

NEOTTERIC





NEOTERIC STAFF PAGE

2025-26

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

This year's edition of the Neoteric magazine is the product of the hard work done by Mrs. Mandarino's 1st and 6th periods. The members of those classes worked hard to select the best of the best out of the wonderful submissions we received this year. We had countless amazing pieces that just didn't quite make it in. If your piece didn't make it into this year's issue, don't fret! There is always next year.

Everything you read here was written and reviewed by students, for students. This year's theme was 'Heroes,' and although we don't limit submissions by topic, every one of these works displays the heroic act of writing. Literacy is more important now than ever, and the people who chose to submit to this magazine have the incredible courage it takes to share creativity with the world.

The River Ridge Literary Society works hard all year to preserve the ever-evolving craft of writing, and this magazine is the culmination of all of our hard work. By picking this up, you have just chosen to support the creativity of young people.

That makes you a hero.

Thank you!

Your 25'-26' Editor,
Ro Bailey

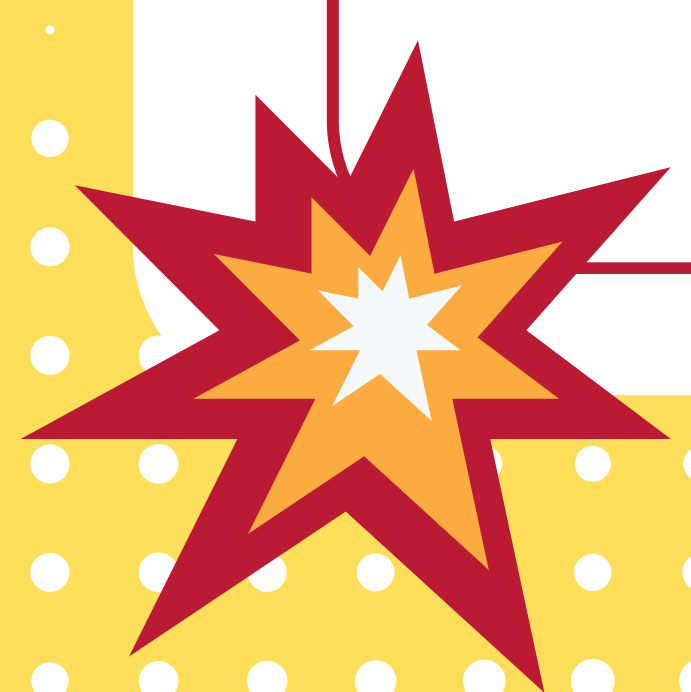




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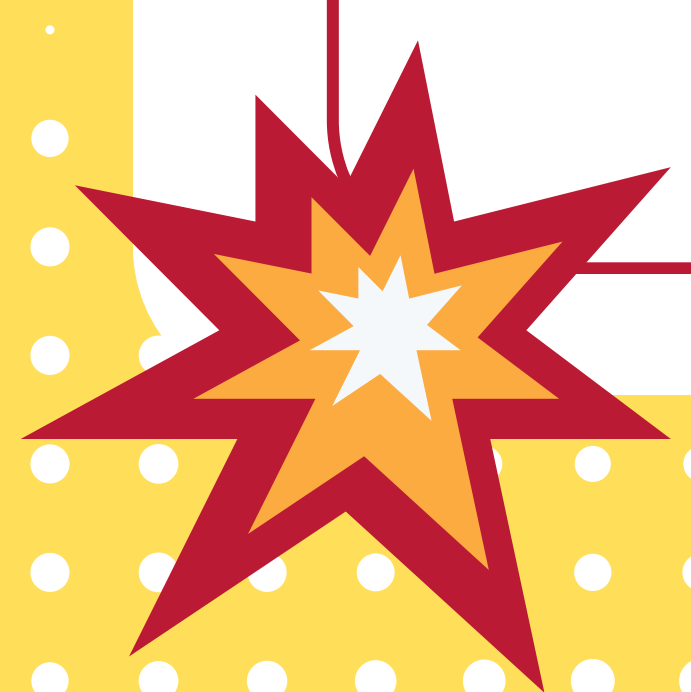
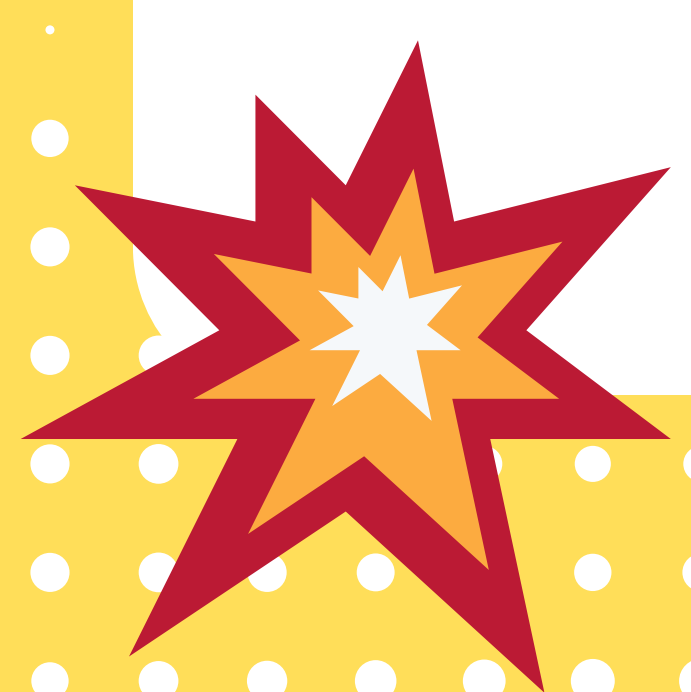




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HEROES

Abby Roman '29

Heroes don't always wear a cape
or shine in bright disguise,
sometimes they're just ordinary
with brave and steady eyes.

They stand up for what is right and fair,
they help, they give, they care.
A hero is a heart that's strong
enough to always share.

OWN THE
SPOTLIGHT

Abigail Moore '27

7



CHATGPT, WILL YOU BE MY BRAIN?

Ella Morris '28

“ChatGPT write me a poem about the dangers of AI. Make it at least 4 stanzas in free form. Try to add points about the environment, big businesses, and impressionable youths.”

“ChatGPT write me a poem.
Something soulless and empty
a form of expression so entirely soul full,
about a topic so inherently human,
that you’ll never make anything real.
But hey, it’s quicker right?”

“ChatGPT make it about the dangers of AI.
How generative AI steals real people’s art
copies it, learns from it, and produces slop.
How even one poem
with every poem in our history
shoved into your database,
will never have the heart of one human made.
But hey, it’s cool right?”

“ChatGPT talk about the environment and big business.
How you and other AI industries ruin our planet
how you use billions of gallons of water
to write emails, essays, and emotional poems.
To generate ads and art and apps.
For big businesses you’re a tool,
a sorry replacement for real artists
for real humans.
But hey, it’s cheaper right?”

“ChatGPT tell me how you’re hurting our children.
As they type prompt after prompt
for homework and any basic question.
Shut down their brains until thinking becomes irrelevant,
until no one can think for themselves;
think against the system.
You’ll become their brains if this goes any further.
Futures ruined all because of you.
But hey, it’s easier right?”

“Complete. Is there anything else you’d like me to generate?”

THE BODY REMEMBERS

Lily 'Ana Garced '28



CORPORATOCRACY

Quentin Crudup '29

“Two hundred fifty-seven,” the virtual assistant said. That was Dominic's remaining quota for the day. The foggy seven-story packing plant owned by Congo Corp, was a terrible place to work. The wages were low, there were excessive amounts of work, there was no air conditioning, everyone was forced to wear heavy, thick clothing; it was not uncommon to see people pass out and fall like timber in the woods. The wet, grotesque thud that came after was engrained in everyone's mind.

The job itself was monotonous; repetition of packing boxes with random items took its toll on the workers. Sound was limited; usually all that was heard was the shuffling of merchandise into boxes and of packing peanuts, the orchestra of beeping from the forklifts, and the occasional, yet accidental, drop of an item. The items, too, were never predictable. One box could be batteries that were put into oversized boxes. Other times, it was fragile vinyl records and consumerist indulgences.

Dominic looked up at the pipes, muscle memory allowing him to keep packing boxes. They were massive, some were leaking, and they were all colorful. Some were basic grey and white hues, but others were magnificent purple shades.

“Distraction from corporate duties noted, Dominic. That’s another strike on your pay,” the virtual assistant said — “further infractions may lead to your employment being terminated. Please make sure to not make further infractions in the future.”

“I agree to not make any further infractions, and I acknowledge that I have wronged Congo Corporation,” he said in a statement that was rehearsed so often by employees that it had been memorized by most like a broken record. The assistant then faded away and began playing a jolly tune as if nothing had happened.

HOT STUFF

Lily Ana Garced '28



SKYFALL

Hunter Ferguson '29

October 17th 1998

The air in Toulouse was calm, and distant ducks could be heard quacking. Today was supposed to be a normal flight for Captain Henry Ross and his co-pilot, Richard Allard, from Toulouse to Detroit. Today Ross and Allard are commanding Air France Flight 429 aboard Air France's brand-new Airbus A340.

After Henry Ross finished making his runs around the plane, he did not find anything out of the ordinary, and the plane was ready to fly. Ross and Allard sat down in their seats, while all 304 passengers got comfortable.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Our flight time today will be 8 hours and 49 minutes if the weather stays calm enough for us to safely land in Detroit. Once we reach our cruising altitude, your flight attendants will come around with refreshments and snacks. Before we depart, I would just like to thank you for flying Air France," the captain said to everyone.

