

NEOTERIC

SPRING 2023



Letter from the Editors

Dearest Readers,

After a considerable amount of work, Neoteric Magazine is proud to present you with our Spring 2023 Magazine. We are, admittedly, a rather short-handed bunch of students, and the idea of releasing an official publication in less than a semester was quite daunting. Still, we persevered, and now we have something incredible to show for it. Our publication reflects the creativity and expertise of River Ridge's student body, and we are so incredibly excited to share it with you. Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts, for your support. We would also like to take a moment to thank all the people who came together to make this publication happen:

1. Artists and authors, you blew our expectations out of the water. The submissions we received were fantastic, so much so that it made the selection process rather difficult. Even if your piece was not chosen to be in this year's publication, we strongly encourage you to submit again next year.

2. We had a fantastic team of Creative Writing students that assembled the magazine's final draft. Special thanks to their teacher, Mrs. Mandarino, for acting as their unofficial manager. The work that they did was mind-numbingly tedious but invaluable, so kudos to them for sticking it out.

3. Our school's Journalism class and their teacher, Mr. Carlson, helped us actually put together and format the publication. We were so focused on the writing itself that we forgot about the formatting, so you can imagine how relieved we were when they offered to help us out.

4. Srinidhi Lakshminarayanan went above and beyond to design our publication's cover and page embellishments. She was incredibly helpful and accommodating throughout the developmental process, and the designs she came up with were phenomenal.

We hope you enjoy Neoteric's Spring 2023 Magazine.

Best wishes,

Aleksa Demby & Grace Horner



Neoteric Magazine

Staff 2022-23



Editor-in-Chief

Aleksa Demby



Managing Editor

Grace Horner



Marketing Director

MiaBella Colmenero

Social Media Managers

Aaryn McClendon & Connor



Burke

Secretary

Francesca Balorio



Treasurer

Clara Morcos

Jane-of-All-Trades

Jasmine Tucker



Review Team

Jackie Broere

Carolena Schmidt

Cameron Constantine

Jessi Schuyler



Emily Oates

Sponsors

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Table of Contents

1. Growing Strong
2. Kuromi
3. Drowning & Tranquility
4. I am going to leave your father
5. Reflecting
7. Melomanie & When We Meet
8. Girlhood
9. Le Cygne
10. Butterfly on the Window
11. A Butterfly's Violin
12. Sockeye
14. I Wish I Were a Poet & Blowing Dandelions in the Wind
15. A Tower on the Water
16. Deep in the Forest & Mystical Paradise
19. Torn to Oblivion
20. Amelia Sunset
21. Human Captivity



Table of Contents



22. The Wolf, the Girl, and the Huntsmen

26. Spark



27. My Star



28. In a Sky Full of Stars



29. My Whiteboard



30. The Diary

32. Red

33. Requiem



34. Statue of David



35. She Deserved to Die

37. The Last Time

38. Rose Gold



39. Last Night

40. Nature



41. Letter to my Best Friend



42. Death's Vice & Failure

43. Coke

44. Natural Interactions

45. Our Lady of Sorrows



46. All Eyes on You





Growing Strong

Ashvitha Kanagaraj, 10th



As trees grow tall, they reach for the sky.

Their roots digging deep, as they strive to thrive.

And so, it is with the life of a high schooler.



As they learn and grow, ever wiser and bolder.



At first, they start small, just like a seedling.

But with time and care, they'll grow to be stunning.

They'll branch out and explore each new opportunity.

And weather the storms, with strength and unity.



Just like trees need sun and rain to grow.

High schoolers need guidance and support to know.

That they can make it through each new challenge and phase

and blossom into adulthood, in their own unique ways



So, take heart, dear high schooler, as you grow and learn.



Remember that each new experience, helps you turn

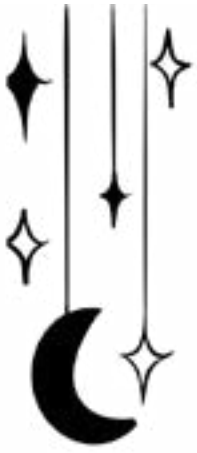
into the strong and capable person, you'll become

a true masterpiece, just like the trees in the sun.





Kuromi by Mercedes Mendez (11th grade)



Drowning

Jasleen Burke, 9th

The truth awoke me like icy waves awake a dead
shore;

I was drowning with no wish to escape.

Can anyone see my dying hand floating in the water?

I was brought unwanted news,
much like a tide brings unwanted and broken shells.

Was I a broken shell?

If there perhaps was some kind of lifeboat to save
me,

would I take it?

My questions remain unanswered,
as I remain drowning.



Tranquility by Liliana Elmore (11th grade)



I am going to leave

your father



My mother says
after every argument
domestic disturbance
and cabinet slam



It is her mantra
an item on her grocery list
she cannot forget



Soon, her words
become mine
but the words are not cheap



I treat them like a lottery ticket
I am waiting to cash in.



On Valentine's Day
my mother shows me
my dad's last attempt—



A crimson envelope
filled with lies



She laughs
her body rippling with delight
but I didn't get the joke

like steel under acid rain
their marriage corrodes.



I'm an adult now
but Mommy and Daddy
are still
there

even though I
am all that remains.



The best thing
they ever did
together

-MiaBella Colmenero, 11th



Reflecting

Tyler Solitis, 11th

I looked at my reflection in the mirror. And there I stood: the pretty pink dress my mom bought for me, the black shoes I already had, the sparkly necklace I received as a birthday gift from my grandmother, and my long hair that I straightened out the night before. It was picture day, which was an especially important day for my family. My parents used to always dazzle me up in the prettiest things that they thought suited me. It was a bright and warm day in Florida—as per usual—and they wanted my light, airy clothing to accommodate me to the heat while ensuring that I looked perfect for the third-grade yearbook. My mom came up behind me with her hands on my shoulders. “What a beautiful girl you are,” she said. “My beautiful baby girl.” Mirrors reflect because they are electrically conductive. When light hits the metal inside of the mirror, it cancels out the electric field, which causes it to reflect away. But when I saw myself, I knew the reflection I saw was wrong. The sound of my mother’s voice felt distant. My mind kept echoing the same word: “girl,” as if it was some foreign language. Why did I look so wrong? Why did the mirror not reflect me?

Both of my parents wanted a daughter. The day my mother had her ultrasound, my parents were ecstatic. They started to map out my new room filled with butterflies, dolls, bright colors, and anything “girly.” Ironically, ever since I was a toddler, my parents had to beg me to try on new skirts or put on new jewelry. I always preferred to wear a t-shirt with crazy graphics on it that represented the cool new video game that just came out. Instead of skirts, I would have cargo shorts. Instead of Barbies, I would have Hot Wheels cars or action figures. I was your traditional little boy; the only problem was, I was a girl.

It was an unspoken rule for girls to be friends with only girls and for boys to be friends with only boys when we were kids. The girls would always dress up, giggling in their small cliques, showing off their beautiful new outfits or makeup they wore that day. But I was intrigued by the boys: playing sports, talking about girls, cracking jokes, and laughing so loud that the class sighed in annoyance. I expressed this more openly online. I would always represent myself with male characters on public platforms. My persona looked like a traditional man: no standard eyelashes that all the girls had, no makeup to represent femininity, and no long hair for people to mistake me as a girl. The word “girl” did not apply to me. I wanted to be a boy, and so, a boy I was.

And that was my biggest secret: that was the true reflection. The mirror was deceptive. The person I saw was not a little girl. They may have looked like a girl in their feminine clothing and pretty jewelry. They may have looked like a girl with their long, soft hair. They may have looked like a girl, but they looked like a girl because everyone told them that they were a girl. The person I saw was a boy. A boy, trapped inside the metal reflection of the mirror. I never told anyone, either. A lost little boy trapped in a girl’s body—a prison—that had nowhere to go. What did this mean? Why didn’t I look like the other boys? I knew how I felt from the beginning, but I never knew how to explain it. Maybe all girls felt this way? Or maybe there was something wrong with me?

Y “You’re just a kid, after all,” my father explained. “Everyone is trying to figure themselves out.” So, I tried. I tried to figure out why I could not do what the boys did. Why were they participating in different activities? Why were they playing without me? Why could they kiss girls? What was the difference between me and the other boys? I tried so hard to figure it out. But all I could figure out was that I was different—different than any girl I have ever known.

