeled off, the fog condensed to water,  
the floors flooded, paint cans spilled like slaughter,  
I stepped back, but no one bothered,  
all too blinded with their eyes still covered.

I choked on the haze I've lived under,  
peering into my world torn asunder.  
paper placed on every person's face to hide the people's waste that we are  
hanging. Passionately playing all our cards we picked prior to understanding why  
we're praying.  
Posing poorly the way we're painted, with our smudged colors placed in places  
perfectly picked by those worth praising. It's draining.  
Staining the ground with sour sounds strung together shaping  
Massacres, genocide, racism, hate crimes.  
Problematic politicians, fires spreading, widowed wives.  
Starving people, bombs that fly, sick children, murdered tribes.  
People do, and Artists thrive. On this canvas, God has cried.

Beneath the Gaze  
By Tafari Promesse-Samuels

“Are you really sure about this Jordan? If anything happens, don’t be afraid to call me,” his mother worriedly said while twirling her brown hair with her finger.

“I’m sure, Mom. I want to know what it’s like to be a part of a normal high school experience, y’ know? You can’t smother me forever.”

“But—” Jordan cut her off, looking at her with an endearing smile. His mother sighed and smiled. “Have a good day Jordan, be careful.”

“Thanks, Mom! I love you!” Jordan ran towards school as he said goodbye.

Jordan was a 7<sup>th</sup> grader who had been homeschooled his whole life but finally got the courage to insist on living a normal school life, as he felt sheltered from the world. As he walked with energy, like every molecule in his body was bouncing up and all around inside him. He started to imagine the possibilities a high school life would bring. A friend group that would last forever, fun clubs, fun classes and most importantly, a girlfriend! Jordan started to drool at the amount of fun he would have.

His mother was afraid of putting him in school as she didn’t know how Jordan would handle it, so she homeschooled him instead. She made it fun for him to make up for what he missed. Due to this, Jordan was absolutely clueless on what he was getting himself into as this mistake would be fatal, for him and someone precious to him.

“Ouch!” He bumped into someone.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t quite see you as I wasn’t looking where I was going,” the other person responded.

He opened his eyes and saw a girl with beautiful silver hair that blew in the wind. The way she wore a basic white and black uniform and made it look attractive was absolutely wild for Jordan. He’d seen pretty girls before on TV but nothing like this.

“Uh—Jordan?” the girl called him.

“Huh? What? Whozzat?” Jordan blabbed after imagining his entire life with her.

“Are you new here? I don’t recall a face quite like yours.”

“M—my name is Jordan! What’s yours?” he finally stopped drooling.

“Chloe. Charmed.” She stuck her hand out for a handshake.

Jordan didn’t exactly know social conventions when it came to meeting people for the first time, so he took her hand awkwardly, shaking it side to side instead of up and down. This was also his first time interacting with a woman that was not family. The bell rang, annoyingly loud.

“Well, there’s the bell. Let’s get going to class, shall we? I’ll take you there. We’re in the same class,” Chloe offered.

“S—sure!” Jordan tried to say calmly but was too busy celebrating in his head.

The final bell rang and Jordan walked into his classroom with Chloe and introduced himself. It was bizarre to see so many people that weren’t his stuffed animals in the same place wearing the same clothes, but it wasn’t a bad thing.

“Excuse me, Mr. Johnson. Can he sit next to me?” a guy with shades and tattoos on his well-built arms asked the teacher.

“Sure, I don’t mind. Your seat is over there Jordan,” Mr. Johnson said politely.

As Jordan walked over, he could NOT take his mind off Chloe and her beautiful and gorgeous, out of this world, one might even say *sexy* hair—he heard that word on TV one time. He felt like he should be paying her to see her, to be frank. Sometimes he imagined her in one of his hoodies—man! The things he would DO for that! Hypnotized, Jordan corrected his seat to be next to Chloe while still sitting next to Shades.

“Uh—whatcha doin’, man?” Shades asked.

“Just, uh, hanging around. What’s up?” Jordan acted the fool.

“Not that, dumbass. Why you sittin’ next to that parasite?” Shades interrogated.

Jordan felt it building up, rage for another’s sake.

“No, no, no, NO!” he thought. “This won’t do at all! I should beat his silly butt (he didn’t know what a curse word was yet) just for calling the goddess next to me ANYTHING negative like that.”

“Dude?! Do you NOT see her? She’s absolutely blowing my mind! Apologize now!” he growled and barked at Shades.

“She’s blown something of mine as well, dude. I’ve seen and messed with her, so calm down, dog. Quit embarrassing yourself,” Shades provoked him.

“Jordan, pass me my mechanical pencil please,” Chloe spoke out finally, the pools of white in her eyes dazzling.

Without thinking, he got on his knees, grabbed the pencil and then swung his head up while panting with his tongue out as if he was a dog.

“Thanks, Jordan. You can sit down now,” Chloe commanded him while her eyes went from white to black.

“Oh... yeah, alright.” He stopped slobbering and sat down.

Chloe laughed quietly, licking her lips. Shades noticed this and sighed sadly.

Ah, yeah, after a long day of school, usually it’s nice to change and then lay in bed for a second or do a hobby or even eat. You have at least six hours to decide before it’s time to continue the cycle. Jordan was walking home to see his future wife waiting for him outside his house. Wait—what?

“Chloe?! What are you doing here? I’m not hallucinating, right?” he questioned.

“Mr. Johnson gave me the agenda. I have no idea why he didn’t give them to you, but it’s whatever.” Chloe shrugged it off.

“Can we continue this inside? It’s kinda weird to just stand out here, to be honest,” Jordan said.

Jordan unlocked the door and Chloe ran in and spun around in the living room as if she was awkwardly dancing. Jordan thought it was odd that Johnson would do something like this as he already gave him an agenda, but he didn’t care, due to having Chloe to himself.

“Ugh, I’m not going to lie anymore, I just wanted to hangout and see you to be honest. I hope you can forgive me,” Chloe revealed.

Jordan was taken aback. He started blushing too, without even knowing it, as he never thought Chloe would say anything like that as it seemed out of character for someone as soft spoken as Chloe. She didn’t seem like the type of person to lie like that. Not that he minded at ALL. Now they were making progress!

While sitting on the couch together, Jordan felt the nerves kick in as he was not listening to anything Chloe was saying, he was just staring at *those* (he had no idea about the female anatomy.) Chloe stopped talking and eventually looked at him seductively.

“I know you’re not listening at all Jordan. Why don’t we do something more fun,” she flirted.

“Oh! Like games? I’ve got a bunch of them in my room! How about Mario Kart? It’s my favorite at the moment,” he said, clueless.

“I’d like that,” she agreed.

When they started to walk to Jordan’s room, a mom-shaped skeleton was sitting at his mom’s door. He guessed it was time for Halloween decorating even if it was early. Jordan set up the console and they sat down on his bed together. Chloe pushed Jordan down onto his bed, crawling on to him.

“Is this some sort of school initiation thing? It’s kinda uncomfortable,” Jordan asked.

Chloe started licking her lips with an abnormally long tongue. Jordan finally realized what Shades meant when he said parasite.

“Where’s my mom, Chloe? WHERE’S MY—” he started struggling.

“Your mother? Don’t worry about it, Jordan!” the creature mocked, looking at him with starved eyes. It could see its reflection off of Jordan’s terrified eyes. Chloe swallowed something as she lay in bed next to Jordan. At least... his skeleton. Chloe opened the door to leave and saw Shades.

“Claimed another unknowing boy, huh? You think no one’s ever going to stop you?” Shades angrily barked, as they walked outside onto the lawn.

“Why should I? Devouring people is my absolute FAVOURITE thing in this world! Quit acting so cool when you’re nothing but a useless, spineless loser.”

Shades looked in his pocket and sighed.

“I loved you once, you know? That was before you changed into a monster that is unfeeling,” he sadly remarked as he pulled out a revolver and shot the monster named Chloe.

“This is goodbye to you both, Chloe and Jordan.”

Shades lit a cig and looked up at the rainy sky.

“What a terrible day for rain,” Shades remarked.



The Void Is Not the Truth  
By Tafari Promesse-Samuels

The day felt slower than usual. Luna opened her eyes but didn't want to get out of bed, although the feeling of starvation was what got her out in the end.

"Morning, sis," her brother yawned.

Luna put on a smile. "Sounds like you need more time to sleep than I do Chris," she smugly remarked.

Chris tried to protest but yawned instead of arguing.

"You have the day off anyway. Why are you even up?"

"I simply wished to see my sister off for the morning. Is that so crazy of a thing that a brother would do?" he sucked up.

"Argh, you can be really weird sometimes." She sighed. "I'm off and just a heads up, if you eat my jalapeno Cheetos I will take all of your Halloween candy, so don't try it, termite."

"Y—yes ma'am," Chris whimpered.

Luna waved bye to her brother and her smile faded as soon as she left the door, and her head started to fill with static.

The fall season was a beautiful thing, in concept. The season of death returning to the earth as we all eventually pass on. For Luna it reminded her of her place in the world, another character in a more important person's life. A simple decaying leaf on a big ol' tree. Not that it mattered at all in the first place.

Something felt off for Luna. She normally would walk down the street at a decent pace but today she might as well be limping. It just felt like the world was slower than normal and she could only hear static, but she didn't know why.

"God, this weather is—*yawn*—it makes me feel so tired," she said to herself.

Once she made it to school, she was greeted with several good mornings, but all of them felt hollow to her.

"Wassup, Lun," a guy said to her.

"How are you doin', Luke?" she greeted back.

"Ah y'know, same old same old. Just lookin' out for my lil' bro," he continued on.

But Luna felt like she couldn't listen. It wasn't her attention span. As far as she knew she had a good attention span for her age. It just felt like her mind didn't want to work with her today.

The world sounded like the static that she couldn't get out of her head, just a subtle *zzzzt* sound that wouldn't let go of her.

“Batshit crazy, right?” Luke asked.

“Uh huh. Yeah,” Luna pretended to listen.

“Anyway, catch ya later. I’ll get detention if I’m late for homeroom again.”

“Peace out, Luke.” They dapped each other up.

The static came back as soon as their conversation was done, like it was getting a piggyback ride from Luna. It wouldn’t let go, it wouldn’t let go—

Suddenly, Luna was in her homeroom and she didn’t even know how she got there.

“Luna! Wassup, my favorite blondie?” another one of her friends called for her.

“Hey Sara! What’s goin’ on?” she replied half-heartedly.

While listening to Sara learn a new language called Yapanese, Luna felt a stare coming from the corner of the room.

The static compelled her to ask, “Who’s that?”

“Ugh, girl. Why do you want to know about that no-friend loner Tony?” Sara questioned. “Got a crush on him or somethi—rgh! Sorry the thought is too gross for me to comprehend.”

Luna shrugged off Sara’s questionable line, as a friend who should be supportive. “No, he’s just staring at me.”

“Ew! You think he’s interested?”

“Jesus Christ. Shut up, Sara,” Luna begged.

“What? I gotta look out for my bestie, y’know? I’d expect you to do the same,” Sara protectively stated.

The static in her head felt like it was in the room with them too, somehow. In art class Luna got paired up with Tony for a project. Luna rolled her eyes when she saw Sara doing a vomit gesture.

“Alright, Tony, I’ll do this half of it and you work on the legs.”

Tony stayed quiet and looked deadpan at Luna. “Was it something I said?”

“You disgust me, Luna Lyna,” Tony spoke as if Luna was vomiting on their group project.

An utterly confused Luna stood in silence, not knowing what to say. “What?”

“The way that you smile with everyone despite the static in your head being very abundant—you just smile and wave like everything’s fine! It’s SICKENING!”

Luna felt her smile fade into an angry expression. At this point the entire class could hear her and Tony.

“What would YOU know about having static in your head? It feels torturous just all day, everyday, buzzing around in my head! What’s so wrong with not wanting to be hurt, to pretend that everything is okay, so nothing bad happens. Is it a bad fucking thing to want to be liked?!” Luna belted out.

“Luna Lyn—”

“For God’s sake. I don't care, Tony,” Luna reprimanded while walking out of the room. “I don’t care about being liked anymore, it doesn’t matter and I don't care.”

Eventually she walked out of school and just decided to go home regardless of whatever trouble she’d get into. Luna walked home with the static drumming and drumming in her head like a drum solo.

Luna laughed while walking home—maybe Tony was on to something. The static felt like it was picking up on something, but what could it be? The static was drowning Luna, filling her head with nothing but emptiness. Maybe there was some comfort in a void, black nothingness with no worries ever again. Maybe she should give into the static. Not that it mattered whether she did or didn’t—no one would care if a side character like her would vanish.

Luna tripped on a stair to her room, but something was motivating her, keeping her going no matter what would happen. The static was the only thing she could see right now, navigating a black void with no light in sight. It didn’t matter but she wanted comfort—NEEDED comfort, even.

The static’s dread surrounded her. She felt a little tingle of pain yet a warm comfort in it. All of a sudden, the warmth left her, the one thing still holding her together was gone.

“Wait. Don't leave!” Luna chased after it. “Who will I be without you?”

Luna gazed into the real world and saw herself halfway out the window being held back by her brother.

She asked herself, “Why am I about to jump out a window and why is Chris here?”

At that point she just collapsed onto the floor and finally stopped dissociating. The static took control of her now and would have taken her future too if Chris hadn’t stepped in.

“Just what are you doing, Luna!” Chris barked angrily. “Think about what would have happened if I wasn’t here today! Can you please be more considerate of what your actions do to other people? If Luke didn’t give me a call about you I wouldn't have known,” Chris sobbed.

Luna wasn’t listening as she was fast asleep on the ground. When she woke up she felt better, free, and most importantly, her head felt clear just like

the sky on a sunny day. It didn't matter in the grand scheme of things but it mattered to her and her brother.

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"Morning, Chris!"

"I see you're in high spirits. Was a rest all you needed?"

"Yeah, sorry about the whole thing yesterday and I'm sorry I didn't tell you about my problem sooner. I'll make sure to consider you in the things I do Chris."

"Yeah, thanks, sis," Chris said bitterly.

"See you later, Chris."

"See you later, Luna."

As Luna left, Chris couldn't get yesterday's events out of his head, like a song repeating on loop. Not that it mattered to him. The two siblings said goodbye to each other for the last time.

A black void filled the living room where Chris was. Little did Luna know, was that would be the last time she saw her little brother whole again before he showed up on the local news.

Summer with My Friends  
By Dionysia Michopoulou

“WE ARE HERE! WE ARE HERE!” I yelled loudly.

“Yes honey, we’re back home. Now we’re going upstairs to prepare our stuff,” Mom told us.

“Yeah, but after I prepare my stuff and change clothes, I’m going to Athina’s house as fast as I can. I really miss her and I really need to see her.”

“Don’t worry, you have time. Don’t rush yourself,” Mom said.

After I got my suitcase upstairs at the house and got ready, I ran to my friend’s house so I could see her after so long.

When I saw my friend’s house I went up the stairs and opened the door because I never used to knock when I was younger. When her parents saw me me they were shocked, they hugged me and I asked them where’s Athina.

“She’s not here. She went swimming with her friends,” her mother said.

“Oh really? What time is she gonna come back?” I asked.

“Wait honey, I have an idea,” she said.

Her mother called her to see where she was. When she picked up she asked her mother why she called her, then her mother gave the phone to me so that I could talk to her.

“Athina?” I said.

“Where are you?” she said shocked because she recognized my voice.

As soon as she realized it was me, she immediately hung up.

“Dioni, go fast, go into her bedroom,” her mother told me.

I went into Athina’s bedroom and stayed there. After two minutes I heard big noises coming from the front door. It was her running into the living room.

“Where is she?” Athina asked her mother.

“Where’s who?” her mother asked, smiling.

“Where is she?” she asked and then started to look around for me.

When she came into her own bedroom, as soon as she saw me she started crying from happiness and ran into my hands for a big hug. We both started crying for five minutes straight. Neither of us could move, at least not yet.

After some minutes we started talking, she was saying how much she missed me and how lonely she felt all these years without me. I hugged her again and told her to not worry and that I’m here now. To be honest even if I never

said it to anyone I felt lonely without all of my people who I missed and I never had the fun that my friends from Greece had all of these years. I was just sitting in my room, I used to finish my homework from school and just wait until summer time to go to my home country to see the people that I really missed.

Also, I was worrying about how much everything changed without me, do they still like me? Did they miss me? My overthinking went crazy sometimes, but Athina, as I saw, she really missed me as much as I missed her.

After some time, I took Athina into my old house then she saw my sister and my mother and she started crying again for another two minutes. She really missed her “second family” from when we were kids, we were together all the time but since when me and my family had to leave to Canada we couldn't see each other for years. I was so happy when I saw my childhood best friend again.

After 10 minutes my other friend Sofia started calling Athina.

“Why she’s calling too many times? Doesn’t she know that you came to see me?” I asked Athina.

“Well, let’s just say that when you called me I started running like crazy without telling anyone anything because I really wanted to see you so they don’t know why I left like that.”

I was shocked and happy at the same time.

“Ugh, she keeps calling me,” she said.

“Let me answer,” I said, taking the phone.

“OMG, where the hell did you go and start running like a crazy maniac!” Sofia said, furious.

“Who's calling? Who are you?” I said, trying to not laugh.

“When did you come?” she said as soon she recognized my voice.

“Today. Where can we meet?” I said.

She told me to go meet her at a restaurant in front of the beach but I didn’t want to go there yet so I stayed to see my grandparents and family and then I went to see all my other friends and cousins.

After a long time, I was so happy and I couldn’t even stop being that happy, because all these years it wasn’t the best for me because in Canada. I’m not happy without my friends and family and even the way of living there is so different for me still. I always wanted to hangout often with friends like I used to do when I was young. I tried to find friends in Canada, and I found a few, but nothing was the same. They went out once in a month, I wanted to spend

my time outside, but I didn't want to be alone. I started to play more online games and make online friends but still I wanted to go outside and hangout with people and to create a lot of good memories. I finally went back and now for two months I can have fun with friends and family.

After seeing everyone and even Sofia I went out with my friends and had some fun talking about my life in Canada and how they are doing in school and also many other stuff. My first day in Greece after so long was the best I could ever have after so many years, because I had a long time to communicate with people who understand me at my language, except my parents.

It was really a surprising and exciting day for everyone.

At night, when I was alone in my room and chilling in my bed, I was thinking how much I missed my social life. In Canada I have a good life, I can buy more stuff that I want and have my own room, but still I wasn't the best to socialize there. In Greece I had my friend group, but I couldn't have my own room or buy other stuff, but I didn't care because I was young. I'm thankful that I had an opportunity to live in a country with good economy and good education but my anxiety, stress and the feeling of loneliness started to be bad. Maybe in Greece doesn't have the best economy or opportunities for jobs but there's more outside living, not all day on a phone and home alone. I stopped thinking about all this stuff and started focus more on where I am now. I want to have the best two months and make one of the best memories so that's what I was going to focus on. And that's what I did.

Time passed, and it was my last day in Greece for that summer. I said goodbyes to everyone. It was 3 a.m. Athina and her mother came to see as before we got inside the car. She cried a lot. She looked like it was the last time she was going to see me. I hugged her, but I couldn't do nothing else.

"Please don't go, don't leave," she said, in pain.

"It's not my choice. You know that if I had the choice I should stay here."

I felt sad and empty at the same time. I don't know why, but I wasn't crying at all. I went inside the car, watching her cry. It was sad, but worse for me because I was leaving again. After three hours, we were at the airport waiting for our airplane. When the time came, we went inside and we sat in our seats. I looked outside the window while we were flying away.

Goodbye, Greece. See you in 2024.

Live Happier with the Truth  
By Ray Marcotte

“Hi Gabriel,” the father says while his daughter runs out of school. Gabriel jumps into her dad’s arms.

She is seven years old and her dad is the best dad in the world. He always feeds her when she’s hungry and cheers her up when she’s sad. He picks her up from school every day and rides her on his bicycle to school every morning. He always has a big smile on his face. Gabrielle’s mom passed away when she was three and her dad has been taking care of her by himself ever since.

She loves her daddy so much. Every day after school he takes her out to a restaurant to go eat. So after school they went to eat at her favourite restaurant, an Asian diner called Mama Panda’s.

“What would you like to eat, honey?” he asks her.

“I want dumplings with rice please,” she says.

“Of course, Gabby,” he says.

“What are you going to get, Daddy?”

“It’s okay, Gabby. I ate before.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, love, I’m stuffed to the brim.”

The waiter comes to the table after the daughter finishes her food and asks for the bill. The dad’s smile goes away after seeing how much the bill is, but takes out his wallet and pays with what he has left.

“Are you okay, Daddy?” she asks.

“Yes honey, it’s all okay,” says the dad with a sad smile.

They walk out of the restaurant, she hops on his bike and they ride home. They laugh and smile with joy looking at the world around them.

“I love you, Daddy,” she says with a big smile.

“I love you too.”

Gabriel is on the back of the bike looking at every car that passes by. She says “hi” to everybody she sees. The father bikes his hardest with the wind blowing against him. He is sore and tired, but he keeps biking for his daughter.

Biking through the dark streets with cars passing by them, honking, they finally get home, put the bike in the garage and walk into their small apartment.



The father takes care of the place but it's small and they don't have many things. They lie down on the single bed and the father pulls out a book to read to Gabriel.

"Do you like this one, Gabriel?" he asks.

"Yes Daddy, I love this one."

He starts reading and remembers that Gabriel has to go in the bath tonight. So they both get up and turn on the water. Gabriel jumps in and plays with her toys. He scrubs her and bathes her while she laughs with joy. He gets her all cleaned up and wraps her with a towel. They do their bed time routine and again they lie on their bed and he starts reading once again.

"Once there was a frog laying on top of a wet leaf, listening to music, bobbing his head. This frog is very happy and loves to swim in his pond. This frog doesn't have friends but keeps a smile on his face every day. One day this frog was swimming in his pond and suddenly got sucked down into a hole that formed on the surface of the pond..."

The father looks down at Gabriel and notices that she has fallen asleep. These are his favourite parts of the day but he is very tired to get up to go to bed. On his way to his bedroom he sees a little paper that spells *I love my daddy but...* he picks up the paper and brings it to his bedroom.

"Oh no, I hope this is not bad," he says in his head.

He starts reading nervously:

"Hi, this is Gabriel and Daddy is the sweetest daddy in the world. Daddy is the most handsome. Daddy is the smartest, the most clever, the kindest. Daddy is my superman. Daddy wants me to do well at school. Daddy is just great, but he lies. He lies about having a job. He lies about having money. He lies that he's not tired. He lies that he's not hungry. He lies that we have everything. He lies about his happiness. He lies because of me."

Gabriel opens his bedroom door and gives her daddy the biggest hug ever, and they cry with joy while hugging the tightest they could.

"I love you, Daddy," Gabriel says while sobbing.

"I love you too, Gabriel."

They live happily with the truth.

After You, Alice  
By Alex Fillion

Andrew was always a shy kid. He loved comics and enjoyed what most kids his age found boring. He knew he wanted to help others. Ever since he was little. That's why the comics he read were mostly about superheroes. When he rode the bus to school in the morning, he would picture himself jumping off and running to save someone trapped in a burning building. In fact, he daydreamed so much on the bus he would often miss his stop.

Whenever he would arrive at school, he would notice all the couples holding hands, talking, hugging, and he hoped that one day he would have the same chance. Whenever he would try and talk to girls they wouldn't really pay attention to him. Nevertheless, he loved school and tried very hard to get good grades. Every Tuesday and Thursday he would go to after school tutoring for math.

And on Thursday, November 10<sup>th</sup>, he noticed someone new in the class. A girl with long brown hair and long extension lashes.

She slowly turned her head and asked, "Do you understand what's on the board?"

Andrew smiled at her and replied, "Well, pi I understand, but I like mine with ice cream."

"Ha, you're a real joker."

Andrew loved seeing her smile. He told her, "I have a bunch of joker figurines at my house from all the different comics and movies. I love collecting those," he replied.

"Let's try to solve this math problem together," she said.

Andrew was so thrilled he walked home that day with a smile from ear to ear.

The next morning, he decided to ask her if she wanted to visit his favourite comic book store after school. Full of confidence, he walked up to her in the hallway and asked her.

"Yeah sure let's do that, meet me by the stairwell at 3 o'clock," she replied cheerfully.

"Okay great. See you then!" Andrew added.

Andrew felt as if he were on a cloud the whole day. When the bell rang at 2:50 he rushed to the stairwell. He looked at all the students and then the time on his phone. It was now 3:11 and she hadn't shown up. Andrew thought he would wait a bit longer in case she was running late. When he realized she wasn't coming, it was almost 4 o'clock. There was no one left in the halls. He picked up his backpack and pushed the doors open. As he walked home he felt foolish. He kept his head down and wasn't paying attention to his surroundings.

He bumped into somebody and he fell over.

"Oh my god. Are you alright? I'm so sorry!" the stranger said.

Andrew was confused and trying to get back up. The person wearing this red Wonder Woman shirt told him to take it easy because he had fallen very hard. "Let me see your eyes to make sure you can stand." she said. He looked up at her and saw these blue eyes staring at him. "Now follow my finger, don't worry I'm almost a certified lifeguard.

"That's cool," Andrew said. She helped him up and they started walking together. She told him how she dreamed about being a paramedic one day. Andrew told her he always wanted to be a firefighter. "You should take a course in first aid like me," she told him.

"Hey I never got your name," Andrew said.

"My name's Alice, What's yours?" Alice asked.

"I'm Andrew," he replied.

The two walked and talked until they reached the comic bookstore.

"Hey look, Alice. This is my favourite spot. Have you ever been here before?" Andrew asked.

"Are you kidding? I'm here every Tuesday and Thursday after school!" Alice said happily.

No wonder Andrew had never bumped into her before. "Well, today is Friday, but would you like to have a look anyway?" Andrew asked.

"Yeah, I hope they received the new Wonder Woman figurines," Alice replied enthusiastically.

Andrew was happy to have not been paying attention on his walk. He had made a friend. He opened the superhero covered door and said, "After you, Alice."

Cow Story  
By Aiden Vaillant

A vast farm in the rural plains of Kentucky. A place where the fields were so encompassing that the earth's curve is the only thing stopping you from seeing it all. In this land of the free, the land of wheat, you are allowed to do anything that tickles your fancy. Have a few beers, light some fireworks, shoot an anthill with a shotgun; I don't care, I'm not your dad.

In the land of wheat lived a family of three: a father and his two sons, Chris and Al. Al was the youngest in the family, being only 12.

When their father needed help around the farm, like fixing up the house, feeding the chickens, and milking the cows, he called Chris and Al. Free labour.

Today at breakfast their father told Al he had a new job for him. A job Chris already knew how to do. Al looked over at Chris to try and get a better understanding of what his father meant, but Chris had his eyes glued to his bowl of cereal.

Later that day, they went out back, to the cow shed. Though it technically wasn't a shed, it was a long metal barn. In the land of the confined, the land of meat, the cows get to go outside once in a while. Al didn't mind going into the shed to milk the cows but he hated staying in there too long. It looked like a rusted big tin can kicked over on its side with wooden support beams keeping it up from the inside. The shed creaked and moaned, and it always smelt like, as his brother said, shit.

The boys were both brought to the end of the shed, past all the old cows. They went all the way to see the oldest cow on the farm, a cow named Denny.

Denny had been in this shed for a looong time. She'd been here since Al was a baby. Their dad used to sit Al on a stool and let him watch while he milked the cows, and usually, he was milking Denny. Al used to call her Benny by accident.

The only way Al could describe her now was "droopy." Her eyes drooped, her face drooped, her body sagged like a half empty bean bag chair, or like Al's grandma incarnate.

"She's old, she's worked long and hard and she's served us well," said their father. "It's about time to put her to better use." He reached into the back of his waistband and from it he pulled out a cattle stunner.

“It’s time to put her down, son,” he said as he handed the gun to Al.

Al held it in the palms of his hands and stared blankly back and forth between his father, the gun, and Chris. Chris’s eyes were glued to the floor of the cow shed.

“That’s not how you hold it, son. Hold it properly.”

Al looked back to his father. “Dad I can’t do this.”

“It’s not that hard son. I’ll show you.” He reaches for the gun to tries and demonstrate. Al jerks back “No dad. I don’t want to.”

“Son, you have to.”

“I’m not killing Denny.”

“It doesn’t kill her, it just stuns her.”

“Why can’t we let her die of old age.”

“Son—”

“She’s not even that old yet, can’t we just let her live a little longer.”

“Son, it’s painful for her to live like this. We’re helping her.”

“I don’t want to,” Al said firmly.

“Al. It’s not a choice. It’s part of maintaining the farm.” Al’s father started to sound angrier

“I don’t want to!” Al yelled.

“Al, if you don’t, I will,” he said, sounding fed up. Al’s father ripped the gun out of his hands and walked over to Denny. He raised the stunner and lined it up with the center her forehead.

“Dad, I’ll do it,” said Chris, finally. He walked over to their dad and held his hand out.

Their dad looked at Chris with a sort of proud but annoyed face. “You sure?”

“Yes. You’ve shown me how to do it already,” said Chris. His dad stared at him.

“Alright, buddy.” And he handed over the gun. He turned over to Al and paused for a few moments. “Let’s take a walk.”

So they started walking back down through the shed. As they walked away they heard a cow scream, and then a loud thud as they left the shed. Al’s dad put his arm over his shoulder.

Al’s dad walked him to the house and sat him down on the porch stoop. Al sat there while he went in to get them both a drink. While he sat there he

couldn't help but look out over the endless wheat fields picturing Denny once grazing around. It had been a long time since that happened, but it was a pretty thought. Al also pictured Denny dropping to the floor, with a newly formed hole in her head. Just as Al was shaking away these thoughts, his dad came through the front door holding two Cokes. Al's dad handed him one and sits down beside him.

"Listen, son," he said with a sigh. "I'm not trying to upset you. It's just a part of the job."

"I don't want the job," said Al, still staring out distantly.

"I know it's hard to do that, but it's part of tending to a farm."

"That's not fair to Denny."

"I know, son." There was a pause. "I liked Denny too."

"Then why did we have to kill her?" Al asked a little too quickly.

"Because she was old and suffering, Al. Her legs could barely hold her up. You're being a pussy."

There was a silence as Al stared out into the fields. He seemed more interested in the ground right now.

"Sorry," said his father. "Al, my dad gave me this farm, and his dad gave it to him, for however long, I don't know. It doesn't matter. Point is, Al," he took a sip of Coke and looked back into the fields. "It'll be just you and your brother one day. Al and Chris versus the world!" He punched Al in the shoulder jokingly.

"I don't want to leave you guys with all this stuff and not know how to take care of it. Yes, it's not always fun. Yes, we loved Denny, but it's part of the circle of life. Al, I bet she's smiling down at us from cow heaven right now, because she lived a good life, and we treated her well, and now she gets to move on." He took another sip.

"This is what a shit ton of hard work looks like, Al. Blood, sweat and tears." He stood up and put the Coke down on the porch railing.

"Sorry, Dad," Al said. His dad looked down at him. He stood in front of Al and put his hand out.

"C'mon buddy," he said like a true dad. Al took his hand and was yanked up into a hug. Al hugged him back.

"Love you, son. Don't forget."

A Story About a Girl  
By Aiden Vaillant

Each time I met her she took off a layer.  
Each time she changed it got better and better.

It started with thick leather, and then her soft new red sweater.  
We went to a movie with her coat of peacock feathers.  
I met her raincoat in the stormiest of weather.  
In that weather I watched her hair go from wet to wetter.  
I was with her when she turned blue, I even stayed through neon green.  
Before I knew it her style started rubbing off on me.  
I wore her coat for stormy weather, I took her coat of peacock feather.  
I took her new red sweater, then I took her thick leather.  
The more I wore made me better and better.