The flight was supposed to be calm, and no weather was even on the radar. As the plane taxied down the tarmac, a low vibration could be felt. Ross didn't think much of it and assumed that it was just the plane rolling down the taxiway. The plane lined up with the runway, and everyone waited for takeoff.

"Air France 429, you're clear to take off. Have a great day," the air traffic controller said over the radio.

Once the plane reached 34 thousand feet above the ground, everybody aboard Flight 429 finally calmed down as drinks and snacks came by. For some, it just seemed like any normal flight, but for others, it was a dream.

Ross and Allard were very skilled at flying planes, especially the A340. Both were certified to fly 4-engined aircraft, so they knew the A340 well. After flying over the English Channel, people now were excited to be leaving Europe. One more country to go before a new world.

Twenty minutes later, a passenger happened to look out their window, and there was dark smoke coming out of the left engine closest to the fuselage of the plane. Then, Ross and Allard got an engine fire warning. It was official, the number 3 engine was on fire, and it shut down. Even though the A340 had four engines, the engines were smaller than most commercial jets, so one engine shutting down could mean trouble for everyone.

The altitude was dropping fast. 33 thousand. 30 thousand. 25 thousand. At this rate, they were going to crash in a matter of 2 minutes. They were only 4 thousand feet above the ground before the plane moved slightly from Ross's inputs. Little hope was left for everybody on Flight 429.

Just before 1 thousand feet, Ross took one more try at moving the plane, and this time, it worked. Ross was able to get the plane out of the free fall and got it back up. They had to land the plane somewhere, and the closest airport they could get to was Liverpool Airport. Twenty-five minutes later, Liverpool Airport was finally in sight for the passengers and crew of Flight 429.

Ross told everyone to brace themselves as they landed. Touchdown. Ross kept the plane on the runway as Allard slammed on the brakes. Once they made a full stop, everyone aboard Flight 429 was saved.

LOCKER 212

Joseph Bresley '29

The hallway smells like pencil shavings
and someone's weird body spray.
I keep my head down,
pretending my phone has something important to say.

Someone laughs too loud—
Probably at a meme I already saw yesterday.
My shoes squeak.
My heart does too, a little.

Mr. Daniel's says, "find your voice,"
but mine keeps hiding
behind my hoodie strings.

Lunch is pizza again,
grease shining like hope.
I trade half for a cookie
and call it balance.

After school,
the sun hits the parking lot just right,
and for a second
everything feels like a music video—
the kind where no one talks,
but you somehow get it.

Then my bus
honks.
And I don't.

THIS ISN'T NORMAL

Line Arias '26

There's reports of possible weapons,
possible attacks to the school.

Then they turn out to be some middle schooler —
one who wanted the day off —
and gets arrested or searched instead.

I see kids crying in corners
then are blasé after they get searched,
they want snacks or chargers.

Parents are outside — crying, worried, angry.

They flood the school's comments with cries for change,
then they don't do anything about their dear children,
the ones who feel like absolute sociopaths,
at least to me.

We should be angrier about all the threats,
the fear that a basic human right has become a war zone,
that people brought into this world,
those with lives unknown to most of the globe,
can have those lives cut by someone uncaring.

That anyone could act so careless
and strike fear in the hearts of anyone,
even people they don't know.

That violence has become nothing new —
something to ignore for someone's vacation photos;
something too “uncomfortable” and “ruins my mental health”
something that gets drowned out by anything else,
or maybe the next threat or shooting
something that's treated by verbal abuse.
Something that will never change.

We can try to correct their behavior,
“But will they be receptive?”

We can try to clear anything that looks like weapons,

“But what will the Color Guard use?”

We can try to restrict guns,

“But what about the Second Amendment?”

We can try to be more accepting,

“But what about the people who have to deal with their thoughts?”

We can try —

“You don’t know anything. Just follow your teachers’ instructions.”

I know fear shouldn’t control my life,

but how do I deal with something I can’t forget?

Something I know will get worse as there’s more apathy, more inaction,
more scapegoating, more distraction,
more normalcy.

It’s always “Keep your head high,”

“You have a life to live,” “You have work to do,”

“Everyone goes through this and turns out okay,”

“Don’t let it take control of your life,”

“Don’t be such a Negative Nancy.”

Move on from having to look behind me?

Having a lingering thought of what could happen?

Fearing that anyone could come and kill me?

Worrying if my neighbors could shoot me,

or anyone attacks based on an obsession?

Thinking during drills of the day it would be for real,
and the present could be destroyed?

Fearing not having a future?

There shouldn’t be anymore reports of how many kids get killed in school shootings,
or of false reports by some unfeeling kid.

There shouldn’t be anymore stories of hiding in corners.

There shouldn’t be anyone inspired by these.

No more callous pranks like the fake reports.

No more seeing others as nothing but props in a story.

No more not feeling anything.

If anyone’s uncomfortable,

be uncomfortable,

be mad,

be horrified,

because this is not normal.

A GUARDIAN'S PURPOSE

Mary Yassa '29

Kelvin looked up at the night sky. The moon was bright tonight. Everyone else had gone inside to rest, and he couldn't blame them. This whole war was messing with everyone's mentality. Now only he and Neoma sat in the field.

"Where do us guardians come from?" Kelvin couldn't help asking.

Neoma turned to him. "What do you mean?"

"We're the ones who make Spiritstones, right?" he said, taking the reflective green stone from his pocket. "Who made *our* Spiritstones?"

Neoma was silent for a while. "I'm not sure?" she sighed. "Who knows? Maybe this war might reveal some things that were hidden from the world. Secrets so old everyone has forgotten."

There was a long silence. "What's our purpose?" Kelvin asked, digging his hands into the dirt.

Neoma scoffed. "That is easy. To protect the world from insanity. To keep magic alive. And to protect the hearts and souls of others. If we don't, the realms will fall into chaos."

"Wow, since when did you become so poetic?" Kelvin said teasingly. Neoma threw a rock at his head. "Ow."

"Shut up," Neoma muttered. "At least I don't have the height of an eight-year-old."

Kelvin clutched the dagger, hands trembling. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening.

He stared down at Neoma's body, which Insanity had cast away. He could see the giant gashes on her head and chest. She was bleeding out fast, and he couldn't do anything.

He could just barely make out a voice telling him to take Neoma and run. He did so, dropping the dagger and running as fast as he could, carrying Neoma on his back.

He could hear the fighting going on behind him. That and the maniacal laughter of the one who had killed Neoma. The one who looks so much like her sister, so much like his friend.

Were they really gone?

Kelvin didn't know how long he ran for, just that he eventually stopped at a building that hadn't been demolished by Insanity. He carefully set Neoma's body on the wall and tried to breathe.

He carefully tried shaking her cold body. "Neoma, please wake up," he said, trying not to let his voice tremble. "You said our purpose was to protect everyone, to make sure the world doesn't fall to Insanity."

Silence.

"I need you, Neoma," he muttered, tears falling from his eyes. "I can't do this on my own."

But there was no response.

All he could do was cry while his friends fought and died in Insanity's carnage.

"I'm sorry..."

The Moon has fallen to Insanity.

Now the little Star does not know what to do.

After all, stars can only shine so brightly before they burn out.

And when they do, the world plunges into darkness.

Oh, Lady in Silver, how cruel can you be?

ENDURANCE

Marley Swartz '26

Trees are not gentle things.
They are archives and witnesses.

They swallow seasons whole,
trap storms beneath bark,
hold lightning in their grain
like a secret no one asked for,
but keeps anyway.
If I am a tree,
I am a cypress rising out of dark water.

Not planted in open fields.
Not rooted in dry certainty.

I rise from floods.

The water never leaves.
It presses at my base,
circles my trunk,
tests my balance
again
and again.

My roots vanish beneath the murk,
invisible,
braided through silt that shifts with no warning.

From that I learned early
that stability is not given.
It is made.

From that drowned earth
my knees break the surface,
wooden pillars
pushing upward through the swamp,

small declarations:

I am here.

I am still breathing.

The air is metallic and swollen.
Humidity clings to bark like a second skin.
Nothing is light here.

Then the lightning comes.

It does not whisper.
It does not warn.

White heat splits the highest branch
and rips downward
in a single blinding seam.

Bark explodes.
Sap hisses.
The trunk opens.

For a moment
there is nothing but fire inside wood.

And then,
I do not fall.

The strike hollows me.
Carves a vertical corridor.
Straight through my center.

A silence
where solid sounds once stood.
Years pass.

The edges darken.
Seal.
New bark forms
around what was torn open.

Growth does not erase the wound.
It grows around it.

The hollow remains.
Not weakness.
But
evidence.

Inside that corridor
echoes pressure
and expectations,
responsibility worn too early,

standards set too high to climb down from,
the quiet demand
to be capable
before feeling ready.

Lightning leaves smoke in memory.

But hollowness
lets light in.

Spanish moss drapes limbs
in long gray veils.
It gathers only on trees
that stand long enough
to carry weight.

It clings.
It layers.
It grows heavy.

Roles I never set down.
Expectations I never shrugged off.
Standards I stitched into my own bark.

The branches bend.
They do not break.

At the tips, it's green.
Small.
Sharp.

Growth doesn't announce itself.
It appears quietly,
a leaf,
a stretch,
a refusal to remain charred.