When I arrived at school for my picture, I saw all the boys dressed in their formal attire: button-up shirts and suits accompanied by pants and boots. I could not help but fantasize about wearing the same clothing, wishing to replace the dress I was wearing—the cage that bonded me to my femininity. I was “beautiful,” while the boys were “handsome.” And as I sat down to take the picture, the photographer helped me groom myself. I brushed down my long, straight hair once again, and I fixed my crooked necklace. She looked at me and smiled: “What a beautiful girl you are.” The blinding flash was a burning reminder of how others perceived me. And now there is forever proof for everyone to see.

That was the first day that I opened my eyes. That was the first day I could see myself and know who I was meant to be. It was not just a phase or a young fantasy. Even now, I can look back and see how lost that boy was. It was a boy that only needed some guidance. Despite everything, it was still me.

My third-grade yearbook still exists, locked away somewhere in a box filled with countless other pictures and artifacts of my unhappy past. But that lost boy in that picture still smiles wide and bright, reflecting what that mirror did not.

Melomanie

Aaryn Starr, 11th

I want the pitch to hug the inside of my ear.
While my soul rests in the cords.
Meanwhile my heart rocks to the melodies.
At the same time my brain relates to the lyrics.
During that period of time my body dances to the beat.
So, please, do not tell me to turn my volume down;
I live for music; it's my only escape.



When We Meet by Jess Johnson (12th)



Girlhood

Katherine Ward, 12th

Girlhood is laughter like wind chimes and playing make-believe.

It is mother brushing your hair and softly singing you to sleep,
loving soft bellies and popsicle stains on your gentle tongue.

It is friendship bracelets and wanting everything in the color pink,
girlhood is innocence.

Girlhood is being made to cover up before your body
even starts to develop and told not to be a “distraction.”

It is trading tampons like dirty secrets and opening pads quietly in the bathroom
so that nobody knows you’re disgusting,

slowly realizing that even the men in your family will always view you as the lesser sex,
and telling yourself “boys will be boys” as the boy on the bus asks for your cup size.

Girlhood is corruption.

Girlhood is being taught how to protect yourself from being raped
because it’s too common to avoid anymore.

It is being told that if a boy is mean to you, it’s because he likes you; well i hope he kisses his
knuckles before they touch my cheek.

It is glancing over your shoulder like a game of cat and mouse, because don’t you ever forget
that you’re easy prey.

Being told “accusations like that could ruin his life “because his future is more important than
the way he shattered mine.

Girlhood is survival.

Girlhood is screaming until my throat is raw because the hands of men
have been pressed against my mouth for too long.

It is car keys between my knuckles and pink pepper spray keychains for Christmas.

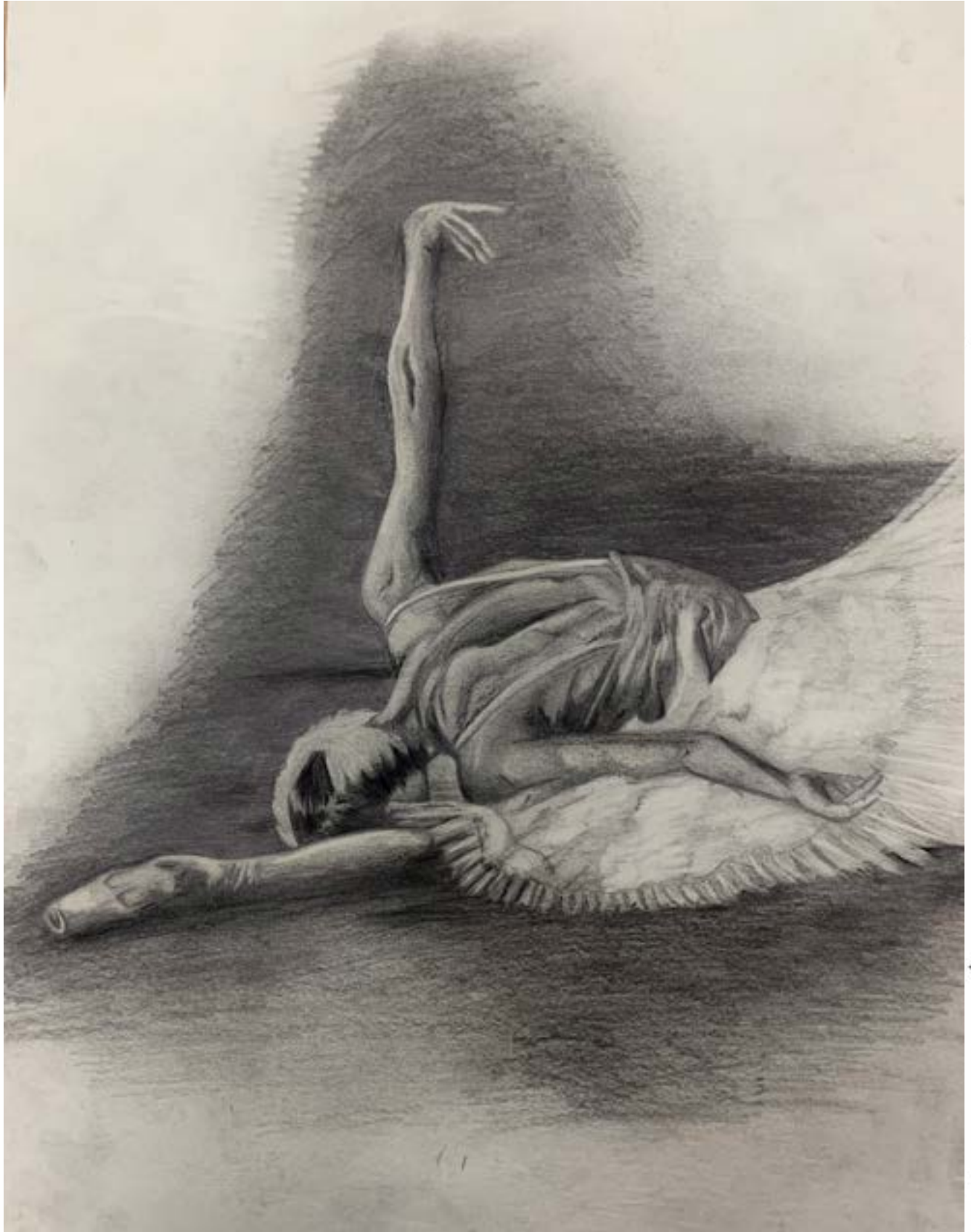
Where “knowing your place” means knowing how to walk quietly
on the shards of glass spit that leaves their loving mouths.

Girlhood is fighting every day to be seen,

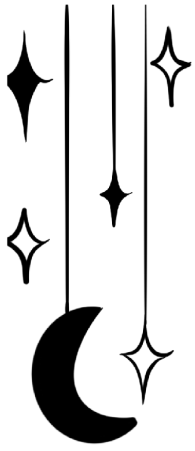
not as a womb, not as an object, and not as a punching bag for your pleasure.

Girlhood is perseverance.





La Cygne by Vanessa Crespo (12th)



I Wish I Were a Poet

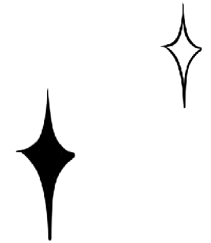
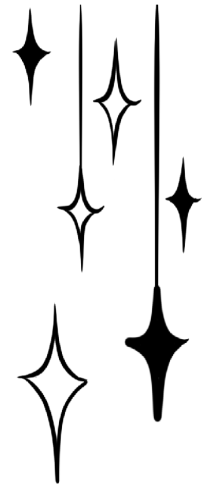
Sierra Marando, 12th

I wish I were a poet.
I wish that my words would
sound just as I mean them.
That I could not only
translate my thoughts
into pieces greater than prose,
but that I could also leave anyone
who stumbles across them
with something to ponder.