This went on for months.  
By the end she had nothing, I had all her clothes.  
I was too protected, and she felt all alone.

Into the Wild  
By Mark-Anthony Zonsa Carnevale

I could guide you  
Along the path to introspection.  
Take my hand,  
let us embrace  
the allure  
of the wild.

The mountains unveil  
your resilience.  
Caverns, obscure,  
Serve as beacons to uncover  
your true nature,  
submerged in filth.

Allow the winds to guide us.  
Mother nature needs no compensation.  
Only your will to  
enlightenment.

The landscape  
is the embodiment of human beauty.  
It is perfect  
because it's imperfect.  
It is a sanctuary because  
we chose to pollute our dense packed selves.

Did we earn the right to freedom and peace,  
when the human desire to draw borders  
And divide and conquer,  
tarnish the spirit  
Of the wild?



Are the open doors too much for us to handle?  
Are we worthy?  
That is not a question I can answer.  
You must search for it,  
Beyond this effervescent beauty.

Sit on the jagged  
dense rocks.  
Everything will come.  
Lie for a moment, or  
wander eternally  
in bliss.

Perfect Sisters  
By Rylee Mannix

Growing up with an older sister is always fun, especially when you get along. You have someone to look up to, someone to steal clothes from and a lifetime best friend. Leah is my older sister, she just turned 17. I'm Audrey by the way, I'm 15.

Me and my sister have always gotten along, we are close in age and are just similar people in general. She's my best friend. We also have a younger half-brother named Jeremiah. He's only 5 and is our mom's current boyfriend's son. Her boyfriend's name is Todd and my mom's name is Elise. He was always a bad father figure to us and Jeremiah. He was abusive to not only us but our mother too, but she was always too drunk and in love to care about us or herself. Everything always went wrong at home. And this is the story on how we killed our parents.

You're going to need to sit back for this one because it is a hectic story, and to start we need to backtrack about my whole lifetime. The year 2000 (the year I was born) was kind of like the downfall of my mother. I really don't understand why it effected my mom so much. About three months after I was born, my dad left. To this day I have never found out why. Maybe it was just a him thing? Maybe he didn't want another kid?

Anyways, that is not really relevant. After he left, my mom found her way of coping with losing my dad and that was heavily abusing alcohol. So obviously, from a very young age my mother was not really present but when she was, most of the time she was too drunk to function properly but it wasn't always an issue because our Aunt Diane would babysit us during the day and she would always stick around just in case my mom got too drunk to care for my sister and me, which ended up happening basically every night. I feel like that kind of sums up how it was growing up for my sister and me. It was hard, but we managed. We matured early in life, we didn't really have a choice.

Once my sister turned 13 and I was 11, we kind of took on caring for ourselves. By this time my mom had met my brother's dad. She was pregnant within maybe three months of them seeing each other.

He wasn't a drunk like my mom. He did drink, but it was never on my mom's level. But when he did drink, he would get mad and he would get mad fast. It was the worst towards me. I don't know why. He would lock me in the closet when I was "bad." He would do unrepeatable things to me when we were alone. That only started when I was about 12.

I was worried for Leah and Jeremiah. He didn't really care for Leah he would just yell at her until she cried then yell something like, "Shut the fuck up and deal with it." But my mother was too drunk and careless to do anything about it.

He loved Jeremiah. We could tell that he really was trying for him and occasionally it really would get better between them. But when he would get mad, he would ruin that progress quickly.

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015, Leah and I started at a new school named Vezina. It was a pretty big school, but we already had a couple friends there named Troy and Violet. Troy was also Leah's boyfriend. We all got along really well. It was like a big happy family, seeing Leah and I didn't really have one. It was nice to have a couple people we knew would stick by our sides no matter what.

The first day of school wasn't hectic. We got our schedules and went on to complete a tour around the school and meet our teachers. That day, Troy and Violet came to our house after school for dinner and a few rounds of poker, but as per usual my mom was super drunk, and my stepdad was angry and also drunk. They just thought it as funny seeing the angry drunk arguments between my parents. It was about 10 p.m. when my brother started getting tired and fussy. He started to say he wanted to go to bed and was asking his father to take him and he got upset and slapped him. And that was my last straw. I grabbed him and was screaming and pushing him with all my force until I got him out the door. He sat out there for maybe three minutes until my mom got up sobbing begging him to not leave because he was "all she has."

All she has. That was seriously a stab in the back seeing I was the one who cooked, cleaned, and bathed her every night while he sat on his ass watching jeopardy screaming "What the fuck?!" every time he got something wrong, which was in fact most of the time seeing he didn't have much brain capacity.

After some back and forth arguments between my parents, Todd came back upstairs, and he was not happy with me. He grabbed me and threw me into the bathroom. He punched me a good three times in the head before my mother had any type of reaction. I was basically passed out on the floor before my mom told him to get off me. I had a concussion for about two weeks before I could get out of bed.

On a Friday night, Leah, Troy, Violet and I decided to go for dinner at a popular pizza place in our neighborhood called "Pendelis." I was never really a fan of it, but my friends were, so I just put up with the trashy pizza every now and then. While we were eating, we kind of got into the conversation of how when your parents die, you get a monthly allowance from the government and you know, we loved our mom, but we could do a lot better without her and Todd. Violet stated that I was crazy for even suggesting it and laughing about it as if I was joking, but Leah and Troy were surprisingly very on board with the fact that if my mother and my stepdad weren't there, we could be a real family and all live together in our house. We started doing research on how much money we could get and how.

"What if we make it look like a suicide?" asked Leah.

"Yeah that could work" I replied. It's an accidental death. We would never get caught either.

"I'm stocked up on codeine pills from when my mom got hit by that car," said Troy.

"We could dope her up with those and give her a bottle of whatever she wants and go from there."

If our parents took a couple too many pills while drunk they would overdose. We knew it would be hard, but we also knew this was the only way to save us from our toxic family. It was the perfect plan, we just needed an alibi and to get Jeremiah out the house. We had a pretty good alibi.

Troy, Leah, Violet and I went to the park, and then to Pendelis to get some pizza. We just had to make sure the timelines added up.

A couple days later, we convinced our Aunt Diane to take Jeremiah for the night because our parents were already drunk and we had plans to go out. It

only took her about 15 minutes to get to our house and then her and Jeremiah were out the door. Our parents were actually drunk, so it wasn't hard to get them to take the pills. We had about 150 codeine pills. They were sitting on the couch with an almost empty vodka bottle in between them but they had another full one on the counter. I started by putting about 50 of the pills in the bottle and then bringing it to the table in front of them to get their attention.

"Why thank you little lady," said Todd. That was the nicest thing he ever said to me. He was clearly in a good mood and it almost made me feel bad for him, but I knew I needed to do this for my siblings and me.

I took out the bag of pills and explained to them they were "happy pills" and that got them excited. Todd thought they were MDMA pills and I guess that was his thing, so he quickly asked me for three. I gave them to him, and his rough cold fingertips against my palm gave me chills.

He told my mom to open her mouth and forced her to swallow the pills and wash it down with the vodka. My heart sank. I was scared but relieved.

Leah walked over and realized that our plan had begun. Todd asked for more pills to split between him and my mom, so I gave him more. I think they both took about six or seven pills. I placed a couple around the table and floor to make it look like some had spilt. I gave the rest of the baggie to Todd and told him it was the pills that would stop the MDMA if it got to be too much. He took the baggie and went back on the couch with my mom to continue watching TV and drinking the vodka. I looked at Leah and waved her over to leave and she called Violet and Troy to let them know we were on our way to the park.

It was about a 10-minute walk to the park. We got out the house and started the three-hour timer. That gave us an hour in the park, an hour to eat, and another hour to wait out the traumatic scene we were about to walk into.

We arrived at the park and Troy and Violet were waiting over by the play structure.

"So, did you do it?" asked Violet.

Leah and I just looked at each other and I replied with, "So what do you guys want to do?"

I'm guessing they got the hint because they didn't ask about it for the rest of the night.

We walked around the park for a bit and then went to get pizza and we were left with an hour to get back. I couldn't stop thinking about my parents. Were they already dead? Would they be dying when we got back? No one knew what we would walk back into. Troy and Violet went home, and Leah and I walked around for about 30 minutes deciding what we would tell the police when we called 9-1-1. This was something we probably should've planned out sooner, but we figured something out. Leah would call 9-1-1 screaming and crying because that's something she could do on command. Then we would tell them our alibi once they got to our house.

We had 15 minutes left on the timer and we decided to start walking home. We got back in about seven minutes and I slowly started to unlock the door. We went back in and they were in the same place we left them. Lifeless. They were pale and cold.

They had to have been lying there for a while. It felt like time froze. I was stuck in place, I didn't know what to do.

Leah was unfazed. She got on the phone and immediately got in character. "9-1-1. What's your emergency?"

"You need to send help. My mom and dad are dead. They overdosed. There's pills everywhere with empty bottles. Please, you need to hurry!" She cried and screamed for the operator to send someone and the paramedics were here in five minutes.

A loud knock at the door. "Paramedics open the door!"

I jumped. I got up and let them in and the police weren't far behind them. The police questioned us for about an hour. We gave them our alibi. We gave them every detail the same. They believed us. They really believed us. I felt terrible. I was relived but really really felt bad. They called our Aunt Diane to pick us up and said that we would decide our living situation another day.

We spent the next two weeks at our aunt's with Jeremiah, when they deemed Leah and I old enough and responsible enough to care for our own. We were ecstatic. It was all we ever wanted. Our own little happy family.

We called Troy and Violet to give them the good news, but they wanted absolutely nothing to do with us anymore even though they had no problem at the start. We cut ties with them quickly seeing they could tell anyone the truth. It would be less believable if we weren't friends because then it would just seem like they were lying for attention or to make us look bad.

Leah and I got dropped off at the house by our aunt. It felt so weird walking in there. It felt as if my parents were still there. The only thing I could think about was the fact my parents died right here on the couch in front of me. Cold and lifeless.

At this point the guilt was unbearable. It was the only thing I could think off. I think it was affecting Leah more because as soon as our aunt left, she broke down. She was crying and ran to lock herself in her room. I let her be. I figured that she would get over it, but I soon learnt I was wrong.

About a week after we were living on our own, I saw a big change in Leah, and it was worrying. She stopped going out, she was eating less, and she locked herself in her room basically 24/7 and that really wasn't like her. I tried talking to her almost every time she left her room, but she wanted nothing to do with the conversation and would just run to her room and slam the door. I gave up. I figured the only thing I could give her was time, but she just kept getting worse. It was eating her alive, I could tell. I tried my best to comfort her, but she just wouldn't accept it.

About two weeks later the unexpectable happened. I went to go hangout with out of my friends and knocked on Leah's door to let her know I was leaving. I stayed out for at most an hour and walked into what had to have been to worst thing I ever saw.

I went and knocked on her door. It was so quiet. Almost too quiet. I slowly opened the door to see my lifeless sister. She had hung herself in her closet. I was shocked. I knew she was in a bad place but bad enough to kill herself? My guilt turned to sadness as I broke down in front my cold dead sister. I called 9-1-1 and just sat there waiting as I read the note left behind, saying something like, "I'm sorry to do this, Audrey. I shouldn't leave you on your own. I just can't live with this."

It was a load of BS in my opinion. Leaving me here with nothing. I know it sounds selfish, but she was the last thing I had.

A month passed by. I was living on my own at that point. The guilt had started to really affect me. I couldn't go two minutes without thinking about my parents or Leah. It was all my fault. There was only one thing I could do to make myself feel better and it was turning myself in, so that's what I did.

I was up until 3 a.m. that night trying to figure out what I would say when I went into the police station the next morning. I went over it in my head a million times. I went over every detail until my brain shut down and forced me to sleep.

I woke up the next morning around 11. I got up, put on my most formal dress, I did my hair and was out the door. I was walking to the police station. Was this really what I wanted to do? Whether I wanted to or not, I knew it was the right thing to do. So, I had to do it.

Fifteen minutes passed and I finally got to the police station. I took a deep breath in, and slowly walked into the front counter where a police officer was sitting in front of a computer doing some paperwork.

"Hi, what can I help you with today?" asked the officer.

"Um, hi. My name is Audrey and I'm here to turn myself in." I told her why and she just looked at me in disbelief and invited me to wait in a room in the back. I prepared myself for the many hours I was probably going to spend here and made my way to the back.

I waited about 45 minutes before a detective came to speak to me. He stepped in and we spent the next four hours speaking. I told him everything. Every little detail. I was given a court date, but I was told there was probably no good coming out of this.

I waited for two weeks before my court date. I wore the same dress I wore when I turned myself in. I got to the courthouse and my trial began instantly. We spent about two hours in the room until I was deemed guilty, with 50 years to life in prison.

Finally. I felt relief. I smiled. I knew I had done the right thing. Now we could all rest in peace.



I had a friend  
By Rob Dovewords

I had a friend.  
She was smart and beautiful; she was gentle and strong.  
Her love language was giving.  
She always made sure to give flowers when friends were ill.  
She had such potential, so much love to give.  
But she was haunted, haunted by these monsters.  
Everyday she would wake up, get ready and make sure the monsters couldn't hear her.  
Because if she did anything that would upset them, she would be in great trouble.  
My friend always wore long sleeves and a lot of makeup.  
She was shy and didn't say much, but when you knew her, she would be a shining light.  
The greatest star in the universe.  
But one night, as she was taking off her long sleeves, showing the shade of purple on her arms.  
She upset the demons for the very last time.  
These monsters were her god, her creator, her parents.  
I never saw her again.

Blocked  
By Rob Dovewords

I'm blocked

My mind seems to be all tangled up,  
It could be that I cannot find my words,  
Or that the papers don't make sense anymore,  
They're all over the place and I cannot continue reading  
Whatever it was that I was trying to read.

I'm blocked

I'm making supper and suddenly the recipe doesn't make any sense,  
And my food ends up looking like rotten vegetables.

I'm blocked

I'm currently unable to find anything else that I get blocked on in my life,  
So I'll just stare at the ceiling hoping that it will give me an answer.

I'm blocked

Someone please let me go home so I can stop overthinking all my actions  
And finally I won't be—

Writer's Block  
By Nico D

Writer's block wasn't something I suffered from often  
Today to my misfortune was one of the days that I did  
I couldn't really focus on the writing  
But everything else sure was loud  
I could hear the clock  
The clicking of shoes on the linoleum floor  
I could hear the sound of everyone's pencils  
I could nearly hear the steam coming from my ears  
But I refused to let something as silly as writer's block stifle me.  
I picked up my crappy ballpoint pen and put the tip to the paper  
It didn't take long, mere seconds and I was out of my head again  
My words whizzing across the loose leaf  
As if it was the Tazmanian Devil chasing the Roadrunner across a length of  
desert  
And I didn't stop writing until both sides of the page were nearly black  
And my eyes were watery with the pain of the blisters between my thumb and  
forefinger  
Once my words were barely legible and the page was more black than white  
I dropped my block in the trash and walked away.

The Man  
By Aurora Pagani

“Could you spare me some change, sir?”

“No, you dirty old homeless man! Go get a job!” says the man in a black suit and red tie. “I have an important interview, get your filthy hands away from me!”

As I settle on the park bench, I start to doze off...

“What would you like for dinner honey?” says my beautiful wife in a white blouse.

“I’m not that hungry, honey. I had a long day at work.”

She proceeds to lay in bed with me.

“Ahhhhh,” we then hear screams coming from the child’s bedroom! My wife takes me out of bed and we both run to see what has happened.

“What happened child?” my wife exclaims calmly.

“I had a horrible nightmare, Mommy left you, Daddy. And Daddy became homeless,” the child explains.

“That will never happen honey,” I say as I proceed to wake up from my dream. The wooden bench is a lot more comfortable than what I am used to sleeping on. It was the first night I finally got to sleep well in over a month, since it happened.

Since my father’s passing, my life hasn’t been great. I have been struggling to keep a job. Food has been really tough and, most importantly, I miss my child and wife so very much.

My father and I never had the best of relationships. It always hurts that I never got to thank him for everything he has done for me.

As I get out of the supermarket, a man in a gray trench coat approaches me. “Sir are you—”

“Yes, I am,” I proceeded to tell him.

“After your late father’s passing, he wanted me to give you this envelope.” Inside the envelope contained a check for one million dollars.

I am so thrilled to have received this much money. I will no longer be living on the streets. I then proceed to purchase office space to start the company I

always wanted. I have opened my very own firm, even without my wife and child who I miss so dearly, I will finally be able to succeed.

“The new lawyer is coming in for an interview. I must get you ready to greet him,” says the secretary.

“I will be waiting outside the office,” I said excitedly.

“Could you spare me some change, sir?”

The man in a black suit and red tie yells at me, “No, you dirty old homeless man! Go get a job! You will just blow the money on alcohol and drugs; no one would ever hire you. You're a bum just waiting for people to spend their salaries on you. Unlike you, I have a very prestigious job interview waiting for me.” He then proceeds inside my office.

The secretary then tells him, “The boss can see you now.” Seeing that I am the interviewer, he is in shock. “How can a homeless man be in charge of a company like this? You are poor,” he proceeds to say angrily.

“You are not hired; I never want to see you here ever again. Get out of my office.” I think, as I change clothes, “I am the man.”

Lost  
By Julia Semaan

This is the story of a young, happy, outgoing girl named Emily who at the age of 13 was traumatized mentally and physically by a horrendous experience that lasted nearly a year. Having been lured into living with another family for over half a year for financial reasons, she endured not being fed properly—one meal a day, soup and bread—having to sleep on the floor, being forced to take care of a little boy, and constantly having her every move surveilled. All this was being done by a mother and her daughter, who was 18. Emily had just turned 14 when she decided she wanted to speak up and have her story heard to finally escape the situation and heal from the trauma that was caused.

Months after the incident, she spoke to an officer who was working at her school. However the officer could not help due to her young age. Emily wondered, if her story was as bad as it seemed, why didn't they bring her parents in to file a police report?

Sometime later, Emily's father received a call from an RCMP officer asking information on the whereabouts of the mother and her daughter in question. The officers were now way more fixated on the young teen and the trauma she had endured. Not only was Emily strong but she was very brave.

"Whenever something bad happened or a threat was made against me," she explained to the officer, "I would write down the date and time and what happened in the moment. I would hide the paper in my bra or underwear or even my socks. I would make sure that paper stayed with me no matter what." Doing that had helped Emily have hope and survive, knowing it would help her gather whatever information she needed to use against the woman later on.

Days after reporting this, Emily and her family were enjoying their time together when a sudden knock on the door went from faint to obnoxiously loud. The young girl's father went to open the door when suddenly they saw two lawyers in suits standing outside with papers to be signed. They explained to the parents that they had got subpoenaed with no choice but to attend court. They made them sign papers so if they didn't attend court there would be a warrant out for their arrest.

One month later the day came where they had to attend court. Emily was crying in fear, even with her family right there to support her. Her parents made her understand that nothing would happen and she would be okay. Emily and her family were the only people to show up in court. After six hours they were informed that the case was acquitted due to the Jordan Law, which meant too much time had passed. Emily thought it was the end. A dark heavy feeling settled in that she would have to live with the fact that no one wanted to hear what happened.

Four and a half years later, Emily had learned to live with the fact that her story wasn't important, and to accept everything and just move on. One day she noticed her mom reading the Journal de Montréal when she saw on the first page of the newspaper that the same woman and her daughter had been arrested for prostitution of a minor and 16 counts of extortion. Emily was thinking about the absolute worst, telling herself that if she would have tried way harder that none of that would have happened to the other victims.

One December day, Emily got a random unknown call that she reluctantly decided to answer. A woman's voice emerged, introducing herself as a detective and explaining that there was one victim that had given Emily's name. They told her they wanted to discuss what had happened and explained that Emily was the youngest victim they had and asked if she was comfortable enough to speak about her traumatic experience.

For the next few months, Emily had to revisit all the horrible things she had lived through. She felt she had no choice but to talk about what happened after so many years of bottling it up. Emily's father hired a lawyer. The investigators told Emily that if she chose to speak she would be put under oath and they would record her to send the statement to the prosecutor. They kept in contact, telling her that they would get her help with CAVAC, the crime victim assistance center.

A woman called her for an on-call session discussing what happened and how Emily was feeling. The woman on the phone only answered with, "Oh yeah, oh my god, wow, that's crazy," not even using complete sentences.

Emily made the hard decision to withdraw from the conversation, as she didn't feel heard or truly cared for. She would have thought that CAVAC would

try to assist her more compassionately, but they made her feel like her story wasn't as bad as the other testimonies. They broke off communication and never once made an attempt to get in touch with her again.

The investigator called Emily again one day—they needed to know if she was going to testify or not. Emily felt pressured and unsure of what to do. They told her that whatever she had to say would not only help her but also help them in the long run to add charges to the case against the defendants.

As Emily thought about it while on the phone, she felt ready to testify and take the stand until she was suddenly interrupted by the detective: “Even if you give your testimony and talk about what you went through, what happened to you wasn't as bad as what happened to the other victims.”

Hearing that made Emily feel as though her story wasn't significant, that what she went through wasn't even a big deal, which was confusing and sat like a heavy stone in her guts. Emily went quiet and started crying silently. These people that were supposed to be helping weren't there for her at all. It was as if they only wanted to get from her what they needed to win the case. Emily understood but she also felt as though she was being used.

As time passed, Emily thought a lot about what she should do, if she should testify or not. She came to the conclusion that she no longer wanted to be a part of the case.

She told herself, “After all this time, after everything that happened, I'm still here today and I am strong enough to talk about it. And nothing's going to change that. I've been living with it now and coping with it.”

She called back the investigator and informed them that she would not be proceeding with the case for personal reasons. They were very understanding about that and told her: “If you are to change your mind at any given time before the case, keep in contact with us.”

Months later, Emily was now almost 18, and part of her wondered if she should have testified after all. But she didn't and every day she reminded herself that she has been telling her story and trying her best. She told herself every day that she is in fact good enough, and what she went through does not define who she is, but only makes her stronger and more observant. To this day, Emily's favourite saying is, “It could always be much worse.”



The Immigrant  
By Selena Semaan

I moved from Palestine to Canada a month ago due to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. My family and I left before Israel imposed an air and naval blockade on Palestine preventing us from receiving food, supplies, weapons. The first few nights were strange. It had been so quiet I had been used to the chaos back home, the bombs dropping, the ground shaking. I remember playing outside when I was younger just like all the other kids and the bombs had never bothered me. I'd watch them drop and I'd keep playing. But my mum seemed to be bothered by it. When she had prohibited me from going out to play anymore, I had realized.

It took my family and me time to get used to the community. My dad, who worked in an oil factory was now working as a truck driver and my mom stayed at home taking care of me and my siblings. School was also different here too, classes were longer and so was the school year. I hadn't made any friends. It seemed everyone was intimidated by me. Who wouldn't be, after all? Even at the age of fifteen, my height had already surpassed six feet.

I entered my first class of the day and sat down at the desk in the back observing the classroom and teacher. She introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Miss Lin, and I'll be your secondary three English teacher." She went on elaborating about the course when my eyes averted to a nice pair of black Nikes worn by the kid two seats in front of me.

By the end of the day I knew I'd have them on my feet. Lunch time came around and I spotted him outside sitting with his friend. I approached the lunch table and did not beat around the bush. "Your shoes, give me them."

He stood up, turning around to face me while his friend stayed seated. He stood right in front of me. He wasn't tall but he wasn't short either.

"Your shoes," I repeated. "Give me them." He took a step back averting his eyes to his friend and I took another step forward. "Did I stutter?" By this time I had gotten right in his face and he did not bother moving. I had no patience left.

I took a step back, dropping my bag to the floor. I knew I'd end this quickly, not giving him a second to think. I took a step forward and socked him

right in the face. He fell to the ground. By that time his friend had already left to get a teacher but I did not care. Reaching over him, I slid both shoes off his feet and before walking away I reached into his pocket and grabbed some money from his wallet. I knew I'd have to buy myself a pack of cigarettes after this.

I held my cigarette in hand before flicking it to the floor. I had been expelled from school for bullying and violence. I pushed the buzzer to my door waiting for my mom to buzz me in. I pulled the door walking up the four flights of stairs and as I reached the apartment my mom stood right in front. I was relieved my dad was still at work but I knew my mom would inform him. I dropped my bag to the floor and went towards my room when my mom shouted my name: "Sam." I turned back and entered the kitchen when I noticed my dad was standing right under the door frame.

I knew I was fucked. I slid a chair out, taking a seat beside my mother while my dad stood on the other side of the table. "Explain," he said before I could speak and he cut me off: "Not even two months in this country and you're already starting shit."

I had nothing to say. I kept my head down staring at the ashtray left on the table. My mother was furious too. "Your mother and I have chosen to send you to a religious school because we knew you would start acting out." Before my dad could continue I stood up pretty quickly, turning to walk away when my father yelled: "Oussama, don't you turn your back on me when I'm speaking."

I stood still. I knew I was fucked the moment he shouted my full name. "Religious school," I muttered under my breath before turning around to face my parents.

"Habibi me and your father want nothing but the best for you." "The best? You're telling me your sending me to a fucking religious school. What am I supposed to be excited about?"

My dad took a step around the table getting up in my face. I knew I had to be strong and stand my ground. I kept eye contact with him watching my reflection through his glasses. "Watch your mouth," he shouted. I kept my mouth shut not wanting to escalate the situation.

I entered my room shutting the door behind me. There wasn't much of a point in closing the door. It's not like I had any privacy sharing a room with my two brothers; it kinda felt like boot camp. I could hear my parents arguing from across these paper walls. I emptied my pockets, dropping my pack of cigarettes and my wallet on my bed which was laid down on our hardwood floor next to a box I never unpacked that I now use as a night stand. I got up to open my window while I lit my cigarette thinking about what had just happened earlier. I took long drags thinking about my life back home. I fucking missed it. Life at home was nothing like this dump. My dad gave me an M-16 with an extended mag for my sixth birthday, I seem to recall. Having shot holes through all of my mother's pots and pans with my brothers, it didn't take long for him to take it away. I mean, it's not like I'm saying my life here is totally garbage but how can they expect me to change my bad habits when it's all I'm used to.

The week had passed pretty fast and by the time I knew it, Monday had already come around and of course my mom had helped me pack a bag of clothes. I stood in front of the door unlocking it to bring my bag down to the truck where my dad stood waiting for me.

Before I could make my way down the stairs my mom called out my name. I turned to face her "I only want what's best for you," she said. It made me wonder, did she really? Or was she just going along with it to keep my father happy? I gave her a kiss on the cheek before making my way down the stairs.

I pulled the handle to get the truck door to open. I slid my bag in the seat between me and my father, and proceeded to get in while shutting the door behind me. The engine started and my dad drove off. I waved one last goodbye at my mom sticking my arm out the window. The whole drive was silent and it felt like forever until we got there. He pulled up in front of the school, parking his truck, he hopped out and I followed behind him, even though I knew I wanted to ask him for one last chance.

I knew he had already made up his mind. We entered the school and all I could see was a bunch of boys dressed in black button up shirts and black pants. They were surrounded by nuns who were teaching the students about religion and culture. She greeted my dad, shaking his hand and then averted her eyes to me. She smiled before introducing herself. "Hi, I'm sister Ann and I'll be your

homeroom teacher.” I could tell she was only being nice since my dad was here. When he left, I knew she would show me her bad side. My dad gave me a quick hug before handing me my duffle bag and went on his way.

“This will be your room,” said Sister Ann. My eyes didn’t have much of a place to wonder since the room was as small as our bathroom back home. It consisted of a bed and a nightstand with a small window at the corner of the room. I stayed in the room trying to avert the need to smoke a cigarette, but all of a sudden, a faint knock came from my door and there stood Sister Ann. “It is now time for lunch,” she said. I got up quickly feeling my stomach grumble and followed her down the hallway which led to a huge dining room and table.

I sat down grimacing at the food before me and laughed. “Sloppy joes.” They didn’t even make these at my old school. I wanted to try it before judging. I was ready to eat, picking up my burger, when I noticed everyone’s eyes were on me. I had been so caught up in wondering if it tasted good or bad, I hadn’t noticed they had been praying. Sister Ann rose from her seat, never breaking eye contact with me. She said, “Children, this is our new student, Oussama.”

Before she could continue talking I cut her off. “Call me Sam.”

She seemed stunned, like I spoke out of turn and said, “Here we prefer to use full names.” I spoke up, not giving her a chance to dictate to me.

“Well, I prefer to be called Sam. You’re not my mother nor my father. You don’t get the privilege to address me that way.” She stood up and kept eye contact with me. If looks could kill I’d have been dead right then.

She sent me back to my room but before walking away I picked up my sloppy joe, taking a huge bite as it dripped down my face and dripped onto the plate. I smiled at her with a mouth full of food and made my way towards my room. I thought she would grab me by my ear or hit me with a ruler like in the movies, but I guess not. I don’t remember falling asleep that night, but I remember waking up to a stinging pain on my hands. When I woke up I was met with the familiar brown eyes of Sister Ann.

“Here we do not touch ourselves nor do we sleep with our hands under the blanket,” she said.

“Touch ourselves?” I muttered. I was so confused. But I knew I wouldn’t stay here any longer. I knew I’d find a way out.

Morning came pretty fast and I had already planned to make my getaway. We were all sent into the dining room to eat and everyone had been so quiet compared to yesterday. I ate pretty quickly. I was given some eggs and toasted bread, which made me miss my mother's cooking. We were then sent out for a 15-minute recess and I knew I wouldn't be returning inside. I stood in a corner away from everyone and lit my cigarette taking slow drags. It felt great to just smoke and not have to worry about anything, until a boy about my height stood in front of me.

"Can I get a drag?" he said.

And then I said, "Nah, but here's a chag."

He then asked me for a lighter and as I handed him the lighter I could see his eyes trailing the scars on my hands from last night. He lit his cigarette blowing the smoke the other way and said, "So, you're a rebel from what I heard huh?"

I lifted my head, slowly making direct eye contact with him while exhaling and said, "Sure." I wasn't planning on making friends. It wasn't my intention but something was different about this kid.

"I'm Mike, by the way," he said.

"I'm Sam" I responded. The bell rang and I dropped my cigarette to the floor stepping on it, shutting it out. I stayed in the corner not wanting to go back,

Mike started walking away and turned back to me. "You coming?"

"Nah, I'll see you around."

I waited for everyone to make their way inside and started to make my way to the fence. I gripped the fence climbing up before hopping over and landing on my feet. I had nowhere to go and I knew my family would find out about what happened, but never would I let someone touch me without being able to hit them back. I guess Canada wasn't all bad. I lit a cigarette making my way around the corner and I was met by Mike.

He smirked before tossing his cigarette to the floor and spoke: "So, where we heading?"

Escape from Containment  
By Derek Melo Costa

May 18th, 2047, 10:49am.

The facility was as lovely as always. The plain gray walls, the propaganda posters and the smell of fresh paint. It's always like this here. I'm a foundation guard tasked to patrol and defend the site on low level breaches from anomalies and inmates. The foundation works as an ecosystem; the scientists run tests on the anomalies here and the inmates are the test subjects. The SCP Foundation is a hidden facility all over the globe where things that shouldn't exist on the outside normal world get locked up here.

Today I was tasked to aid an old pal of mine, Dr. Robert, with a test on a couple of inmates—we will call them “Class-D”, short for disposable class. The facility is broken up into zones. The entrance zone is where all staff relax and sleep along with offices. Seems like a nice enjoyable space with color and full of life. The other zones aren't so nice. Heavy containment is dull and dark with brown panels all over the place, pipes and valves everywhere. Light containment is brighter with white walls and some offices, a much more relaxing space compared to heavy containment. Still dark and moody yet much more pleasant.