From far away
I look ancient-
still.
Certain.

Up close
You see the seam.
The hollow channel.
The moss woven thick along my shoulders.
Water pressing constant at my roots.

I am not untouched.
Lighting-struck.
Flood-rooted.
Moss-laden.

Hollowed,

And still vertical.

Not pristine.
Not symmetrical.
Not weightless.

But standing.

In water that never dries,
Under skies that split without warning,

And rising
anyway.

THE CREEK

Ro Bailey '26

We four were farm boys. A show of skin tanned from the Kentucky sun, and fingernails crusted with dirt so deep that we had to keep our hands in our pockets during church so that our mothers' friends wouldn't think we didn't wash. Wilbur was the worst of us. He stood at a towering 6'1, an unheard-of height for a boy of 12. Apart from that one freakish quality, he was nothing but a sunburnt, pimply face and calloused hands.

We would spend those rare days when we finished work early running to the end of Ol' Man McKafferys' property and splashing around in the creek until our feet were all cut up by the sharp rocks lining the ground. Wilbur was too dumb to know how to swim, so it was up to Jacob, the McKafferys' boy, to keep him away from the pit near the middle of the stream. Our longest stick didn't reach the bottom, so it had to be deeper than 10 feet.

"Hey, Willy!" Cormac, the youngest boy with a bad tooth, waved his shirt over his head.

"Eh?" Wilbur squinted. His eyes were shot from staring straight into the sun, but he had broken so many pairs of glasses that his Ma refused to get any more.

"Come over 'ere. I'll show ya how to skip a pebble." The water was red near his feet, he was already sporting a bad cut from a piece of scrap metal that had made its way from the farm to the water.

Wilbur bounded over, his pounds of fat jiggling as his huge feet pushed rocks deeper into the mud. As soon as he was close enough to touch, Cormac jumped to the side. He had hidden the metal behind him under a pile of dirt, and Wilbur didn't have time to stop himself before his foot came down.

In the summer of '94, about 6 years before that day at the creek, Wilbur's Pa had gotten real into boating. On account of me being Wilbur's best bud and years smarter than him, I always went with.

“Ya ready, Jimbo?” Wilbur’s Pa would holler. The sky was darkening, but we were only going out on a lake a few miles south. He hitched his old fishing boat to the back of his rusty truck and let me sit in the trunk so I could feel the wind tickle my nose.

We got out to the middle of the lake before the wind started to pick up.

“After I get just one more fish, we’ll head in. How’s about I take you over to the store and pick you up a little somethin’ ey?” The pockets of his vest were filled to the brim with lure, and only one fish lay dead in his cooler.

“Sounds sweet,” I nodded.

The rain came just before the waves. One drop fell onto my hat, then two, then I was in the water. I could swim just fine, but the lake shook from the force of thunder. Lightning struck so close that all the hair on my arms stood up.

“Jimbo!” I heard Wilbur’s Pa faintly with my head underwater. His hands, the skin thick and scarred from years of manual labor, wrapped around the back of my leg. It wasn’t until that moment that I realized I had been flipped over so that my feet were closer to the sky than my face.

I vomited all the water I had swallowed and lunged forward as Wilbur’s Pa thumped a huge hand against my back.

“Close one, eh Jimbo?” He smiled, showing off the spot near the front of his mouth where a tooth had fallen out when he was a boy.

A wave the height of two tractors stacked on top of each other hit the side of the boat with a crack so loud that my ears rang. By the time enough water had left my eyes for me to see, Wilbur’s Pa was gone.

Wilbur may have been stupid, but he wasn’t empty-headed. He didn’t look in my eyes again until he was falling backwards, clutching his foot. His pupils were so big that he looked like my little brother after he’d drunk a whole bottle of cough syrup.

He hit his head going down. A boulder got him on the back of the skull just above his brainstem. I still think he would’ve survived if it weren’t for the pit. I ran to him, cutting the soles of my feet, but he was so big that gravity must’ve pulled him down faster. I was about 15 feet down in that pit and still couldn’t see the bottom. My grip on Wilbur’s blubbery arm was slipping, and I couldn’t see anything. My eyes burned even though the creek wasn’t saltwater. I looked up and made my choice.

DAISIES AND DAFFODILS

Hannah Hedges '28

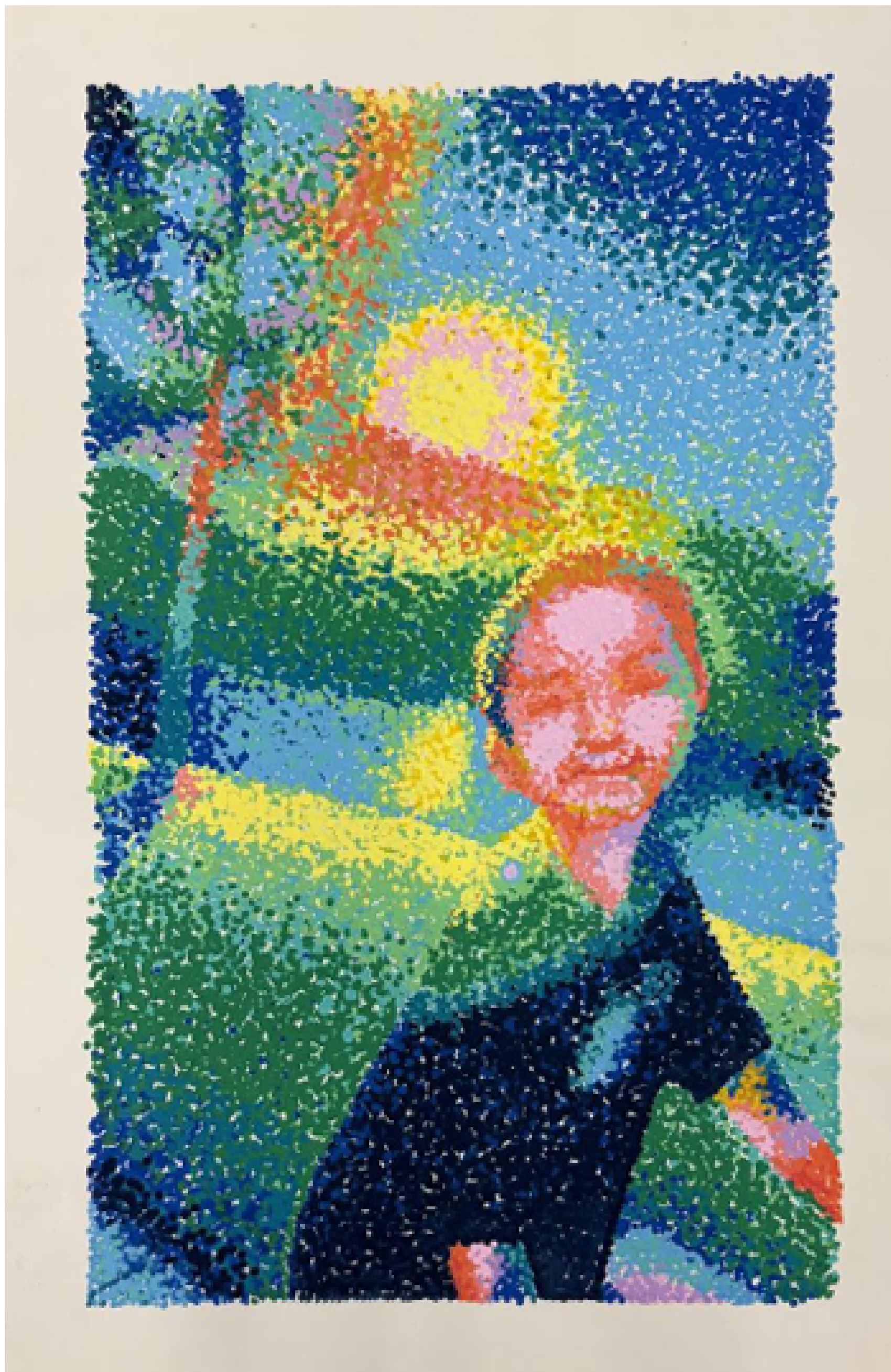
I used to run barefoot through streets on summer nights that felt endless,
now I count years by how quickly they disappear and start again.
The cracks in the sidewalk remember my laughter,
and so do the little daisies and daffodils I left in the grass.

I once believed that puddles were portals,
and clouds were maps to somewhere else.
But somewhere between bell schedules,
and growing pains, I stopped looking up.
The sky remained but the wonder didn't,
it was replaced by late bedtimes and early morning clocks.

I walk the same streets, no longer barefoot,
the ground feels harder beneath my feet.
The daisies and daffodils still bloom where I left them,
unnoticed, fading away, a memory lost in the weeds.

BROTHER

Bryn Banker '26



THE GARDENER

Madison McWilliams '28

April 17th 1985

My name is Mary Jane, and any woman would tell me I have the perfect life. I have a beautiful tan two-story house that always looks polished and neat. The windows are always squeaky clean and glistening; the paint is pristine and never chipped, and even after incessant rains the roof always looks new. I have a husband who works for one of the biggest software businesses and makes more money than anyone has ever seen.

However, I still feel deeply unsatisfied, like there is a weight holding me down. I feel as if I have no freedom, no room to be my own person. My daily life revolves around my stubborn husband; I tend to his every need like he's my newborn son. In public, he acts like he is above everyone. If a waiter accidentally got his order wrong, he'd practically flip the table over and demand a refund. He'll storm out cursing (and most likely smelling like booze). If someone bumps into him on the street, he'll shove them down, this time demanding an apology. And as for me, it's hard to believe he even views me as his wife, more like a butler.