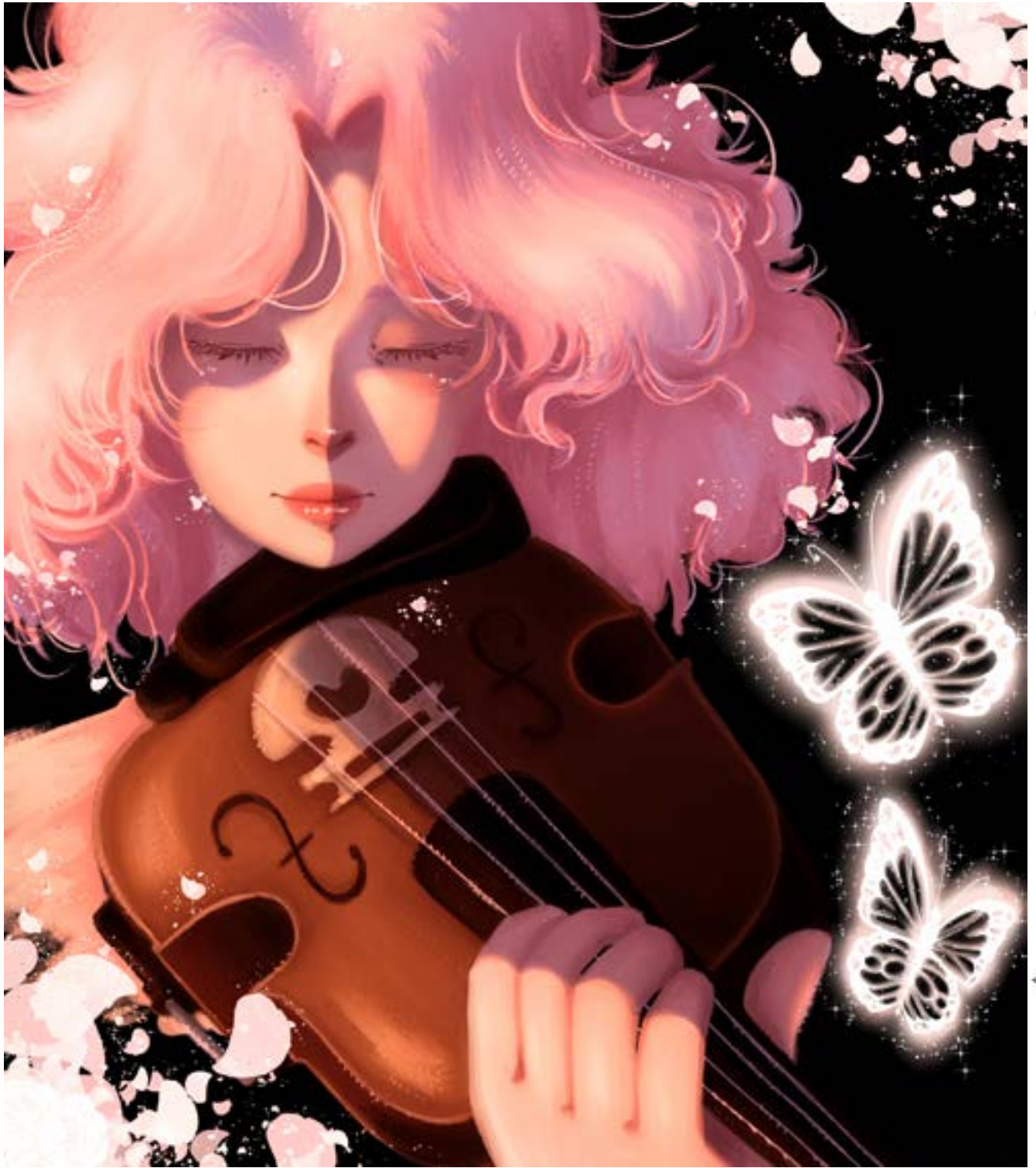
I wish I were a poet.
I wish that I knew just how to
regurgitate my devastation
into lines and stanzas
that make any kind of sense.
That my feeble attempts at communication
could be considered an art form.

I wish I were a poet
because aren't they respected?
Distinguished in the way that only comes
with the ability to string words together
so that they mean something greater,
deeper, more illustrious.
A skill that few truly master,
and even fewer put to proper use.

I wish I were a poet
because poetry perfectly embodies
the organized chaos of language.
Because I long to be transparent,
yet indecipherable in my work;
able to be studied
though never completely understood.



Blowing Dandelions in the Wind by Katelyn Krapfl (9th)



A Butterfly's Violin by Dani Delgado (10th)

Sockeye

Phoenix Mauldin, 9th

Every child has some sort of legend or myth told to them by their parents that lulls them to sleep.

When my mother was still around, she told me stories about a fish that she and my father saw only once, a golden salmon that shone like the sun as it swam upstream. Mom told me it's how they met; they both followed it as far as they could from the river mouth until the lines of the delta came together at a spring, where the fleck of gold disappeared among a sea of bright red sockeyes.

Mom always described it as the most beautiful sight that she ever saw; I always thought she was talking about my father until I realized that perhaps it was the fish instead. May God rest their memories, but dad was not exactly the most handsome man around. Any like-minded kid who had come from poverty as deep as mom had would have gone for the salmon, right? And still, somehow, she did not. She saw my dad and they talked for hours, always told me how she knew she would marry that man on the spot; right at the lake during salmon season.

They did end up getting married at the lake when the fish were just as abundant. I still do not know how my dad did it. The only thing different about their wedding from the day they first met was the lack of the singular, special golden salmon. The only thing that has changed since then and the day I visited the lake all alone was the lack of mom and dad presence there with me.

I had run away from home after getting into a fight with my brother. He said he did not want me around anymore, and truthfully, I did not want to be around anymore. I walked out of the door and took a slapstick sack on a stick full of clothes with me. I must have walked around for hours through the wetland beneath the hanging moss and willow trees before hearing rushing water coming from a clearing up ahead.

Blinded by my anger, I had left my canteen behind; I was parched and the only thing I could think to do was lean down and plunge my whole upper body into the babbling creek.

Y

That's when my hands touched something slimy, so I snapped out quickly, and biting on my wrist was this big, ugly, green-headed fish. A mass of them rushed past all at once, the one attached to me letting go. With a splash of water that soaked every part of me that already wasn't, it was swimming against the current and jumping up the brook with ease once again.

I knew immediately what they were, so running on interest and impulse I followed the salmon upstream and reached the same lake that mom had seen when she was younger.

There was a sudden question behind me, so I turned. It was a girl in a white dress and a flowery bow in her long dark hair, just as out of breath as I was as she stood at the other end of the estuary. She wiped her brow and waited for me to answer. I didn't hear her well the first time, so I of course asked her to repeat it.

"I said," she repeated to me, in an airy, beautiful voice, "Were you following the shiny fish as well?"

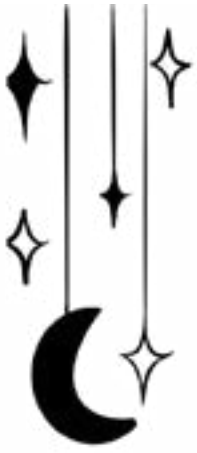
In response, I cocked my head to the side. "What?" I asked her. She laughed. "The golden one, with scales like glittering stars. You saw it too, didn't you?"

I looked at her, then back at the stream. Something somewhere, a voice in my head or perhaps the voice of fate itself told me that even if I said what I didn't see, it wouldn't be a lie. There was something as beautiful as gold right in front of me. She was more beautiful. "I guess I did."

The girl in the white dress walks closer. I realize that she's barefoot. "Betcha've never seen a rock do this before," she said to me, picking up a flat stone that lay at her feet. She threw it far across the lake and it skipped three times in a row. I could see through the clear water how the fish scattered away.

I smiled. "My brother knows how to skip rocks, but you just did it a lot better than I've ever seen him do. What's your name?"

"Y'know, you shouldn't tell your name to strangers," she said. Her hair blew in the wind and for just a moment, I swore I saw it glimmer. The light caught her eyes brilliantly, so ethereally that when she next spoke, I nearly missed it. "I go by a lot of things, but... you can just call me Sockeye."



I Wish I Were a Poet

Sierra Marando, 12th

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sound just as I mean them.
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A Tower on the Water

Vanessa Crespo, 12th

A tough and tall tower was built amid turbulent waters
the only ones who leave are the ones with winds
heavily chained to these walls and the floor
only a small window provides a glimpse of life beyond these walls

Alone with two other beings
who live in opposites of the darkest corners of this tower,
one who screams and one who sleeps to awaken as a beast

He puffs between his finger and thumb
as he chokes down on his vicious liquid
accompanied by the venom of Satan himself
this tiny window does nothing to this endless glum

Lifting these heavy chains these wings won't grow
how can they when there's not enough sunlight,
chained to these walls that paint pictures of hell
the other creatures' hyena songs echos throughout
the waters break apart the light from the brightest star
that shakes our world in boiling thunder

As the walls of this tower enrage them with high-frequency sound,
and she only causes a storm
the storm that prevents us from ever making it to the shore
she seemed to be constantly trying to keep her footing in rough waters
when will the waves stop being roiled by this terrible storm?