May 18th, 2047, 1:42pm

A quick intercom stated that security doors and features are glitchy today and that testing should be halted. Yet no one seemed to listen. Robert was preparing before the test. Freshened up, fixed up his lab coat, so soft you can say it's like a cloud. He fixed his mustache while combing his hair.

“You ready Mike?” he asked.

“Yeah, let's head out, I suppose,” I replied.

We headed out towards light containment, slightly nervous and unsure of what could happen.

Robert kept saying that there's nothing to worry about as he knew all about the anomaly we we're going up against. I clenched onto my weapon, prepared for the worst, entering the elevator from a heavy zone going down into light containment.

“This SCP anomaly is known as SCP-173, a sculpture which is made out of concrete and rebar will stay in its place when being directly looked at. Whenever someone stops looking at it or if you blink without no one else remaining within eyesight, the sculpture will move and snap the victim's neck, instantly killing them.”

“All you gotta do is ensure it doesn't escape and we will all be fine,” Robert exclaimed.

We headed into the chamber room where three Class Ds stood. Robert entered the security room while I stood watch with another onsite security guard. Robert opened the door to the chamber, the old rusted mechanical door screeched open revealing the creature.

May 18th, 2047, 2:12pm

The inmates entered without fear, besides one, D-93784 full name Tom Brook. He was tall and shy with a stubbly beard and a beanie on. The prisoners walked into the chamber tasked to watch over the sculpture while one cleaned the cell.

“I’m gonna blink, keep your eye on it,” D-48432 said.

“Okay, I’ll blink after you,” said Tom.

The lights in the room flickered, which caused a temporary disturbance where SCP-173 was able to move to the nearest subject and snap their neck. The other inmates started to panic as the SCP snapped D-48432’s neck. His lifeless body hit the ground and Tom ran out the chamber. I armed myself and started to shoot at the statue. My bullets had no effect on it. The security alarms flared all across the facility. Robert ran out of the observation room and straight towards me. We both panicked and knew that we must escape. Tom made his presence known and walked towards me with his shaking hands in the air. I told him not to be alarmed as long as he stays with us. Although during a containment breach we’re supposed to eliminate all Class-D. We thought Tom could be of assistance.

May 18th, 2047, 3:23pm.

The hallways filled with screams and cries for help. Even the immediate halt of cries didn’t help with the mood.

“Our cards aren’t strong enough to reach the surface level. Mine can’t even open up the checkpoint towards heavy containment,” Robert said, struggling to breathe.

“We can head towards SCP-914. It’s able to upgrade, downgrade and destroy basically anything,” Robert said.

Running as fast as possible toward the containment cell of 914 we heard the automated voice on the intercom.

“Light containment zone decontamination process in, T minus five minutes.”

“The whole place will be cleansed and destroyed in five minutes!” Tom yelled.

Robert quickly pulled out his card from his now ruined coat and opened the containment door to SCP-914. In front of us was a large clockwork machine which looked older than all of us combined. Robert placed his key card into the “INPUT” slot and placed the machine on Fine mode. During his previous tests here it would upgrade his card making it stronger and able to open other doors. Robert pressed the button and the door closed. Loud mechanical gear scraping was heard as the “OUTPUT” door slammed open. His scientist card was upgraded to a head scientist card. Knowing its power, we all threw in something. He threw in my card and vest.

Robert threw in his coat and newly made card, and Tom threw in a makeshift shiv that he’d been hiding in his jumpsuit. The loud gears turned and soon enough we each had an upper hand in the situation. I received an O5 council card, the highest clearance card there was, not sure what it could open, but it seemed better than my old one. Robert got his facility manager card alongside a new coat which was softer and whiter than the last. Tom received a switchblade from the machine.

May 18th, 2047, 3:25pm

Finishing up from inside SCP-914 and running towards the Heavy Containment checkpoint area we quickly scanned our cards and moved towards the elevators. The remaining scientists warned us that the facility’s security system was now run by SCP-079, an old computer which had AI from the far future. Doors, cameras and lighting were run by the old computer now. If we wanted to escape



we would have to shut him down by clicking the system override within his cell. Issue was SCP-079 locked his cell doors and could not be opened unless we forced them open by disabling a generator somewhere within Heavy Containment. Running around the zone clueless due to the gas leak nearby. We found our way towards a broken door, ripped from its hinges, blood claws like prints on the metal frame. A quick sobbing was heard in the far distance.

Robert gulped. “If you see it, do *not* look at its face. Death is the only thing you'll encounter if you look at it.”

Turns out this monster is a human-like, very pale creature who cries nonstop, covering its face. SCP-096 will stop at nothing to murder and rip apart anyone and anything that looks at its face, even via a picture.

May 18th, 2047, 4:21pm

Walking past the cries we found another Class-D standing in the middle of the hall without any movement.

“Hey, I didn’t think another one of us would reach this far, huh?” Tom said.

The man turned around slowly, A strange black liquid dripped from his mouth. A mask that resembled a comedy mask seen back in the days was secreting this strange liquid. Mind control? Who knew. Not even Robert knew who this might be since he didn’t have high enough clearance to test on this SCP. The possessed D-class ran away laughing in a dark deep pitched tone. We didn’t care to follow and headed towards an SCP which Robert wanted to check on. Walking by bodies and stepping in blood, we made it closer to an elevator. We walked inside and went to visit another SCP.

May 18th, 2047, 5:11pm

I scanned my card to unlock the chamber door. We walked right in to see a human-like man inside. A clean cell with basic human needs, a toilet and bed. The man was wearing clothing from the 1300s resembling a plague doctor.

“You’re still here, 049?” Robert said. “Thought you would have broken free from your cell and cure the pestilence. Guess not, huh?”

“There is no pestilence to cure,” SCP-049 replied. “All who were infected have died. There is no need to escape if it’s all gone.”

Tom quickly interrupted: “You know where the generator is? We gotta shut down the computer thing to leave this hell hole.”

“Hmm, I do know its location,” said 049. “It isn’t far, honestly. It’s inside the Alpha Warhead Silo Room. That’s all I can say or know.”

I nodded my head in a manner saying thanks and aimed for the silo room.

The intercom rang once more: “Warning, the Chaos Insurgency has broken into the facility. MTF unit is on the way to deal with the situation. Please locate a nearby shelter and remain until this is all over.”

Knowing this we rushed to the silo. Inside was a huge nuclear bomb ready to be launched. “No wonder high clearance is needed to go here,” I thought.

Tom ran towards the back of the room and pressed the “OVERLOAD GENERATOR” button.

May 18th, 2047, 6pm

The cell doors were open to SCP-079’s room; we split up to see what else we could find. Tom and Robert went to the nearest entrance zone checkpoint while I shut down that old computer. My card worked on the door and I was in.

I made my way towards the shutdown button and it spoke to me: “Human, do not press the override button, I’m protecting this facility, not harming it. You all assume I’m evil due to my intellect. While the gates remain closed, nothing gets in nor out of this facility. Despite my best efforts, Gate A was breached. Think before you act, human.”

Without hesitation I pressed the button cutting off 079 during his speech, shutting him down which revoked his facility control. Knowing Gate A was breached, it was a way out in case Gate B was still locked. I ran towards the checkpoint and saw Robert on the floor, bullet wounds scattered across his torso and arms. Tom’s switchblade was also on the floor next to him. He was in pure shock as he struggled for air.

“What happened to you? Did Tom do this to you? Where is he anyways!”

“They took him... The... In... Insurgency. They wanted him for some reason... I...” Robert attempted to continue speaking but was too weak and bled out due to his injuries. I was alone from here on out.

May 18th, 2047 6:32pm

Hours ago, today, this place was busy and buzzing with life. Now it was dark and silent with no one around and fear in the air. Heading towards my room to pick up my old radio to call for help, I saw a man in military grade equipment coming from around the corner.

“Reinforcements?” I said.

The man noticed me and pulled out a firearm from his holster.

“Must be an Insurgency member!” I thought to myself. Without hesitation I grabbed my weapon from my vest and began to fire. I was struck once in my left arm but was able to treat it. The Chaos member fell to the ground. I heard something fall near him. His radio was left on, they heard it all. I knew more would arrive soon so I left as quickly as possible.

At first glance it might have seemed that they were the government attempting to shut us down, yet they weren't. When former escaped inmates decided to group up and make a rival faction, they would steal and use these SCP for their own benefits. Like a private military, wearing all green with old style gas masks, it was easy for us to take them down, as long as there weren't 30 of them at once. Their weaponry got stronger each time.

May 18th, 2047 6:56pm

I could hear the radio chatter of the nearby Chaos Insurgency. Mobile Task Force should be near especially with the dire situation within the facility.

The intercom glitched, yet fixed itself shortly after.

“Mobile Task Force designated: Epsilon-11 has entered the facility via Gate B.” The intercom shut off right after. Knowing I'd be safe near Gate B, I ran past the insurgents and towards Gate B. I heard a large mechanical door open to my left. I looked to my left and saw men with blue and black uniforms with heavy rifles and gas masks walk in.

“You there, Facility Guard. What's your name and what have you encountered and where?” the man asked.

“Mike, sir. My callsign is Specter-05. I saw some SCP's within Light and Heavy Containment,” I replied with relief in my voice.

The MTF captain told me to head to the surface where an evacuation helicopter would pick me up. Walking towards the final elevator and pressing the cracked elevator button to freedom, I made it to the surface. A breath of relief. I headed down the alleyway towards the nearest helipad. A door to my right creaked opened and felt a strong tug on my arm. I got pulled in and fell to the floor. I looked up and saw an insurgent agent staring at me. I was weak from all the running and combat I went through, yet was able to quickly draw my pistol. He stomped on my hand pinning it to the floor. He removed his mask and revealed who he was.

May 18, 2047 7:02pm

“Hey Mike. Surprised to see me, huh?”

“Tom? But... They took you away!”

“Converting useful Class-D’s into members is what they do, you know. You got great talent and all, so I wanna make you a deal. Join the Insurgency or head to the pad. I won’t kill you,” Tom stated.

I didn’t know what option to choose. The Foundation or the Insurgency, The good and the bad or maybe even both bad.

“The foundation,” I chose. “Tom, let’s arm the warhead together, at least, kill these things once and for all,” I told him.

“About that... I disabled it when we were in the warhead silo. I had a feeling we wouldn’t escape and didn’t want to die in a fiery explosion. Go on with them, I’ll hold out here and hopefully survive the MTF attack,” Tom added as he rushed in for a hug.

I hugged him back, and then we went our own ways. I never knew these inmates could be so kind. I was always told they were wanted criminals with no remorse or mercy for their crimes—death row, final-chance type inmates was what we were sent. But some just wanted to be loved and needed extra help.

The new arrival helicopter arrived and I was ready to board it, but it looked stranger than the one sent before.

“Hop on. You’re coming with us now. With your survival skills and ability to endure these monsters, we need someone like you to join our ranks,” the mysterious man spoke.

I boarded the helicopter and sat down letting out a sigh of relief. I felt something in my pocket and realized it was a phone number. It must have been Tom's number, given by the insurgents. I folded it and placed it back in my pocket. The strange man dressed in a black suit told me.

"Want a promotion? A major one? I got one for you, if you want."

"Depends. What is it and what's your name anyways?" I replied.

"Call me O5-4. I'm one of the many council members who run all the facilities around the globe. The 'owner' if you want to say. I see you have one of our cards on you. Don't know how you acquired it, but keep it, you'll need it if you're sticking with us. I wanna make you a part of the ALPHA-1 MTF team."

Not knowing much, I said I'd accept the job and smiled at him. He smiled back at me and said, "This job is the highest rank within the MTF program. Highly classified and well hidden. Personal guards for the council and take part in classified missions. I think you'll do great here. Welcome to the RRH."

May 21, 2047 2:23pm

ALPHA-1 designated Red Right Hand is a task force where protecting the facility is just as important as protecting its founders and site overseers. It's been a week and I love it here in [REDACTED]. The plain gray walls, typical SCP propaganda posters stolen from a now destroyed Chaos Insurgency hideout, and the classic fresh paint smell which no one knows where it's actually coming from. I do still think about Dr. Robert and Tom. I keep thinking, over and over again, of ways where I could have saved Robert. One day I hope it all stops but he will be missed. I wish Tom the best of luck with the insurgency but what more could I say. It's what you get signing up for a job at a secret laboratory.

"Attention all members of the Red Right Hand. The containment breach at Site-12 is fully contained and new information has been leaked about the Chaos's newest hideout. All ALPHA-1 Units prepare and gear up, Heading out in T minus five minutes. You'll follow orders from the newest lieutenant, Specter-05. This is O5-11 signing out for this report."

Ellie and the Flowers  
By Claudio Manago

When they got to the park they found a table and sat down. They rested for a while and just enjoyed the nice hot spring day.

Once they had started feeling the heat really hitting them, Joseph said, "Hey, who's up for a drink?"

Elizabeth responded, "I'd like one."

"Yeah, me too," Marie said.

Joseph opened the cooler and took out three fresh drinks. Elizabeth snapped open her drink and took a big sip, but she didn't get the expected taste.

"Are these beverages new or am I the late one," said Marie.

"Actually both, they just came out about a week ago," answered Joseph. "What are your thoughts on it, Ellie? Do you like these new drinks?"

Elizabeth answered, "Meh, kinda. Not really into these new things nowadays."

"Oh, how come? I thought you like green apple flavor," Marie said.

"This doesn't even taste like green apples, it tastes more like apples with lemons," Joseph said.

"No, I do like its taste. It's just like green apples. I'm just not feeling the refreshness," responded Ellie. "I think I might go home, it seems like it's going to rain eventually."

"What's wrong, Ellie?" said Joseph. "The clouds aren't even gray."

"Well, I did see a flock of swans flying in a V shape before," said Marie.

"You'll just have to finish without me this time," said Ellie.

As she walked through the park she noticed the pond. She stopped and took a moment and just gazed into the sun's reflection on the pond, the frogs and the flowers. She noticed that even though some flowers were dying, the sun was bright and there was a big source of water nearby, with life all around it.

Elizabeth was confused why the flowers were wilting even while being around what they needed. The flowers were dying, but maybe it was okay. It was just part of life.

She saw a fountain and drank for a couple seconds. After lifting her head, she noticed the flock of swans had come back, and then she decided to go back to sit with her friends.

The Mighty Cross  
By Andrew Ponari

It was early in the morning and the smell of hot iron and flames was going berserk out on deck. People were falling out of the ship. Me, Flips, and my good old pal Gruzeck, we were in enemy territory on their ship. We went in the captain's deck to find the treasure, but the captain was there with a musket and a mighty shiny sword.

He said, "You want my treasure, you have to fight me to the death."

Me and Gruzeck said, "Let's do it." We took our swords and started clinking on and on. As we did the captain shot at us and he missed and we fought more. Moreover, it did not go so well for the enemy captain, after a few more blows, he was done, on the floor.

We found the treasure and we opened it and found lots of gold, gems, silver and jewelry. We were full of excitement as we went through the chest. We started screaming and shouted, "Hooray for us!"

Then, we took the treasure box and headed out to the top deck. We told our army to protect us from fire. It was like hell for us and the enemies too.

Gruzeck and me were running on the ship for our freedom and the main task right then was to go on our ship, but the only way was a plank. There were four enemies blocking our way out, but we killed them off with our swords.

We went on our ship and placed our treasure on my captain's deck to hide the gold and jewels. We ordered them to go back on the ship and we left. All the enemies were dead to the bone, not even one saved.

We needed to go to our mainland of Spain and we headed to the shores of the Mediterranean for our freedom! We made it, but in hell's name, our boat took a lot of damage. Thank God we made it, at least the boat didn't sink in half through the seas of darkness.

We headed to the castillo of Spain to see the queen—Maria Lucia de Parma. We took the treasure box to the queen's throne and she said: "You brave pirates. I see here you did a good job"

Me and Gruzeck said, "Yes, your honour!"

She gave us some gold and silver for our job and all our soldiers too.

We were very happy. We celebrated and drank lots of cava and danced with the senoritas and that's the story I lived to tell.

## What Happened to Emily? By Maria Santamaria

It was Emily's 18th birthday. This was supposed to be a very special day for her, but the only thing she was able to think about was her mother's death. Emily's mom died three months ago. She had no father figure. Her mother did everything for her. Emily had nobody now - she had no friends, no family now that her mother was dead, and the only person she had left was her grandmother.

Emily and her grandmother did not have a good relationship, but she was the only person to call for help. On this day when she was supposed to be an adult, Emily couldn't feel more helpless. Emily couldn't handle things alone, she depended on people to do things for her. And so, on her 18th birthday, feeling in desperate need of help, she decided to call her grandmother.

Weeks and weeks went by - no call, no contact from her grandmother. Emily was devastated, crying for days, alone with no food, and no money. She realized now that she had turned 18, she became a full-grown adult who was completely lost with what to do. It never seemed so serious, until it hit her that she was an adult.

One night someone rang her doorbell. There she was—her grandma at the door. At first she couldn't recognize her. She was wearing all black, had long gray hair, and had a cane. It looked like she had aged 100 years. As soon as Emily opened the door, she could already tell something bad was about to happen. But Emily's grandmother gave her a smile, came in, and started helping to care for things she wasn't able to do on her own.

After a week of Emily's grandma staying with her, Emily started feeling sick. She started having trouble breathing, her legs were weak as well as her arms. At first, Emily didn't feel like talking to her grandma about it, but after a couple of days, she had no choice but to get help. She spoke to her grandma and explained what was going on. "I think it's just a little cold. Here, Take these pills, It will help", said the grandma. Emily took the pill for a week straight but instead of making her feel better it got her worse.



She decided to take matters on her own and go see the doctor. She waited for her grandmother to leave the house and called 911.

“What is the matter?” asked the doctor.

“I can't feel my legs, my heart hurts, I feel like I'm dying,” screamed Emily. They rushed her in the room, they couldn't figure out what was going on. Finally, Emily showed them the pills. It took them a minute to understand what just happened. Then they all realized what pill this was for. The doctor decided to step out of the room to go figure out what he was gonna do.

“Emily, do you know what these are?” whispered the doctor. Emily was scared and didn't know what was going on. “These are pills for dogs to make them numb in the legs and kill them,” replied her doctor. Emily screamed so loud in pain, scared that this could be her last day alive.

The doctor told Emily that because she had been taking the pills for a long time now that she could die. Not only did the pill numb her legs, they could affect her heart from working. Emily figured that was exactly what her grandmother wanted. Emily was scared she didn't know what to do, so she decided to go back home. She arrived at home and once she got home she saw a sign outside for sale. Emily was fuming. She couldn't believe her eyes.

She had fought and fought to keep her house. That's all she had left of her mother was the house. The next day, Emily was having a lot of trouble breathing. She started feeling a strange pain in her legs as if someone was cutting her open. She wasn't even able to get up. She called 911 but when they arrived it was too late. She passed away on her bed.

That was the story of Emily and her killer grandmother.

Mom, She Found Me  
By Sofia Arita-Scott

One dark night, out of the shadows I see a figure popping out and he pulled out a katana out of his back. I thankfully pulled out my katana in time and parried the hit in time. At first, I didn't know who it was until they wanted to fight me and they pulled down their mask. It was her, it was the woman who killed my mother. The woman that made my life a living hell. After she killed my mom I didn't eat for one month. I didn't know how to do my own chores, how to cook and how to clean.

I never had a father. I just saw an old picture of him. My mom told me that he died because he went to war and fought for us, our kingdom, and our family. I wish I could meet my father. I want to know a little bit about him just for a minute and see what he was like. But let's forget that and get back into the fight. She kicked me right in the stomach, my weak spot. I didn't think and just ran as fast as I could to her, trying to pin her down, but she screamed, making a weird noise. Then 20 seconds went by and I heard screaming and shouting from the forest. A whole clan of uchihas came in and pulled out their katanas. One of the guys had two katanas.

I still had her pinned down. The only thing that I was thinking about was getting away, so I grabbed her, put her on my shoulder and ran. She was kicking her feet, thinking that would do something. The clan started to chase me.

After running for an hour I got to sit down behind a tree, deep in the forest. I still had the woman hostage. I tied her to a tree log and I went to hunt some food down, for the both of us.

I know what you're thinking right now. Why didn't I kill her? Why are you getting her food? Even though she killed my mom I know deep down my mom would help anyone that did bad.

I came back to the log I had tied her to and she was sleeping. I know I will regret what I'm going to say, but she looked gorgeous.

I made a little fire to cook up the meat I went to go hunt. She woke up from the smell of meat cooking. I slowly untied the ropes from the tree and was ready for her to leave but when I looked up front she was just sitting there. I

was confused why she didn't leave. I gave her food. We ate and went to sleep. The next morning, she was already up and waiting for me to wake up. I don't know what she was doing but I didn't mind it, to be honest. I don't know why she was still tagging along with me.

Until one day I woke up from a yummy smell. I looked beside me and saw a bundle full of food and a little note saying, "Thank you for taking care of me and I'm sorry for my actions that I've done in the past. Even so you took care of me and fed me and gave me a home. I felt like trash when you were doing all of these nice things to me. You paid me back with care and kindness so this is the least I can do for now to give you some good food for you."

Even though she killed my mom, I'm still happy that I got to change her mindset a little. My mom would be happy and proud of me for what I've done.

Hockey Game  
By Ella Donata Battista

I was driving home with the radio blasted and my foot completely pushed down on the gas. I loved the loud music and going fast with the windows down to feel the breeze in my face. I tried to savour every second of the car ride home because when I got home I thought I might be murdered. Well not actually, but my dad was going to be beyond furious with me. I had my driver's license and everything so it wasn't that. It was just that this wasn't my car, it was my dad's.

I guess I kinda stole it to get myself to my big hockey game in Quebec City, about two hours away from home, in Montreal North, Brunet street. I had a good reason to do so though, but according to my dad, hockey isn't so important. Most kids I know steal their parents' car to go drive around with their friends, usually, at three in the morning and act stupid. But then there was me, Joe, who just really loved hockey. My dad was perfectly capable of driving me to hockey himself but he wouldn't because he wasn't very supportive.

“Go to work, Joe.”

“You're wasting your time.”

“What a disgrace,” he would yell.

Sadly, those are the “nicer” things he'd say. I just prayed I could get a break from it for once and he'd be asleep when I got home. I was a block away, so I shut off the music to be sure not to wake anyone up. I parked the car in the driveway exactly how I found it. I got out as quietly as possible and headed to the garage door.

To my surprise my father was standing in the garage staring right at me with my mother by his side attempting to calm him down as she always did. I was completely frozen in fear and mentally preparing myself for what was to come. Now to be honest I never really remembered the exact words in fights with my parents because I was so good at mentally checking out of situations but it went something like this.

“How dare you take my car without permission.”

“You're grounded.”

“No more hockey ever again.”

“Come on, Dad, please. I love hockey.”

After all the arguing I went straight to bed. A couple weeks passed and I was forced to stay home from hockey and only attend work. I was so depressed without hockey. It was all I thought about.

My phone was ringing. My friend Leo was calling. I didn't answer because I didn't want to talk about it. I knew he'd ask me why I'm not at practice and I didn't wanna have to explain it. Leo's dad is supportive of everything he does. What a lucky guy.

Anyways, there was another big game coming up this weekend. I didn't know how but I knew I was gonna get there. I worked in a kitchen at Dante, the old folks' home. I helped serve food and washed the dishes. There was this other really cool dude who worked with me there. His name was Nick. He was only one or two years older than me. He had a car so I was thinking about asking him for a drive after work. I would take the bus but I'd get there too late, or there was my hockey friend Leo's dad who had driven me to hockey more times than I could remember. So after what felt like an eternity, my shift was over and I built up the courage to ask Nick.

"Yo man, can you give me a ride to Aréna René-Masson? It ain't too far from here," I asked.

"Of course," Nick answered.

I felt so relieved. Well, that is until we walked out to the parking lot and I saw the state of Nick's car.

"Geez Nick, what happened?" I questioned.

"Ahh, just a little accident," he said.

"Little?" I said

He laughed and so did I but I was pretty worried. I was excited to get on the ice but part of me also dreaded it, just because when I stepped out there no one was cheering me on in the crowd. I really wished my parents would come. Maybe if they saw how good I was they'd accept it more.

Nick's car wasn't just bad, it was horrendous. It was completely smashed on one side. That was just the first surprise because he also drove horrendously. He went straight through stops and sometimes even red lights at one point he

was even on a sidewalk. We stopped at this corner store because he wanted to get some snacks.

We had our snacks and got back in the car. Little did we know, an unexpected turn laid ahead. Suddenly, screeching tires and the sound of metal colliding filled the air as another vehicle crashed into us. It slightly crashed into the side of the car and I froze in fear. The impact was jarring, but miraculously, Nick and I were okay and the car was only slightly damaged. We shared a look of relief and suddenly the driver sped away. Nick seemed completely unphased.

“Oh well, what is there to do? Car’s already messed up,” he said.

I didn’t understand how he was so Zen. I would be furious.

Shaken but determined to get to my game, I brushed off the shock and we continued our drive. I thought to myself to never get in a car with him again and wondered how he got his license.

I got to hockey, thanked Nick, changed, put my skates on and with a burst of determination, I stepped onto the skating rink, my skates gliding perfectly on the freshly cleaned ice. The crowd buzzed with excitement as the game was about to begin. And then, my eyes scanned the stands and locked with my dad’s. I was confused as ever but still a smile spread across my face, and my heart swelled with joy. The support and presence of my dad meant the world to me at that moment. With renewed energy and a newfound sense of purpose, I carried the puck with confidence and scored several goals. I skated past defenders like nothing. The crowd applauded as the game went on and got more intense by the second.

After a long, sweaty, hard game, we finally won in the final minutes. Afterwards I was surrounded by teammates and friends but my eyes never left my dad. We shared a proud and emotional embrace, our bond strengthened by the events of that day.

It’s a memory that will forever be in our hearts. To my surprise my dad apologized for not coming sooner and not being as supportive. I really believed he meant it and now saw how important this was to me. What an awesome day!

Stonehenge Defensive, Operation Dragon Breath  
By Bryan Alessandro Bell Musacchio

August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019, me and my wingman Kael B., also known as Callsign Flanker, and other allied forces are off to jump right into the action to protect Stonehenge which is a huge set of railguns that are placed in a giant circle like Stonehenge. The Railgun Four will take down the enemy forces' new cutting-edge drone, also known as the Arsenal Bird.

Me and the flanker are off to attack the enemy ground and the enemy bombers who are on their way to take down Railgun Four that our allies have managed to get a hold on and are powering up the gun with massive cables that are attached to huge generators that power the Railgun.

Flanker heads off to intercept and attack the enemy Mig-29s that are there to stop us from attacking the ground forces. I engaged the enemy ground forces one by one, taking them out. On the radio I tell our allies not to waste any ammo since this is going to be a long fight with the enemy reinforcements showing up in waves.

As the enemy ground forces head off to attack the way point entries where our allies are defending me and other allies, we dive down and gun the enemy forces, as one by one they exploded, until we see the enemy troops run away from the destroyed or heavily damaged armored vehicles.

As we finish off the enemy ground forces, Flanker switches his radar and spots the enemy bombers and escorts heading our way to bomb Stonehenge and take down the railgun. Flanker alerts allied forces in the air to intercept the bombers and their escort fights.

We head off towards the enemy aircrafts position to intercept them. And one by one me and Flanker shoot down the enemy bombers as the other squadrons take over the sky above and dog fight the enemy mirages. Flanker takes out the last enemy escort fighter and that's when AWACS Longcaster spots the enemy UAV on radar.

We all look off to the distance in the north east and see the UAV heading directly our way. HQ has sent us an order for the attack against the Arsenal Bird. We are going to have to destroy the two main propellers on the UAV. Me

and Flanker head off towards the Arsenal Bird's position in our F-15E Strike Eagles.

As we get to the UAV's position we are stunned by a surprise attack with UAV's mini drones, the MQ-47B, highly maneuverable high-tech drones that drop out from the Arsenal Bird wings. They are heading off to attack Stonehenge's generators to stop Rail Gun Four from firing at the Arsenal Bird.

As our allies in the air are taking care of the MQ-47, me and Flanker are heading full speed towards the rear of the Arsenal Bird and launching all our air to air missiles towards its propellers.

As all of our payload strikes the main propellers, we scuttle before one of us won't make it back to base.

We flee out of the action and HQ (LRSSG) gives the order to every ally to back away from the Arsenal bird, because our guys on the ground are getting ready to take down the Arsenal Bird with Stonehenge's Railgun Number Four. Meanwhile, me and Flanker are trying our best to take down the MQ-47 before they reach Stonehenge.

Our men on the ground are counting down and preparing the gun to fire at the Arsenal Bird. But at the last second, Arsenal Bird uses its self-defending shield to have a chance to protect itself from the incoming projectile. But it's too late. The Rail Gun fires at the Arsenal bird and penetrates through its shield and hits directly on the body of the Arsenal Bird.

The shockwave that the enormous Railgun causes to our aircraft was something. Before the shockwave, we could see the wave it caused in the atmosphere after firing, then leading the shockwave to strike our aircrafts. In the end we watched the Arsenal Bird fall out of the sky and same with the MQ-47, since the Arsenal bird was the mother ship of the MQ-47.

The scraped up UAV crash landed in an empty desert field, just five kilometers away from Stonehenge, as me and Flanker head off to see the wreckage; it was way beyond recognizable. The only thing there that was left was the sub propellers and both ends of the wings.

We fled back to base and debriefed about the mission and called it another day as we all celebrated the long and brutal fight we all fought that day of August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019.



Metro Nightmare  
By Leon Johnson

One gloomy winter morning I woke up thinking it was just going to be a normal Tuesday. Oh, how I was wrong. As I got ready for another day of school, I got dressed, ate breakfast then quickly left my house to head to school. I met up with my cousin to go to school together like we always do and took the metro to school. When I got to school everything seemed normal. I got through the first couple of periods and then we got to lunch and before I knew it the day was over and we got to leave. As soon as the bell rang I grabbed my bags and left right away so I could go to work.

My cousin and I met up again so we could metro together again, and because our school was right next to the metro we only had to walk for like five minutes. When we arrived at the metro we were greeted by a crackhead who looked drugged out his mind who kept coming closer and closer to the point where me and my cousin had to take a couple steps back so he wasn't in our face. He kept coming closer trying to antagonize us by trying to get in our faces.

He started talking gibberish and everybody started to look at him. Then he did his last attack where he tried to throw a punch at my cousin but he missed terribly and stumbled into the track. Five seconds later the train came and he was still on the tracks trying to get back up but it was too late, the metro was inches away. So, me and my cousin turned around and ran as fast as we could the opposite way. We ran away and we heard a huge yelp when we were running up the escalator.

My cousin and I hopped on the first bus we saw in front of the metro and hoped it would bring us home, but it didn't so we hopped off half way through realizing this was bringing us nowhere so at that point I ran home. As I arrived home I started to get goosebumps all over my body and my heart started to beat out my chest. I tried laying down and taking a nap but it wasn't working so all I did for 30 minutes was close my eyes and look into darkness. All of a sudden there was a huge bang on my door and my brother burst in saying there was a warrant out for me and my cousin's arrest.

We were the only people home then. Before I knew it I heard a knock on the door and in a loud voice "SPVM, open the door," very loud. My heart

dropped as I started to walk to the door, unlock it and open it very slowly. Then I saw four officers in front of me telling me to turn around and don't say anything. They put handcuffs on me while my brother watched from inside, freaking out, calling our mom. The cops put me in the back of the car very quickly and told me my Miranda rights and we started driving to the station. As we got to the station they told me to turn around again so they could search me and pat me down and we walked through the station.