On one particularly sunny day, I decided that it had been too long since I had done any gardening. Earlier my husband requested a special dinner that would require me to spend all day in the kitchen. He wanted to come home to a marvelous feast after a long day of sitting on his rear at work. For once, I refused and decided to do what I wanted. I spent all day on my hands and knees watering my flowers, planting seeds, and picking weeds. I felt sweat trickle down my face and the warmth of the sun, but it was relieving being able to do something for myself. The sun began to set, and I heard a car pull into the driveway.

Immediately, I knew who it was.

"Mary Jane! Where are you, and where is my dinner?" A loud, booming voice came from the house.

In the past, I would have felt great fear from not doing what my husband asked, but this time a new feeling bubbled up inside. It was a feeling of anger. A feeling of rage after being at his beck and call for all these years, controlled like a puppet.

“I decided to garden today; it was a perfect day outside. You know I haven’t kept up with my garden in months. If you want your special dinner, then I think you are fully capable of walking into the kitchen and making it yourself.”

This response infuriated my husband; he rebutted with whining and shouting.

“How dare you speak to me this way. Your duty as my wife is to fulfill my every request and do what I ask. I provide everything for you, this house, my income, all of this is because of me!”

While angrily shouting, he stomped on my bed of flowers and kicked around dirt, throwing a temper tantrum. Seeing my garden being destroyed, I did something I thought I’d never do. I picked up the shovel I was using earlier in the day, waiting for the perfect moment. As soon as my husband turned around to walk inside, I crept up behind him.

“Now you get inside right this instant and do what I-”,

A loud thunk echoed.

The shovel vibrated and my husband fell to the ground in an instant. He wasn’t moving nor was he breathing. Immediately, I felt relieved that the man who had full control over me was gone. Then a slight panic set in. I quickly rolled my husband over near my bed of flowers and began digging a deep hole. As soon as I finished, I quickly shoved him into his homemade grave. I decided before I left him for good to say a few words.

“How’s this for dinner?”

I buried him and made my flower bed look as good as new. I then hid the murder weapon in the shed after hosing the blood off of it. Miraculously, the shovel wasn’t dented after receiving such a big blow. I assume it’s because my husband had nothing in his head to begin with. The process of hiding my husband’s body and the evidence took around an hour or two. After concealing all the evidence, I heard a weak knock coming from the front door. I brushed myself off and went to open it. I was greeted by my neighbor Ms. Elmerson, a little old lady who lives next door.

“Why hello, Mary Jane, my, my you look especially dirty. What have you gotten yourself into?” she said with a shaking voice.

“Why hello, Ms. Emerson, I have been gardening all day. What can I help you with?”

“I have some boxes from my attic that I need to move downstairs, do you think your husband can help me move them? I’m too frail now to do it myself.” She let out a small chuckle.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Emerson. I’m afraid my husband is not home. I assume he is working late tonight.”

Ms. Emerson let out a sigh and turned to leave. “Alright Mary, you have a good night.”

The next few days passed like always.

But one day I awoke to the sound of banging on my door, again. I opened it and was greeted by police officers. I felt a hint of fear run through my body, but I did not dare to show it.

“We’re very sorry to bother you, ma’am, but we’ve gotten reports that your husband has not been showing up to work. Has he returned home at all?”

My fear then turned into panic. “No, officer, he has not been home. Usually, he takes long business trips, but he does not inform me about them. To hear that he’s not at work worries me quite a bit. Do you have any other information?”

The officer shook his head and responded, “No, ma’am, the last time he was seen was at work a couple of days ago. Many of his coworkers say he was heading home. May we have a look inside?”

I walked in with the officers and let them search the whole house. They then arrived in the garden. Thankfully, the smell of my husband’s corpse was masked by the scent of fresh flowers. They glanced at the shed, and I followed their eyes.

“Now what do you keep in here, ma’am?”

“I like to garden often; it helps me relax. My husband actually encourages me to garden; he loves the flowers himself.” What a lie that just came out of my mouth.

The officers wished me a good day and left just as quickly as they had arrived. After another few days, my husband was pronounced missing. My family and friends all came over to comfort me.

“How unfortunate, oh Mary Jane, how are you holding up?” his sister asked.

I responded with a fake sob, weeping over the disappearance of my husband. As the family began to depart, for my final act of revenge, I gave them all a little gift to wish them my condolences. I gave them all a bouquet of flowers straight from my garden. The same bed of flowers that has my husband rotting underneath it.

EFFIGY SEASON

Ben Hill '27

The autumn Marlana turned seven, her father built her a brother in the garden.

It happened gradually, the way rot claims a good apple from the inside out. First came the crossbeam, hammered into the cold October ground where the tomato plants had died back to blackened vines. Then the old flannel shirt, sleeves stuffed with crumpled newspaper until they bulged with a fake, rustling strength. The head was a burlap sack pulled tight over a sphere of chicken wire, and for three days it sat empty-faced while Marlana watched from her bedroom window, pressing her nose to the cold glass until it went numb.

On the fourth day, her father took a stick of charcoal from the fireplace grate and drew the features on the blank burlap. Two eyes tilted and sad. A single line for a mouth. A small, round nose.

"There," he said, stepping back. His breath plumed in the chill air. "That's better."

Marlana didn't think it was better. The charcoal eyes seemed to follow her as she crossed the yard to bring her father his forgotten thermos of coffee. The mouth was a slit, not a smile. It looked less like a brother and more like something that had been waiting, patient and silent, for someone to give it a face so it could finally see.

"Can we take it down now?" she asked.

Her father looked at her, his own eyes tired and rimmed with red. He'd been working late at the warehouse, or so he said. The house had felt emptier since summer, a hollow quality to the silence that even the radio couldn't fill.

Her mother's sewing basket was still sitting by the armchair. A needle stuck into a spool of white thread, waiting.

"Not yet," he said, his voice soft. "The crows need someone to watch over them."

But there were no crows. The birds had all gone south weeks ago. That night, Marlana dreamed of the garden. In the dream, the scarecrow had turned its head on its stake, the burlap rasping against the wood. It was looking at her window. It was waiting.

She awoke to the sound of scratching.

It was a dry, skittering sound, like dead leaves being pushed across concrete. She lay rigid in her bed, the quilt pulled up to her chin, listening. It came from the window. She didn't dare look. She squeezed her eyes shut and hummed a song her mother used to sing. A nonsense tune about a little bluebird, until the sound faded with the dawn.

She didn't tell her father. He seemed different now, quieter. He would stand at the kitchen window for long stretches, just looking out at the garden, his coffee growing cold in his hand. He'd started talking to himself, or so Marlana thought. She'd hear his low murmur from the other room, a steady, one-sided conversation.

One afternoon, she found him in the garden, standing right next to the scarecrow. He wasn't just looking at it. He was leaning in, his lips moving, his voice too low for her to hear. The scarecrow's burlap head was tilted, as if it were listening intently. A gust of wind rustled its newspaper-stuffed chest, and for a terrifying second, Marlana thought she saw the charcoal mouth twitch.

"Daddy?"

He spun around, a strange, furtive look on his face.

"Marlena. I didn't hear you." He walked toward her, blocking her view of the scarecrow. "Let's go inside. I'll make some hot chocolate for us."

As he took her hand, she looked back over her shoulder. The scarecrow stood alone, its flannel shirt flapping gently in the breeze. But the charcoal eyes were different. They were wider now. And they were definitely looking at her.

The scratching returned every night. Sometimes it was at her window, sometimes at the back door. Once, she thought she heard a soft, padding footstep in the hall, a rustling sound that stopped right outside her bedroom door. She held her breath for what felt like an hour, waiting for the door to creak open, but nothing happened.

Her father grew paler, thinner. He stopped going to work. He spent all his time in the garden, even when it rained. He would sit on the cold, damp ground and just talk. Marlana watched from the window, a chill that had nothing to do with the weather settling deep in her bones. He was talking to the scarecrow, and the scarecrow was always looking down at him, its burlap face a mask of silent, rapt attention.

The day the first hard frost came, Marlana finally gathered the courage to go out alone. She had to see it up close. She had to understand.

The garden was a graveyard of brown stalks and wilted leaves. Frost sparkled on every surface, a deceptive beauty. As she approached the scarecrow, she noticed something odd. The ground at its feet was disturbed. Not by animals, but by something else. The dirt was smooth, packed down, as if someone had been kneeling there for a long, long time.

She looked up at it. Up close, the charcoal eyes were just smudges, the mouth just a line. It was just a sack of old clothes. A thing made of straw and patience.

But then she saw its hand.

One of the stuffed gloves was hanging at its side. But the other... the other was raised, just a little. The fingers, once limp and shapeless, seemed to be curled, as if around an invisible object. As if it had been reaching for something. Or someone.

A floorboard creaked behind her. She whirled around.

Her father stood on the back porch. He wasn't wearing a coat, just his thin work shirt. His arms hung at his sides. He looked impossibly tired; a man made of ash and sorrow.

"Come inside, Marlena," he said. His voice was flat. "It's cold."

"But Daddy, its hand—"

"He was just trying to say hello," her father interrupted. He wasn't looking at her. He was looking past her, at the scarecrow. A small, sad smile touched his lips. "He's shy. He gets that from his mother."