The being on the tower's darkest side wants to hear her melody
over the thundering thunder, but the liquid he picks has already built
his bed in hell
every scream makes the chains heavier

Oh, how could my creator keep me here?
Will I ever get long enough hair or wings to fly away from this tower?

The ones my designers had designed to trap me within a terrible
labyrinth of nets and snares
there are still glimmers of love despite the fact that this torment never
ends
concealed among the enormous chambers that keep this house together.

Deep in The Forest

Ro Bailey, 9th

I knew from a young age that the king would never cease his search for me. My father had committed the worst crime in the king's eyes years before I was born, and so the oh-so-great ruler decided to go after me as punishment. The forest surrounding the kingdom became my home: far enough from the rest of society so I'd be safe, but not so far that I'd be completely ostracized from all of humanity. Many people came through the forest with their tales and stories, but the most interesting people didn't speak a single word. Once, there was a woman who changed the forest while sleeping soundlessly in the middle of the day.

The woman's wavy copper hair lay spread around her head like a halo as she lay unconscious in the vibrant green grass. Her hands were folded across her chest as if she were dead, but from my kneeling position behind the bushes I could see the slight rise and fall of her chest. The midday sun glowed orange, illuminating her strong jawline and crooked nose. As she lay in the clearing of the forest, many animals skittered curiously towards her, only to race away as soon as she started mumbling in her sleep. Typically, I'd run and hide as far away as possible from anyone I saw, but this woman was so miraculous and ethereal that I found it impossible to tear my eyes away. I couldn't make out anything she was saying, but I could see her plump lips moving ever-so slightly. Hours passed with just me and her. My knees ached from my position, but I knew I couldn't move. The soft grass cushioned my bare feet, and I could feel the dirt caking onto my skin.

When the night started to fall and the stars began to twinkle, a man came. He was difficult to see with only the moon's pale light, but I could see his long, dark hair. The hairs on my arm raised, as I knew that any man I saw was likely one of the king's follies. He crouched next to the maiden, shielding her from my view. The man poked her cheek a few times, urging her to wake up. He removed the oversized satchel from his back and took something out. It seemed to be a canteen and a cloth. The man then soaked the cloth and dabbed her forehead with it, wiping away the grime and dirt from her gentle face. When he stood up, I caught a glimpse of the girl in the moonlight. She looked like an angel, her features strong yet soft. The man turned around and I could see his face. I bit my lip to keep me from screaming. He wore an old leather eyepatch, and the entire left side of his face was burnt off. His cheeks were torn off and I could see his teeth through the hole. His lips were brutally mutilated, leaving him with a permanent cleft lip and grimace. He pulled a mask over his face and simply looked at me. His warm brown eyes showed none of the malice or cruelty so many others had. Our eyes met before he nodded softly and walked away.

The next to arrive was a thief with a dangerous smile. It was dawn, and as the birds chirped and the morning sun rose, I retreated a little further into the woods. I did not fear that man, and there was no need to. He was a simple yet successful thief who could do me no harm. My view of the sleeping girl remained as clear as daylight, she hadn't moved an inch all night. The thief snatched the damp cloth from the girl's head and tore off his mask, wiping his forehead. He was undeniably handsome, almost like a prince. His tan hair hung neatly down to his chin, his nose poked straight out from his face. Golden chains adorned his neck and wrists, and if I hadn't seen him stealing the satchel the burnt man had left behind, I would've assumed he was royalty.

Something about that man's face disgusted me, a smug look like he had done something impressive, adorned his face, while all he managed to do was take a few small items from the sleeping girl. He didn't stay long enough for me to analyze his face anymore, for he fled after taking the bag.

Around what must have been noon, a young lady walked up to the girl and lay right next to her. She wasn't hideous like the burnt man, nor was she beautiful like the sleeping girl. This girl was exceptionally plain. My lips were cracked, and my eyes were so heavy I could barely stay awake. The sight of this girl, the feeling of uncertainty about my safety, was the only thing that kept me awake. She simply laid right there and basked in the warm sun until her cheeks were tinged with red. I felt sweat dripping from the back of my neck, the day had grown unbearably hot. The simple girl stretched, watching as her shadow moved with her. She stood up and marveled at how tall and long the shadow was, casting darkness upon the grass. The girl yawned wide, stretching her thin lips and round face out and then back to normal. She wiped the grass and dirt off her homely brown dress and left.

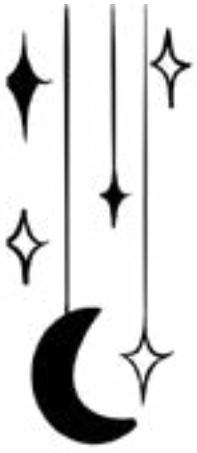
The last person I remember seeing before I blacked out from exhaustion was the king. I couldn't breathe at all, my head pounding before I allowed myself the tiniest breath. He wore a dramatic gold headpiece and long furry robes. All proof of the wealth he had stolen from the common folk. The king kneeled next to the girl and wept. I hated seeing people cry, despising how disheveled they always looked, but the sight of the man sobbing, he who had ruined my life before I was born, filled me with a strange, guilty feeling. I didn't dare move a muscle, as any sound I produced would surely result in my demise. My position put extreme strain on my legs, hips, and arms, I could feel the bark of a tree cutting into my side, but my desire to live erased all the pain.

It must have been hours before the king left, and much longer before I was able to will my body to move. I collapsed onto the group, exhausted, starving, and dehydrated. The girl finally awoke, and with my blurred vision I watched her approach me. Everything in my body screamed at me to run, to fight, to do anything, but I just couldn't. My end was so near that I could taste it on the tip of my tongue. But the girl didn't hurt me. She simply held me in her arms, and my body shut down in her warm embrace. I awoke with a racing heart, but no pain in my body.

I never saw that woman again, but sometimes I'd think I saw her in the reflection of a pond or the eye of a squirrel. The forest was never the same after that. With each day there was a new blessing, a fresh ring of daisies or a lovely circle of rocks to start a fireplace. The king died, but it was already too late for me. Though I was used to the forest, the medicine in the kingdom was the only thing that could cure my illness. By the time it would be safe for me to enter, my body had given up on itself. As my consciousness floated away into pitch black darkness, my last thoughts were of that wonderful girl. The cold embrace of death was just as warm as the girl's arms.



Mystical Paradise by Theresa Boban (12th)



Torn to Oblivion

Emily Oates, 11th

Being forgotten feels like drifting away
the ice-cold water nipping at your skin
the aching loneliness a heavy weight on your chest
the constant overwhelming background noise
that drown out your cries

Your body becoming small, smaller and smaller
eyes staring at you unrecognizing
everything fading away until you're all that's left

No one to murmur your name
no one to hold you
no one to hold your memory
no one to laugh with
just drifting away

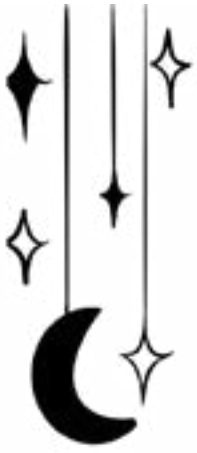
Nothing but the void to keep you company
slowly losing your feelings until you are simply a shell
becoming one with the vast waves
forgotten and alone
simply listening but never comprehending

After all, what else can you do
when you're torn to oblivion





Amelia Sunset by Emily Oates (11th)



Human Captivity

Sophia McKeever, 12th

A mother cradles her newborn son,
and tells him how they used to live in a house made of wood,
the sky used to be the color blue,
and grass began with the letter g because it was green.

She begins a tale of her youth,
of how her lover was a man named Jack,
who saved her from a fire,
and on the same day set her heart ablaze.

Oh, she rambled about his bravery,
how he always held her in his arms,
the way he would softly caress her stomach
because their love had made a family.