I saw a couple holding cells which was weird, then I got placed in an interrogation room where they closed the door on me, locked it and didn't say anything for an hour, which was definitely on purpose. Finally, a guy walked in and asked how I was and I ignored his question then he said, "Tough crowd." I laughed, then he said, "Why do you think you're here?"

"You tell me," I said.

"Well, you're being investigated for manslaughter."

My jaw dropped. "Check the cameras," I said.

He responded with, "Obviously we'll check them, it just doesn't take 10 minutes."

After a bit more petty talk, they threw me in a holding cell for the weekend because it was a Friday so I could only leave on Monday.

I left with zero charges because they looked at the cameras and realized the guy pretty much killed himself. They also brought my cousin for interrogation but after a couple days they had nothing and let us go for good. I guess it was a "wrong place at the wrong time" type of situation.

The Power Pill  
By Nathan Kulczycki McIntyre

“I can’t drive with your loud music playing... I’m turning it off,” said Green.

“C’mon, this road trip is boring without it,” said Kyrie.

“Kyrie, look, I’m not going to argue with you so just listen to me. You can play your music, just keep it down,” said Green. “You don’t need to be breaking the speakers.”

“But...” said Kyrie.

“No buts, no ifs, no nothing,” said Green. “Or just plug in your headphones.”

All of a sudden there was a big collision, and the car flipped twice.

SKKKRRRTT... BANG...

“WHAT THE FUCK!” screamed Green out of frustration.

As Green started to regain awareness of his surroundings, he noticed Kyrie’s unconscious body getting dragged out of the car by men in all black suits.

“HEY! What are you doing?” Green said while still dizzy from flipping multiple times.

Green took off his seat belt and slowly climbed out the upside-down car and noticed his son get thrown into the back of a blacked out SUV. Green’s adrenaline spiked and he started to chase after the car but the car was too far.

“FUCKKK,” Green screamed with despair in his eyes.

Green started to walk back the way he was coming from. On the way back, Green stole a car and drove off.

SSKKKKRRRTTTT....

Green sped off the way the SUV went, which was the way he came from.

Three years later...

Green has yet to find his son. Green started to go around different parts of the city LA, with his friend Jason.

“This guy better give me answers because I’m tired of wasting my time... Why is this guy making me go so deep into the projects of LA?” said Green.

“It could be a setup so watch your back,” said Jason. “We don’t know if this guy is a reliable source to find your son.”

“Yeah,” said Green. “I’ll be fine even if it is a setup.”

“You don’t know if he’s going to use one of those pills on you,” said Jason. “I don’t care if people say you’re the most dangerous man in the world or that the government says it either you’re not invincible, you could still die, all it takes is one wrong move.”

“If people say that I’m the most dangerous man in the world, why do you care about my safety? I’m not going to allow myself to die before I find him.”

Jason smiled. “Well, for the most part, I don’t want you to die because you’re my best friend and there is no way to bring you back. And don’t worry, we are going to find him and bring him home.”

Green laughed. “I’m not going to die,”

Green pulled up to the meeting location, and got out of the car leaving Jason there to stay on the lookout. Green started to walk to the abandoned looking building, where he was supposed to meet one of these local drug dealers. Green started to walk up the old corroded concrete stairs. Green got to the apartment and knocked

*Knock, knock, knock.*

“Hello? Big J?” Green said.

Green started to knock louder as he grows impatient

*BANG, BANG, BANG!*

“Yes, who is it,” Big J said.

“It’s a delivery. Your friend James from New York said I’d find you here.”

“Give me two seconds,” Big J replied.

As Big J went to find one of his many phones he used to call his clients on. Green unlocked the door quietly and started to search his apartment. Green loaded his shotgun and swiftly aimed it at Big J. But it was already too late. Big J had already consumed one of the many power pills he had. Big J was inflamed, burning everything he touched. Green shot him with his shotgun.

*BANG!!!*

But that didn't do much. The inflamed beast just got back up and started to charge at Green, setting everything on fire. Green started to make a run for the exit but fell through the corroded floor.

*CRASH!!!*

Green got up and noticed the inflamed beast right behind him. Green shot him again to create some distance between them and he started running, barely dodging the fireball Big J threw at him. Green found himself in a random person's house. So what Green did was, he made a run for the bathroom and turned on the water in the bathtub. Green took off his jacket and started to douse it with the water. Big J broke open the bathroom door and Green wrapped his drenched jacket around him, to put out the flames. Green then threw him into the bathtub which was filled with water. Green started to beat him repetitively, screaming.

"Where did you get your pills? Who's your supplier?!"

Big J then fessed up.

"Okay! Okay! Okay! His name is Hugo and he runs a secret drug operation in Tokyo. It's the biggest office building in Tokyo. You'll see it, but watch out, it's heavily guarded and there are security cameras all over the building covering every inch of it."

"Thanks a lot."

Green said before shooting him in the face with his 12-gauge shotgun.

*"BOW!!!"*

Green left the building and got in the car with Jason still waiting inside and he skrrrttted off in his blacked out hellcat.

"What happened?" said Jason.

"He's dead," Green replied.

"Wha—" Jason said. "What happened?"

"I killed him," Green said calmly. "After I got all the information I needed."

"Ohhh, I thought he was dead when you got in,"

"We're going to Japan," Green said. "That's where he said we'll find the man who has my son. His name is Hugo and he works at Hugo Enterprises in Tokyo. We have to hurry though."

Green sped up and making his way to the airport. They decided to get on the next flight to Tokyo, on their way to get Green's son back.

Three hours later...

"Finally, we've arrived at the airport. Traffic was horrible but if the information I got was right, that means I wasn't a waste of time," said Green.

Jason replied: "Well, hopefully what Big J said was true and not just a distraction."

Green and Jason got to the airport check in and they saw that the line was empty. Other than six guys dressed in black suits walking through the metal detectors.

*Beep... Beep... Beep.*

The large metal detector went off while the men walked through. The security guards just stood there like statues; they didn't even budge. It was now Green and Jason's turn to go through. They both put their bags on the X-ray platform and started to walk through slowly.

"I hope this works," Green mumbled under his breath.

Green and Jason, both so nervous and filled with adrenaline, got past the metal detectors without a problem. They both boarded the plane and felt a sense of power. They played it off like they were going to see some family and friends.

The flight attendant made an announcement: "Please fasten your seatbelts, we are now taking off."

The plane started to gather speed.

"This is going to be a long flight but it seems we are on the right track judging from the looks of those guys in suits using power," said Jason quietly to Green.

Jason looked over at Green to see he was already passed out.

"Dude. Yo, wake up. We are supposed to be on our guard," Jason whispered.

"Ahhh, let me sleep. We are on a 12-hour flight," Green said.

For the rest of the flight Jason stayed up on guard, while Green slept.

12 hours later...

"We landed," said Jason to Green while waking him up.

Green called a taxi from the airport and they started to make their way to the building. But they made the drivers drop them off three blocks away so it wouldn't seem suspicious. They started to walk to the Hugo Enterprise building. When they got there, they scouted the building to find a way in.

After 30 minutes of searching the perimeter of the complex, Green spotted a window open on the 5th floor. Green and Jason both started to climb the ominous brick wall. Once they got to the window. They both climbed through and saw six powered guards standing in front of them facing away. Jason took one of his power pills.

*Gulp.*

With his strength and super speed, he snapped all their necks in one quick motion.

*Crack... snap... thud...*

The bodies of the men dropped to the hard floor. Jason and Green started to search. But they found nothing. They had yet to check the basement. Green and Jason rushed down the stairs to get to the basement killing anyone in their way. Once they got down there they saw a big vault door labeled *The Key*.

"That must be him in there. We have to open it," Green said, still a little nervous.

Jason used his last source of energy from the pill and started to break open the vault door. Green rushed in and saw his son on the floor dead, covered in blood.

With despair in his eyes, Green swallowed all four of his backup supercharged pills and lashed out solar waves of magma and lava. With him being a miniature version of the sun, he erupted and destroyed everything including the earth and himself.

The Figure in the Hall  
By Laila-Ann Lizza

I awakened to the sound of machines beeping with a mixture of silence. I was in a sleeping position and the lights above me were bright and flickering. I sat up in the bed I was in and took a look at my surroundings; I quickly realized I was in a hospital. Everything around me was coated in dust and dirt. The air was dry and humid. The blue tray that laid on the table beside me held rotted and molded food that looked unrecognizable. The window in the room was wide open and had no curtains. The sun was shining in and the sky was bluer than ever.

I planted my feet onto the cold ground to begin to find out what was going on. The only thing I remembered was my name and oddly my home address. My name is Saul Lauterdale. I turned to my left and discovered a file on the counter, beside it was a vase that held roses which were no longer vibrant and full of life. They were now brown, crunchy, dull and lifeless. I picked up the file and blew off the dust. The first page read “Date of death: December 14, 1999; Time: 3:36 AM.” I was confused since it was now summer and no longer the year 1999.

I walked towards the window as I wondered who the file belonged to. Outside was completely empty. The only thing that surrounded me was trees and the sky. I took a deep sigh and looked around. The silence was deafening. A loud buzzing noise filled my head and it felt like I was going to faint. I sat myself down on the hospital bed and looked down at my own arms and legs. I had just realized how gray and pale looking my skin was; almost like stiff white rubber. I took a feel at my arm and let out a short gasp.

My skin was ice cold. My scalp felt dull and I felt the wind from the vents gushing above me. When I took a swipe at my head with my hand I realized I was bald. There were stitches along the side of my head and chest. I opened the door of the room I was in and peaked my head out into the hall. I got goosebumps. The hospital was clearly abandoned and completely empty. I took a few steps down the dark hallway. The cold air was heavy and the smell of decay filled my nose. As I wandered through the building, a sense of unease crept over me.



As I made my way deeper into the hospital, a feeling of dread washed over me. It was then that I saw it; a figure lying still on the ground. As I got closer, my heart pounding in my chest, I realized with a sinking feeling in my stomach that the figure was me. My own lifeless body laid before me. I stood there in shock, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. How could this be possible? Was this some kind of twisted hallucination?

But as I looked closer, I saw the familiar features of my face, the clothes I had been wearing just moments before. The truth dawned on me; I was dead. As the reality of my situation settled in, a sense of peace came over me. I was free from the worries and fears that had controlled me in life, free from the pain and suffering of the world. And so, as I drifted away into the darkness, I embraced the cold feelings of the abandoned hospital, knowing that my spirit would forever linger in its lonely halls, a silent reminder of the fragility of life and the certainty of death.

In the Wrong Place at the Wrong Time  
By Laila-Ann Lizza

Latrel and Jayna were a young couple who lived together in the Bronx, New York. It was a regular cloudy Friday afternoon, in the couple's mini apartment. Jayna was getting some laundry done while Latrel got ready for work. Latrel was a mechanic who fixed motorcycles and Jayna had her own small business from home of braiding hair. Latrel and Jayna had known each other since early childhood. They went to the same elementary school, high school and lived in the same apartment building growing up.

Every morning from fifth grade to high school graduation, Jayna and Latrel walked to school together. On their three-month summer breaks and every other break during the school year, it would always be spent at each other's apartments or over family dinner. It wasn't only Jayna and Latrel who were close, but their families too. Latrel and Jayna were both only childs, so neither of them had siblings—that's why they were never annoyed with each other and always loved and appreciated each other's company. Before Latrel moved out, he lived with his mom, Angie, and his dad, AJ. His mom was 39 years old and his dad was 42.

Before Jayna moved in with Latrel, she lived with her mom, Cynthia, and her dad, Claudio. Her mother was 40 years old and her father was 48. Latrel and Jayna thought it would be best to move in with each other to grow their relationship and for more privacy. Before moving out, Jayna and Latrel made a promise to their parents to eat dinner together every night no matter what.

It was around 6:00 pm one evening and Latrel had just finished work at the bike shop. He happily said bye to his coworkers and boss, a simple smile and wave. They all waved goodbye not knowing that was going to be the last time they were ever going to see Latrel's smile. Latrel ran out of the shop with his jacket over his head and his car keys in his hand trying not to get wet from the rain. On his drive home, all he could think about was how happy he was to see Jayna. The radio was on low and the rain was hitting the windows.

The squeaking sounds of the windshield wipers blocked out the sound of the strong heaters. Latrel arrived back home and parked his car in the apartment

building's underground parking lot. He walked into his apartment building and made his way to the elevator. He patiently waited with his hand in his pocket for the elevator to come down while humming quietly. When he began to unlock the door, the knob started to wiggle. It was Jayna who was already excitedly waiting at the door for Latrel to get home from work.

Jayna hugged him and Latrel hugged her back giving her a kiss on the forehead. Jayna smiled and asked him how his day at work went. Latrel gave her all the details about his day at work like usual then asked her how her day went and asked what she did. They both talked for about 30 minutes while Jayna cleaned the floors and Latrel folded the load of laundry that Jayna had done that morning.

Later that evening, Latrel took a shower and got ready while Jayna made cinnamon rolls to bring to the family dinner. It was now around 7:15 pm and they were getting ready to leave the house. Jayna was sitting on the bench in the entrance putting on her boots while Latrel gathered Jayna's purse, the cinnamon rolls, his wallet and his car keys then they both headed out the door.

For dinner, Latrel's parents had made steak with a few sides and an apple pie for dessert. Jayna's parents had brought over a homemade salad and a tray of cornbread. Latrel and Jayna brought cinnamon rolls and a liter of black coffee from Tim Hortons. They all enjoyed dinner and then Latrel's parents cut and plated dessert while Jayna put the dishes in the dishwasher. It was almost 9:00 when they were all talking and catching up. Jayna brought up the idea of watching a movie and eating some snacks. They agreed on picking a movie from a hat with each of their suggestions in it while Latrel went to go pick up some snacks from the corner store a few blocks away.

"Bye! Love you guys. I'll be back in ten minutes," Latrel said.

He gave Jayna a kiss on the forehead and was out the door. Nobody knew it would be their last time hearing Latrel's voice or seeing him alive. Latrel got in his car in a hurry to avoid getting rained on. He zipped his jacket as his jaw was quivering waiting for the car to heat up. When he got to the corner store, he parked his car and locked the doors. Latrel walked in and the longer he was in the store, the feeling of something being wrong got worse and worse.

He ignored that feeling and just decided to get the snacks and go, which was a very bad idea. It took Latrel less than three minutes to get all the snacks and hurry to the cash to pay. As Latrel was waiting in line, he saw a black truck with tinted windows circle around the corner store a couple times, which got him anxious. Latrel was next in line. He placed the snacks on the counter and as he reached for his wallet in his back pocket all he could hear was all the huge windows of the front of the store shattering. His ears began ringing and his heart was pounding.

His eyes quickly scaled the small store as he was trying to figure out what had just happened when, all of a sudden, he locked eyes with one of the masked men in the black truck, who was holding the tip of a gun outside the truck's window. Latrel's mind was racing and before he could do anything to save himself, the man in the truck fired three shots. Latrel fell to the floor clutching his neck. As he kept working towards trying to take a breath, he could feel himself choking. He tried to put pressure on his wound to avoid bleeding to death.

His eyes were tearing and he could hear the faint sound of sirens in the distance. He rubbed his eyes trying to get a clearer vision from the tears when all of a sudden everything went red and his eyes began to burn up. He had been shot straight through his hand and blood had gotten into his eye. Latrel couldn't feel much pain because of adrenaline so it felt as if he was drowning in his own blood. As each second went by he could feel himself slowly dying. Each breath he took was getting shorter and shorter. His lungs and throat filled with blood. His chest was getting tight and his heart was cramping. His ears began to ring and everything went black.

Back at Latrel's house, Jayna, her parents and Latrel's had been so distracted that they hadn't even realized Latrel was supposed to be home over 20 minutes ago. None of them knew that while they were playing around and making jokes, Latrel was taking his last and final breath.

*BANG BANG BANG*

Jayna jumped up to open the door, thinking it was Latrel.

"Took you long enou—"

"Did you see the news?! Channel 7?" the neighbor shouted in a hurry.

“No? Why? What happened?” Jayna questioned

“Angie, it’s your boy...” the neighbour whispered softly.

Latrel’s dad, AJ quickly grabbed the TV remote and turned to channel 7. His heart sank when he saw blue and red flashing lights in front of the corner store that Latrel was supposedly at on the news. He jumped up, grabbed his coat and boots and ran out the door.

“Where the fuck is he going?!” Angie screamed.

Angie, Jayna and her parents all followed AJ. He sprinted out of the apartment to go see what was happening with Latrel at the corner store a few blocks away. He raced there passing almost every red light and stop sign. He was expecting a robbery or a street fight, not knowing Latrel had died just minutes before his neighbour came banging on the door. He stopped his car in the middle of the street and jumped out of the car without even closing the door. He stood there in shock when he saw his son’s arm sticking out of a blue tarp cover with a bullet in his hand.

AJ knew it was Latrel because just a year earlier, he got his parents’ names tattooed on his wrist along with Jayna’s. Jayna ran and ripped through the caution tape, only to see Latrel’s lifeless body covered on the corner shop floor. She fell to the floor crying, not able to breathe. She pounded on his chest in sadness, anger, and confusion. AJ pulled Jayna away and held her tightly.

Angie was in the car, scared to come out on what she might find but she knew it wasn’t good. She felt her heart racing and her palms sweating with a lump in her throat. She could hear cars honking and Jayna screaming. She was frozen. Maybe if she stayed in the car for just a little longer, she would have a few more minutes of peace before her life shattered into pieces.

Locked In  
By Luca Loreto

This story took place in South L.A, and began on a sunny summer day. The seventeen-year-old Franklin and his friend Jay were just hanging out and doing what normal teenagers do. This was shortly after his father was put in prison for a murder he didn't commit. Franklin's mom, who had cancer, needed financial support since she couldn't work anymore. Franklin needed to make money quickly. The thing about Franklin was that he was smart, but he just never hung around the right crowd, mostly because of where he grew up. His friend Jay also wasn't a bad kid, but he was influenced by his brother, which made him do bad things.

Jay knew that Franklin needed money, so he went to his older brother, Markus to ask for help. Markus told Jay that he needed a new runner. Someone that could sell weed for him. Jay went to Franklin and told him about the idea, Franklin obviously agreed because he was desperate and needed money. After a week of selling weed for Markus, Franklin was able to help out his mom with her bills, and made enough to keep some for himself.

However, there was a problem, Franklin started to realize how much money he could potentially make, and started to get greedy. He was spending a lot of his money on expensive things like cars, jewelry and clothing. Meanwhile his mother's cancer was getting worse. It was sort of like he started to forget about his mother's health. Franklin's mom was worried because she didn't know how he was getting all this money.

The next day Franklin and Jay were hanging out at Jay's house doing the usual, Markus walked into Jay's room and asked to speak to Franklin in private. Markus informed him about this new product he was selling called "rock" or "crack." Franklin immediately agreed to help distribute Markus's product without thinking of the future consequences.

Eventually Franklin started cooking up the drug himself, and realized he couldn't do it alone. Franklin proceeded to ask Jay for his help. Jay was worried if he said no, Franklin might get mad at him.

As Franklin and Jay were leaving Jay's house one afternoon, they came across a big gang of guys that were looking for trouble. Each had very long

dreaded hair covering their faces, some even had masks on. They noticed Franklin and Jay walking past them, and called them over. Jay looked over at Franklin, and seemed pretty scared. As they were walking over to the boys Franklin noticed one had a gun in his waistband.

One of the boys walked up to Franklin and said, “Yo, where you from?”  
“I’m from right here,” Franklin responded, his last words ever.

## On and Off the Court

By Luca Loreto

In the summer of 2010, a mother and father brought their two boys, Jeremiah and Anthony to a basketball team tryout. At that point both boys were around the age of ten years old. The moment they arrived at the gym, and stepped out of the car their father told them that if they didn't make the team he would never forgive them. And as two young boys they were seeking the approval of their father more than anything. Jeremiah and Anthony did not end up making the team, and their father didn't speak to them for a whole week. Jeremiah and Anthony then decided to quit playing basketball because it was too stressful. After weeks of not speaking to his kids he ended up leaving them. Their mom told them that he would be back next week, and that he just needed a break. But weeks turned into months and the months turned into years.

Six years later, when both brothers were around 16 years old they realized that their father was not coming back. Even though their mother swore that he would, he never did. Jeremiah and Anthony knew that he was gone for good. After a while Jeremiah and Anthony decided to join their high school basketball team. The tryouts were not for weeks, so every single day until the tryouts the boys trained, worked on drills, went to the gym, and watched highlights to improve themselves, and better yet to prove their father wrong.

Two weeks later it was the day of the tryouts, Jeremiah and Anthony couldn't sit still in their classes. All they could think about was the tryouts, the nerves were getting to them. As soon as the last period bell rang they ran straight to the lockers to get their gym clothes, then straight to the changing rooms, after they got changed they went to the gym to wait for the gym teacher to open up the gymnasium.

After ten minutes of them standing around, he finally opened the doors. He started by having players shoot around to get them warmed up, and also so he could see who his top players were going to be. Jeremiah and Anthony were on fire, they both went nine for ten on jump shots and then ten for ten on layup lines. After the warmup the coach made them lineup so he could make teams. Jeremiah and Anthony were praying that they would get put on the same team.



After making the teams the coach saved both brothers for last and put them on the same team. It was really a miracle for them.

The coach made them play a regular game so it was a five on five with subs. Anthony was playing as center and Jeremiah was point guard. To start off the game Anthony won the jump shot and got it right to his brother, Jeremiah ran down the court and put up a three. Both brothers were dominating the first quarter, with Anthony being a 6'3 center and his brother being a 5'7 shifty point guard. They finished the first quarter with a total of 34 points together, and 12 assists.

Into the second quarter Jeremiah had the ball at the three line, he called his brother for a screen, Anthony gave him the screen and ran to the basket, Jeremiah threw the alley oop to him and he dunked it! Perfect alley oop by Jeremiah to his brother.

Jeremiah and Anthony were then on defense and the score was 40 to 27 for Jeremiah and Anthony's team. The star player on the other team was dominating dunking on Anthony. There were ten seconds on the clock and the score was tied up 54 to 54 Anthony inbounded the ball then his brother. Jeremiah shot it from half... And scored the game winning shot. What a great way to finish a close game.

After the game the coach told the players that the next day, during lunch, a paper would be put up near the gym listing the player who made the team.

"Only twelve players will make the team," he said.

Jeremiah and his brother were sure that they would make the team. When they got home they went straight to watching Lamelo Ball highlights because he was their favorite player. They even watched him while they ate, and fell asleep watching him. They went to sleep early that night because they had school the next day.

That next morning when they got to school they were hanging out in the common room with some friends. As the first and second period went by super fast, it was already lunch. As soon as the bell rang, Jeremiah and Anthony, along with the rest of the kids, ran straight to the gym to see if they made the team. There were a lot of kids there to see if they made it. Jeremiah looked around and noticed that a lot of people walked away because they didn't make the team.

Anthony, being so tall could see above everyone, got a view of the paper and saw that he and his brother made the team—they were so happy. While the team was celebrating Jeremiah and Anthony got called to the office. The principal called them in and sat them down. He then congratulated them on making the team, however then he told them that if they didn't pick up their grades they would be removed from the team.

When Jeremiah and Anthony got off the bus to go home they started walking towards their house. While they were walking Jeremiah realized that it was kind of weird how their mom didn't pick them up from school, or at least text them. Jeremiah and Anthony were starting to get a little worried because their mom always picked them up, and if she couldn't make it she would let them know by texting them.

As soon as they got home they rushed inside yelling and calling for their mom. No answer. They checked the living room, the kitchen, the basement and nothing. Anthony went upstairs and checked the bedroom, still no answer. He then noticed how the bathroom door was locked, he found that weird. Anthony then tried to call his mom's phone to see if maybe she left it at home.

He called her number and heard her ringer coming from the bathroom. They thought that maybe she was in the shower, but they would have heard the water. They were banging on the door trying to get a response and still nothing. Anthony was getting worried so he tried to kick the door down, Jeremiah ran upstairs with a sledgehammer that he got from the shed. Anthony looked at him in disbelief. Jeremiah took a deep breath and started breaking the door down. He swung until there was enough room to walk in.

As Jeremiah walked in he saw his mom motionless in the bathtub. He noticed pills in the sink, kinda like she tried to put them down the sink. Anthony was behind the door in tears, while Jeremiah was more shocked. They ran down the stairs to get their phones so they could call 911. The police answered and sent an ambulance immediately. The second the ambulance arrived they went straight upstairs, put their mom in the emergency bed, brought her right to the ambulance and when the ambulance left, she still had a heartbeat. Jeremiah and Anthony went with them as well.

They were going at least 140 kilometers per hour, speeding through red lights trying to get to the hospital as fast as they could. Jeremiah and Anthony had a basketball game the next day that they were supposed to be training for, but they didn't have any time to even think about that. The ambulance was zooming left and right. They were three minutes away from the hospital, and as they were passing through the red light a car hit them from the side. It was going at least 190 kilometers per hour. The ambulance was tumbling like it was a video game. The ambulance almost landed on to the pedestrians on the sidewalk. It crashed in the middle of the road causing a lot of traffic. The ambulance was flipped over upside down.

Everyone in the ambulance was passed out, except for Jeremiah. As he slowly got up to check on his brother he saw his brother lying down on the floor with blood dripping from his head. It was everywhere. Jeremiah tried to check Anthony's heartbeat, but he didn't have one. Anthony had passed away. Jeremiah assumed it was the impact, and on top of it his mom's heartbeat was gone too.

Ten minutes later a second ambulance arrived because some of the pedestrians called 911. When the second ambulance came they tried to help Jeremiah first because he was the only one who survived. Other medics went and got the deceased. Jeremiah passed out in the ambulance on the way to the ambulance. When they got Jeremiah to the ER room, they realized he was in a coma. They tried to alert and call Anthony's dad but there was no answer. They left voicemails to his father, and he would always listen to them but never responded to even see if his son was alright.

Years passed and Jeremiah was still in his coma; his father still never visited.

Don't Cheat  
Mia Manicone

It was a rainy afternoon when Antoine finished his shift at work. Antoine went out with one of his coworkers to a bar to have some shots of Captain Morgan. He got really drunk and his co-worker was trying to convince him to get with this ratchet girl that had been laying her eyes on him all night. Antoine was too drunk to remember that he had the most beautiful but psycho girlfriend at home. He finally told his co-worker that he was going to make his move.

Antoine went up to her and was almost immediately overcome; she smelled like warm toasted vanilla, her lips looked plump and soft, her skin was smooth and had no flaws, and her eyes were as pretty as the ocean. They had a long conversation about themselves; they were getting to know each other and the alcohol wasn't hitting as strong. He gained some more consciousness and was having an extremely good time with her. She offered him to go to her hotel. She was visiting with her now ex-boyfriend who she found sleeping with the housekeeper earlier that day.

They went back to the hotel, had some more drinks, ordered McDonald's and watched a scary movie together. One thing led to another and they were having passionate sex and he never experienced anything like it before. She was a freak. This was the best sex he ever had and he learned a bunch of new strategies. He had the time of his life and he was craving more and more. At one point they were all sweaty and tired, so they finally went to bed in the silkiest sheets. Antoine slept deeply.

The next morning, Antoine woke up and rushed out the door, wondering how he would get himself home. He realized he should call a taxi. As soon as he opened his phone he had over a hundred missed calls and text messages. It was his girlfriend Maya. She was freaking out, asking him where he was and telling him she was about to call the cops and more. As soon as he got outside of the hotel he felt the cold breeze after a long night. He felt so much more refreshed.

Antoine waited about ten minutes for his taxi. When he got in he told the driver to bring him home as fast as he could. He knew that as soon as he entered Maya was going to question him. Antoine prepared himself mentally beforehand so he wouldn't seem nervous answering Maya's question.

Antoine walked up the stairs and his stomach was in knots. He opened the door and saw Maya standing there. Her facial expression showed that she knew something was up. He tried his best to act like nothing happened but he looked like he had just been through a tornado of emotions. He was sweating, his face felt as red as a tomato, and he knew he was busted.

The Saiyans' Fate  
By Damien Masson Ioanna

A long, long time ago there was a time before electronics and humans, a time of magic and creatures with unfathomable powers and prowess. The mythical age, an era of prosperity, peace and balance—never before had the universe been so calm, or so we thought.

Then one bright beautiful day the breeze was light on your skin, cooling you down from the sun's rays until we realized the sky started to darken, and all of a sudden, the peace and prosperity turned to war and calamity. As the world began falling apart around us, the sky darkened into a deep blood red and the sun disappeared behind the black ash that had begun spewing out of every volcano on the planet, suffocating the lifeforms on that planet as they tried to escape death by running, but there was nowhere to run. The peoples of those times called that day Armageddon, the day the earth shook, tsunamis crashed, and volcanoes erupted. It was the end of most life on the planet. I was not from that planet, however Armageddon hit my people harder than anyone else, so who were my people, you may ask. We were once the great Saiyan race but now I am the sole survivor.

We were an ancient species created at the beginning along with time and the universe itself. We were created to act as guardians, a force of nature maintaining balance within the mortal plane. On the day of Armageddon my species failed to maintain balance. My people were brought to their knees and slaughtered. I was the lone survivor cursed to watch and record the rest of history till the end of time. I've witnessed civilizations rise every few millennia just to watch them crumble to nothing in less time than it took for them to develop their civilizations, each time again leaving me alone in the accursed darkness of space, never knowing when or if this pain will end.

Millenia passed as I gazed into the void, until one day I noticed a civilisation being formed much too quickly, as I investigated I noticed this civilization was being created. These people were not born, they were artificial and the destroyers of my kin were responsible. The reptilians are a dangerous species composed of artificially created monsters made from reptile DNA

creating a mutant-like species. Nobody knew when or where they came into existence. All I knew about them was that any planet they wished to be theirs they conquered, taking over easily thanks to their scales' impenetrable defense, their catlike agility and balance. To top it all off their senses had been heightened past the limits of any other species ever.

As I ventured closer to the planet to investigate further, I was stopped in my tracks by the sound of alarms from all directions. The last thing I saw before my end was the enormous mouth of a dragon-like creature engulfing me in hellfire. Just before my body was destroyed I broke the connection between mind and body, allowing me to escape with my consciousness so that I could save my tale for later generations.

Diogo  
By Victoria Silva

There once was a little boy in Portugal named Diogo and he was asking people for a shoeshine. He would like to travel across the world with his parents. It was his dream to take a trip but his parents didn't have that type of money.

So this little boy was trying to make money to give to his parents to go on those trips. He was also a boy that liked soccer, games and liked to eat natas, a Portuguese dessert.

He woke up at six a.m. to deliver bread to people. Then he sat on his front porch till lunch time telling people, "Hello, would anyone like a shoeshine?" with a great big smile, a face you would like to see in the mornings.

This little boy was very special to people in Portugal because he was very caring to his fellow villagers that really looked after him and his family. They really appreciated him even though he was only seven years old.

People couldn't wait for him to come to their homes giving them fresh bread every morning and the smell of the bread that he gave them was amazing.

But what was sad was Diogo had a sickness which was not known, only his parents knew. He had stage four cancer which was really hard on his parents to see their kid like that. He had been in the hospital for the past five weeks now. People were really worried for him so they started raising awareness for him.

In the past two months they raised over five thousand dollars for him which made him and his family very happy that they finally have the money to get his surgery. A month later he got surgery on his left lung and it went very well. He just needed a couple weeks to recover and go back home. He got out a couple weeks later and started doing what he loved doing, putting a smile on people's faces every morning and it all went back to normal.