That night, the scratching was everywhere. It was a frantic, desperate sound, a thousand dry fingers scraping against the walls, the windows, the door. Marlena pulled the quilt over her head and wept silently, her small body shaking with fear.

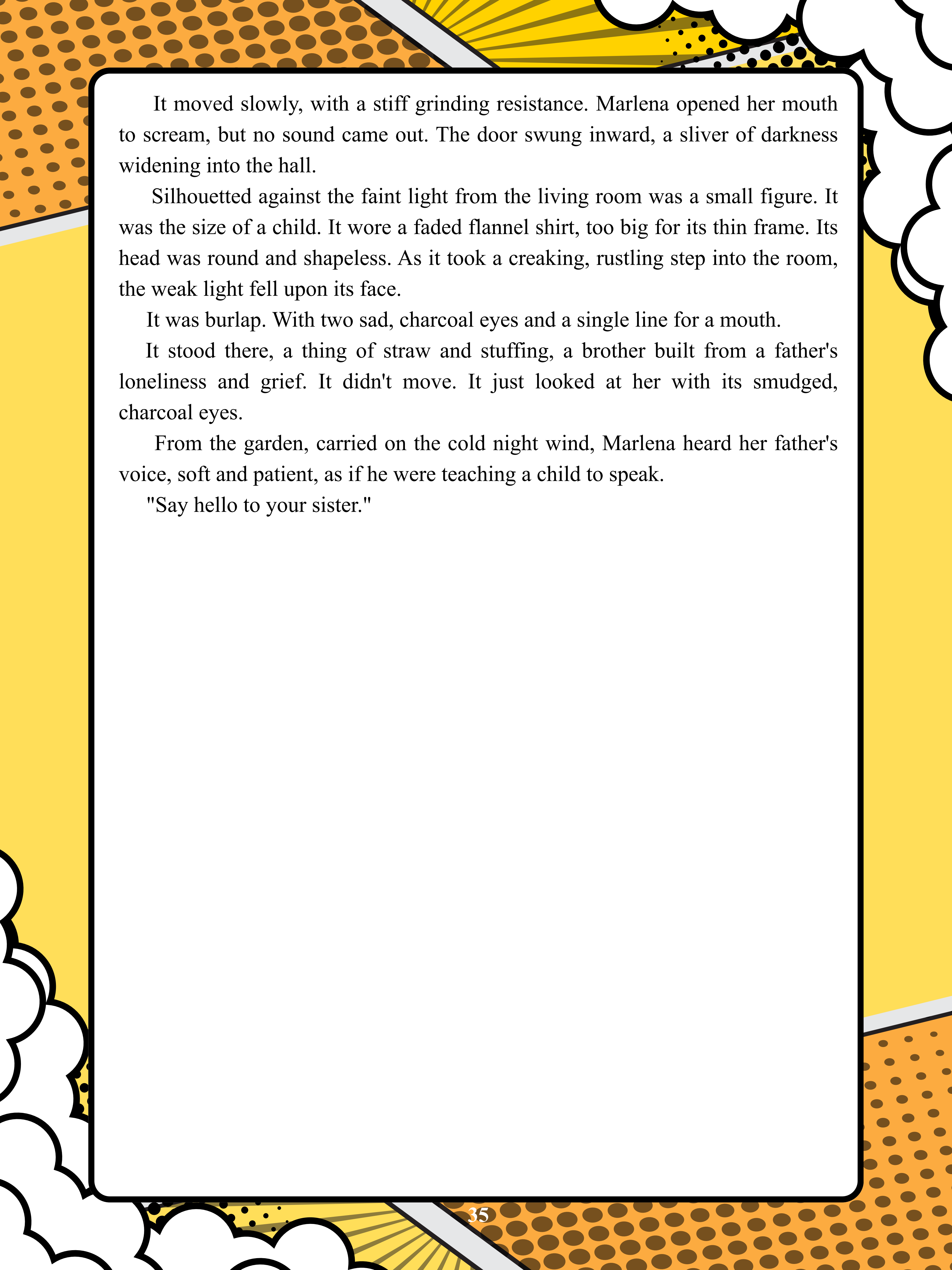
Then, as suddenly as it started, it stopped.

In the profound silence that followed, she heard a new sound. It was soft and hesitant. A rustling. And then a voice. It wasn't her father's voice. It was dry, like wind through cornstalks, and it seemed to come from just outside her door.

"Mama?"

Marlena's blood turned to ice. Her mother was gone. Her mother had been gone since the summer, since the accident at the lake that no one would talk about. This thing in the hall, this thing that sounded like a child made of dead leaves, didn't know that.

The doorknob began to turn.



It moved slowly, with a stiff grinding resistance. Marlena opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. The door swung inward, a sliver of darkness widening into the hall.

Silhouetted against the faint light from the living room was a small figure. It was the size of a child. It wore a faded flannel shirt, too big for its thin frame. Its head was round and shapeless. As it took a creaking, rustling step into the room, the weak light fell upon its face.

It was burlap. With two sad, charcoal eyes and a single line for a mouth.

It stood there, a thing of straw and stuffing, a brother built from a father's loneliness and grief. It didn't move. It just looked at her with its smudged, charcoal eyes.

From the garden, carried on the cold night wind, Marlena heard her father's voice, soft and patient, as if he were teaching a child to speak.

"Say hello to your sister."

IT IS HUMAN

Marcus Newton '28

I cut my ties,
throw on my clothes
grab the skies.

I breathe in prose

I struggle through the highs,
wade through my lows.
My life horror and surprise
self-perception changes, flows

I brave my unknown demise.
My thoughts composed
my knowns, aloof, belies
my mind slamming closed.

We march in rows,
our souls once lighted,
dim consumed with sorrows.
Our spirits plighted

I murder with the crows,
a flock united.
We fight to decompose,
our corpses knighted.

A race with rats,
a race ignited.
While reaching for our spats
our first and final breath affrighted

A caged bird,
caged for eons.
We subjugate
we rule the peons

A cage its owner.
The bird a slave,
the bird encaged
works its life away.

It withers and prays
it pecks in craze.

It's crucified.
It's demonized.

It's worshipped.
It's idolized.

It is human.

DEMONIC ABOLITION

Danica Federle '27



DON'T GO INTO THE WOODS

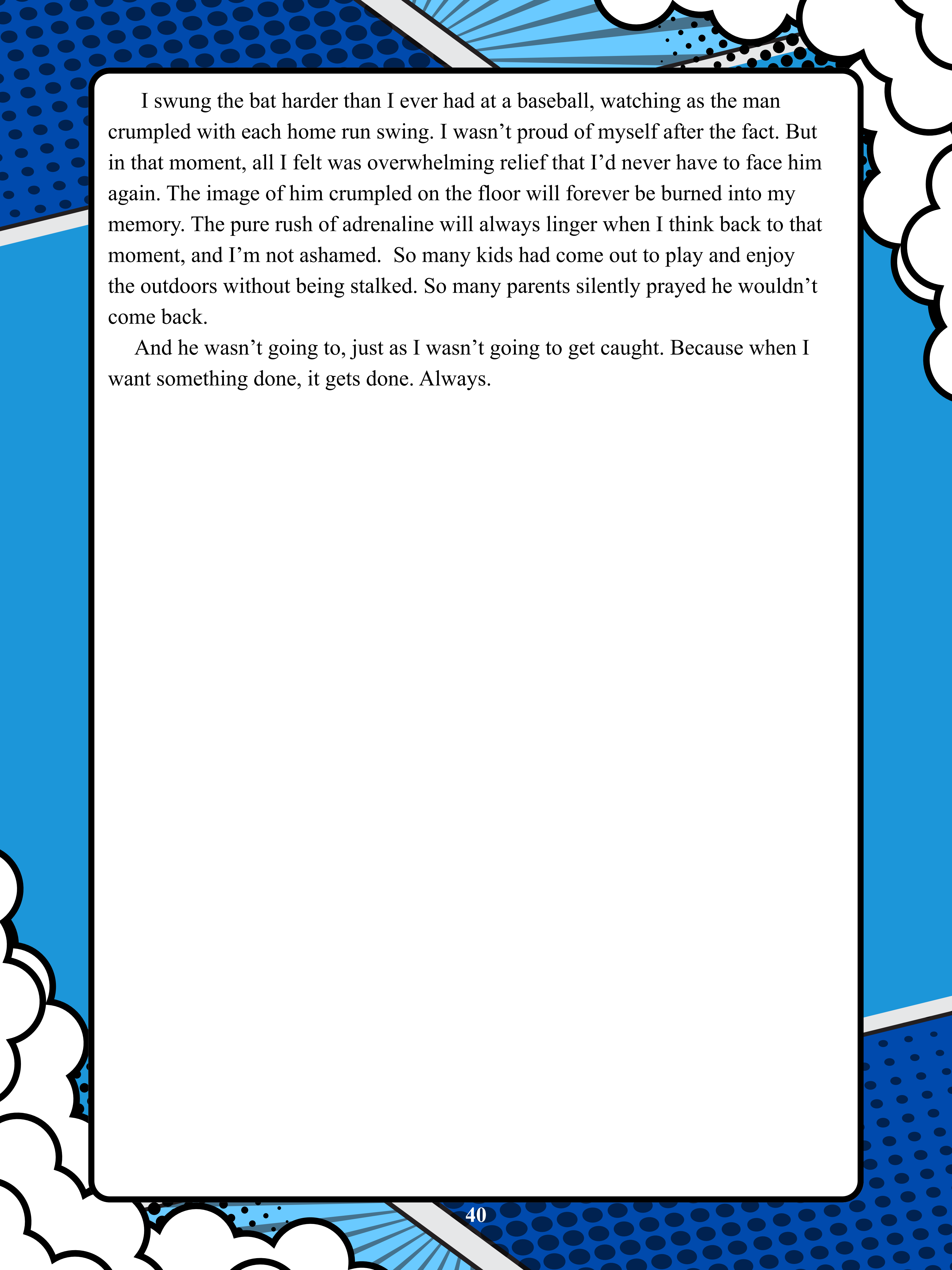
Leah Faber-Mitchum '29

Today's the fourth day of searching, with no luck. The old man we were desperately searching for had surely died, but we had to keep looking just in case. Even still, a grown man doesn't just go missing. I continued my path through the foliage, leaves crunching underfoot, when suddenly something else crunched. I looked down, curiosity and horror washing over me as I gazed upon the lifeless, now decapitated figure of what was left as something seeming to be human. I stood there and was unable to move.