The woman begins to weep,
for her tears shovel the dirt on her cheek,
and cries for the burden of knowing love
that was picked apart.

Her voice becomes cracked like heated glass,
when she tells the tale of the men with grey skin,
who plundered each room,
and killed the man that tried protecting his home.


The bars around her stop reverberating sound,
red sand violently swooshes in the air,
as she recalls the last sight of her home world-
her husband's hollow eyes.

"I will teach you all that I know,
while vain in nature,
there will come a day
when you are all alone."

"There will be jeers,
there will be trash,
there will be those that 'ooh' and 'ahh',
there will be those that look at us with pity."



The woman rocks her baby back and forth,
singing little lullabies
the crowd taunts and mocks,
but the mother knows he will be the keeper of memories so dear.









The Wolf, the Girl, and the Huntsman




Cameron Constantine, 12th




A small cabin sat in the middle of the woods. It was overgrown with blood roses and thorny vines, the wood that made up the structure rotted from years of decay. One would not be blamed for thinking the cabin abandoned, lost to the woods like many others before it. However, just beyond the undead vines and roses, beyond the rot and wear, there lies life. A girl, dressed in a black dress, draped in a beautiful scarlet hooded cape and her wolf; with fur as dark as charcoal and eyes red as blood. The girl's name was Autumn, which was inscribed on a locket she'd had for as long as she could remember, and the wolf was named Zule; a name Autumn had chosen for him after reading a tale of a great hero by the same name. They lived alone together, closer than mere owner and pet. Zule hunted for the girl, gathering everything they needed; from meat to berries, and even firewood and old lost books for her to read. Autumn, in turn, cooked meals for the two, making use of the wolf's gifts. Despite being merely 17 and living outside of normal society, she was well versed in her craft; learning everything she needed to from old cookbooks.



And as they provided for each other's needs, they defended each other when threatened as well. Autumn wielded two sickles to mercilessly slaughter anyone who'd dare threaten her wolf and their life together. She possessed great agility too, being able to climb up even the tallest trees of the woods and was too fast for most to hit with a rifle or bow. Zule, likewise, possessed his own tricks that helped him ward off threats. His dark fur allowed him to hide within the shadows too, as if part of the void itself his prey, watching and waiting in the dark corners of the woods and within the cover of the night. And when he struck it was a brutal sight, with sharp teeth and beastly claws he mauled his enemies and painted the dark and drab woods with their blood and decorated the trees with their entrails.



The main threat the pair faced were huntsmen; hired mercenaries sent by lords and noblemen to kill and retrieve whoever or whatever they needed. Huntsmen mainly targeted Zule; as their employers valued the dark and beautiful hides along with the haunting red eyes his breed was known for. Autumn was not exempt from these bounties either, however; as her multiple killings of huntsmen had accrued a hefty price upon her head. It had been months since the last attack; a considerable break from what used to be a near-weekly occurrence for them. Perhaps, they thought; they had finally given up and decided to leave them be, whether out of respect, fear, or just not worth the effort anymore. But as Zule was out on another hunt, he heard sounds in the distance.



The leaves crunched beneath their leather combat boots as they trudged through the forest. They were a group of 7 strong: five rangers armed with rifles and crossbows, a knight wielding an enchanted sword, and a mage gripping his crystal staff. They were experienced and ruthless, showing no mercy to their adversaries as they executed their missions. Hunting down the girl and her wolf would be their most daunting mission yet. They'd heard stories about:he cursed mission that doomed those foolish enough to take it, and the guts and blood splattered across the forest. They knew all too well what they were getting into and planned it accordingly, training and making use of talking ravens to scout the area. For months they prepared for this fateful day, and they were determined to prove their efforts worthwhile; it would be victory or death.

“So... I know it's, uh, a bit late to ask this...,” Donovan, one of the rangers and undoubtedly the most cowardly of the bunch, skittishly began to ask, “if this mission were taking is infamously impossible... why did we take it again?” Another ranger, Harry, who was marching alongside just to his left looked at him with a look of complete bewilderment. “Excuse me? Months of rigorous training, planning, and scouting, and only now you start to wonder ‘hrm why are we doing this again guys?’” Harry quietly raised his voice. “You completely sheepish fool, do you even know what you-” he said this as he was cut off by the Knight, who was second in command of the group.

“Silence, you imbeciles! We must remain as silent as possible for we are in hostile territory, and we must not alert our adversaries,” the Knight ordered the men in a quiet and stern voice.

Unbeknownst to the Knight, or any of the group, the wolf had already spotted them and made his way back to the cabin to alert the girl. He ran as fast as he could, but he was farther than he usually went out to hunt and overexerted himself in the process. By the time he made it back to the cabin, he was tired and in no fighting shape. The girl immediately noticed this unusual behavior from the wolf as she exited the cabin; for the wolf is rarely exhausted to this extent after a mere hunting trip.

“Zule! What's wrong, is everything alright?” she asked, panicked that her poor Zule could be hurt or in danger. But as her mind raced through every possibility that could explain his condition, the wolf let out a cry, a very familiar and specific cry, one that Zule used to tell Autumn that danger was coming. Her worry then turned to fear, which turned to anger, for she knew this meant huntsmen were after them again.

“They're back... I was foolish to think they'd leave us be. Rest here, Zule, I'll take care of them for you,” she said with a soft fury and determination in her voice.

Zule whimpered, for he cared for Autumn too, and did not wish for harm to come to her. But he knew she was a capable fighter and reluctantly trusted her despite his worries, not that he was in any shape to help her anyways.

Y

“I will be back soon, it’ll be alright,” Autumn whispered to Zule as she rubbed his head, “I will make them suffer for daring to even scratch you,” and with that, she ran off into the woods to track her prey.

The men were getting closer now, closing in on the cabin with every step. For every one step they took; however, Autumn continued her hunt, and though the huntsmen didn’t know it yet; it would not be long before they would become the hunted.

“Look, I’m just feeling a bit nervous... and maybe having second thoughts now that it’s, well, happening,” Donovan whispered, continuing the conversation with Harry from before.

“Seriously? You’re still on about that? Look just shut up, be quiet, and focus,” Harry whispered in return, “Lest our fears be realized...”

The Knight then ordered the men to settle down, as dark would soon befall the forest. They took shelter in a nearby cave; spacious enough to house all 7 men relatively comfortably. They unpacked their equipment, unrolled their sleep sacks, and rested their weary bodies. The Knight, however, strengthened by the magic of his enchanted sword, refused to rest and chose to keep watch as the group sat within the cave. However, the Wizard, who was named Theo, felt restless as well and took up watch alongside the Knight.

“Come to think of it, you’ve never told me,” Theo started, grabbing the Knight’s attention, “We’ve known each other a long while, 6 years to be exact, but only now do I wonder; why the huntsman business? You were a highly decorated warrior, you’ve seen your share of bloodshed, and furthermore, you had an illustrious dwelling and a loving family. So why leave that behind to return to all the gore and the violence? Most men who’ve witnessed what you’ve seen would be ridden with fear of even witnessing such things again.” Indeed, it was quite a striking question to the Knight, one he wasn’t sure if he should even answer, for it was painful to think about, but nonetheless, he trusted Theo and would share his tale.

“I cannot find peace outside of violence. Even as I tried to settle down, something nagged me to take up the sword again and continue fighting. I was never taught how to lead a life outside warfare, from the moment I turned eight I was trained to fight and by the time I was 16, I had taken my first life. It’s a life I could not peacefully escape, and I had to return somehow. So, I found my peace in being a huntsman; every fight, every kill fills me with purpose and keeps me sane, at least it feels that way,” the knights sighed, and it was quiet for a moment. “So, what about you, why are you here?” he asked.

“I just need to repay my debts to my guild. I mixed the wrong potions, stuff blew up, and now I’m 800,000 in debt. 700,563 now actually, and if we pull this off it’ll be completely paid off with extra to spare,” Theo replied.

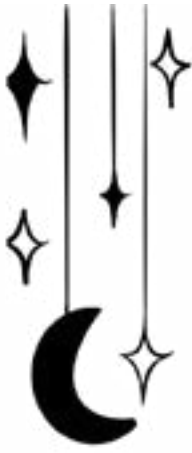
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The Knight chuckled, “Well that figure-” he started, but as he responded a red figure in the distance caught his eye. Its form flowed elegantly in the wind as it stared down the group. Its mere presence was haunting, even to the Knight as tough and experienced as he was. There was no doubt in his mind that this was the girl.