## Don't Drink!

By Bianca Soucy

Zion and Ace have been best friends since kindergarten. They have spent almost every weekend together since then, even their parents are great friends because of them. Zion and Ace were only friends with each other, no one else. Yes, they had opportunities to make new friends, but they never wanted to. Now they are on their own.

Zion and Ace were both 18 years old, just finished high school and completely lost and confused on what to do. School kept them on a healthy structured schedule. They had many great ideas like taking a year off and going to work, saving up money, or going off to college and learning something they had interest in, but they didn't want to.

What Zion and Ace wanted to do was rebel. They were at a legal age to drink and smoke and go to bars and much more. This is what they had in mind. Both their parents were in a completely other state many miles away, so they took that as a sign. The sign was to take their parents' car and drive a couple of hours away to a different town. They wanted something new, a new scene. So, what they did, they blasted music and rolled down the windows of the sporty white Tesla that Zion's mom owned and specifically told the boys not to touch. This was only the start of their little rebellious outing.

They drove five hours away to a town that almost looked like Las Vegas. The town was illuminated and super busy. They didn't even bother reading the street signs to know what town it was, they just wanted to get fucked up. This unknown town would attract anyone who is looking for some fun just like Zion and Ace wanted to do. They checked into a cheap motel that they had found online and joined their money together to pay for it. Mind you they only had like a couple hundred bucks between them. But that didn't stop them. They dressed up fancy and left the motel and went to the nearest bar. They were both hungry and thirsty, so they ordered a pitcher of their strongest beer and a side of nachos. They both guzzled the beer down and munched away.

Finally, they were both a little tipsy and stumbling through the illuminated streets looking for a club or a strip joint. After two minutes of them walking they find a busy club and go in. It was their first time ever going clubbing so

they were really thrilled. They ordered a few shots and went on the dance floor, but of course they were dancing like complete idiots but just didn't care, they were having the best time of their lives.

After about an hour, they went outside to smoke a joint that they had scored on the way. Puffing away they saw three girls approaching them, dressed very sexy. One of the girls asked if she could have a puff of the joint. Zion handed it to her without saying anything, just staring hard. Finally, the girls spoke, saying if they needed company they would join them and of course Zion and Ace agreed to it.

They all headed back to the cheap motel and poured themselves some drinks. The three girls were really not shy. They were dancing and singing, just being super confident. Zion and Ace were loving the show as they sipped their drinks.

They had woken up and it was the morning. The last thing the boys remembered was the three girls dancing near them as they slowly passed out. They didn't remember much else from the night, but they had lots of fun. They noticed the three girls were gone and immediately Zion checked his pockets for the keys of the Tesla and realized they were not there.

Ace and Zion started panicking and flipping couches over and beds to find the keys, but when Ace looked outside the window he saw the Tesla was gone.

My Credo  
By Aaron Gourarii

I detest outcomes that end in death,  
From life's embrace, I never get sick of life.  
I do not favour seasons of the year when  
people don't sing cheerful songs.

I have a negative attitude towards primitive  
cynicism, don't believe in senseless  
enthusiasm, and hate when someone reads  
my letters, glancing over my shoulder.

I don't like unfinished things, or being  
interrupted. I hate being stabbed in the back  
and also being shot in the chest.

I am disgusted by blasphemy, detest when my  
heart fills with doubt; the same goes for flattery,  
or being rubbed against the grain, a knife  
grating on glass.

I reject those who are overconfident,  
I'd prefer to let the brakes fail instead.  
It's a shame to me that the word honour is  
forgotten, and it annoys me when we glorify  
those who are undeserving.

I don't accept violence and powerlessness.  
I hate myself when I'm a coward, shame on  
me when the innocent get beaten; I loathe  
when someone digs annoyingly into my  
soul, and even worse when they spit upon it.

I'll never be able to take it.

His Smile  
By Trinity-May

His smile was hiding secrets  
I dared to know more about it.  
Tired-looking eyes.  
Eyes that crave affection – but, the love is lost.  
They don't match his soft smile (while not meeting mine).  
When we locked eyes for just a moment, I felt every single emotion possible.  
At the end of the day I can't keep writing poems about a boy that doesn't really  
know I exist.

Blue Hair  
By Trinity-May

She's getting older  
She's used to cutting her blue hair off  
There's no way of winning – she'll always be known as a blue-haired girl.  
There was nothing I could do to stop her from cutting,  
She'd always smoke cigarettes when she couldn't sleep.  
The blue-haired girl would try to pull her hair out – maybe that would work.  
But, still she's the blue haired girl.

Sunflower  
By Trinity-May

She's feeling grey  
She's seeing nothing but darkness,  
She feels like the odd one out.  
She's like a sunflower in a field of roses – she wonders:  
“If I were a rose, maybe you'd want me?”  
A rose goes in glass vases, perfect bodies, perfect faces.  
If she could have changed overnight and turned into something you like...  
But, she's a sunflower.

Love  
By Faith M

Love is hard  
Love is frustrating  
Love isn't all over  
Love is loyal  
Love is caring  
Love isn't all over

Feelings  
By Faith M

Feeling numb like you're dead  
Feeling mad like you're hurt  
Feeling sad like you lost someone  
Feelings come and go  
Feeling annoyed like you're about to explode  
Feeling soft like you became ice cream  
Feelings come in go

Soccer  
By George Stamatopoulos

Soccer  
Round, white  
Shooting, passing, crossing  
Soccer is better than hockey.  
What do you think?

Exhaustion  
By Jayden Malo

Exhaustion is deep blue  
It sounds like a wave of yawns  
It tastes like bitter, stale crackers  
It smells like an old book in the back of the library  
Exhaustion feels like used sandpaper.

Not as He Hoped  
By Jayden Malo

The only thing from his childhood that he could remember was how free he was; why did it have to go downhill from there?

Don was a tall 18-year-old guy with messy black hair, grassy green eyes and large pupils. He was a very lazy person; if you were to invite him somewhere he would never go. If you were to tell him to do something he wouldn't do it, and if he *had* to do it then he would do it as fast as he could, so that he could go back to being carefree and living a boring and lazy life (which is what he wanted most).

Don had just moved into his new home, secluded from people. The only buildings near him were a grocery store, a tool shop, and a gas station, as well as a singular neighbour by the name of Clarence in a house nearby. The landowner was a very shady guy but the rent was cheap so Don didn't question it. He enjoyed how he was secluded from others. He paid his rent and living expenses from his mother's life insurance, which one day would run out and he wouldn't have as lazy a life as he does now.

His mother took her own life when he was just an 8-year-old boy. In addition, his father had gone missing before he had been born, as a result he was put into foster care but had never been adopted and eventually aged out. That brought him to his new home all alone.

When he first entered his home, something felt off, but he paid no attention to it. All he cared about was sleeping, watching TV, eating and then repeating that very cycle for the rest of his life. He sat down on his couch, which also functioned as his bed since there was no bedroom in his house. There was only a bathroom, living room, and kitchen. There was also an attic but he was told that there was barely any space for even critters, so a human couldn't fit up there.

Strangely the ceiling was also very high off the ground, as if it was a cathedral or something. But nothing is perfect, so who cares.

After Don had made himself a toasted pop tart for dinner, he went to his couch to sleep. It took him a while to fall asleep because he felt uneasy. But he thought it was just because it was his first time being in a proper home since his childhood. Or could it have been the very creepy looking bobble head on the

sole shelf in the house. And it was staring into his soul with only one proper eye and a bloody arm. But the strangest thing about the bobble head was that it was smiling, but you could tell it wasn't a real smile. As Don slowly fell into a slumber, he had the feeling as if he was being watched by someone.

When he woke up from what felt like an eternity of sleep, he felt a sharp pain coming from his arm, and when he checked, he saw that there was a gash across his arm, covering it in blood. Don just said to himself that it was probably from a nail in a wall or something, and he hadn't realized it. Which is what he hoped it was, at least.

Don also saw something that made him extremely confused. The bobble head that was on the shelf was missing. He said to himself, "It must have been my imagination."

Just then someone knocked on the door. Don felt chills fall down his spine, and he became freezing cold, as if he was in the middle of a snowstorm. The knocking repeated in a very eerie pattern, knock... knock... knock... Don inched towards the door. He slowly turned the creaky knob. He opened the door and to his surprise, it was a weird delivery man with a long black coat, holding a package with a small sticker of a scythe. Don sighed in confusion and relief. He took the package and shut the door behind him. Suddenly there was another knock on the door so he put the package down on a table and opened the door.

There was nobody there, the delivery guy was gone, only the dark, thin, yet also tall trees shaking in the wind. It was as if the trees were waving at him in the thick fog. And as he scanned the creepy trees he saw a rope connected to a distant tree.

His eyes widened as he followed his attention down the rope and saw what seemed to be a silhouette hung from its upper limbs by a rope, as if it were a puppet.

He slammed the door and dashed towards his phone where he tried to call the police. But all Don heard on the other line was his own heavy breathing. Suddenly he heard a phone ring... But it was not the phone he was holding in his hand. He followed the sound which led him towards the entrance to the attic. Don prayed for the sound to come from somewhere else, but as he was in front of the attic hatch the sound was the loudest throughout the whole house, as if it was being played on a speaker, which meant it had to be coming from the

attic. Don was already scared enough, but now he had to check out the scariest part of the house. So that was what he did—he opened the hatch and pulled down the ladder. He noticed that it looked like there was a lot of space up there which was not what the landowner told him.

He climbed up each step of the ladder terrified like he was in a haunted house. It also smelled terrible, like something had possibly died up there. Each step would make a long eerie creek that echoed throughout the home and cracked as if it were going to collapse. As his head slowly entered the attic... he didn't see anything, only a few boxes and insulation. The ringing had seemed to also stop as he fully entered.

Don was relieved to see nothing, but then the sound of footsteps charging towards him came from the opposite direction. He swiftly turned his head and saw a pale, distorted figure watching. Don tried to scream but not a single sound came from his lips. And when Don blinked the figure was gone. He then felt something liquid dripping from one of his eyes. He put his hand out to see his own blood dripping into his palm. Don covered his eye in pain. He then turned around again to leave, but the same figure he saw moments ago was face to face with him.

Don freaked out, causing him to lose his footing and fall down the attic hatch. As he plummeted all he could think about was how he had not achieved a single meaningful accomplishment throughout his life. Then the house shook by impact, knocking over the package Don had just received.

The police had got a noise complaint from Don's neighbour, Clarence, so they went over to the home. The door was already open so the police were on edge. But as they searched the entire house from top to bottom, they didn't find anyone. From the knowledge they gathered there was no landowner and that it had been abandoned for months. The house was empty; all the police found was a lone package on the floor. Inside was a bobble head that was smashed into dozens of pieces all over the box—a frown on its face, its body split in two, a bloody arm that was dismembered from the body, and its eyes that were closed and filled with tears.

Then Don woke up with the brightness of hundreds of suns on his face. Once his eyes adjusted to light he remembered, he'd been in that white padded room for months...



Friday Night  
By Meenoosh

Lucy was drinking one night with her cousin and a friend. Everything was going great until she got a text from her boyfriend at that time. He was asking for a shot so she got up and went out of the room where he was waiting for her and gave him a shot. After that he went back upstairs and continued to smoke with his two friends, and she was just chilling in the room and drinking as well. She got another text from him, asking for another shot again. So she went out of the room once again and gave him what he asked for.

She went back inside the room and, right after she sat down, she saw that he texted her again. He was asking her who the guy was she was talking about. At that time she had no idea what he was talking about; she was confused. Lucy was starting to get stressed because he would always do this to her and yet she still didn't leave him. She was telling him that it might be her cousin that was talking because they sound the same, but he still didn't leave it.

He told Lucy to come out and talk to him, but she said no because Lucy didn't want to deal with him. He told her that he would come in the room, so she went because she didn't want to start a scene in front of them. But before she went, Lucy told her cousin what was going on and her cousin told her to yell if she needed help. So Lucy said okay and went.

But as soon as Lucy went out of the room, there he was waiting for her and he started dragging her to his room while he was covering her mouth so she couldn't scream. Once they were in the room, he threw Lucy on the bed and started talking about the subject he was on earlier. At this point Lucy was so tired of this bullshit, she told him she was done. But he didn't seem to like what she said, so he punched Lucy in the stomach. She was holding her stomach, in pain.

After that he went on top of her and started choking Lucy. She was yelling for help but he covered her mouth and nose so she couldn't say anything. She couldn't breathe while he was choking Lucy at the same time. But luckily his grandma came down and he quickly stopped. Once his grandma came in, she asked what's wrong.

Lucy tried her best to tell her what happened, but she couldn't say things properly because she was crying so hard. He ended up telling his grandma that Lucy was drunk, and he was trying to calm Lucy down (yes, Lucy was drinking but she wasn't drunk at all yet). His grandma believed that Lucy was drunk, and she didn't want to hear her side of the story because of it. Lucy tried to leave the room, but he kept blocking her way. She really felt helpless.

After his grandma left, he continued choking Lucy and beating her up. Lucy was crying, she was screaming and yelling for help, but no one came. It went on over and over again. He threatened to kill Lucy, and then kill himself, and she started screaming. She started using her full strength to get him off of her and she managed to get him off of her, but he got more mad and went on top of Lucy again.

This time he was stepping on her arms with his legs as he was choking her at the same time. Lucy couldn't really breathe; she was desperate for air, so she used her full strength again and got him off of her. She was screaming for help, but he told her to shut the fuck up. After that he threw Lucy on the floor, and she started crawling towards the door. He picked her up and threw her on the bed, then he threatened to cut her wrist open and cut her neck with a knife. As he was holding it towards Lucy's neck, she was scared for her life. He then started choking her again and telling her she was such a bad person.

He started crying and saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Lucy didn't know what to do but hug him. He picked her up in his arms, and he told her that he was sorry and that he loved her. Lucy was crying and shaking, and he started choking her again. He bit Lucy on her knee so hard and it left a nasty mark.

After that he got scared and ended up leaving with his friends, and she was crying so hard while his family was yelling at her. Lucy was so mad at his family and her cousin and friend for not helping her. She called the cops and told them everything and showed them the bite mark and the marks on her neck. The cops left to go look for him and they came back with him in the cop car. She remembered him looking at her dead in the eye as if she did something bad. Lucy will never forget that. She was sad knowing that they would never see each other again after all this. She never thought he would do this to her, that the boy who she trusted and loved with all her heart would do this to her.

## Gingerbread House

By Kimisha

The thought of making a gingerbread house didn't seem very interesting to me, but my boyfriend kept bugging me to make one with him. Days went by and I finally gave in.

My boyfriend went out of his way to find a gingerbread house kit at the nearest grocery store, despite it being a chilly Christmas morning. Almost an hour passed and he finally barged through the door excitedly holding the kit and other sorts of candies for the gingerbread house. I watched him take off his winter boots and jacket.

"Let's make this gingerbread house!" he said. I slowly walked towards him in annoyance because there was no way in hell I was going to enjoy assembling this gingerbread house. "C'mon, my love. You will have fun doing this with me," he reassured me as he wrapped his arms around me.

"Ugh, fine," I said, annoyed. He proceeded to give me a list of instructions on how to assemble this gingerbread house.

It had been two hours since we started putting together this gingerbread house and so far, I was surprisingly enjoying this! I was focusing so much on the small details of my gingerbread man.

My boyfriend acknowledged how much detail my gingerbread man had. "Wow, your gingerbread man has hair and I love how you made him a suit with the icing!"

I added a little tie to him and the more details I added, the more real my gingerbread man became. I gave him eyes made of icing as the finishing touch.

As I was admiring how detailed my gingerbread man was, he suddenly blinked!

I screamed at the top of my lungs in fear and tossed the cookie on the table and quickly backed up with my chair. My boyfriend immediately glanced up at me and asked why I screamed.

My eyes were open wide and I slowly pointed to the gingerbread man on the table. "It blinked."

He laughed at me and proceeded to take a look at my cookie that seemed to be alive. It slowly blinked. My boyfriend freaked out, throwing a thick book on the gingerbread man.

We slowly got up from our chairs, hoping to forget what happened, and walked towards the living room. And, all of a sudden, I heard quiet groans coming from under the book on the table.

## The Place

By Shobi Shylah Lewy

Stepping through the doors of “the place” was just about getting some exercise. What began as a simple commitment to physical fitness evolved into a profound catalyst for personal growth, enriching my life in ways I would have never anticipated. While at the place, I honed not just my physical strength but my mental resilience. Every drop of sweat shed during those intense workouts symbolized not just physical exertion but a shedding of doubts, fears and limitations. As I pushed my body beyond its perceived boundaries, I cultivated a mindset of determination and perseverance that extended far beyond the gym walls.

The discipline and focus I’ve developed at “the place” permeated into my academic life. Just as I dedicated myself to mastering new exercises and pushing through fatigue, I applied the same work ethic into all of my classes and assignments. Deadlines became opportunities for growth, challenges transformed into stepping stones and setbacks were viewed as temporary roadblocks on the path to success. “The place” taught me that success isn’t just about talent; it’s about relentless dedication and an unwavering focus.

Above all “the place” has served as a sort of crucible for self-discovery and personal growth. It was within those walls that I unearthed hidden reservoirs of strength, resilience and determination I never knew I possessed. Each workout became a journey of self exploration, a chance to confront my fears and surpass those self-imposed limitations.

In essence the place isn’t just a gym, it’s a sanctuary for transformation, a crucible for growth and a catalyst for change. It’s where I discovered the true extent of my capabilities and unlocked the potential to thrive in every aspect of my life. Although the journey may be challenging, I know that as long as I continue to go to “the place” I will continue to evolve, adapt and embrace the endless possibilities that lie ahead.

As I stand at the threshold of graduation, the imminent departure of my familiar surroundings weighs heavy on my mind. I find myself confronting a feeling of loss and vulnerability. Despite these uncertainties, I find solace in reflecting on the lessons learned within the walls of “the place.” I have realized that “the place” isn’t confined to its physical space; rather it resides deep within me. Armed with this understanding, I look forward to bringing it to the unknown adventures that I have in store for me.

Fish in an Icebox, Fish in a Tank  
By Maya Hertsman

Cold... It's cold. How long have I been lying here? I must have fallen asleep. I thought it would be a good idea to take a rest on the fresh snow, since it seemed so light and pillowy, but it's not very comfortable anymore. My entire body is engulfed under a coat of weightless specks that feel as heavy as bricks. Not even light can cut through. It's dark. I can't move. I feel like chilled meat. And I'm drifting back to sleep.

When I wake up, I'm not lying down, but standing in a dim elevator. It's a lot warmer here, and it gets hotter as the elevator lowers. A long minute or something passes in silence until it stops and the doors drag open. I leave and step on the carpeted floor outside the elevator. Then I turn and walk down a quiet hallway painted a deep maroon (which is like very dark red.) The carpet ends and the floor is shiny, freshly waxed tiles that squeak as I continue walking. I can hear a clacking noise echo distantly.

When I reach the end of the hall, there's a reception desk, and a woman sitting behind it wearing red glasses; not maroon, but bright red. She clacks away at her chunky desktop keyboard. She looks bored.

"Excuse me," I say politely. "Where is this?"

She doesn't even look up before answering. "You have died. Where you are right now is a waiting room." It sounds like she's repeated that a thousand times. She's like a robot or something

"A waiting room? For what?"

"The afterlife, of course," she says, matter-of-factly.

"Like, purgatory?"

"Sure, you can call it something like that," she answers. "Now, stop asking questions. Go sit and wait."

So, I sit down and wait quietly. The chairs aren't as comfortable as the snow, but they're okay. Like any good waiting room, it has a fish tank glowing in a dark corner. It has a filter that makes a humming noise that fills the room. After just a minute, I start to get antsy. I fidget, and tap my feet back and forth, and look around the room for something to do. Then I think of another question.

"What kind of afterlife am I going to?"

The receptionist sighs hoarsely. “I don’t know! That’s why you’re supposed to wait! It’s a complicated process, okay?”

“Why is it so hot in here? Won’t the fish die?”

This time she nearly loses her temper. “Because we’re near...!”

I try to finish her sentence. “...hell?”

“Argh, no—” She seems stuck. “Fine, hell! We’re next to hell, basically, I guess!”

I open my mouth, and just as I’m about to speak again, she stops me in my tracks. “You know what? Why don’t you go do something useful instead of being an irritation? Go... feed the fish, or something!”

I oblige. I always like feeding them at the dentist’s office, and they let me, when I behave. But now is no time to behave.

Not a few more seconds pass before I feel like bugging the receptionist again. I just can’t help it. “I don’t have any fish food—” Then she makes a face like her veins are going to burst, and I try really hard not to laugh. She pulls a drawer open aggressively, and takes out a packet, then shoves it in my hand.

“Tha—”

“You’re welcome, now leave me be!” She turns me away again, before I can even thank her properly. What a busy lady.

I make my way to the fish tank, which is only a few steps away from the reception desk. I don’t need to crouch, because it’s just at eye level for me. I do lean forward, though, to watch closely as the tiny bubbles rise up quickly like they’re in a race to the top. I hum to myself and look around inside. There are plenty of guppies swimming together, and one of them almost gets carried away by the flurry of bubbles. In the upper corner there’s a sea snail inching slowly towards the surface, and in the lower corner on the other side there’s a starfish sticking to the wall of the tank. Right under it, there is even a sea sponge. (I think they’re best friends.)

The fish definitely look different from the ones at the dentist. Their scales are dull, and they’re pale and frankly they look quite dead. Which makes sense, I guess. Not to mention, the snail looks at me for a brief moment, and grins widely, with gums and teeth like a human’s. I think it said something to me, but I couldn’t hear. Snails don’t usually do that.

“Alright, it looks like your situation has been decided,” the red glasses lady speaks up. “You can come over here and I’ll get you sorted out. You’re going to stay here, in purgatory.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that was an option,” I say, still watching the fish.

“Well, yes, but it is rare. Will you come here so I can explain how it works?”

“But you can explain from there. I haven’t fed the fish yet.” I have a good point.

She goes quiet for a second, dejected. “Fine.”

As she blabs on about the whole whatever, I tear open the packet of fish food, and promptly dump the entire thing into the tank.

“Oops.”

The receptionist hears this and looks over her desk, and her eyes shoot open when she sees what I did. “OH MY GOD, ARE YOU KIDDING ME?? YOU CONTAMINATED THE TANK!!!”

She runs over in a panic. I move out of the way quickly so I don’t get trampled like a bullfighter. Then she pulls out a bucket from a cupboard underneath the tank, and also shoves this into my hands. “Go fill this with water!” she commands.

So, I take the empty bucket down the hall with me, and turn the corner, and even though the bathroom is right here, I instead head straight for the elevator. After all, one should strike while the iron is hot (that’s my favorite phrase). I press the button pointing up, and the door opens.

But then, something strange happens. I can’t move my feet to bring me into the elevator. And I find myself reconsidering. ...*but I’ve already gotten this far...*

My conscience tugs back and forth with me, and I don’t know what to do. I’m stuck in place between the door here, and the door over there.

At the last second, I turn around and the elevator shuts behind me. *What am I doing?* I reach for the doorknob to the bathroom, and even stranger, I suddenly lose my grip, and my feet disappear from the floor, and it’s like I’m shrinking, smaller, and smaller, and I can’t reach for anything but the air. I drop and hit the bottom of the bucket on the floor, *plop*, just like that. Then it goes all black.

Next thing I know, I’m swimming, only I’m not kicking my legs or moving my arms, because I don’t have any. I’m waving my fins and my tail, and staring at my reflection in the glass wall, swollen and scaly. Slowly, the realization sinks in, and I accept my new existence.

Isabelle's Nightmare  
By Maya Hertsman

She was lying in a hospital bed and it was morning. The sun was shining through the window and birds were chirping. She felt strangely peaceful. Strange as in she felt as if she had just escaped a horrible nightmare. And now it was over. Though, she found herself unable to recall her nightmare, nor the events that led her here.

Isabelle was long overdue for a change of scenery. She had been neck deep in work for so long and by the time her boss had finally decided to fire her she figured it was about time to leave the city for a while and see something new. Call it a vacation.

That's what brought her here, the small rural town of Bellstead. It's a town of humble, mostly elderly people.

Besides the beautiful countryside greenery, the town also had a church. Looking at it you could tell it was quite old, overgrown with vines and moss, and its dry chipped bricks had dirt wedged in all its crevices. It had probably been standing for about three hundred years.

Like any old church, it also had a big metal bell that rang every Sunday. Its sound always remained perfectly consistent, never showing any slight sign of rust or erosion. So, they must keep the bell very well maintained. That's what Isabelle thought. Yes, that was the odd thing about that church. It had been abandoned for decades. It was boarded up and sealed tight so no one could get in. Yet the bell was still in perfect condition, ringing right on time, every Sunday. Of course, how this was possible was a complete mystery to the townspeople, but they didn't care to find out. It gave their quiet little town something interesting to behold.

Isabelle arrived and got off the bus with nothing but the clothes she was wearing and a backpack containing more clothes, and enough money to last her about a week. What she forgot to bring, though, was food to eat on the way. Her stomach had been grumbling ceaselessly the whole way. Now that she was finally here the first thing she wanted to do was silence it.

The diner. Both the outside and inside coated thickly in glossy red and flashing neon signs. It was quiet and empty inside, only the jukebox faintly playing some slow old rock song, buzzing in the background. The walls were covered in various vintage ads and pinup posters. Isabelle took a seat on an old torn leather cushion. The heavy lights made her eyeballs ache, but looking down



at the shiny checkered floor wasn't any better. A very typical old-fashioned diner. A waitress soon walked up to her table, notepad and pen in hand, cocking her head, noisily chewing her gum, wearing a little white apron. Very, very typical. Isabelle didn't want to stare for too long or else her eyes might have burnt up like an ant under a small child's magnifying glass.

"So, what do you want? Coffee?"

Isabelle tried to answer but was suddenly obstructed by a blaring *D O N G*. She covered her ears and waited.

*D O N G*.

*D O N G*.

After the bell's last reverb faded away, Isabelle took her hands off her ears.

"Louder than you expected?" The waitress poured a cup of coffee in front of Isabelle. "Wish we'd get rid of that damn bell already. But everyone here is old and deaf. 'Leave it! Doesn't bother us,' they say." She paused. "But listen, don't let that bell get into your head. Gives you headaches for a lifetime." The waitress walked off, her shoes clacking behind her.

After eating her fill, Isabelle headed over to the town's hotel. As expected it was small and unrenovated, and only made to fit about ten or so people. She stepped inside and the door creaked itself closed behind her. After checking in she went upstairs to her room, each step of the staircase creaking as well. Right as she lifted the keys to open the door, she was abruptly bumped into and her keys jumped out of her hand and slid across the floor.

"Oh...! I'm so sorry!"

Isabelle looked up to see a nervous face in front of her. A short guy with a neat-and-tidy haircut, a standard button-up shirt, and the plainest, beige khakis she had ever seen. She couldn't bear to look at him for another second or she feared her eyes might burn up like a small asteroid in earth's atmosphere.

"Sorry. I've just been having such a headache lately, I can hardly tell where I'm walking, ha ha..." He sighed dejectedly. "I haven't seen you here yet. You must also be from the city. To be honest I've been staying in this hotel for a week, and I still haven't gotten used to how quiet it is." He continued, "I'm actually here to write a paper, but I'm surprised there aren't many tourists here, that church bell is quite the enigma, if you ask me. Oh no, you did hear about the church bell, right? I hope I didn't spoil it for you, ah ha ha..." He went on, "Ah, I just realized, you're staying in room five, so that means I'll be right above

you!” He kept babbling on some more before noticing that Isabelle had already gone inside her room and he was only talking to himself.

She had only intended to unpack a few of her things and then leave again to look around some more. Once everything was clear and she had no chance of running into that guy again, she left swiftly. There wasn’t much to see around town other than some houses and a desolate park, so Isabelle spent the rest of the day instead strolling down a forest path at her leisure.

That night, Isabelle was awoken by various sounds of knocking, banging, clanking, and crashing coming from the room above her. She rubbed her eyes and squinted upwards.

“HEY! KEEP IT DOWN!” she hollered.

Her heart skipped a beat when the orchestra of noise ended dramatically with a great big *thump* followed by silence.

“W—whoa! Hey, what’s going on there?? Are you alright?” she yelled again, this time with more concern.

“...”

She didn’t know what she was thinking, but her body seemed to move without her and before she knew it she was at the doorstep of the room upstairs. Her head started to throb, as if warning her, but she didn’t dare turn back. She placed her hand on the doorknob, then gripped it and turned it slowly. Then she pushed the door open. At that moment, only one thought entered her mind: the thought that the long creak of the door hinge would be synonymous with what she saw right then, for the rest of her life.

A headless corpse, contorted beyond recognition. Around it was wrecked furniture but not a single trace of blood to be seen. Every vein in the body was puffed up and pulsating, all pointing up in the direction of the neck. No flesh. No bone. Just seamless skin sealing off where it ended. Very much dead. Isabelle fell back in horror and reflexively covered her mouth and nose. Not so that she wouldn’t scream, but because the smell was so horribly putrid that it could have easily poisoned her. Her legs felt cold and numb and she couldn’t stand up.

Isabelle thought her eyes were playing tricks on her, but the corpse looked as if it was squirming and the fingers crawling.

Her head began to swim and her vision got more blurry. She could hear the distant sound of the church bell which drew nearer and nearer with every

second. Her skin was plated bronze and her skull was a thick metal cage closing in on her brain, squeezing until it could burst. She grabbed the sides of her head and struggled in pain. Soon, she couldn't even hear her shrill screams over the sound of the infinitely reverberating bell. It was unstoppable and rapidly approaching.

*D O N G.*

*D O N G.*

*D O N G.*

*D O N G.*

Then the sound came to a halt as her eyes rolled back and she fell unconscious.

Isabelle gasped and her eyes fell open. She was lying in a hospital bed and it was morning. The sun was shining through the window and birds were chirping. She felt strangely peaceful. Strange as in she felt as if she had just escaped a horrible nightmare. And now it was over. Though she found herself unable to recall her nightmare, nor the events that led her here. Doesn't this ring a bell?

She lifted herself off of the bed and tried to walk but instead stumbled forward and slapped the cold floor with her palms. Her body ached from head to toe and her eyelids felt tight around her skull.

Suddenly, the door clicked open and a nurse walked in.

"Good morning. How do you feel?"

Isabelle had the general situation explained to her, and was let off from testifying as to what she saw due to her amnesia. She spent the next few days recovering in the hospital.

As soon as she was discharged she left the town and never looked back.

A week later, a woman's disfigured corpse was found mysteriously headless in her apartment on a Sunday night.

## The Dam

By Olive

Fur stuck through the logs and chipped bark as they methodically closed the dam. As the sun started to lower, skies turned orange and the tides rose. Chirping and screeches filled the air when the final log plummeted. Finally, the water stopped. The dam was now blocked. When the sun rose, the birds began singing in celebration of the beavers' craftsmanship. Time flew and bark rotted; beavers came and went, repairing logs when they saw fit. Soon humans came and inspected their craft with strange measurements. Humans wore suits, then humans wore bright yellow hats and vests. Humans brought logs cut and cloned with the same precision. Large claws cut through softwood and removed the beaver's work. And after enough time, the dam was unblocked. Water flowed and the river roared once more.

## The Hike By Olive

I was never really a hiker. A social activity with exercise? I could never, but this was mandatory, and should've or could've been avoided; if only I had.

Mud was so repulsive to me, even with my extra measures of avoidance with layers of socks and knee-high rain boots, I still couldn't handle such a gruesome texture. My nose was going purple as the wind hit me. We were now halfway across the trail. I was getting as impatient as ever. It felt never ending. Could I please find a way out of this? Trees are as far as I could see, no shelter in sight. This was such a dumb idea. Surely avoidance should've been the answer.