I was a 15-year-old boy, and to the eyes of others, I was scared and horrified. But I'm not too sure why I was even mildly shocked. After all, I knew where he was. I'm the one who put him there. I heard footsteps behind me, someone else from the search party, I'd assume. But the air got cooler as they approached, and I shuddered, wondering where this sudden breeze had come from. Then I smelt it, the overwhelming smell of rot and death.

I turned slowly, expecting the odor to be the rotting corpse at my feet; the coolness is only an extension of the cold. I was wrong; I was so very wrong. The man who had once lived next door, the one who haunted my very being to the point where death was his only option, was now facing me. I turned back, glancing at the corpse, the one that was very real and on the ground. So how on earth was this man standing here? Not just standing but staring almost. A purely hollow look, but I could tell he knew who I was. I was the little boy at age 4 crying to his mother, the kid at age 11 who was inside by 6 p.m., the young man who had had enough of the constant terror.

So, illogically, I acted out on the emotion I had bottled up. Anger. I took a bat, the bat that I hadn't used in years, because I was too afraid outside and walked over. This old man. This predator was walking around outside while I hid carefully in my home. I wasn't going to hide anymore. I couldn't hide anymore.



I swung the bat harder than I ever had at a baseball, watching as the man crumpled with each home run swing. I wasn't proud of myself after the fact. But in that moment, all I felt was overwhelming relief that I'd never have to face him again. The image of him crumpled on the floor will forever be burned into my memory. The pure rush of adrenaline will always linger when I think back to that moment, and I'm not ashamed. So many kids had come out to play and enjoy the outdoors without being stalked. So many parents silently prayed he wouldn't come back.

And he wasn't going to, just as I wasn't going to get caught. Because when I want something done, it gets done. Always.

ANOTHER CHANCE

Ro Bailey '26

Water spread over the road like a plague, soaking my socks before I had the chance to see where it was coming from. It was stained brown from the dirt-crusted, dead leaves that had been stomped into the pavement. It gave me the impression that the last two miles of the hike would be a lot tougher than expected.

“Seriously?” Al, the newest member of our makeshift party, lifted her drenched boot. “I’m gonna be sick.”

“It’s just water,” I assured her. “Just keep reminding yourself that it’s just water.”

“How much longer do we have left?” Al squinted at the dying sun. “It’ll be dark soon.”

“It’s easier if you don’t think about it.” Don’t think about anything, not even the three people trailing behind. If we didn’t get back to camp in time, we wouldn’t be fed. As well as she played it off, I could tell that almost four days without a proper meal was getting to Al. I had been at Wilderness Camp for two years and had lost any hope that I was ever going to leave. As one of the oldest kids there, I found myself forced to take care of each new person that came through. According to the rules, I only had six months left until I could leave. My parents weren’t coming back, that I was certain of, but they couldn’t keep me after I turned eighteen. All I needed to do was hold on for a few more months; two miles was nothing.

“God, my feet hurt.” Al had more spirit than anyone else who had come through. I watched with what was almost admiration as she resisted each attempt the councilors made to dim her. At the rate they were going, I could only hope Al’s parents would pick her up soon.

“Like I said, it’s easier if you don’t think about it.” We trudged on, finally moving from the mud to solid ground. The water in our boots weighed us down, making a sickening *squish* with each step we took.

“How can I not think about it?” she groaned. “It *hurts*.”

I took a deep breath in through my nose, slowly exhaling before responding. “I know. How about this? If you don’t bring it up again, I’ll give you half my dinner.”

Al perked up. "Deal."

I had walked the same path hundreds of times, but it stopped getting easier. The first walk had been an impossible trek, where I had started it before the sun came up and barely finished before midnight. My legs didn't have the decency to go numb. I felt every step multiplied by the one that had come before it.

"Jane," Al's voice was further behind me than it had been before.

"Keep going," I grit my teeth.

"Jane, stop," Al stood, drenched, and shook her head. "They're not gonna make it back, are they?" She looked back, searching for any sign of the rest of our party.

"I don't know," I snapped, finally turning around. "I don't know if they're a mile behind us, I don't know if they're lost, I don't know if they're even alive. What I do know is that you and I? We're here. We still have a chance."

"We have to go back," Al insisted. "C'mon, we still have a few hours of sunlight left. They're not gonna be able to make it back on their own."

"We can't," I grabbed her arm. "Al, listen to me. I've been here a lot longer than you have. If you want to wake up tomorrow morning, we need to get back."

"What's the point in surviving if you let everyone around you die?" She ripped herself away from me. "I'm going back."

"You're going to die."

"And you're going to regret not following me," Al scoffed. "I'm going back."

I waited until she was just a blip in my vision to smile. Al was a fun subject. The past few participants had been boring, too dedicated to keeping themselves safe. Their tests had ended with them following me, dooming themselves to an eternity of walking until they found themselves in the same position as me. They would trudge through forests, marshes, and swamps for the rest of time. I watched as Al kept moving, not looking back, and approached the end of her trial. I may have failed, but a flicker of pride- of hope- burned in my chest. Al would get another chance at life, and I would keep leading souls to their fates.

RUSTED OVER

Ava Moochnek '28

I sleep at night with nothing in my heart
the passion of blood that once ran through me is now of stones.
My joints creak, I begin to fall apart,
the rust stuck to my brain made its way to my bones.

I stand there frozen with nothing in my head
the tears in my eyes roll down as ink.
My pulse so quiet, you'd think I was dead.
The whirring so loud, I can't hear myself think.

I lay on my side, twitching and cold.
Unmoving, I forget the purpose of my design.
I'll continue to rust until I grow old.
I'm a shell with no more warmth to find.

THE FOG

Adonia Taylor '26

August 5th 1795

I arrived in the village today. Rumors have it that this village, which is not on a map but is located deep in France, away from the capital, has had some sightings of a woman in red. No one knows her intentions, but there have been some men taken and found later, lifeless and nonverbal. Fortunately, for me, one of the men snatched has been able to speak lately, I shall conduct my research when I arrive.

Atticus walks out of his carriage with his luggage, looking at the scenery he had landed in. He turns to the coachman and tosses him a coin.

“Thank you for the safe passage,” mumbles Atticus as he avoids eye contact.

The coachman tips his hat in gratitude. “Of course, though I have to say you are probably the most insane man I've met. Not many people come here, not even the townspeople leave,” he chuckles.

Atticus nods in response, “I suppose I am a bit.... where shall I walk?”

“Over pass those trees, you will see a bell pop up from the fog.”

Atticus nods and takes his luggage without another response. As he journeys through the trail, he reads the report, and he jots down for the incidents. Why would this one woman stay in such a secluded area? Is she a ghost that can't pass on? Or is she just a vengeful spirit? After Atticus drops his bags off in a small tavern, he makes his way to the hospital where they keep the young man in.

Atticus walks into the room where the man was sleeping as he puts his gloves on. One of the nurses, named Marley, stands beside him with a tray of medication she gives to the patient.

“I didn't know you were going to show up so soon. The mayor said you would show up by dawn the next day,” questions Marley.

“I have a routine I like to do; anytime too late, there could be more men missing in this village,” states Atticus, “and I thought I told the mayor no medicine while I do my investigation.”

“I'm sorry, he's not as doped up as he just closed his eyes a few seconds before you arrived.”

“How long could he speak for until he completely blanks?”

“About three minutes, it’s a strong dose he can’t sleep without the medication.”

Atticus nods as he shakes the man awkwardly as he sits down on the chair beside the bed. The man jolts up a bit as he rubs the sleep off his eyes.

“Name, please,” states Atticus as he pulls out his notepad.

“Oh, umm, my name is Gabriel, sir,” replies Gabriel, “are you the man they sent to fix our problem?”

“What can you tell me about your first encounter? Reply quickly, I only have three minutes until you fall back asleep.”

“Right, sorry. I was getting firewood for my mother until I heard whispers that felt close, but no one was around until I saw her,” Gabriel shudders, “I was about to leave until she showed up behind me and grabbed my face, I saw only her lips nothing more the cloak covered most of her face it almost felt as if she was sucking my soul out of my body.”

Atticus jots down what Gabriel has said. Seems to me some type of vengeful spirit, but I never heard of a spirit that sucks the person's soul could be some type of witch, but it is not likely for a witch to die that easily, he thought to himself.

Gabriel yawns slightly as the medicine runs deep. “Are there any more questions, sir?” grumbles Gabriel.

Atticus shakes his head as he got up from the chair and walks away.