“She’s here! The girl is here! From up and prepare to fight!” the Knight yelled. The rangers were engaged in an intense card game but threw it aside when they heard the order. They formed up beside Theo and the Knight and aimed their firearms toward the ghastly red figure in the woods. The true terror of their situation struck their hearts; as they realized they were staring down an undefeated brutal killer with an appearance haunting enough to match.



Spark by Alex Takeuchi (10th)



My Star

Jasmine Tucker, 12th

Oh, my beautiful star,
how you shine so brightly
even in the darkest of times

When the lights go out and the sun is down
you are all I can see in the night

You guide my way
to the galaxies
that I am so far away from.

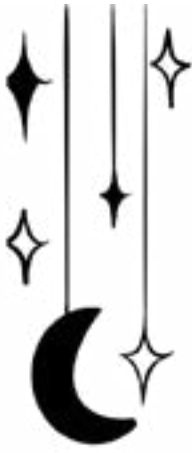
You hold the key to my heart,
and even when we cannot be together
you will never stop being the one I love.

No matter where life
takes me, my beautiful star
is always right by my side,
in the sky





In a Sky Full of Stars by Arissara Treepala (11th)



My Whiteboard

Jasmine Tucker, 12th

You wrote in marker
on my whiteboard

So easily erasable
those markers were.

Except you wrote in
Sharpie, and now it
won't come off.

Permanently etched across that
white surface, the same
words you uttered to me every day:
"I will love you forever."

You should have been careful,
with which marker you used.

Those words do not mean the
same for you as they do for me.



The Diary

Connor Ronnie, 10th

“Diary, you say? Bring it here,” Rensford said and put out his cigarette in his ashtray, twirling it around until the orange light dissipated into nothingness, then slanted back in his chair with a flick of his tail. The cat placed his hands on his stomach as he waited impatiently for his servant to answer his demands. The feline’s air was so careless, yet so deadly. Barley could see his golden canines glint, even in the dark, the reflection like the moon hitting the black sea at midnight. It was the tail end of their workday, when Barley would return to his chains in the stable among the cold unforgiving hay, and Rensford would fall into a deep slumber under his silk sheets on his gold bed. But his city never slept. Rensford’s empire could never rest. His horse clattered towards him and dropped the little journal on his desk.

The feline picked it up and inspected it, turning it around to observe it at different angles. He parted the front cover from the pages inside and skimmed about, letting his fingers trail through. He was utterly satisfied to see so much vulnerable, pubescent, and emotional vomit scribbled there in pen. All his rival’s vulnerabilities were resting there, right in his hands. He peeked at the very first page inside. He glanced over the small, lined box for the author to mark the journal as their personal property with their name.

“Bugpuppy,” it read. Rensford closed it shut.

“And how did you get this?” he pried, his claws tracing the cover, his fingers bumping over the slight incline of the stickers.

“He left his bag in the church lobby.”

Rensford sat up immediately and his voice turned bitter. “Dee’s church?”
“Yes, sir,” Barley said and looked down at his horseshoes. He was drowning in shame, but the worst feeling of all was the fear for his life. A feeling that would stab at him every time his dogmatic boss would raise his voice like that. It was a constant, agonizing struggle to not eye the captive bolt gun on the very edge of his desk, well within reaching distance of Rensford. It was in his instinct to eye the danger that loomed over him.

“You went inside Dee’s church where they train,” Rensford said while rubbing his forehead, his eyes piercing into his servant. “Were they in there?”

“Yes, sir,” Barley said wincing, and weaving from side-to-side and squeezing his haunches out of terror. With a swift, sharp strike, Barley’s face was scratched.

“You know better!” Rensford was standing now, heaving and hissing with his head sunk down into his shoulders while he spat, feline eyes wide and snout scrunched up like a Bengal tiger.

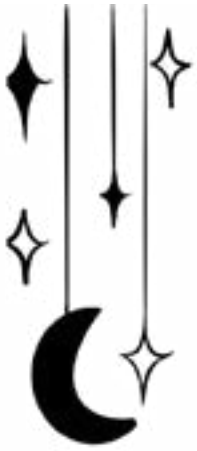
The stallion was stunned. His posture was frozen upright in shock. He and his master stood across from each other with eyes locked. Breathing, waiting, bleeding. Silence. Barley brought a hoof up to his cheek, then pulled it back to his line of sight. His deep black hoof was coated in a thin layer of blood. He turned back to Rensford. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Get out,” his boss commanded with a hand raised towards the door. Nothing from Barley this time.



“Get out, goddammit! Out!” he said as his nails dug into the desk furiously, raking downwards. And as if Barley had just been thrust back into reality, he departed as quickly as possible, tail tucked in between his legs. When all was silent again and the feeling of another body present had left him completely, he sighed and sat back down in his chair. Poker-faced, he pulled out his silk handkerchief, embroidered just for him. One claw at a time, he wiped the blood off him and tucked it back into his pocket.





Red

Grace Horner, 12th

Red, the color that spins my head
and fuels my flaming desires;
my hopes and dreams of wanting to be
a person the world can admire.

Red is loud and red is fierce;
it took my life by storm.
Red guided me through grays and blues
'til warmer shades were born.

Red is a place where I can rest
my weary, beaten soul.
Lead-laden limbs find solace in
red embers mixed with coal.

Sometimes red is volatile,
too hot for skin to touch,
but I relish in its scorching heat;
red never hurts too much.

And even on my darkest days
when all color fades away,
red rears its head and charges forth
towards hope for better days.