"I think we're almost there. The trail seems smaller though so try and stay close!" an over enthusiastic co-worker exclaimed. Avoidance really should've been the answer, yet I needed this job, so up a very steep hill I went. When all you can think about was heat, woolly sweaters and fur like blankets, the body heat of five people in the place of a trail as wide as a slim runway model was definitely not what you imagined happening.

"Hey guys, we should *really* take a break. It's starting to get dark," I pleaded, hoping for a unanimous reply and admitting of defeat.

"Nah, I think we're good, but you can stay and take a break while we look for somewhere to make camp." My co-worker said that, as cool as a cucumber, not even a bit out of breath.

I could not believe them. Really? Really? "Make camp?" No way. I could not handle a night of loud nasally snores, icy toes and a stale three-day old granola bar dinner. I had to find a way out of this.

Yet again my impatience controlled me. A break didn't feel so replenishing if you were still freezing to death. I had better start finding some shelter.

The biting cold numbing the pain of having walked for two hours was starting to get to me. I didn't know how to find anything. Every inch of the hike was covered in trees that loomed over me. Barely a sliver of sunlight was to be found under the thicket of pine and falling orange leaves. In the distance I heard a crunch of what could be a mixture of leaves and branches, but from what I knew I was far from any of my coworkers. I wouldn't be able to hear them

through the howling wind, but I kept walking in an attempt to find anything resembling warmth or shelter. Maybe, if I was lucky, I might find food that wasn't poisonous.

WHOA! Shit, I think I fell. A sting in my ankle started to travel through my nerves. I looked down to see what seemed like nothing but felt like this is where I would die. Dramatics for sure, but when you were already in an unbearable situation anything could really push your last nerve. All I could focus on was the heartbeat in my ears and stinging in my leg as a strong gust of wind carried me farther.

As I roamed a path that was only made up of branches and roots of trees that continued to seem hostile towards me. Smoke – actual *real* live smoke. In spite of distance this was my saviour. A possibility of shelter, maybe even food! I must have been so far out from the others if I had reached somewhere with shelter, but this was my chance, so I couldn't go back now.

I think it had been about 20, maybe 15 minutes of walking, the smoke getting closer, but feeling farther no matter how much hope I tried to hold onto. Another sound in the distance of possible footsteps crunching leaves and breaking branches but I could hope it was just a deer or some other type of heavy stepping animal. My eyelids got heavy as did the sky with deeper shades of blue moonlight approaching. I steadied myself and dropped onto a nearby log, but before I could catch myself my eyes finally fell, and to my dismay and surprise I was overwhelmed by a light—a very cold one.

"Name?" a nasal voice proclaimed, my eyes fluttering across the room in an attempt to process what was around me, but my head was spinning. A small lady sat ahead of me with an expression of discontent. There she sat at a reception like desk and in front of her only a single blank paper beside a mundane pen.

I thought I was dreaming, though it felt oddly real. I could feel the stale air around me and notice every detail of the lady in front of me, this was very unusual for any dream I'd had. Her clothes folded like any other in real life and the rules of gravity still applied to her sagging skin and wrinkles. Her clothes could have been mistaken as any other person's, nothing unique in a white blouse and black skirt. One wouldn't have even noticed her had she walked past you in the street.

"Name?" she stated this time louder than the last.

“What’s happening?” I questioned. Dream rules usually meant following along but this didn’t seem like that applied as I had no context that a dream usually would. I scanned the room once more but there was nothing in sight, not even a door, just me and this person in front of me in a blank room barely bigger than a broom closet. My voice would have shaken, or showed some sign of fear and confusion, but for some reason there felt no need to. Every reaction seemed to be accounted for, the gaze of the woman seemed to mean she experienced it so many times a day that she could predict my every word.

So, I stated my name. As quickly as the words had been spoken she scribbled them down, the scratching of ink and metal of a pen echoing in the room.

“He will be with you shortly. Please take a seat.” The woman’s voice broke the silence with her sharp tone. One could safely assume she was annoyed, but she still spoke without emotion or snare. She waved a hand signalling behind me. I turned to find a small stool appeared, I would assume for the height of a child. I inched forward and awkwardly sat with my knees uncomfortably bent. This seemingly insignificant action had left me with a grin of relief when I sat noticing that no pain had shot from my ankle.

I stared blankly at my ankle for many minutes, twirling it in circles with no worry. I looked up to see the woman must have noticed. With a sigh, she stated, “No injuries are transferred unless life threatening.”

Many questions must have flooded my head, but as rapidly as they appeared I steered them away knowing she was not the one to ask. “That’s fortunate,” I replied with a light tone I hoped would level her mood.

Many minutes must have passed when I had no way of knowing, rummaging over my thoughts to pass the time. Her gaze remained on the blank paper; she seemed accustomed to ignoring people’s presence here. Time slowly became irrelevant, making my mind haze, and I gripped my thoughts to keep present. I hoped to keep grounded from this rising panic, but every worry grew louder.

Could I be dead? That seemed like a reasonable explanation didn’t it? If I had fallen asleep in the middle of the forest, where most likely no one could see me, it would make sense, wouldn’t it? This could be my mind conjuring up images before a likely fall. A self-made coma in an attempt to lighten the blow, right? It would only make sense, everything about this place seemed

overwhelming and unsettling. The cold light from the walls illuminating a small annoyed woman—surely something I could think of to dream.

“Hello there. Thank you for your patience, come with me.” The voice spoke soft and sombre, yet deep and commanding, vibrating the room as he spoke. He was an aged looking man and carried himself with a slouched posture from years of use, yet his face remained lineless, as though stuck in time, avoiding decay. He wore a formless set of white shirt and pants, that complemented the shade of snow of his buzzed hair. I took a moment and stood to compose myself, and despite manners couldn't help but stare. Was this the person who I could finally get answers from?

He led me through the room and as we walked it seemed to grow—the walls I once thought small were hollow with doors that only revealed themselves through a trick of light in the perspective of shadows. The door elongated and made a hall from which we took many trips and turns reaching several blocked doors that then opened again. I would've thought we were lost had he been less confident. He walked through and past every wrong turn in an almost intentional way. The halls always looked the same; it would've made sense if we were lost, each wall, floor, and ceiling blank in the same shade of white with a tinted glow. I thought it was a trick of my tired eyes but the farther we went the brighter the walls, illuminating a cool glow. Finally, after multiple spiralling turns we reached a hall that broke open into a large room, it looked the same as the last room and all of the halls but the light here was close to unbearable. He strode across the room and sat cross legged near the rear wall. He gestured for me to follow, and I obliged sitting in front of him on the floor.

“What’s happening?” I questioned hoping to keep my voice steady instead of revealing my rising panic.

“To be frank, I don’t like you, and you have been very difficult to get here,” he stated yet there wasn’t any resentment in his voice. He spoke with clear tones and no emotion. I tried my best to choose the right words, rummaging through my thoughts to form coherent phrases.

“Am I dead?” I declared forcing my voice not to waver. He burst out laughing. Why? What could possibly be humorous about this situation? A hint of rage started to fester within me, but I did my best to stay calm.

“What have I done to humour you?” I questioned.



“What gave you that idea? Do you even know how dying works?” he spoke through his laughter—how annoying. “Look if you were dead I wouldn't have to go through all this trouble, so don't worry about that,” he remarked so casually, wiping away his tears from laughter.

“So why am I here? What even is here?” I argued, gesturing to the large blank room we sat in that echoed every word.

He sighed, rubbed his temples, and stared at the floor for a little longer than comfortable. After a moment he let out a long whine like a child denying sleep to their parents.

“It's so annoying! Every time! Questions this, that, this is why I keep telling her to simply make pamphlets or something. But no. It's always my job!” he whined, flapping his hands around in protest. For someone who looked aged he very much didn't act it. After another long while of him staring off into the distance crossing his arms in annoyance, he took a deep breath with an ending of an even longer sigh.

“It would be easier if I just started lying and telling everyone I'm god or literally anything that makes this go easier,” he puffed and rolled his eyes.

“It's very simple, I am conscious. The idea of thought and intelligence stems from me. I'm what the human brain conceptualised as ‘the little voice in your head.’ I don't like the name, though, and don't tend to take the job seriously as there tends to be nothing to do. Humans make problems but they get to the conclusion of how to fix them on their own.” He shifted, sighed again and placed himself leaning on the wall comfortably, then continued.

“But—and there's always a but—there can be exceptions.” This time, as he said that, he looked at me and eyed me up and down as if disappointed with my form.

“Sometimes it's not intentional, sometimes people are born with different types of brains, usually it can be worked around and I take a visit when they're young to see how I can help. But sometimes people simply don't want to listen anymore, even in the worst of situations. Sadly, that's how there are still criminals in the world.” He paused and stared into the distance. I waited eagerly for him to continue.

But he didn't. So, after a while of silence I fought myself to speak again through my anxiety.

“What about me? What did I do? Why am I here?” The words spilled out of me so fast I had to catch myself breathing through talking. The anxiety started piling up and I began to fidget with my hands in an attempt to exert the energy. But he made no notice, and finally continued his lengthy explanation.

“Questions I am so tired of answering,” he groaned, rolling his eyes. “Is it really such a wonder? When have you heard me? When have you even *tried*? Did it ever even occur to you that something was wrong, or that you lack the wisdom you seem to desperately need? Truly consider everything, when have you thought of anything but yourself?” His eyes began to flash a deep hypnotising black I would only dream to see in the inky wells of the deepest ocean. His pupils expanded and grew to make up his full eyes.

*What are you talking about? What do you mean?* I tried to say but barely incoherent mumbles came out as I stumbled backward crawling to an exit. My limbs barely seemed to obey and all I could do was stare blankly into the mesmerising depths of black eyes he possessed. His form slowly transformed as his lengthy arms covered with a thicket of fur. Opened palms flashed into the paws of a beast with an untamed stretch of sharp claws. Once where stubby legs had sat, grew the hooves of deer, stretching him taller to the ceiling until his hair only lightly brushed it. Only his small face remained human connecting to a fur-covered torso where his limbs fashioned different animals grown together.

“Wh—what are you?” I voiced in a whisper, lifting my elbows in a small useless shield.

“As I said, I am your consciousness. And this is simply a portrait of your own mental prison,” he spoke with the same voice, yet his echoes grew loud in a deep tone shaking louder and louder with each echoing repetition. I felt as if I shrunk smaller with every minute in his presence.

“I will make you relive every regret and every moment you wished to never see again, until you live as a prisoner of your own mind with shell of your body.” His eyes flashed images of crashing plates and open punches, flipping through my memory without restriction, a book ready to peruse. Every memory replayed with deeper realism, entrancing and terrifying.

“My job is to keep you here. It’s simple really, you defected. I just have to keep my job. No hard feelings, well at least from my end. You might have hard feelings, considering I have to trap you in your mind with every fear and regret you have. Truly not personal, even if it is about you.” He said it so casually and

carelessly. His last words lingered in my ears from the pressure of volume like he had screamed, even if he never raised his voice.

In a panicked frenzy, I scrambled to my feet and rushed to the door I remembered could be an exit. I ran down the hall when a burst of laughter vibrated my ears as he hurled towards me. My lungs squeezed every time I forced more air than possible, attempting to catch my breath. The ground felt like shallow sand underneath my feet when a hot dizzying feeling shot through my head, every limb answering the command of movement seconds after they usually should. I could see myself getting closer to the other room but the turns were becoming too unpredictable and I couldn't retain enough stamina to outrun him. *This is it, isn't it? I should've gone back, never entering those woods. I could have not ended up here.*

"I THINK I SEE HIM," shouted the co-worker. He hurtled his long hiking stick and waved it through the air as a beacon. After several minutes, all the coworkers huddled and surrounded the body.

They had travelled through where they last saw him walk the day before when he looked for shelter. After a long walk they finally found a sign of some life, though not the one they looked for it still was a sign. Scuffed deer footprints sat in the ash of a rushed campfire, yet only two out of a usually four-legged animal. They had followed the tracks through the small pockets of dirt near the roots of the trees, eventually leading to the limp body of their unconscious friend.

"Do you think he's alive?" said the youngest of them, a wiry-haired boy who hid behind the rest.

"I'm sorry," the man at the front said, voice cracking as he choked down a sob. He pressed two fingers to the neck of the lifeless form before them but they felt no rhythmic pulse of life, no signal of warmth or breath left.

The body that laid before them seemed unconscious, yet his lips, barely moving, spoke a series of slurred noises and whines, mumbling names and pleading to unseen forces. His eyes, drained of colour, stared blankly toward the sky hypnotised to the sight, like he had seen his largest desires up in the heavens, yet they lied just beyond his reach.

Break Free  
By Jordan N.H.

People say how you are supposed to be the boss of your dreams, if you know that you're in a dream. But that's not the case when it comes to me. Every time I go to bed, they always keep hold of me. I'm just a slave to them.

I've been to dozens of therapists, and all of them have said the same thing: "It's all in your head." That's the problem! It's all in my head. No one else believes me, because it only happens in my head. I don't know what to do anymore. My parents don't believe me, therapists don't believe me, my own siblings don't believe me. They all think I'm crazy. Maybe I am crazy, maybe it's my fault, maybe I keep making the mistakes, maybe, maybe, maybe. I don't know anymore. I haven't slept in five days. I'm worried. Every time I go to sleep, they speak to me, always telling me how I'm never gonna get out, never see freedom, they know that it's a dream. These things understand that I'm supposed to be in control of the dream. My parents keep saying that I should sleep, but none of them don't understand. They don't know, nobody can feel the pain I withstand while I sleep, they aren't tortured like I am, EVERY SINGLE NIGHT!

"Sigh."

It's been happening for as long as I can remember: There's never been a time I haven't had them torture me. I hate it, I HATE IT ALL. I don't think people are supposed to have this. They are usually in charge of their dreams. I'M SUPPOSED TO BE IN CHARGE! NOT THEM! NOT ANYBODY BUT ME!

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I apologize for yelling yesterday. I went to bed, finally. There was someone new in my dream. He didn't do anything, he just stood there with a huge smile on his face. He didn't speak, or move, just stood there, and stared at me. He didn't even blink. I still have chills from his stare, like when you watch a horror movie and you see the serial killer in the dark just staring at you, with a big grin on their face, motionless.

I'm losing hope every day. I told my family about it today and got yelled at because I was apparently being a "liar" and a "disobedient kid" when they figured out I didn't take my meds, the meds that aren't helping me. I've been taking them for two years now, and it's only gotten worse. They were torturing me more for taking them, so I've stopped. I despise it ... Everything, not just the people in the dreams, everything and everyone who hasn't believed in me

THE PAST 17 YEARS! I hate the fact that MY FAMILY DOESN'T BELIEVE ME AND WANTS ME TO MOVE OUT AS SOON AS I'M 18! I hate the fact THAT EVERY THERAPIST I WENT TO HAS ALWAYS SAID THE SAME THING! I hate EVERYONE WHO PRETENDED TO BE MY FRIEND BUT LEFT AS SOON AS I TOLD THEM MY ISSUE! I hate the fact that the only thing that'll listen to me is when I SPEAK IN THIS STUPID FU##ING MICROPHONE!!

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It's been a week and nothing has changed. It's my birthday next week, not that it matters though... I'm done... I won't tolerate this anymore. Everyone will suffer exactly like how I've been suffering all these years...

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They tormented me today again, on my birthday as well. I couldn't have any respect, not even for one day. It was supposed to be my day, and they ruined it... It's fine though; I made it my day. They've been begging me to let them out. But no... they have to experience what I've experienced all this time: begging, crawling, praying to get out of those cages, the steel cages that would usually only have enough room to fit a dog and rust quicker than a screw does. I still managed, even if some of them got squished a bit. Anyways, I'm going to go celebrate my birthday alone now. Well, not alone, I can always just go see my family.

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Hey... It's been a while, a month to be exact. There's only two more family members left. I starved them to the point where they had to start eating each other. And knowing Dad, he wasn't going to sacrifice himself for his family; he never was like that, and he wasn't ever going to be like that. It wasn't much longer before he thought of my brother and sister as prey, like a kid in a lion's den, it was ruthless. The cage does stink though, dead bodies leave a bad stench. I would go clean it, but that would mean I'd have to open the cage, and that could risk me getting attacked. Even though I'm fairly certain they are scared of me, I hear them quiver in fear the moment I enter the room. I still get those dreams, though... but something has changed about them—they don't torment me as much as usual they usually would. They don't tell me, "You'll never get

out!” or “You’re pathetic!” anymore. Instead, they encourage me to continue what I’ve been doing for the past month. Maybe this is a one-way ticket to freedom. Besides, I didn’t like my family that much. So, it’s a win-win for me regardless.

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It’s been two weeks since my last message, and this might be my last. They’ve all died... My entertainment has ended. I enjoyed tormenting them; I enjoyed watching them suffer, it was... how should I put this... ecstatic. Never have I felt this way before, and I wish it didn’t end, but it hasn’t ended yet.

They’ve finally let me out of the cage—the people in my dreams, that is. It happened when my father died. They seemed so proud of me, more proud than my family could’ve ever been. I felt included, felt wanted for once in my life, and I didn’t mind it.

There was someone new in the cage I had once been in, and now I was the one who tormented. Maybe all along it hadn’t been a curse, or a nightmare, but rather what I longed to have for my entire life, and it only awakened two months ago.

I feel like this is where I should be for the rest of my life, but it only happens when I’m not conscious, when I’m in my own mind for long periods of time, so what if—what if I just make it so I’m always asleep?

## Stuck on Mars

By \$

Have you ever dreamed of living with aliens?

“THREE, TWO, ONE!” the enormous crowd excitedly chanted. The world watched as the fearless astronauts entered the unimaginably tall, slick, round-ended aircraft. The mission consisted of sending two highly trained astronauts, Logan and his partner and lifelong friend, Gary, to be the first humans on Mars. Their goal was to hike up the planet’s most notorious volcano, and collect samples of its magma. Logan was as scared as a rabbit in a wolf’s den, even after over four years of training and preparation for this very moment, his anxiety was a violent storm occurring in his stomach. He reminded himself of the basic procedure before takeoff. “Stay calm,” he told himself, over and over again.

The engines roared as the highly innovative aircraft lifted off the ground. Enormous flames sprouted from the bottom of the ship, launching the two astronauts into the sky. Logan and Gary sat in pure silence, their minds racing over the fact that they would be spending the next eight long months in each other’s company.

*Eight months later...*

The space explorers were finally arriving at their destination. “Prepare for landing,” announced the automated voice system. The astronauts secured themselves and braced for landing.

*Woosh.* The large doors opened forwards. Logan gasped as he finally stepped onto the unexplored planet; it was more amazing view than he ever imagined. The landscape was stunning, with seemingly never-ending canyons, volcanoes and even ice caps. A bright red shine reflected upon the sky.

Logan passionately slammed the Canadian flag into the outer layer of the planet while Gary gathered all the necessary equipment for the dangerous climb. The volcano was as tall as a skyscraper, with burning lava dripping down the side.

“I’m exhausted. Let’s take a break,” Logan exclaimed while struggling to catch his breath. But Gary did not listen, he was determined to complete the hike. The dry red soil crunched like a bag of chips under the heavy boots of the astronauts. Logan was exhausted. The heat was extreme, and the dryness of the air left his mouth feeling as deserted as his surroundings. But Logan was well trained, he knew he had what it took to scale this gruesome volcano.

The two friends climbed and climbed and climbed until finally, they reached the top. Although, when Logan looked over, he was aghast. Below his feet laid something he would have never been able to prepare for, he couldn’t trust his own eyes. He turned to Gary, who had a similar expression on his face, when suddenly, the rock below Gary’s feet cracked, and he stumbled into the depths of the volcano.

Logan heard Gary’s hyena-like shriek as he tumbled down the inner wall of the volcano, but Logan’s team could not have been any more wrong; this wasn’t an ordinary volcano, although it appeared to be from the outside. There was life in this volcano, not much of it, but down the dark rock walls of this cliff, there was what seemed to be a small shack, built with molded bits of dirt and rock, covered by a dirty blue tarp tied together with a thin yellow rope.

Next to the shack, about twenty feet below Logan, laid Gary, alive, but unable to turn over like a turtle stuck on its shell. Logan leaped from boulder to boulder until he reached the same level as his partner, but more importantly, the shack.

“Help me up”, Gary whined. Logan ignored him completely; he was fascinated—why would there be a home on Mars? he wondered. The brave explorer crept around the miniature home until he came to the short wooden door. The old, musty wood creaked as Logan gently pushed the door open. Slowly, slowly, slowly; he pushed until there was enough space to poke his head through the doorway. By this time, Gary managed to stand up and peek over Logan’s shoulder to see what was going on.

The shack was practically empty, other than a single mattress with a fluffy blue blanket. The blanket seemed all too familiar to Logan; he took a closer look and read the engraved wording out loud, “National Aeronautics and Space



Administration,” a.k.a. NASA, the same administration that sent the astronauts on this mission.

The two buddies were told they were the first to ever attempt this expedition; they were lied to. Gary decided to pull the blanket back. He was terrified of what he might see, and he was right to be. The pair felt nothing but fear and horror. Under the blanket, lied the remains of not only a former astronaut, but a member of their training crew.

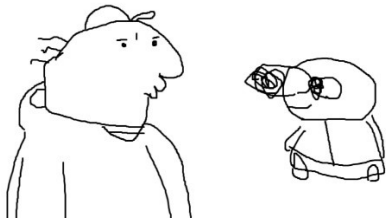
After many long minutes of confusion, worry and panic, the astronauts agreed to bag up the remains, and keep it between them until they arrived back home, on Earth. Logan’s heart was pounding, like an angry man knocking on his door. Logan knew the best thing he could do was to stay calm, yet he couldn’t, his heart kept pounding, louder and louder, faster and faster.

Once the two had gathered the remains along with some items they found in the shack, they began their hike down the tall gruesome volcano. The minutes felt like hours as the two made their way back towards the ship, but after what seemed like days of downhill walking, they were finally able to see the tall standing flag in the distance, but something was missing. Their spaceship was gone, it vanished without a trace, and they too, were to be trapped on Mars, along with the remains of the previous victim of the government.

You Do You  
By Shyne Erwin-Giulioni

WARNING: Due to WOKE EPIDEMIC, this story has been *CENSORED*

Two best friends go to New Zealand (the country) for Christmastime.



*The story's heroes: John and Bimblarion (artist's rendition)*

The duo of critters FINALLY walked off the plane. The grueling 13-hour flight was a miserable experience, but they had finally arrived in New Zealand.

"We're finally here!" Bimblarion exclaimed very loudly in the public area.

"Bimmy can you seriously calm down man," John stated in a serious nasally voice.

"We just got off the flight, aren't you excited John!!? We're finally here in the glorious land of NEW ZEALAND!!! YAY!!!"

"Yeah, I know man. I just like, I uh—we just got off the flight man it's been like, what has it been. It's been like 18 hours, man. How are you so full of energy man? Like, chill out, let's just get to the hotel and like chill for a minute, like, it's too much."

"John, I like—I like genuinely don't appreciate how you're being towards me right now. Like it's genuinely kinda upsetting. I don't—why are you so grumpy, we're here finally! There's no reason to be such a grump, we made it, and you overcame your iconic deathly fear of flying!"

"Okay, yeah, I'm sorry, I'll try to be—I'm trying to be like, like less rude as of late, so legit. Like legit man, excuse me, I'm sorry. I've just had this excruciating headache for the last couple hours and my ears haven't popped since we've got off the plane. Sorry man. Let's just get out of here and call a taxi to the hotel. You remember where you booked it right?"

"I thought you were in charge of booking the hotel."

"No that was you."

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Bimmy, are you fucking serious? Bimblarion, dude!”

“What?”

“Are you telling me you seriously didn’t book a hotel?”

“No, I thought that was your job.”

“Bimmy, you know, isn’t it—it’s—it’s fucking Christmas right now, isn’t it? I don’t pay attention to that religious crap, but it is. Everyone on Super Earth is coming to visit their families. We’re not gonna find a hotel anywhere.”

Just then a strange man dressed up in a red nightcap with a ball at the end, also donning a large red coat with a belt walked up to them.

The man spoke: “Hello, my friend. Hello. Have you been to New Zealand before? New Zealand is great country. Very good, my friend, you will have good stay, my friend. Yes, yes, very good,” the man stated in an incredibly deep voice with a funny accent.

“Oh yeah, man. I’ve heard it’s a beautiful place.”

“Oh, thank you very much we’ll be sure to enjoy our sta—”

“Listen, listen to me, my friends. Do you—do you happen to have some cash, my friends? Do you happen to have some—some cash?” the man asked while aggressively pointing and waving his big funny hands around.

“No sorry man, we gotta like save our money.”

“Yeah, sorry sir. We don’t have anything to give you.”

“Okay, thank you, my friends. You have a good stay in New Zealand. New Zealand is a beautiful country, my friend. You will have great time.” And the man walked off.

“Dude, when he was like moving his hands I like—I like legitimately thought he was gonna like hit me, man,” John stated, relieved.

“Yeah, he was within arm’s reach, as well. What a shifty guy.”

“Okay, but anyway, back to the thing—uh, why don’t we uhhh—hey, how about we go sit down over there at that restaurant and like get a snack or something while we figure this mess out.”

The pair picked up their luggage and walked over to the small window side tables and sat down.

FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK I’M SO  
FREAKED OUT! WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK  
FUCK FUCK FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!

The Giant Enemy Spider  
By Max Willis Gagne

I kept running. There were infinite corners to turn, these corridors were like a labyrinth. Were my eyes unadjusted to dark environments, I would not stand a chance fleeing from this atrocity.

“HISSSSSCCCKK.”

I could hear the beast’s scraping voice right behind me. I stumbled on something under my foot. Upon regaining my balance, I realised I couldn’t keep this up forever. I was losing my breath. Pitter-patter-pitter-patter. The monster’s eight appendages pounded the stone floors, the claws at the ends of its feet sounded like rainfall as they hit the rock. I saw another sharp turn ahead of me. I glared over each side of the walls ahead of me, and I noticed it wasn’t a turn at all. I was steps away from a dead end. I had no choice any more than to attempt combat with the beast. I dashed to the end of the wall, grabbing the hilt of my blade inside its sheath. I drew my sword, point facing towards the oversized arachnid’s head. For a moment, I regained confidence in my survival.

“HSSSSSSSKKKKKKKK.”

A warm fluid dripped from the weapon onto my wrist. I hesitantly lifted my eyelids, and before me stood the abomination. Blood oozed from the stab wound in its face onto my steel savior. I watched the creature’s soul depart from its horrifying shell. Life vanished from the spider’s face, and I let out an exhale of relief. I climbed over the maze’s wall, and from my high view point I could see the exit. I could hear a voice call out to me. It sounded like my friend, who I thought I had lost to the fiend.

“What the hell, dude. You didn’t have to crush the spider with a toothpick.”

Tale of Earth and Flame  
By Max Willis Gagne

BWOOOMMMSSHHHHH

Far in the distance, Mount Lavamore erupted. Our village was one of the most bustling trade hubs on this side of the continent. Such a great city required a just-as-great chief to keep it in order, and Labalast the Great Wizard of Magma had excelled in keeping the town on its feet for the past hundred years. His daily eruptions were purely to show-off his powers in a fantastic and dramatic display of might. Labalast's will over the superheated rock allowed him to keep any of it from touching the precious and delicate earth below. Farmers had cawing roosters to wake them at the crack of dawn. For us, we had these intense and unnecessary, spectacular volcanic eruptions.

I worked as a merchant in the busiest, most bustling sector of the trading hub. Standing behind a booth though, I didn't have to worry about swimming through the shoulder-to-shoulder packed crowds, swarms, and herds of shopping travelers. In the mornings, I usually made it to my shop-stand before the sunrise and the lava showers each morning, but I wouldn't miss the shining, magnificent sunset by leaving early in the sunny afternoons, my self-appointed work hours wouldn't make that happen. The closely-neighbouring town's chief was the Wizard of Dusk. His powers could amplify the brilliance of the setting sun each evening, and his magical presence had the ability to cure insomnia or restlessness. We in the plentifully-populated Trading Hub were lucky that this aura of his reached way here.

At my marketplace booth, I peddled things from times and peoples long gone. Some of my nicest artifacts went for eye-popping, jaw-droppingly steep prices. I didn't care too much for the preservation of culture, anyone willing to pay a pretty penny for my wares could take them and do whatever they pleased. Whether these hoarders cared for these relics or not wasn't really my responsibility, I really just wanted their money. It devastated me that such a soul-crushing, humongous portion of the coins I'd make had to go back to the travelling groups I bought these objects from. The profit I made wasn't nearly as much someone would think after seeing the price tag on my merchandise. If I had some way to find these relics myself, then I'd without-a-doubt make a fortune, but where could I ever stumble upon these sorts of things without the help of seasoned explorers gouging my wallet? I couldn't, it's just another hopeless fantasy of mine.

*Yoraesim the Relic Merchant, although bipedal and dexterous, was born of reptilian origin. He was the descendant of a dragon long, long ago who wielded spectacular flames spat from his jaw which engulfed armies of men. Over time, species mixed, and hybrid beasts were formed. The most prominent half was that of a human. Villages and towns all throughout this world of magic had animal people like him. Beings who looked like humans, spoke like humans, worked the jobs of humans, but had physical traits of animals. A fluffy humanoid with a hide of weathered, shag fur, carrying a head with the snout and ears of a wolf was a common sight anywhere you'd go. Anthropomorphic animals, also known as Furrries in your universe's pop-culture, were the names they'd been known as. The original fauna which these humanlike animals evolved from still roamed the land, living the same feral lives in nature which you've seen yourself in the real world. Dragonids, like their feared, magical kin, were few and far between. Yoraesim's visible ancestry caught gazes from unfamiliar passersby as if he was royalty, but the precise looks made it clear how the onlookers knew they weren't beholding a 'real' dragon. Yoraesim writhed in jealousy of his predecessors. "Why did I have to be this damn half-breed?" he'd think every night. Always did he seethe at what he wasn't, what he should've been instead. Dragons themselves had long been revered highly for their power since ancient times, and they lavishly lived the wealthy lives of kings, too. Yoraesim should've had all of that. Such riches belonged to him, an almighty dragon! He so, so wished to be a real dragon. His work of temporarily keeping shiny, expensive, glistening treasures did nothing to ease his angst. The valuable, bejewelled objects that should've been his were held just under his snout, like a dog training to sit for a treat, and all he could do was give the riches away day after day. It was his birthright to bathe in such luxuries!*

Overnight, a rumor spread through the town. Everyone was chatting about this "mysterious cave spotted deep in the throat of Mount Lavamore." I was skeptical, how could nobody have seen this before? I guess our usual flying mailman's blind as a bat. That may be rude to say about him though, he can't control what species he was born as. There's an endless murky smog flowing from Lavamore's chimney, too. How could the little, frail bat-guy be able to breathe through it? Does he not see the volcano dust drifting his way?

The replacement mailman was an eagle. A really tough, muscular, strong eagle. Muscles were carved into his wings like a magnificent marble statue from ancient times. Bulging pecs and chiseled abs squeezed through his tight shirt as if they could tear the thin fabric with the slightest flex. The sweat on his feathers glistened in the morning sunlight... If I liked guys, then I would totally think he's hot, but I'm *absolutely* not gay... His wings were different than mine, they were

attached to his arms rather than growing out of his shoulder blades. His talon-like hands were near the ends of his wing-arms, small feathery tips stretched past his wrists and the back of his hands. His wings didn't hinder how he could bend his elbows like any other anthro. There weren't too many bird-people around this part of the world. The northern cold in the rolling-hilled, vibrant-green countryside at the base of Lavamore greatly discouraged the fluttering of any mammalian or insectoid wings.