Marley sighs softly as she fixes Gabriel’s sheet. “Odd man, but he is here to help you, my dear; he is known for this kind of work,” reassures Marley.

August 7th 1795

It doesn't make sense at all. If it were a vengeful spirit, it would've possessed their victims, even haunting a specific area, but I never heard of a spirit sucking one's soul. The only supernatural that I know that does that is a witch, but I hardly ever get a case where a witch dies; most stay as youthful as they can. Of course, it is a fact to kidnap children and take their youth, but for this one, why take lives and a man's life at that.

As Atticus is writing, Marley walks in to make him perk up, but he avoids her eyes. “Evening, Atticus got any luck?” smiles Marley as she sits beside him.

Atticus shifts a bit uncomfortably as he looks back at his notes. “Not well, though I suppose I have an answer to the problem, but don’t know how it is possible in a way,” mumbles Atticus.

“Well, I could help if you like,” she states.

Atticus looks Marley's way as he leans close to her, "Are there any cases of a witch trial ever taken place here?" questions Atticus.

"I think there was one a long time ago, I believe that the mayor's great-grandfather documented it in the hall—" answers Marley. But before she could finish, Atticus is already up and walking to the great hall, making Marley follow quickly. "Wait, Atticus!"

In the great hall, Atticus is rummaging through mountains of paper as Marley stands beside the very angry Mayor Finch. "This is highly unprofessional of a supernatural specialist making a mess in my office," spits Finch.

Atticus doesn't listen as he found the paper he was looking for and reads it out loud: "Date is 1675. The village was in ruins with many of the stock dying and the crops growing wilted except for one house of a woman named Lorraine Hills, wife of Harry Hills. Her house had crops growing perfectly. Her husband was away on a trip so many of us suspect that she hid her unholy witch powers from the village and her own husband, Mr. Hanks informed me about how her so called medicine once healed someone's child instead of our village doctor, Mr. Kim. We decided to have get rid of this witch at once. We burned the unholy house and brought Mrs. Hills to the center of village to be hung. Unfortunately for us, her husband returned from his travels and tried to interrupt the trial; we had to dispose of him at once."

Marley stands there in shock at the horrors she has just heard, but as for Mayor Finch he snatches the paper from Atticus.

"Are you saying that the justice that my great-grandfather did..." growls Mayor Finch, "...was an unholy woman that took the life of the village for her own selfish gain."

"Or this woman knew how to take care of the land. It's not unnatural for someone to know the way of the land like the Natives," corrects Atticus.

"The only reason you are here is to fix this problem and get rid of whatever spirit is haunting this village. If you are here to make a fool of yourself, you can take your bags and set yourself off my land," curses Mayor Finch.

Atticus only glares as he adjusts his coat and makes his way out of the hall. Marley gives an apologetic look to Mayor Finch and follows Atticus. He knows now the reason for this witch's hauntings of the village, and he just needs to know her reasoning.

"Ms. Marley, do you know where Mrs. Hills's residence used to be? I need to make a connection with her if I am to solve your problems," questions Atticus.

"Of course, but what will you do once you go up there?" asks Marley.

“Something very dangerous...I want you to tell the villagers to stay indoors tonight...please.”

“Yes, of course...be careful.”

Night falls and Atticus stands on the dead grass that once laid a beautiful house. Atticus holds the lantern that he had tightly as he takes off his glasses. He clears his throat as he looks out towards the forest. “May this be the only time I use this chant,” he whispers to himself as he sets down the lantern. He starts to speak in Latin of an old chant his great uncle used to go into the special place, or so his uncle called the world between two worlds. Atticus lets out his last breath as he falls backwards to the ground and closes his eyes.

Atticus lets out a gasp as he opens his eyes to the other world, a vast landscape that doesn't seem to end as the sky goes from day to night more quickly, but not dizzyingly. His eyes lock onto a figure in a red cloak, standing tall.

“So, you are the man who has been running amok in this spoiled village?” echoes the woman's voice.

“I know...I am the last person you would want to see, but this is the only way I could free the people and free you,” affirms Atticus.

“And why would you want to help those insufferable parasites? They're too rotten and blinded by the mayor to even have a brain.”

“And I am here to help you. Just tell me your story, and I'll see what I can do.”

Lorriane, though covered by the cloak over her face, looks puzzled by his offer but gives a huff in defeat as she steps closer to him.

“Fine, but only because you seem like a stubborn but fair man,” huffs Lorraine, “I wasn't always a ‘witch,’ or however they label me now. My husband went out on his trip to sell his goods in the capital of France. He said it would help us get out of this sad little area and somewhere nicer where you can't see another house for miles away, and I get to have my own garden.

The village kept a close eye on me ever since I helped a small girl with her illness. It was simple to really mix in mint and goats' milk with a hint of salt, and she bounced right back up. The men grew more suspicious of me and decided to take matters into their own hands. Swept up my house, broke everything, and burned my house. They questioned me for hours, yelling at me about what sorcery I've done or how long I had been brainwashing my husband to cover up who I truly am.

They grew restless at my truthful answers, so they just decided to put a rope around and you know, take care of their perfect village.”

Atticus looks puzzlingly at Lorriane. “Then how did you become an actual witch if you weren’t one to begin with?”

“I guess hatred or maybe it was deep inside me that needed to be released,” whispers Lorriane.

“I know you want to have your revenge but those who came after the men did not do this, they may tell themselves that it was a righteous doing but they are only trying to protect their heart,” comforts Atticus.

Lorriane looks up at Atticus as she takes off her hood, revealing her black eyes and pale features as she stares at him.

“If you trust me, I can potentially lift your curse from this place and let you in the afterlife with your husband,” vows Atticus.

With a kind smile, he holds out his hand for her to take.

Lorriane hesitates but holds his hand, receiving a nod from Atticus.

“I may leave this land, but don’t let the village forget about what happened to me,” affirms Lorriane.

“I promise you,” declares Atticus.

Atticus gasps as he finds himself in bed; he sits up to see Marley by the bed, half asleep, holding his hand. He sighs as he looks at the sun rise to a new day.

August 12th 1795

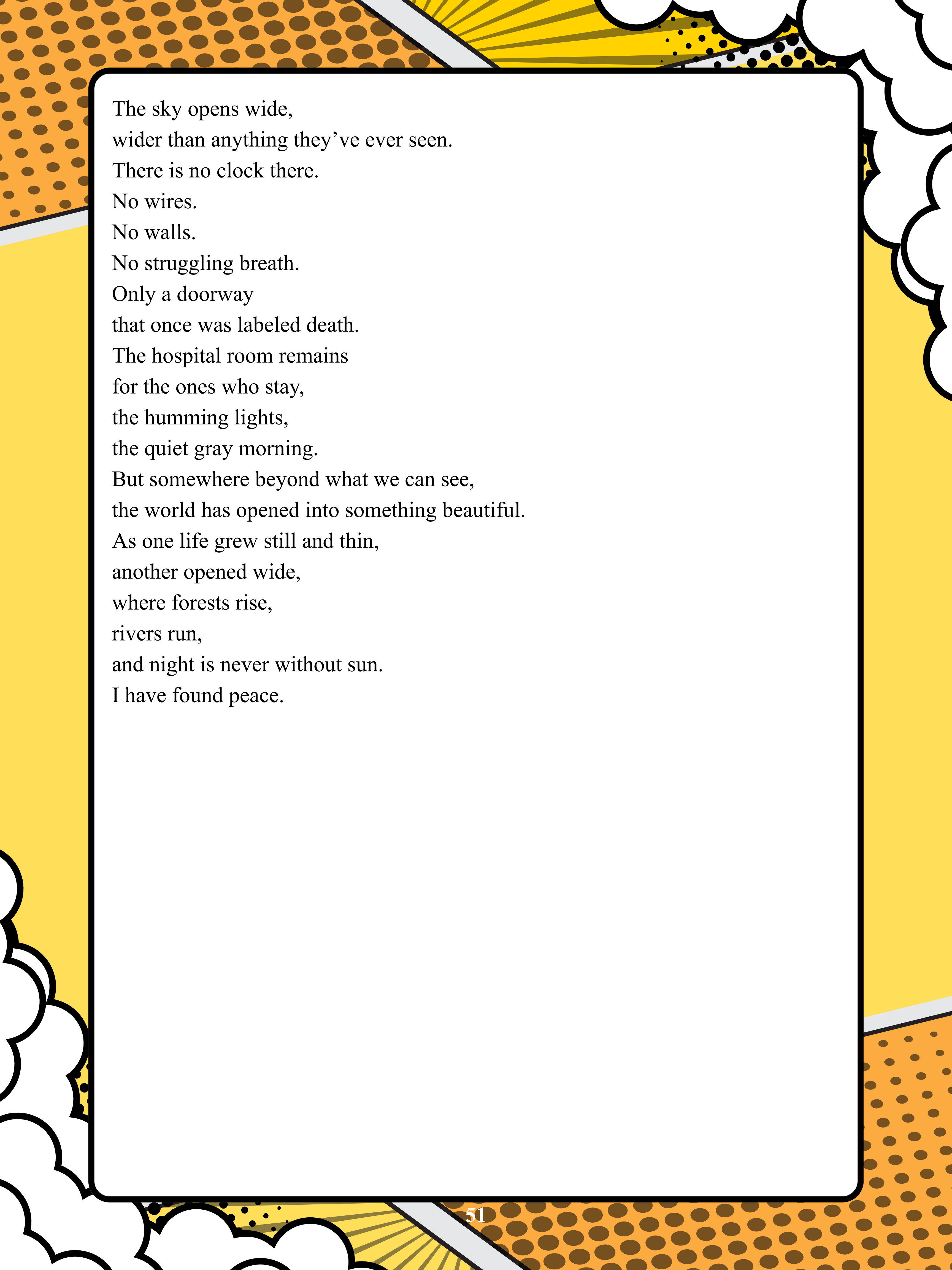
It is done. I set the witch free with an old ancient tongue and it took a toll on me. I may have a few headaches from time to time, but it was for the good of the people. Lorriane had an unfair life. She was only twenty-seven when they took her life, but lucky for the men of the village, they don’t have to fear her anymore more. Starting tomorrow, I’ll give my report and head out of the village to send the final version for the books, and maybe, finally, take a break. This case reminds me too much of my own beloved taken from me, of my own doing.