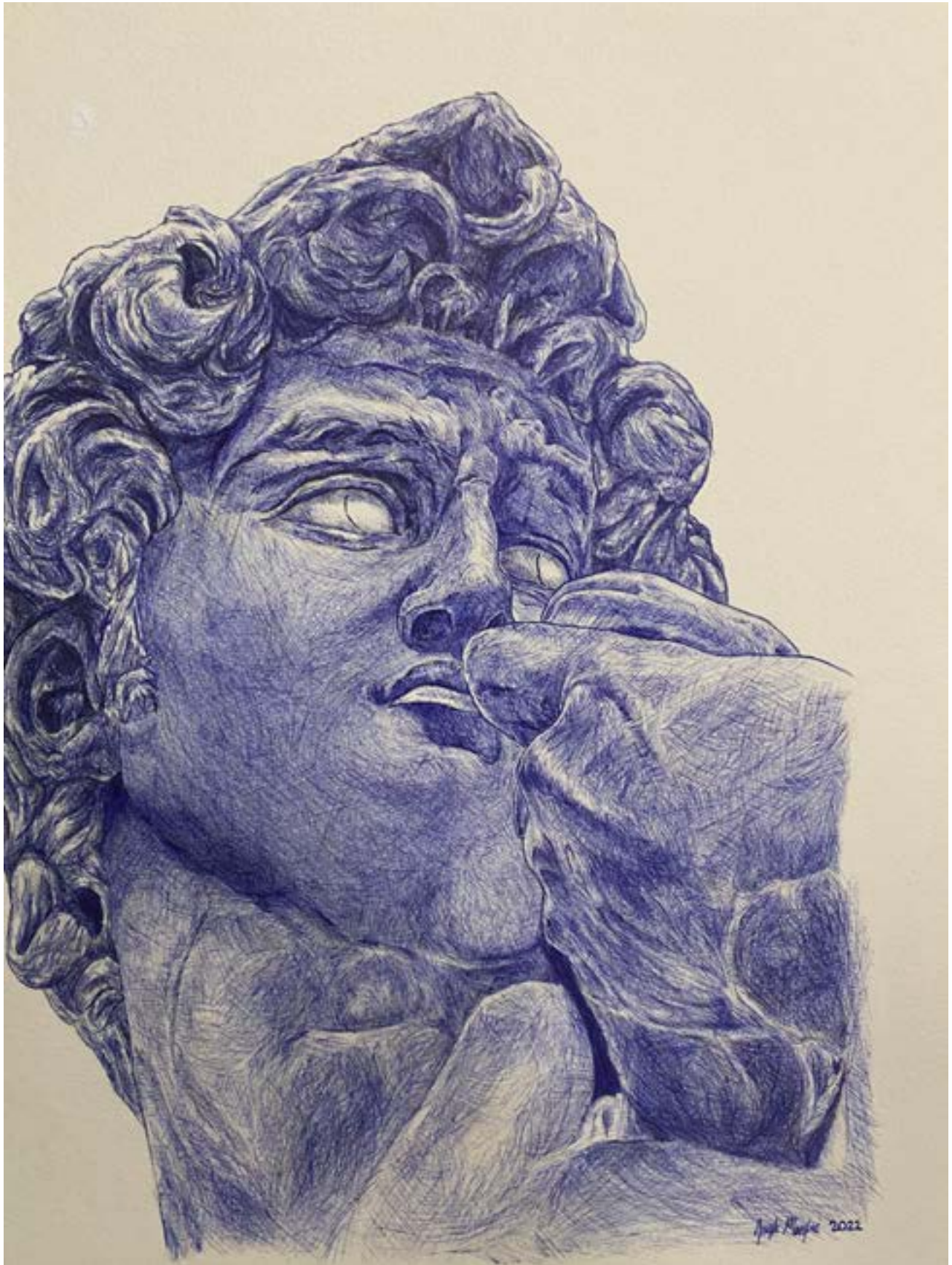
Requiem

CJ Stannard, 11th

Requiem. A term based off the final passage between life and death. A state of neutrality. A calm tranquility. A term based off of purgatory. Religious philosophy bases all of morality and human thought on a scale; a scale of good and evil. Now I wouldn't say that human experience should be based entirely off of a scale of right and wrong. Life is not so black and white, barely saturated. However, this term; "Requiem", shouldn't only apply to a pure life. Requiem should be everyone's understanding that life is not as precious as everyone makes it out to be.

"Requiem": the term that keeps circling and spiraling out of control. This is my ultimate hell, the ultimate pain and suffering. I deserved this. I am this. I am requiem. This experience of obsession throughout my life has followed me. This obsession for greatness. My relationships severed. My vision clouded. The silence deafens. The light blinds. The feeling piercing. Requiem. Requiem. REQUIEM. Obsession. The final stretch of life continues. It's all cleared. The perfect symphony. Requiem. Endless possibilities with endless amounts of time. Requiem. My final resting. Requiem. The star aligns. Requiem. The ink dries up. Requiem. And the dinner finishes. Requiem. My final thoughts. Requiem. Mental clarity. Requiem. This is my conclusion. Requiem. The ultimate harmonic. Requiem. The ultimate denouement of life. Requiem. This is my requiem.





Statue of David by Joseph Manfre (12th)

She Deserved to Die

Emerald Soldier, 9th

Red and blue lights glow, casting an apprehensive light on the hospital walls. Cameras from the local news and journalists flash, despite the protests of patients and visitors alike. But they persisted. The very next day, on the morning news, the violent events of the night before were displayed; bold ink contrasting vastly with the pure white of the paper. The previous day was one of shock and unrest for the police, patrolling the streets as usual. Hospital workers were in a flurry, trying to get ahold of the situation, hustling patients away from the scene and blocking the journalist's view. I stood by the doorway with my hospital gown just barely touching the floor. I watched as nurses and paramedics lifted the corpse of a woman from the ground and on a stretcher and whisked her away. I saw the other doctors and emergency room assistants desperately trying to clean up the bloody mess. The other patients and I saw everything, looking back at what we had done. But, in all honesty, she deserved it.

When she was alive, she was the supervisor of the hospital. Her job was to watch doctors do their job and criticize them, even though she did not know how to administer any medication. All the hospital staff despised her, and the patients despised her even more. She loomed over us like a hawk, nitpicking us for each individual "mistake" we made. One of us was bound to lash out. I remember one time, sometime in September, she had walked in on a liver transplant surgery. The lead surgeon, the anesthesiologist, and the nurses had everything under control. It was meant to be a tedious, but smooth-sailing surgery. But Donna had walked in, with her sagging hips and downturned mouth, and a jingling keychain which could be heard for miles and began tampering with their work. Eventually, one of the nurses pushed her out of the surgery room, with her shouting in fury about "insubordination." It was insane to hear the next day.

Sometimes she walked into patients' rooms and criticized their hygiene. Other times she gave us candy. She was a two-faced monster. She had no shame.

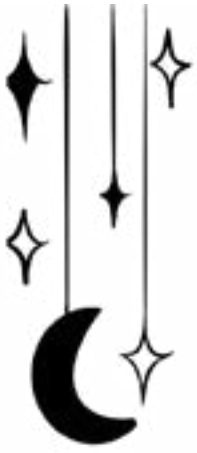
Yesterday evening, right when the patients' curfew began, some patients were still walking to their dorms. Donna had decided to pester them about their tardiness. Even when one of the patients had reached her room, Donna had walked in and continued her unsolicited tirade. In a short flash of rage, the patient jumped on her, tackled her to the ground, and began strangling and punching her head in. Donna was dead in 2 minutes and 34 seconds. The doctors who had seen this event chose not to report her. They chose to swiftly move the patient to a different room, clean up the bloody mess, and stage her death as a suicide.

We had waited for this moment. We all knew that one of us had to kill her. I was sure that the hospital staff had secretly been wishing for this moment as well. She deserved it.

Weeks had passed since the initial crime. The sun shone brilliantly through the windows of the dormitory. Patients walked down the hallway, blissfully unaware of the qualms of the world outside. To us, this was our world. Although the crime had only been a couple of weeks ago, everyone had forgotten about it. The papers said that the community mourned the death of Donna McLaughlin and she was buried with mounds of flowers by the newly erected gravestone. She was kind, courteous, and a hero to the community. She studied at Harvard Medical School and worked up the ranks of the Bulbar Hospital and Psych Center. She became a hospital supervisor and kept her position for 15 years. However, the stress of her honorable job had gotten to her, and she tragically committed suicide on December 15, 2023. She was buried in the Sweetheart Cemetery, just outside of the local church.

I sat on my bed, rereading *The Silent Patient* once again. I flipped the pages mindlessly, not acknowledging the doctor at my door. Slowly, she walked in, and sat next to me on my bed. She was one of the doctors who had seen my crime. She silently brought me food, gave me an affirming smile, almost a smile of approval, and left.

The sun set and rose again. My stay at the hospital is close to indefinite. Although the doctors chose to not say a word about my murder of Donna McLaughlin, they still cared about me. They wanted me to be in a better place, and not go around and murder people. But despite how much I respected those doctors, I couldn't help but think that I was in the right. She deserved to die.



The Last Time

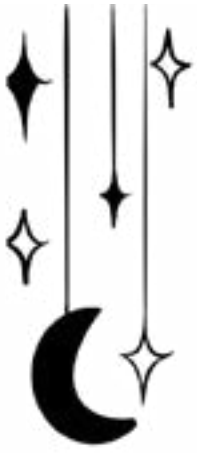
Fernando Villalta, 11th

Each day we do things we don't think much about. We eat, sleep, breathe, walk, talk and more, but do we ever question when our last time is doing anything will be? Maybe we will be doing this longer than our peers, but are they prepared to take their last breath, to take their last walk, to have their last conversation, to have their last meal, to sleep for their final night? Are they your mom, dad, brother, sister, friend, or anyone you care about? Are you prepared to experience life after them? Are you prepared when this will inevitably happen to you?





Rose Gold by Arissara Treepala (11th)



Last Night

Kloee Banker, 9th

The moon suddenly heaves starboard,
and I feel like I should avert my eyes from her
but she just paused a moment, looming over me
tiptoeing on the neighbor's splintering fence.

Leaning over the gunwale
born of a magazine model and an operating table light,
pearly teeth behind chapped lips
accompanied by soft and spindly hands
resting in front of me, with her stringy, golden hair
soaked in seawater and streaked in sand
we both lie awake, with her wide and luminous eyes
spotlighting the lawn I lie on

I stare at her like a lighthouse keeper gone mad
she stares back at me,
"You should not look at me,
I know it hurts you,"

we both pause for a minute

"Why do you not look away?"
she sounded almost sad.

The neighborhood is alive and buzzing
with the murmurs and hums of AC units,
and the fabric softener smell wafting from the next-door
neighbor's dryer vents

I replied;
"You're beautiful."
and the moon smiled back at me.