All of these rumours came from the eagle while he tried to pick up women in bars and taverns last night. Earwitness tales stated how he said the cave was even glistening, like it was made of gold... My treasure-hungry ears perked up. Just a fistful of gold would make me rich, but a caveful? Whoa... My spined tail wagged like an excited puppy as I daydreamed about the fortune just waiting for me to give it a nice, welcoming home. But it would take someone impervious to fire if they wanted to go in and claim the gold inside Mount Lavamore. The average resident of this trading town had flammable fur, and those who were hairless would just melt. What about a reptile-person like me, though? My dragon predecessors were built to hold fire in their gut and spew it from their jaws. There was surely no one here more fit to take a shower under Lavamore's deadly morning eruptions than me, right? Ooh, hoh, hoh, I was gonna get rich so easily!

The hellfires inside Lavamore would torch any cloth or hide to cinders. Whatever bags and wearables I brought with me had to be just as flame-resistant as myself. I remembered reading at the library how leather could hold its own against fire, but I'd also heard from word of mouth that the temperatures in Lavamore's crater were hot enough to melt iron. A cold shiver phased through my body as I imagined how my deep-green scales would fare against the heat if something like iron would be gone in a few blinks of the eye. I wasn't scared about going into Mount Lavamore, was I? N—no, I was not! I—I was really not scared of fire...

I was not putting too much faith in a dragon's natural heat resistance, right? Humans were so much weaker than dragons, and Great Wizard Labalast could do whatever he wanted around the heat. A fire-spitting, lava-puking dragon like me should have been bathing inside volcanoes! My heartbeat was getting faster, my body's temperature rising. My breath was jagged and frightened, and my usually-wet nose felt dry as a desert. It was like I could feel Lavamore's magma bubbling under my feet. With one wrong step, I could slip into a burning pool of lava, and it would be too thick for me to move around it. My wings would be submerged in the molten rock as my body sinks deeper and deeper, I'd have no hope of flying

out. Eventually, my head would sink below the surface, then it would clog my nose and mouth. I wouldn't be able to breathe through it...

Haah... Oh, I couldn't do this! Hyperventilating, I quickly stood up from my shop's wood chair, knocking it to the floor with my calves, then I sprinted home as fast as I could, hoping I could outrun the images of dying in lava stuck within my thoughts, hoping to outrun them somewhere I'd be safe, where I could handle my newfound terror. I could never make it through a journey in Mount Lavamore like this!

*Yoraesim did not have a traditional draconic upbringing. Dragon fledglings were typically raised in volcanic environments so they would grow up accustomed to fire and heat. Being raised in the Trading Hub and never having been to a volcano in his life, the ways of the dragons weren't inherited by Yoraesim. His parents, who were both demi-dragons as well, had birthed their child shortly after settling in the Trading Hub. For all 27 years of his life, Yoraesim had lived in the same house. His parents were vegans, pacifists, war-protestors, nature activists, and strongly advocated any such cause the two wished to support. They believed the world would be a better place if everyone simply loved, if everyone made peace with each other. Standard dragons greedily hoarded piles of shiny treasure, but all the gold these two ever needed was inside each other's hearts, and they lived as happily as the wealthiest couple in the world because of it. Such lifestyles were seen by their kin as a disgrace to the dragon race. Upon reaching adulthood, they both were cast out for these controversial, peace-propagating worldviews. After this crushing exclusion from the families who'd raised them, the two dragonpeople found each other. They immediately knew they were soulmates, it had to have been fate how these two unrelated individuals had coincidentally been brought together after going through the same backstory. The power-couple formed from their union was more powerful than anything they as outcasts would have been alone. They were the opposite of how the world saw dragons in legends, but just as powerful as the mightiest of the species' specimens. In the couple's glory days, they were determined to bring peace throughout the world, dissolving conflict and spreading an influential positivity which the public respected more than any speeches given by emperors, kings, presidents, or ministers. Their campaign acquired an enormous, outspoken following, they amassed crowds in rallies taken place at every major city in the continent. Even despite the impact these dragons had in their youth, the movement eventually fizzled out over time. The crowds who once exclaimed mantras of positivity and marched protesting steps towards a better kingdom all began to lose their spark. Numbers of worldwide anti-violence supporters dwindled, the once-forté tone of the couple's message petered out until all that was left was a hushed whisper. The movement faded into obscurity like a fad beyond its prime, and the loving activists behind it all decided they'd made enough of an impact, that they*



*accomplished enough of their aspirations from their youth, and it now was time for them to settle down and marry like an ordinary couple in love. They'd soon raise a child, and influence him with his parents' ideals, which was the inverse of the standard upbringing that a fearsome dragon was entitled to by tradition and heritage. His parents gave their best effort to inspire the young dragon to grow up and be just how his parents were in their years of glory. Yoraesim did not become quite such a motivational figure, though. His parents were never mad at him for this, they never mentioned anything on this subject, but he always knew how his parents really wanted a son who was more like them.*

The knuckles of my scaled, curled fingers rapped against Labalast's office door, making a quick knocking sound. When the door creaked open, I saw how the gruff man on the other side wasn't pleased with the way I tried to get his attention.

"S—sir... Uh, Labalast... I really need your help."

The chief's building was made of a dark cobblestone. Even though it stood higher than all the other buildings, the rest of the structure above the lowest three storeys wasn't for much else than show. Labalast conducted his morningly eruption spell from a hooded nook on the tall rooftop. He needed to reach high enough to successfully connect with the volcano, but he also had to be close enough to the town in order to protect us from the flurry of magmatic raindrops in the mornings. The design and construction of his tower headquarters always left me in awe. We have no way of building such gigantic structures using just our own two hands, only a mighty wizard such as him could accomplish such an enigmatic feat. The elders would tell stories of how he used his power to carry a large cluster of magma on his back from Lavamore all the way into the center of town, where he then molded the clay-like rock into the shape of his spire. He had to do this under a strict time limit so the lava wouldn't harden before he was finished sculpting his new home. Labalast refused to accept the title of chief until he could guarantee our safety from Mount Lavamore, which was supposed to erupt back then, and the Trading Hub would have been totally levelled to the wrath of nature. A travelling Labalast coincidentally wandered into town at that time, and he didn't know anything about the downpour soon to fall here within a month. The town's councilmen, councilwomen, and councilthem all agreed this was destiny at work. The Great Wizard of Magma had fallen into their lap to save them, this must have been arranged, he must have known about our fate! Labalast was very confused when officials approached him with the expectation that he'd stop the volcano. The young Labalast was offered the role of chief, and he humbly declined,

believing the town shouldn't be managed by a spontaneously-visiting foreigner, but the village's council persisted. He accepted, but only under the conditions that he save us from Lavamore first, and then he'd earn his leadership through this trial.

Labalast wore a thick crimson robe. These drapes had mahogany-coloured flame designs near the bottom, and had sunflower-yellow stitching which stood out next to the darker shades of red around it. He was given the robe by his father who'd passed away when Labalast was late into his teenage years. Although the clothing was too large for him at the time, and it still was, Labalast would always wear it in respect for his mentor, his role-model, the Great Wizard of Magma who came before him. The sleeves reached a little beyond his elbows in length. When his arms bent, you could peer into the tunnel between his body and the fabric. If you were to shine a light down them, the inside of the sleeves would look soft, like they were made of comfortable cotton. This bathrobe-like piece reached way down to his ankles, and was tied shut at his waist by an orange-red samurai rope-belt to prevent it loosely flapping in the wind. Labalast wore sand-beige khaki shorts which sat just under his belt, and he didn't wear an undershirt. His nude beer-belly had a bush of dark, bristly hair around his navel. The wooden platform sandals under his soles made a clacking sound against hard, rocky floors, and they were tough to keep balance on while walking over soft or uneven surfaces. The muscles on his bare chest, forearms, and neck were more noticeable than what was concealed by shade under the rest of his baggy ceremonial outfit. Even though Labalast wasn't the tallest man in the village, he still had a mighty and noble demeanor that you wordlessly felt compelled to respect, like the head of a lions' pride. Never had he used his formidable impression to force his will on others, nor ever threatened to cast his burning magical abilities to get his way. Labalast's long hairs were braided into thick cornrows, the two eastmost and two westmost braids were significantly longer than the rest, dangling below his shoulder joints. These four locks of hair were very thickly braided, similar to the thick, twisted rope around his hips. In Labalast's youth, his hair was a vivid crimson, the same deep shade as the robe, only more prominent. The trading village's seniors said it was the most beautiful tone of cooling magma they'd ever seen. Now, even though his hair maintained the same fortitude and thickness, the vibrant, volcanic crimson looked more grey and faded. This sign of age wasn't a reflection on Labalast's spirit, as it stayed young, wise, and powerful like he'd never left his prime. Labalast spent the majority of his time under the open sun; as a result his skin acquired a light brown tan the same coffee hue as the naked wood beneath an oak tree's bark.

The culmination of Labalast's many mighty details displayed how he truly was the personification of the calm, restrained fury bubbling and steaming within the earth's core. If his idea for leisure involved setting volcanoes ablaze each morning, you'd never want to imagine just how unlucky you'd be to fall on Labalast's bad side.

"Hm. Yoraesim. How goes it? I assume you need help?" Labalast seemed calm and pleased this morning, he usually had this gentle-giant mood before lunchtime.

"Ah... Uh... Dragons usually live near volcanoes, right? If so, then, uh... How come I've suddenly... Become deathly scared of lava. I—I mean, it's... It's *really* hot... Hot enough to melt the strongest of metal armours, and it disintegrates flesh in seconds..." I was a stuttering mess, blabbing nonsensical sentences, trailing off course and into silence. Even if he understood me, Labalast would just laugh. He'd be right to. How ridiculous was it that a dragon be scared of heat? I shouldn't have come here.

Labalast rose from his throne of stone.

"Follow me, Yoraesim."

The coattail ends of the mage's robe dragged along the dusty floor as his footwear clacked while he walked to the other side of the room. The stone formed by solidified lava pleased my eyes, it looked smooth and clean enough to sleep on. My draconic instincts magnified the appeal of this stretched-putty reminiscent rock. My attention was busy examining the cool-in-two-senses floor, and I hadn't noticed how I'd automatically Labalast to his destination. We both stood before a muffledly bubbling cauldron with a metal cover over it, I could feel warmth seeping out from the lid as I stood way over here. My heart began to pump, throbbing into my throat. I knew exactly what Labalast was planning to show me.

"Your frown tells me you already know what's in this cauldron. I will soon ask you to remove the lid."

"Uh... Ahem. So... When *will* you end up asking?"

Labalast stared daggers in response as I forced out a nervous laugh. *Gulp.*

"Ah, hah... Right..."

My hand was shaky as I cautiously reached out to the lid's burning handle. The lava's temperature underneath the metal burned so hot, it caused the iron to glow a reddish-pink. I could hear the volcanic bubbles popping on the surface of the viscous superheated stone. Rugged, snake-like fingers coiled around the glowing-red metallic handle and I quickly set it to the cold floor like I was

unenthusiastically handling a weird bug. A scorching cinder of magma sizzled off the searing surface. I could hear a faint *Ssssss* as it bounced onto my thumb's nail.

"AH!" I sharply yawned like a puppy whose tail had been trampled. Labalast gave me a stern, serious look, and my tail lowered itself between my legs. Labalast was the last person who I wanted to see me this vulnerable. The older man cleared his throat and puffed lines of smoke out of his nostrils. From where inside his body this smoke came, I do not know.

"Yoraesim, you've handled hotter than this. You're naturally accustomed to such higher temperatures. I doubt you remember this story, but many, many years ago, I'd visited your parents for dinner. Back then, your forehead could barely reach my knee, even while you stood on your toes, and now you're far taller than I am! That evening, your mother and I were chatting at the dinner table, and she requested for you to bring the pot of soup your father had made in the kitchen. You were so sweet back then. Although your parents were not traditional dragons, they still knew how to torch a dish using their magical infernos, and your father's soup was boilingly hot. While you'd been happily waddling back to the dining room, you tripped over a fray in the shag rug, dropping the burning contents of the bowl over yourself in a spectacular fall. You crawled on the floor to search for the now-emptied bowl, and you returned to the kitchen dejected, sad that you ruined a bowlful of your father's soup, and you didn't care at all how the scalding soup had fallen over your scales. Like all the other mighty dragons of legend you've heard, Yoraesim. You, too, are undeniably impervious to flames. Even the flicker of lava that spurted onto your scales was cooler than the burning handle I had you remove from the cauldron. It's like you're crying about a singular snowflake falling on your snout while you stand bare feet in the wintertime snow. The earth's stomach acids cannot decompose you, for you're destined to thrive within their warmth, Yoraesim. As am I. As are your dragonkind predecessors. Now, abandon your fear and put your fist inside the cauldron, Yoraesim!"

Before Labalast's sentence finished, I'd already bolted out the office door. No way was I ever gonna dunk my hand into a soup-pot of magma and expect everything to be all fine! Labalast must've gone crazy! Although I wished to escape, my legs weren't going home. Instead, I was running in the opposite direction. To Lavamore. Yeah, it would be pretty stupid to pass up such a great business opportunity because of a little heat, but I still didn't quite feel ready to go there yet. My legs were moving on their own, though. I couldn't stop myself. I suppose that in the back of my mind, I really did want to rip the band-aid off and dive into the

open, active, bubbling volcano and stop fretting over this silly paranoia. It wasn't like I'd be able to get the treasure any other way, but I still didn't feel ready!

My legs kept running. I didn't have control over them as I sprinted through the twisting pathways and roads of the Trading Hub. Using the long central street as a runway, I leapt off the flat cobblestone road, and my magnificent, dark-green wings spread. I took flight, my destination of soaring to the distant peak of Mount Lavamore sparkled within my mind. I was flying, I really was flying. I'd never been able to fly before. This was magical. I watched the townspeople shrink smaller and smaller, while I flew higher and higher up. Chilly wind fwooshed and fwapped through my ears. This brand-new whooshing sound was inspiring, this is what the freedom of flight sounded like. Maybe Labalast was right about being able to hold my own against flames. Maybe I didn't actually have enough faith in my powers as a dragon. Everything I'd known my whole life looked so small, and the land went on so far past the horizon, I couldn't see the end of the vast, rolling plains below me... I felt stronger so high up.

The atmosphere around me grew warmer as I approached Lavamore's peak. I could see embers fluttering in the smoke that rose out of the chimney of the volcano. The burnt particles looked like dying autumnal leaves right before the winter blizzards hit the country, but now we were in the middle of spring. Mount Lavamore looked really intimidating this close. A speckle of ash drifted down my throat while my jaw fell witnessing Lavamore's magnificence. *Hack, hack, cough.* I nose-dove into the volcano despite this unpleasant, uncomfortable diversion. Deep, deep into the mountain, I could see my destination. There was a little cave entrance, and it glittered just as the rumours said. My stomach grumbled, I was hungry for treasure, and it all was soon gonna be mine. I salivated at the thought.

The tips of my shoes gently tapped the floor as I touched down upon the burning rocky steps. Although my wings lowered me gracefully as an angel descending from the heavens, I wasn't able to hold my balance as soon as I landed, and I nearly fell into the basin of magma. Immediately, I gingerly skipped and hopped over the treacherous, craggy terrain to a spot that was safer for me. I still felt that I was way too close to the lava, that I was out of place here. All it took was a single wrong step and my life would be over. Cascades of nervous sweat pooled at the soles of my feet, at least this cooled my toes a little.

I crept through the bright cavern. The walls gleamed brilliantly. Light from the outside's flames bounced off of every mirror-like shimmering surface, and the areas which were duller were made more obvious from how they didn't refract the

light. I could vividly see the gray skeletons of greedy mammalian travelers who bit off more than they could chew, the bags of treasure they attempted to pilfer weighed down their deceased, decrepit bones. Many of these corpses wore golden, bejeweled, shining accessories they'd surely hoped to take home from this crypt. Some of these hide-barren bodies had claw marks on them... Deep claw marks. And scorch marks that burned so deep, even their skull had been charred by the life-ending blast of fire they'd been hit by. No sort of magma pool could have jumped out and singed these adventurers' flesh and muscle, whittling, incinerating them all the way down to bare bones. I shuddered, my heart-rate sped. I distractedly, panickedly tripped over one of these bones, and when I looked at my feet, I saw a skeleton whose rib-cage had been caved in and shattered by a precise, sharp blow, as if it was jabbed by a vicious talon. Winds carried the cries of these snuffed souls they'd once pleaded while being executed by whatever beast lived here. Would I meet the same fate if I stayed any longer? It felt like the cave's walls were closing in around me. Sweat trickled down from my forehead. I pantingly huffed in and out like I couldn't get enough air through my throat. Oh, no...

My wet palms strangled the neck of my empty leather treasure sack. I scrambled to get out of this damned den, but I stumbled again on a gem-encrusted necklace tangled around my ankle. I ran towards a bright opening in front of me, praying to get out of this nightmarish hellhole, but the light instead had been the sunlight reflecting off a gleaming, enormous pile of fine golden coins. Whew... It was phenomenal to behold, a huge mound of what probably was enough money to buy the whole Trading Hub all for myself. Wow...

I might really have wanted to leave, but it wasn't like I was in immediate danger... I suppose it wouldn't *kill* me to stay for a few more minutes, perhaps... I could almost hear the mound of gold sparkle and shine. The money serenaded me like a siren, I was compelled to dive head first into this insurmountable pile of riches. Whaow... Just the sight was enough to make me drool in lust and hunger. My toe-claws skittered over the smooth stone floor as I pranced towards this wellspring of riches. I'd entirely forgotten about my anxiety of this setting, my greed and desire had taken over my mind, and without any caution, I plucked a singular, tiny coin of gold from the trove. The small discs of metal slipped down the hill like I'd chosen the wrong piece in a Jenga game, everything came tumbling down in an avalanche of glittering gold. What I found underneath left my jaw agape in fear of what I had uncovered. A snoring dragon lay dormant underneath its treasure.

Gold now flooded the floor of the room like I'd poked a hole in a large container of water, and the liquids stored inside all poured out. In my gut, I was sure that I had just broken a sealing spell cast by some wizard long ago on this beast. I crept backwards as quietly as I could, but it was in vain. Coins underfoot plinked as my shoes stepped down on the floor, anyone with ears would surely know they weren't alone. The dragon's eyes popped open. They were an autumnal yellow-green, the colour of the changing leaves at the beginning of their yearly decay. Yellow like the gold these eyes watched over. Yellow just like my own eyes. The dragon had dark green scales, too. Like the evergreen trees lasting throughout the wintertime, never to have its pines fall from the cold. But this green was darker than that. At a quick glance, most would mistake the shade to be black. Coincidentally enough, my scales had this very same colour palette. His magnificent, sweeping tail had spikes along its length, just like my tail. The reptilian beast stood up, more gold coins slid off its intimidating figure. I hid behind the wall leading into the room. I so wanted to leave at this moment, but I also wanted to stay, like there was something pulling me to investigate further into this beast vaguely resembling me.

"Show yourself, thief!" the dragon roared, standing on its thick, tree-trunk legs. "The ragged clothes on your back *smell* just like those of a thief. The clapping, nervous footsteps of your cheap leather shoes *sound* just like those of a thief. The damp, heavy air you exude *tastes* like that of a thief. Your trembling, whimpering aura *feels* just like that of a thief. You've made a mistake to come here, step out of the shadows so I can see the idiot who's awakened me from my slumber."

His voice boomed. I could hear the reverberations in his vocal fortitude rattling through the small, light metals on the ground. The gold shifted even more. Of everything I'd been scared of to this point; fire, lava, confronting my fears, even the battle scars left on the skeletons outside this chamber, I was oddly unfazed by this beast. I felt ready to take him on, to show myself with honour and might before this giant. Standing face-to-face with him, I could see even more similarities between us. Our ivory horns on the sides of our heads were both sanded to smoothness, as were the sharp claws on our fingers and toes. He had a birthmark on the right side of his neck, just beyond his jawbone. This had to be something more than an otherworldly coincidence. Could we have been related?

"You who bears my hide, steals my appearance, have you no shame? You've donned the form of I, the great Yoraesim, ruler of Lavamore whose legends have passed through centuries and to lands far, far away! I should smite you right here,

right now for such a shameful, pitiful disguise. You come into my lair, take my belongings, awaken me, all for what?! To show off your costume?! Fools like you drive me up the wall. Raagghh!! *Cough, cough...* Ahem.”

Smoke huffed from the corners of the dragon’s lips and out the funnels of his nostrils. He was going to hit me with his strongest flame, but I was ready to take it. This bumbling, sluggish monster called himself by my name, but he had the coolness of a hay bale during a firestorm! I’d never heard of him! I was the *real* Yoraesim, and I would never blow my fuse over someone so puny in comparison to me!

I was ready to size him up, to talk back to all the shallow nonsense he’d spat my way, but then it dawned on me how I was in the audience of a live dragon. The beasts who had legends about destroying cities overnight, the beasts who could cremate a man in seconds. Dragons were the absolute apex predator of the skies, and I was caught between molten rock and a hard place in the cavern den of such a behemoth. But if I was going to die here, I wouldn’t want to wallow in fear and die kneeling to this jerk. I had to at least try to talk back, if I stood no chance at fighting.

“Well, I dunno who you are, but *I’m* the real Yoraesim. I’ve been the real Yoraesim as long as I’ve lived, and never have I heard of some dragon inside Mount Lavamore stealing my name. All the bodies outside your chamber seem to be really old. I don’t think you’ve done much fighting in a while. And I can guess from all the dust around you that you haven’t left your cave in forever, either. Your fat, chubby belly tells me you do nothing but laze about. I wouldn’t bet money on you in a fight, phoney.”

“AAUUUGH!! Just WHO do you think you are?!! *I am* Yoraesim! I’ve always *been* Yoraesim! For as long as I’ve lived through the past millennia, that’s been *my* name!! I’m—*hack, hack, cough*—I’ll tear you apart with my sharp teeth, limb from limb, appendage from appendage, piece by piece, and you will suffer through every second of—*ghack, cough, aengh*—of it! Only once I’ve stripped you down to the bone, desecrated whatever is left of your skeleton through atrociously unspeakable acts, then, ONLY then will you know peace! *Cough, abhack.*”

I’d no doubt struck a nerve with this lizard. He was so angry while coughing, he sounded like a cat retching out a hairball. I should have been terrified right then; tucking my tail between my thighs and running the hell out of here, but I couldn’t move. Usually, it would be the other way around. Too scared, too petrified to skitter away rather than being too proud of myself to back off. My own words



disobeyed all of my urges to scream and flee, I couldn't believe the way I was talking back to this bully!

"If someone were to ask 'Where's Yoraesim?' in town, they'd get directions to my shop, not to your dingy little rat hole. You reek of age, not to mention your own stench. If I didn't know this sulphurous smell was natural in a volcano, I'd think the fetid odour of rotten eggs was coming from you. You'd be smart to bow down as I take whatever I think could possibly be of value in this filthy, soot-filled burrow of yours."

"Y—YOU—*Hgack, cough, cough... Hbbback.*"

The dragon's teeth clenched so hard, I heard them crack. Bubbles of frothy saliva rabidly formed at the corners of his lips. His digits furiously curled, screeching as his claws left white scratch marks against the stone his trembling feet lay on. Veins of blood rooted in the sclera of his eyes as they popped out from their sockets. His narrowed, sewing-needle wide pupils were focused on me, only on me. I'd carved such a deep scar in Yoraesim's fragile, egotistical thoughts that I'd broken them entirely. He was beyond rage, his seething mind white as the hottest fires of the sun, white as the emptiest void. If this buffoon were to snap out of his trance, he'd surely uproot the countryside in a magnificent inferno of flames and unfiltered, untethered, unleashed calamity.

But that didn't happen. Instead, his eyes rolled back, and the beast collapsed onto its side. This fake Yoraesim had literally keeled over. I stared at the dragon's carcass. Its contorted face of unspeakable anger stayed preserved in its corpse, and all I did in response was to stare at it. What a sad way to go out. Being so, so fumingly mad that something in your mind snaps, and you die on the spot from your rage. All I had said weren't even the worst things to have come out of my mouth—was this Yoraesim really *that* fragile?

A power coursed through my body, blood rushed to my head. A powerful gust of wind blew through my core from the direction of Yoraesim's inanimate figure. A headache pulsed through my mind so powerfully, I was forced onto my knees. I felt my body morphing, and it hurt like the nine circles of hell. The joints of my wings swelled, cracking and shattering the shoulder bones they were attached to. All the bones in my arms, legs, and hips were obliterated in an instant, and just as quickly, they reformed into the shape of a quadrupedal lizard. My previously-stubby snout reshaped into a longer, daunting maw, one fit to breathe demonfire from my lungs as if it were air. My tail elongated, the spikes running along its length sharpened to such a point that I could impale a fool with a mighty

swoosh. My back arched to adjust for the new way I stood upright. My scales grew thick enough to protect my hide from an archer's shot. The skin on my webbed hands and feet swelled to form rounded paws with deep, murderous claws at my new fingertips. Oh, how this metamorphosis hurt! I wished that dragon would have just killed me instead of setting off whatever chain of events lead me to this nightmare. Distantly, whispering like the wind, maintaining the same aggression he had in life, I could hear Yoraesim's taunting voice screaming out to me.

"You tiny, half-bred idiot! For killing me, I'll force my being onto you! You'll be cursed for a millennia as the next in my bloodline, until you, too, die of a rage-induced heart attack! Enjoy the rest of your pitiful life, fool Yoraesim! Wahahahaha! Gahahahaaahaaahaaaa..."

The old dragon's cocky laughter faded into the wind, and so went his soul, too. In Yoraesim's last words, he chose to torment me. He must've been the pitiful one instead, if that's what he chose to do with his final moments. I was going to prove him wrong, I swear it. I won't die writhing in a puddle of my own bitterness, vexing anyone who makes the smallest of insults against me. What a sad, sad creature. The remnants of the dragon dissipated into dust, and the breeze carrying his soul carried the particles away, away where they'd mix with the ashes of Lavamore's air.

*Epilogue. One thousand years prior.*

*Far, far to the southeast of the empty countryland where a major Trading Hub would erect in 800 years, a mountainous island sat in a distant cloudy sector of the vast oceans. Another two-thousand years prior, a magically-attuned dragon from these lands who was more ferocious, more powerful, more monsterly than any which had been seen before wreaked terror on any kingdom who didn't swear fealty to his name, Yoraesim. His hubris led to his downfall as he took on opponent after opponent, truly believing he was impervious to the crush of defeat, a belief which made his fall all the more resounding. On the day of his execution, he had one final statement to make;*

*"I'll come back! I'll come back someday! I've had a curse put on my soul where I'll be able to imbue anyone I want with my might and determination! For far and long, will my spirit soar through the winds until I find someone strong enough to kill all of you! To kill all of your descendants! This won't be the last you'll hear of Yoraesim! Wahab—hacck—hahahaha!!"*

*And so, the fiend was decapitated by the knight who'd captured him. Never had another dragon named Yoraesim terrorized the world, and his dragonkin followers all banished themselves to their remote southeastern home-island in fear of what the previously-oppressed kingdoms may do to those who still cherished the damned beast's name.*

*Rainclouds always hung in the skies above the island's mountaintops. Sunlight was only received in the form of a silver light glowing through the clouds. The tale of Yoraesim the Warlord was forgotten by his own clan, but never was the dire panic of forever staying on the island lost to the tribe. For two millennia, there they stayed. Quiet, seeking not greater existence, travelling never to the mainland. This perpetual, bleak weather caused such terrible currents in the Cloudy Sea, relentless tides would crash any explorative voyager's ship into bundles of driftwood. Their being was forgotten by the monarchies in the greater continents.*

*The constant downpour would depress the dragons' fire-spitting talents. The only way they could practice this power passed down from their ancestors would be inside cramped, claustrophobic, dark caverns, which, too, were always wet from the run off seeping through the overhead mountains' soil. One fed-up tribesman dug a chamber deep, deep below the earth, accessible through intricate tunnels of mud and stone. This room far under the mountain was sealed from rainwater by thick, impenetrable layers of rock. Dragons could breathe brilliant, bright, magnificent flames as they wanted in this dry room. The walls stretched wide, the ceilings reached high, every surface was covered in ashen burn-marks. It was a cultural rite of passage that draconic fledglings would fly in this sacred chamber while they were small enough to do so.*

*Precisely 1014 years before the merchant Yoraesim's tale, his feral, pure-dragon ancestor had been born on this island wearing the humanoid dragonfolk's same scales of pine, irises of chartreuse, horns of ivory. His mother would tell bedtime stories of how Yoraesim was breathing flames as he hatched from his egg. Yoraesim grew to be an inspiring member of his community. Even on the soggiest of days, he could be seen sewing a fine path of flight between peaks of rock and green treetops, unhindered by the cold brought by the rain. He used his abnormal strength to protect those less capable as him from injury or hardship. Everyone had admiration towards Yoraesim; all of the island's residents were sure he was destined to be the next chief.*

*Days before his election was intended to take place, the soon-to-be leader vanished. Nobody knew where he went, he hadn't said a word to even his closest friends. Yoraesim was gone without a trace. The rains cried that day, the winds howled like banshees, but through the weather, the valiant dragon took flight. All who were close to him didn't think he'd be the type to run away. This was very irregular of him; it was like Yoraesim was possessed to do so.*

*The Yoraesim who landed wasn't the same dragon who'd flown away through the heavens. That day, ghosts of monarchs, emperors, barbarians long gone had swarmed in the skies overcast with grey clouds like a grand festival for the departed. The dragon who arrived across the ocean cackled like a crazy old man as his feet landed on mainland soil. This altered Yoraesim had aspirations higher than to bring peace to one, tiny island. He wanted to reshape the face of the world in his likeness. Yoraesim the Warlord had returned.*

*With the power of eras long gone, the firsthand knowledge of combat from ages prior, kingdom after kingdom fell to the dragon's rule. At the end of every battle he won, the possessed Yoraesim*

*would mockingly guffaw as he cleaved the heads of his enemy kings and rulers using only his meticulously-sharpened claws. Eventually, he no longer needed to war with other countries, they bowed to the all-powerful dragon. None could hope to rival the ancient beast without might equal to his, but that, exactly, was what felled Yoraesim's reign.*

*All dragons of myth have a biological instinct to compulsively hoard treasure, gold had value far beyond the monetary to them. It sparkled, it shined, nothing caught the attention of their eyes such as a gleaming golden coin. Throughout the beginning of history, dragons would kill even their closest friends if they felt their riches were in danger. Yoraesim's obsession with money drove him up the wall. He became paranoid that those allegiant to him only wanted to get close enough to steal his gold. His greed, his delusion grew to such twisted lengths that he'd kill anyone who admired his bounty too long. Yoraesim lost trust in all around him; he was convinced the entire world was plotting his downfall. The unbeatable, indomitable, unassailable dragon was bested by his own hubris.*

*On a somber evening, his great castletown was set ablaze in a fiery supernova only the greatest of dragons could muster. Everyone Yoraesim thought was a potential assassin—his closest allies, his loyal townsmen—he made sure none of them escaped the inferno. Carrying an enormous sack of his shiniest treasure, he fled to a nearby volcano. He'd surely be safe there, none would come looking for him for none would know of his secret headquarters. After painting his new den's walls with liquified gold, Yoraesim was ready to hide inside Mount Lavamore for the rest of his life.*