Nature by Molly Cooley (12th)





Letter to My Best Friend

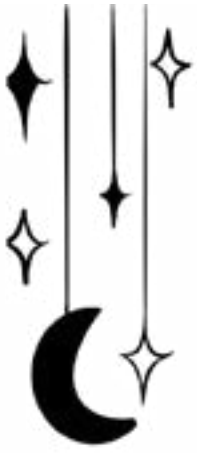
Shayna Peruzzi, 11th



Dear person who can't look at me, talk to me, or even think about me. I miss you. No matter how much I fill my head with lies, name calling, and the blame, I still think about you. I think about you in a good way. In a way that makes me smile. In a way that makes me write something like this. In a way that questions every part of the relationship we had. In a way that causes me to say to myself, "How did it come to this?" Sometimes I can't think about anything else. My head is on repeat to the events leading up to this dissolve. The miscommunication, the badmouthing, every factor. It all makes sense when it comes down to it. I just never thought this would be real. Because this is reality. We are no longer friends. We no longer tell each other about how our boyfriends have been misbehaving or tell each other how beautiful the other person is. We've become two complete strangers. I've decided I don't want to believe that anymore. I like to think that you do think about me, that you will, one day, talk to me. I like to believe if I wait long enough, we will go back to normal. These beliefs give me hope. False hope. Hope that with never become anything. Hope that is just that; hope. Holding out for you, the way I am, breaks my heart a little more every week that passes without any contact from you. I can't take it anymore. This hurt and pain has slowly turned to anger, as I find myself hating you. I hate you for what you did. I hate the way you're treating me, and the way you walk with your head tall, as if your heart isn't breaking in that moment too. I hate you when I see you smile, knowing that it's probably real. I hate you. I hate you because, for some reason, I miss you. And I love you. And I find myself loving you, even when I'm hating you.



I'm trying to move on. To be honest, I don't think I've worked toward anything harder than I am for that moment. The moment I realize you don't have the unconditional love I have for you. The moment I come to terms with your thoughtlessness. The moment I realize I no longer think of you. I won't think about how you are doing, or how life is treating you. I won't try to look for you in the halls just to imagine myself running into your arms while we laugh so hard, we cry. I won't think of you. But I have to tell you, moving on with no sense of closure is the hardest thing I think I have ever done. I wouldn't wish that upon anyone. Not my worst enemy, and especially not you. I'll always have love for you, even when I know you don't deserve it.



Death's Vice
Chase Thurber, 12th

Smothering frost, howling winds
Winter starts; the fight begins.



Failure by Brynne Meher (12th)



Coke

R.S., 12th



When we were cleaning out my grandma's house we found a crate of dusty, limited edition Coke bottles from the 90s, unopened and worth \$7 a bottle today.

She used to drink Cokes when she worked the desk at the family store. About three a day, each one after finishing a cigarette.



Her son had gifted her the crate of Cokes.

My dad, a fanatic.

He comes home each day with a super-sized cup of the stuff. He doesn't like water. I can't think of any time when I've seen him drink water.



I'm not immune to this generational addiction.

I need it.

The sweet taste of caramel and Christmas.

The fizz when I pour it into a glass over ice.

The feeling of brandishing a bottle in my hand.



The craving runs in my blood.

Coke memorabilia all over my house,

empty cans always somewhere;

product placement in my own home.

Its presence will never leave, even once we're all with my grandma.



Excavators will someday find artifacts

attributed to one of the many

20th century American deities.

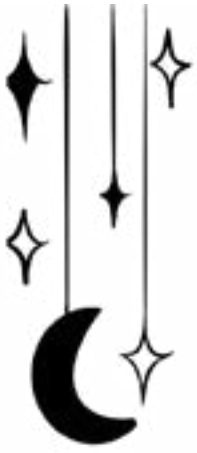
Coke is our patriarch, our lord,

our giver of life.





Natural Interactions by Fernando Villalta (11th)



Our Lady of Sorrows

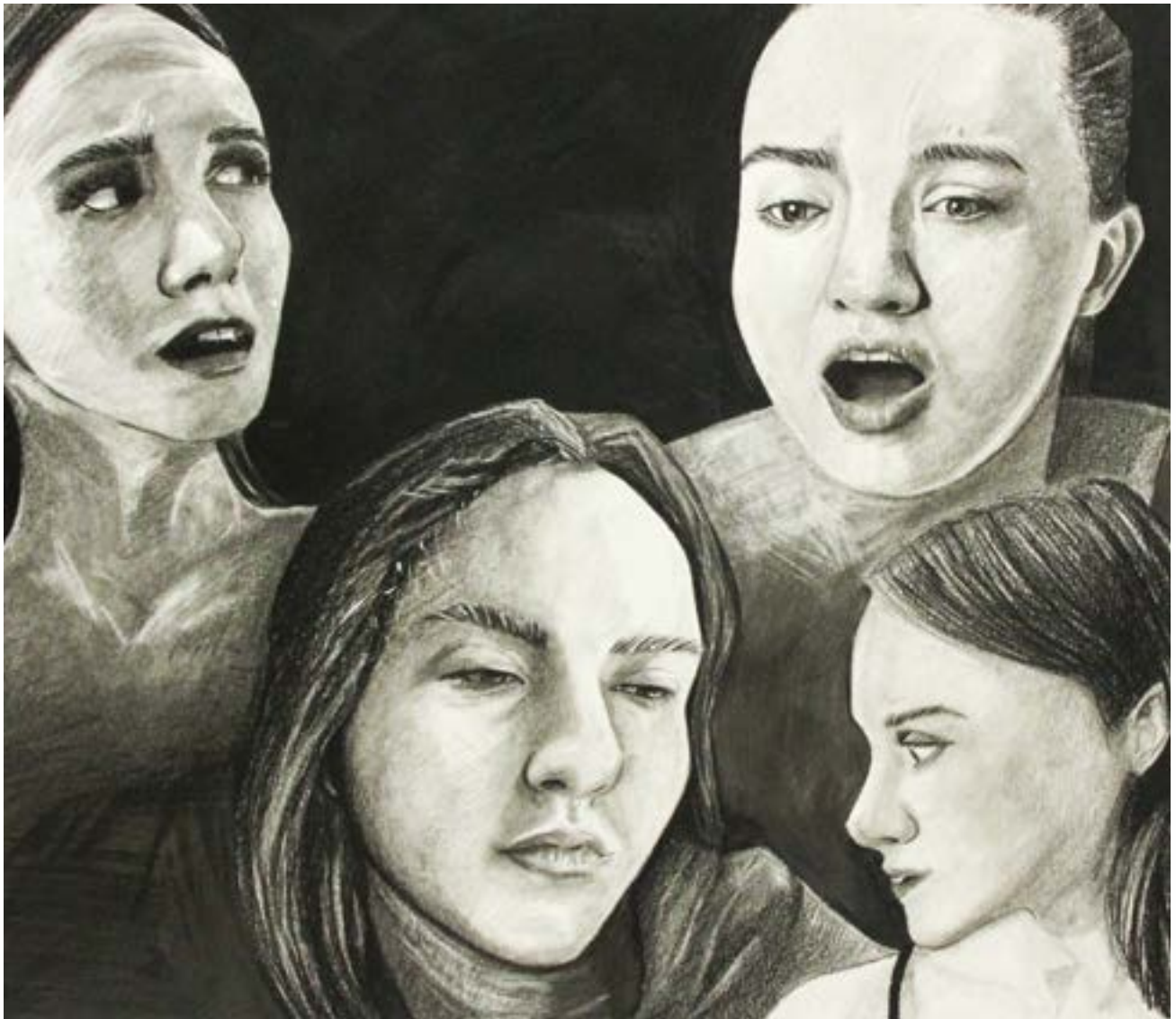
Kristian Campisi, 11th

Do not weep for me
take this requiem from the dead
an everlasting flame
let it act as a light
while ensnared in shadows
of overwhelming sorrow
joyous bands will play
hear thy angels scream
the journey will be over
but the eternal soul will not rest

Bury me in a mausoleum
fit for the spectacle
a glorious sight for all indeed
inside a rotting corpse long gone
memories constrained
through profound loss
woes of your majesty will not be forgot

My suffering
brought your salvation
in the name of the cosmos
are destiny interwoven
however, split apart
by Father Time
a mercy killing perhaps
for the love I feel
has seen no constraint





All Eyes on You by Corrine Candelario (12th)

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