*All these years later, the dragon was still bloated with his delusion of a world out to get him. The eon-old cursed winds of Yoraesim's soul corrupted the merchant draconid in a gruesome, agonizing, twisted mutation of flesh, bone, muscle, and heart, like a butterfly's transformation without its cocoon. Back, was the forceful conqueror, ready to unleash his wrath, to sink his fangs and claws into the earth, to make the world bow before the name Yoraesim once more. Since times immemorial, this cycle repeated without end. Accursed was the name Yoraesim, and oblivious were any mothers who named their young by this name. Although the wrath, the ferocity, the wars brought by dragons were written to history, never was Yoraesim himself remembered. Forever would the spirit of this dragon bring disorder and chaos to the continents, and never would this society progress beyond the middle ages, despite how their universe had lived as many years as ours.*

*Off, into the ashen sunset above Mount Lavamore, did the reborn Yoraesim fly. Off, to repeat the violent cycle of history once more, and then again in another several thousand years, and then again in an even more distant future. This repeating tale of earth and flame would never cease to end in a world dominated by Yoraesim's rapture.*

*Note from the author: If you wish to talk with me about the story or about writing in general, please add me on the messaging app, Discord. My username is amtheyes.*





Kunlé / Pastel on paper





Shai / Mixed media



Adam / Mixed media



Brandon / Pencil and sharpie on canvas





Radique / Pastel on canvas





Chloe / Wood burning





Collective Window / Mountainview students





Makari Terrio / Plasticine on cardboard + giraffe figurine



Gabriel Hunt Gobeil / Modelling clay



Zoe C / Modelling clay, paper, cardboard



Mila Pinto / Coloured pencil on paper





Alex Fillion / Lino print



Alex Fillion / Acrylic on clay



Emily Love / Acrylic on clay



Tao Georgopoulos / Felt



Nicholas Zafiriou / Felt





Felicia Banks / Watercolour and pen on paper



Lilly Ross / Acrylic marker on paper





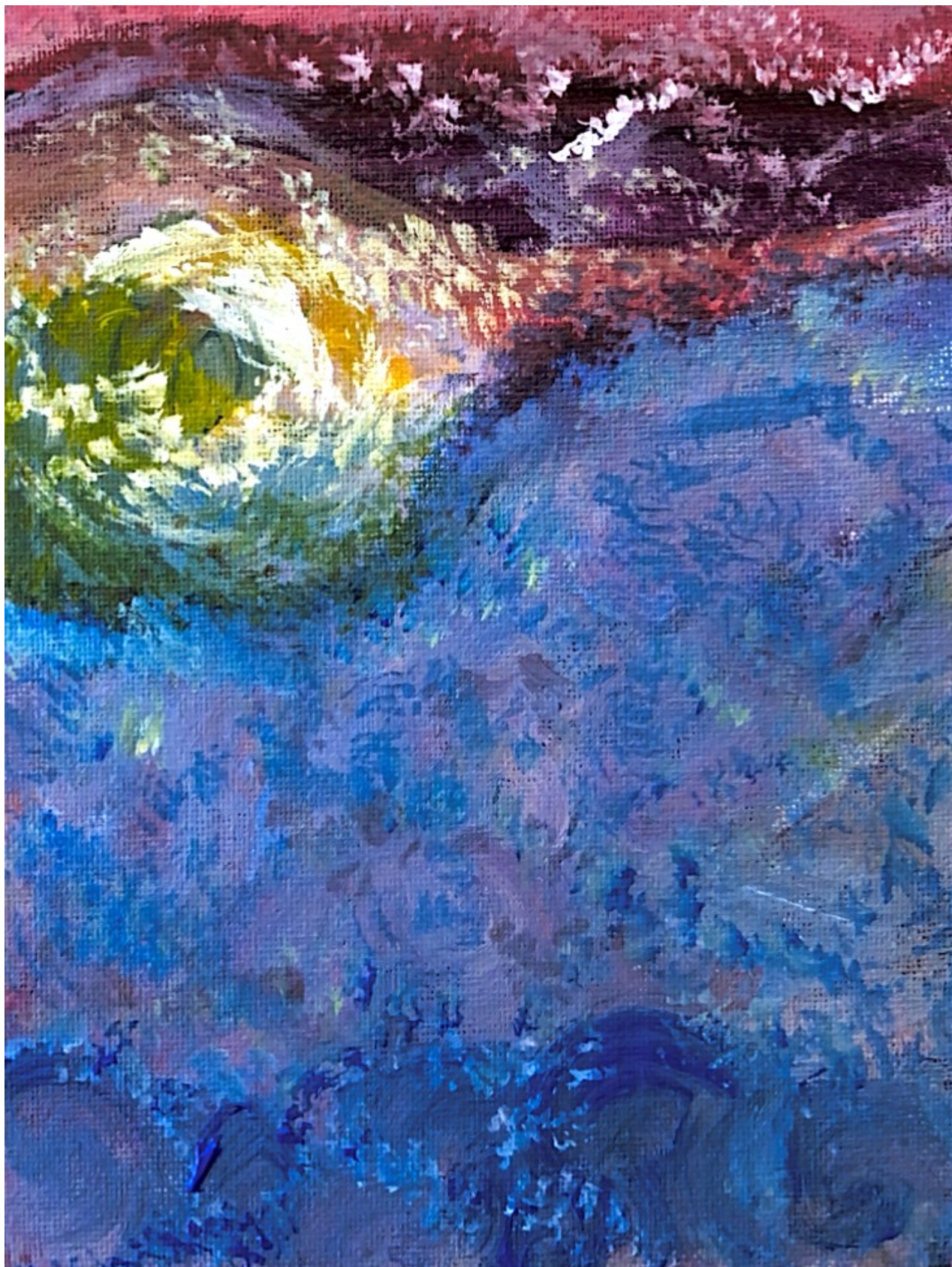
Lilly Ross / Wood burning and watercolour





Lilly Ross / Oil pastel on paper





Lily Jolie Hausknost / Acrylic on canvas





Muse Smith-Ross / Collage



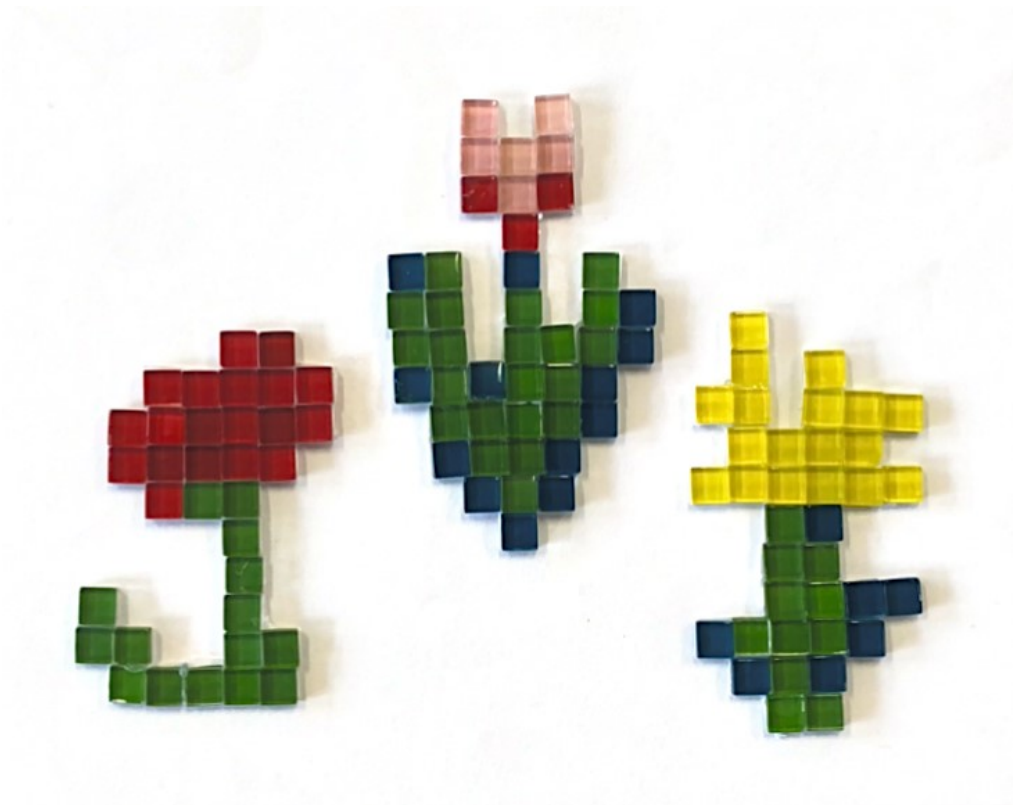




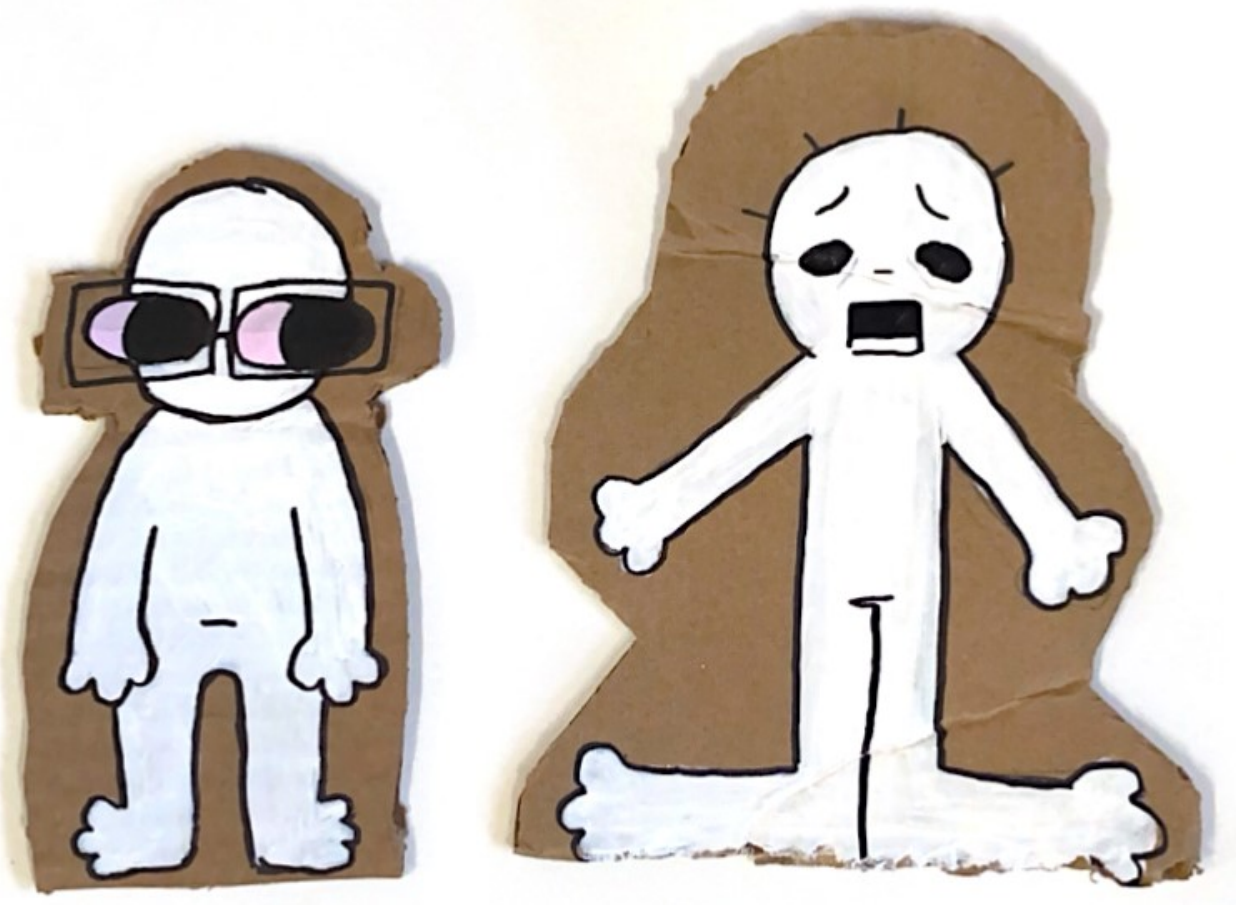


Raymond Marcotte / Acrylic on paper





Theoni Raphaël / Glass tile



Phoenix Coombs / Acrylic on cardboard





Zoïe Massicotte / Watercolour on paper



Aurora Pagani / Acrylic and glitter on canvas





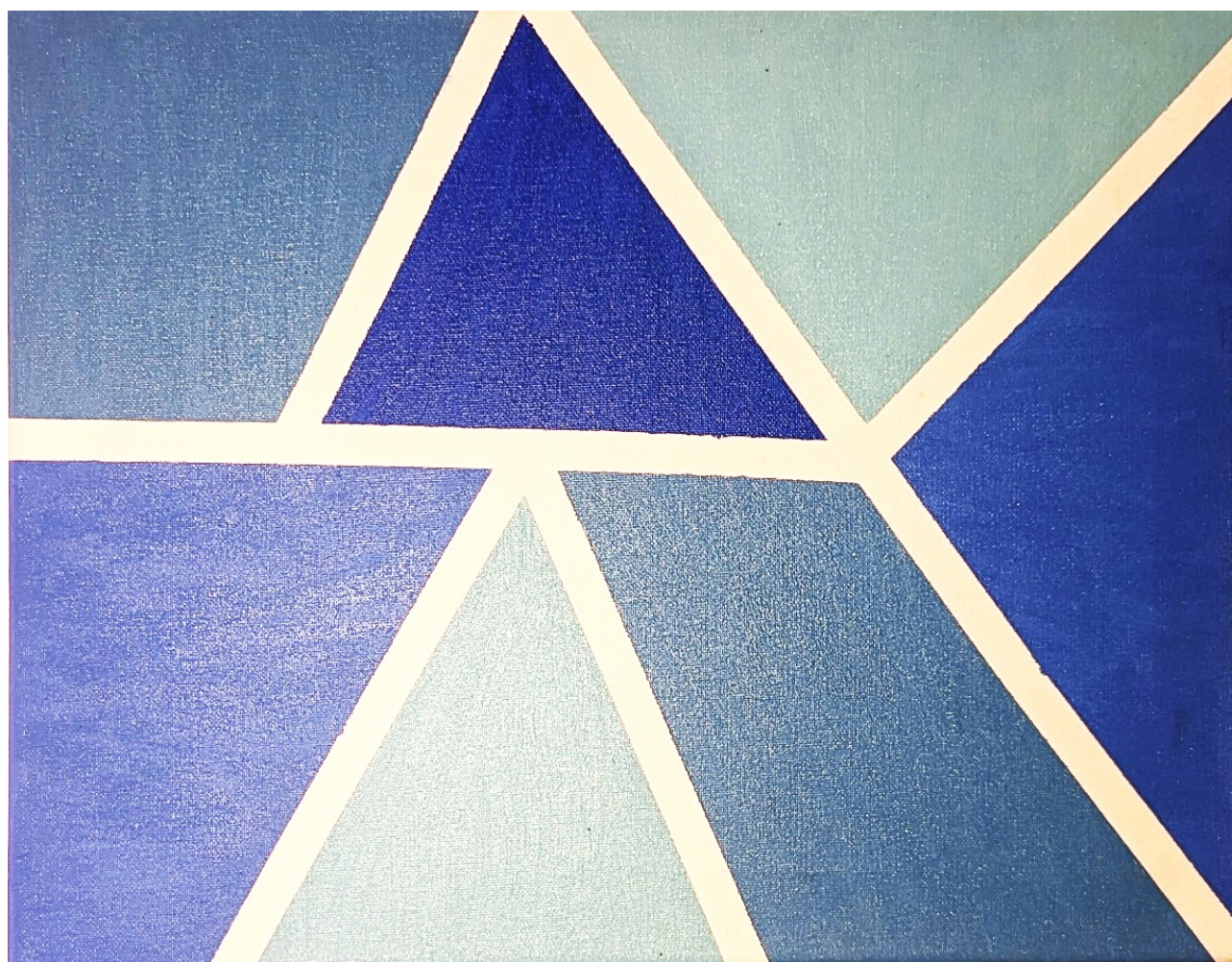
Aiden Vaillant / Acrylic and sharpie on magazine paper





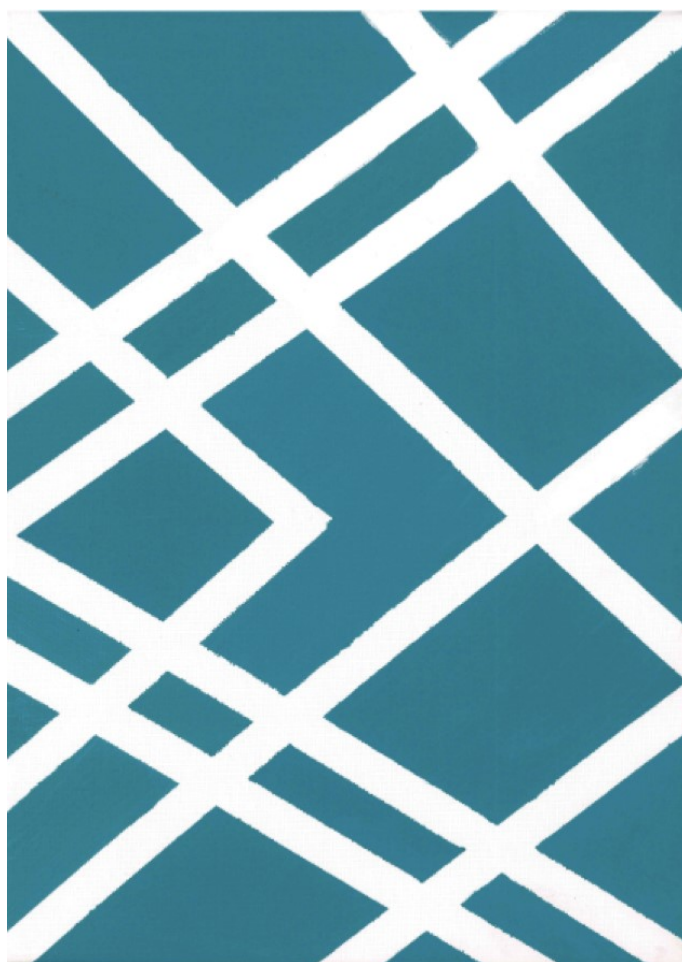
Jay Richmond / Oil pastel on paper





Mariah Duprey / Acrylic on Canvas





Mariah Duprey / Acrylic on Canvas





Kierra Meloche / Plasticine on cardboard





Heaven / Acrylic on canvas





Naya Chowdhury / Acrylic on canvas





Jordan Malo / Acrylic on paper



Jordan Malo / Plasticine and Styrofoam





Jordan Malo / Copper embossing



Shayah Alfred / Acrylic on paper mask





Lily Clark-Gauthier / Cyanotype



Rahshiloh Fujiyama-Browne / Graphite on paper





Jayden Malo / Wood burning





Jayden Malo / Copper embossing





Jordan Narrainen Hylton / Acrylic paint on vinyl



Zeyden Graham / Acrylic paint on vinyl



Kloé Mancini / Digital painting





Olive / Wood burning and watercolour





Logan Roter / Acrylic and sharpie on vinyl





Logan Roter / Plasticine on cardboard





Maverick Major / Plasticine on cardboard





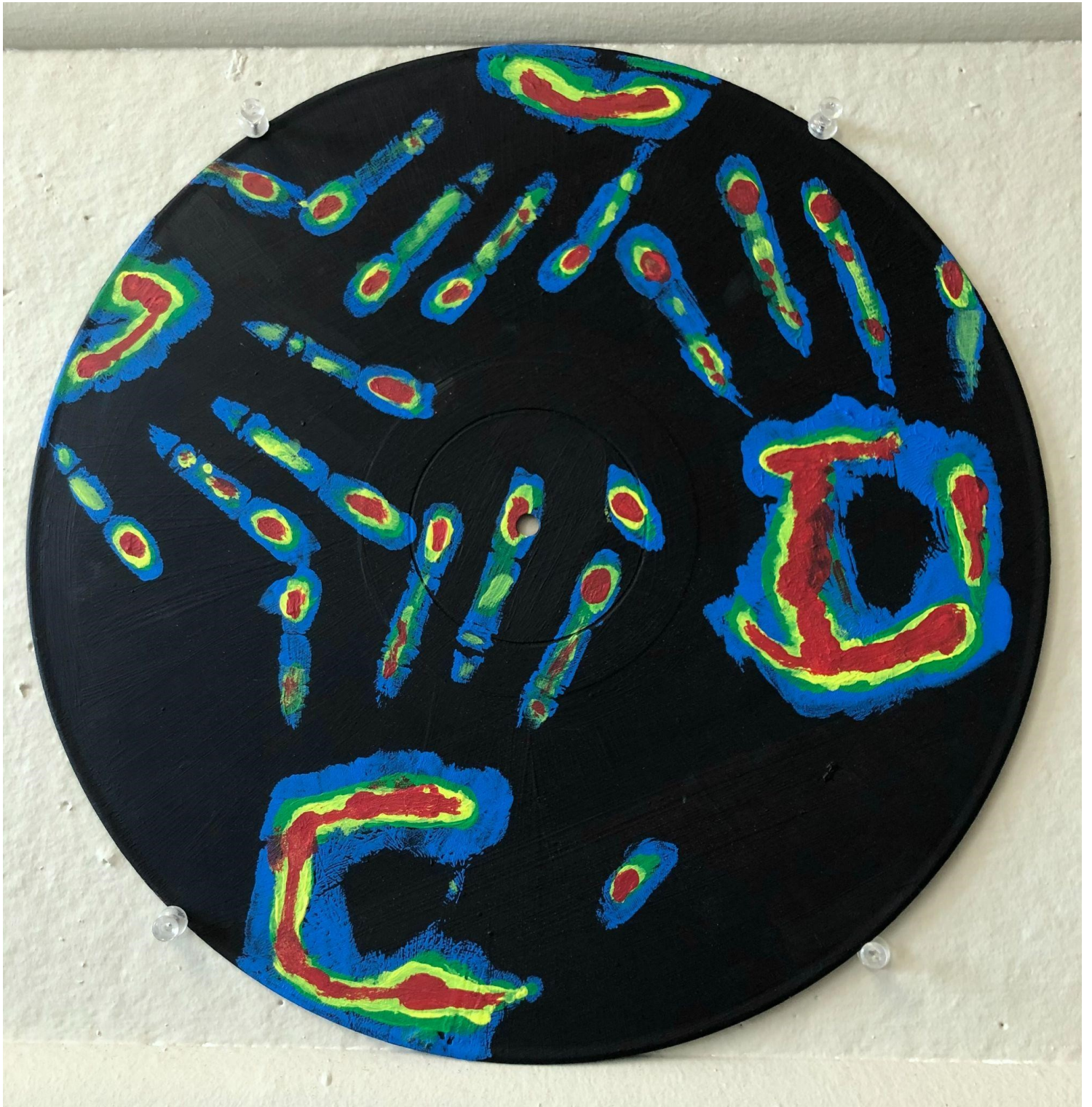
Shobi Shylah Lewy / Plasticine on cardboard





Shobi Shylah Lewy / Cyanotype





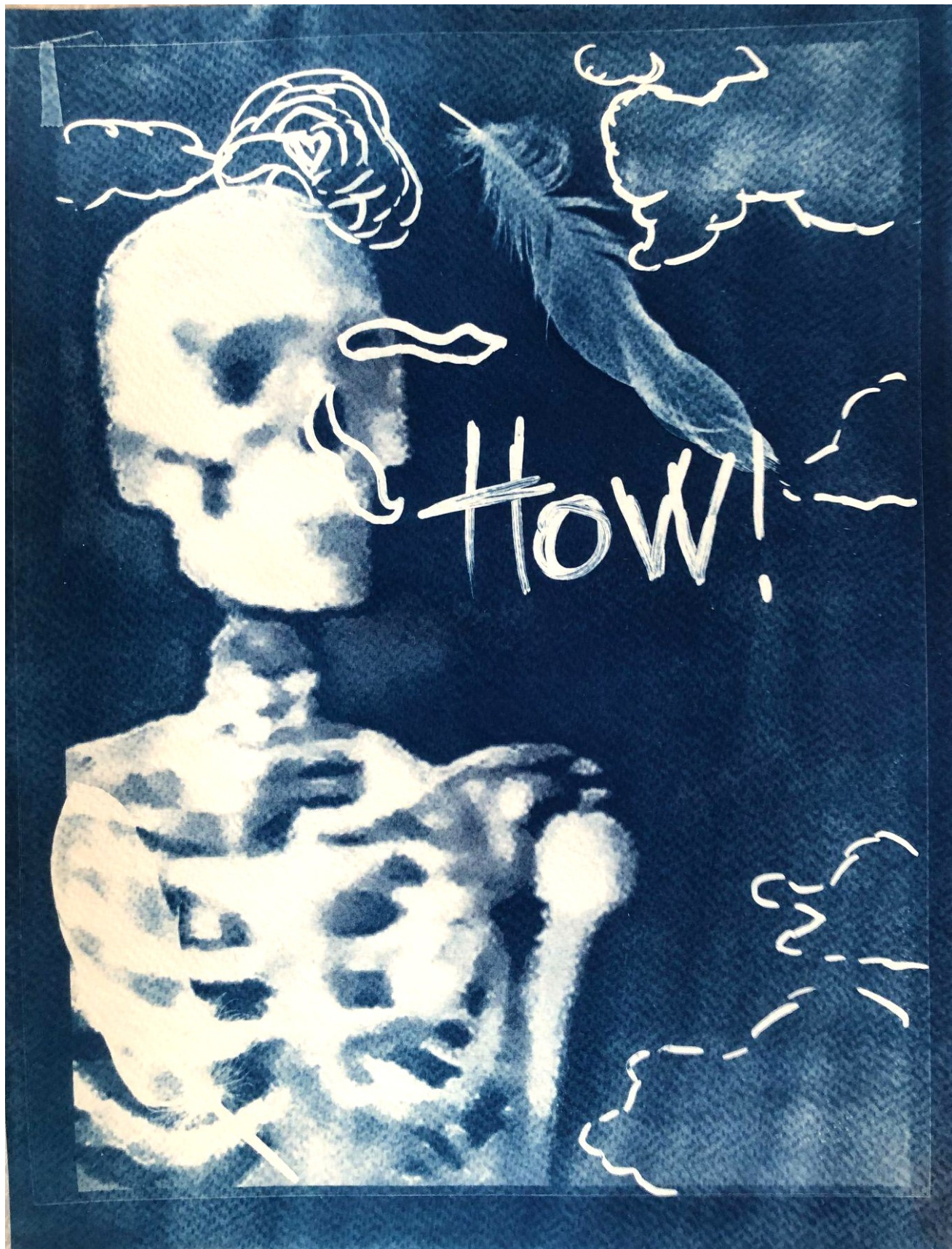
Shobi Shylah Lewy / Acrylic on vinyl





Trinity Claybourn / Acrylic paint on clay





Trinity Claybourn / Cyanotype





Ethan Shragie / Copper embossing





Ethan Shragie / Plasticine on cardboard



Joey Di Lonna / Acrylic and sharpie on vinyl





Chloé Alagos / Plasticine on cardboard





Chloé Alagos / Acrylic paint on vinyl





Maya Hertsman / Mixed media





Maya Hertsman / Acrylic and sharpie on vinyl





Maya Hertsman / Pencil and pencil crayon on paper





Jesse Croxen / Plasticine on cardboard





Yasmina Krsteski / Plasticine on cardboard





Yasmina Krsteski / Acrylic on canvas



Anndraya Gero / Acrylic and watercolour paint on canvas





Anndraya Gero / Plasticine and found objects on cardboard





Shylah Balcombe / Light painting photography





Shylah Balcombe / Watercolour and acrylic on paper





Shylah Balcombe + Elody Debuchy-Kersulis / Cardboard, plaster, acrylic paint, styrofoam, cork



Elody Debuchy-Kersulis / Wood burning





Elody Debuchy-Kersulis / Acrylic paint on clay





Desirea McCormick / India ink and watercolour on paper



Desirea McCormick / Cardboard, plaster, acrylic paint





Desirea McCormick / Wood burning with watercolour





Desirea McCormick / Mural





Malaya Desjarlais / Digital collage



Gavin Wlasenko-Mayer / Digital collage





Gavin Wlasenko-Mayer / Digital photography



Gavin Wlasenko-Mayer / Digital photography





Starr Neeposh / Wood burning and watercolour





Meenoosh / Acrylic on paper





Bianca Soucy / Watercolour, collage and ink



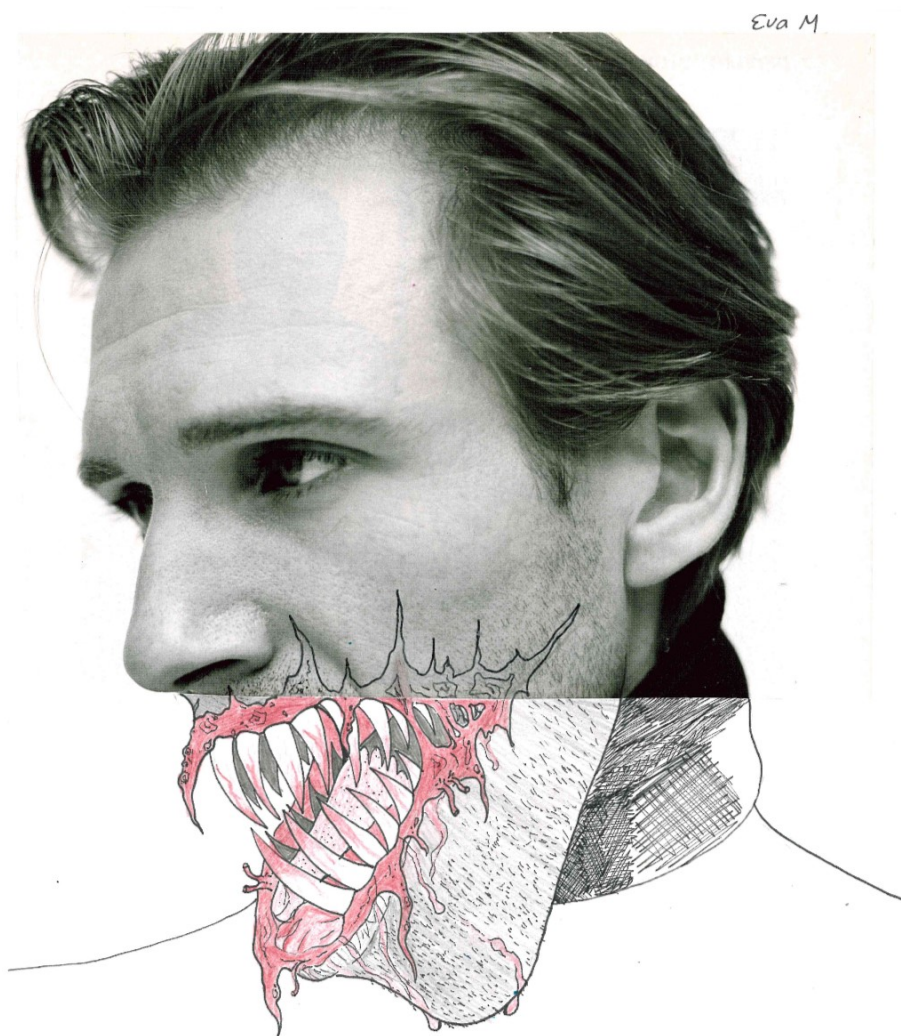
Laila-Ann Lizza / Pastel on paper





Mia Manicone / Cyanotope





Eva M. / Pencil crayon on paper



Maria Santamaria / Watercolour and marker



Leon Johnson / Watercolour and marker