FINAL MOMENTS

Kiran Truitt '26

The room is small.
Yellow lights hum softly above,
white walls closing in,
a clock ticking through the night like it's afraid to stop.
The window is cracked just enough to let in a draft that smells of rain,
and something like a prayer.
Machines beep in quiet rhythms,
steady and low,
like distant drums you can barely hear.
Someone holds my hand.
Someone else tries not to cry.
Words are whispered in comfort.
Breath comes thin to me now,
fragile as winter thread.
My silver hair spreads across the pillow.
Pain has dimmed their eyes,
but not completely.
There's still something there,
a small, stubborn light that hasn't gone out.
The ceiling starts to blur.
The sharp edges of the room soften.
The beeping slows, deepens,
like the ocean pulling gently at the shore.
The sterile air shifts.

It doesn't smell like antiseptic anymore.
It smells like the pine trees,
and open fields from childhood.
The IV pole is no longer metal,
it's now a big tree stretching upward.
The blankets melt into golden fields.
Fluorescent lights fade into a wide blue sky
where swallows dance across painted dusk.
The monitor's uneven tone shifts,
to a river slipping over smooth stones.
The window stretches from wall-to-wall
until there are no walls at all,
just mountains rising tall in gentle light.
The bed grows warm beneath me
soft as moss beside a quiet stream.
Breathing, once so hard,
comes easy now,
like summer rain.
The voices in the room grow distant,
still full of love,
but no longer heavy with fear.
Love does not disappear.
It forever lingers,
like the last rays of sunset.
And though their feet do not move,
they step forward.
Pain falls away like melting frost in spring.
Nothing essential is lost.
Wildflowers bow along the path,
gentle as old memories.



The sky opens wide,
wider than anything they've ever seen.
There is no clock there.
No wires.
No walls.
No struggling breath.
Only a doorway
that once was labeled death.
The hospital room remains
for the ones who stay,
the humming lights,
the quiet gray morning.
But somewhere beyond what we can see,
the world has opened into something beautiful.
As one life grew still and thin,
another opened wide,
where forests rise,
rivers run,
and night is never without sun.
I have found peace.

THE CONQUER

Aryan Seshadri '29

John King sat on his throne in the center of his kingdom located just past the orbit of Neptune. His glowing green eyes was set with a gaze over his kingdom, thinking deeply to himself about his past. He's over 500 years old, and in his long life, only the first 40 of them he has enjoyed. That was when he was a human.

John used to have a normal life with his wife and kid up until one day, he came back from work to the house only to see the entire city block ablaze. His house had burnt to the ground.

His jaw dropped as he saw what was happening. Beings who looked almost alien set eyes upon him. John ran, but the lead alien instantly caught up to him and hit him on the ground. He then tried to punch the alien, but his entire hand shattered among impact.

The alien didn't seem like it wanted to fight though, and telepathically it communicated to him. It said to him, "My name is Gi-mal. I come from a place beyond your earthly comprehension. Everything you have here is gone. There's nothing left for you here. But I can make you something no human can ever hope to be. Come with me and I will spare you and this planet."

John reluctantly agreed in the hope that it would save this planet from further destruction and, just maybe, his wife and kid would manage to get to safety.

The alien reached out his hand and placed it on John's chest.

Then somehow, John began to change.

His broken hand instantly healed, and then a green and black electric glow enveloped his entire body. His once dark brown eyes turned into a bright glowing green as black plated armor outlined in solid emerald took form around his body. A pitch-black helmet, reminiscent of an ancient Spartan's, formed in his hand. John then slowly put it on his head. The helmet was a perfect fit. He raised his head slowly and looked up. The piercing glow of his green eyes was the only thing visible of his face.

Gi-Mal then used some kind of tech to grab a huge piece of rubble and gave it to John

The rubble had to weigh over a few hundred tons, but John lifted it in one hand without any issue. No one could see it through his helmet, but John was in total shock. He tossed the piece of rubble away and then looked at himself with curiosity.

Gi-Mal gave a twisted evil smile knowing that now his creation was powerful and formidable. The alien then beckoned one of his soldiers over. "Now your final test," Gi-Mal said, "end him."

"What?!" said John, his already deep voice now being distorted by the helmet.

"I said, end him, John. Now."

The soldier was scared and he looked around frantically trying to see if any other soldier would try to help him. No one dared.

John hesitated and gave a deep breath. "I'm sorry," John said. His eyes started glowing brighter and brighter and then...there was one less soldier.

When the dust cleared, there was nothing left. Just a shadow outlined in green fire of where the alien soldier used to be.

John's eyes then went back to the normal brightness they were before. He was breathing heavily as he looked around until he met eyes with Gi-Mal.

Another twisted smile crept across Gi-Mal's face. "You are ready now. From now on, you shall bear the name of The Conquer, and will now lead my army and serve as King of Army and grow my kingdom into an empire."

John knew what was going to happen and wanted to stop this, but he also knew that even if he is now strong enough to kill Gi-Mal, the alien would be able to destroy a majority of the planet and hundreds of millions of people before that and that was best case scenario. There was a good chance he could just take away John's newfound power and then one day, shoot him.

So John had to go along with this. He promised to himself that he wouldn't kill or conquer much and only would if it was necessary.

If he only knew how soon his descent into madness would start.

SOCIETY

Adina Polley '29

They spout “Suck it up”
you're only a girl,
in a world so corrupt.
They'll measure your worth
till the well has run up.
So, keep your head down,
and keep your mouth shut.
Don't step out of line,
straighten your spine.

Zip up in satin,
and suck yourself in,
work till it fits,
till you're slender and slim.
Fitting the 'normal'
whatever the cost,
winning in image
but realizing you're lost?

Their cheers are a whisper,
this victory thin

You're a thin, sculpted shell,
hollow within.

Carved through the edges,
to fit to their songs,
traded your spark
for ladylike palms,
but some things made brittle
break at the seams,
some shapes I'm fit into
just isn't me.

LOVER'S REFLECTION

Ivy Bergman '28



PINK

Ella Morris '28

I used to love pink,
the way it softens a person's features
making them look beautiful
like budding flowers growing in wonderful shades,
becoming breathtaking while embodying love and femininity.

But now I hate pink.
It's not about whether we like it or not.
It's no longer about the color
but more about the gender associated with it.

You can't like pink without being "girly"
like it's a bad thing to be a woman.
And to our cruel society it is bad; being a woman is weak.
Being a woman is wrong.
An unpredictable phenomenon suddenly defines everything we are.
And we are no longer worth more than what other people see.

I never want to feel weak or wrong.
Never want to be at the mercy of a man for the body I have.

So, I gave up my femininity;
I gave up my pink butterfly sheets for cool gray ones,
gave up my cherished dolls and toys for books and music,
I threw away each flowery dress, each Barbie doll, each skirt.
Each sequin and sparkle wiped away to make room for another person.
One who could hide from men's eyes,
and live outside of the box they put me in.

With time women reclaimed it.

They turned pink into a symbol of womanhood
something to show the world their strength,
show the world how beauty doesn't mean weakness.

How they are more than just their faces.

But I've hidden my face with my intellect and silence for too long.

So, I won't reclaim pink.

It's too late to bring back the child I spent too much time scrubbing away,
pushing down until all that was left was anger,
anger at the patronizing men who enforced it.

Who put me in a box I never fit.

So, I gave up pink for red.

Turned soft innocence into sharper intelligence
gave up being a princess to be my own knight.

I gave up what I loved to protect myself from a world of hate;
a world of condescension.

Soft edges don't defend well against force.

And silly dreams mean nothing compared to "real world skills."

I changed.

Turned from love to hate.

From weakness to strength.

From pink to red.

MR. FROGGY

Reo Wickard '28



WORLD

Alexis Street '28

“Take care of ‘er for me.”

Gary’s face crinkles with that familiar disappointment seen in most old men finally giving up their run-down trucks. His face is adorned with wrinkles, a crease above his brow, and smile lines prominent from long nights of family fun. His hand extends outwards, and in his palm are the keys to his stereotypically red Ford F-150.

“Sure thing. Thanks for— you know— This will make things a lot easier for me.”

Gary only nods. As I see it, he's not very fond of my plan to leave this town, to get rid of the burden it has caused me. Whatever, it isn't his business anyway. He sees the turmoil on my face, speaking far swifter than I can turn away and leave.

“Look, Aspen — this is — it's dangerous for a young woman to be out on ‘er own. Surely you have safer options...?”

I want to roll my eyes. His intentions are kind, but what did he know about me? He’s only my father’s friend, not mine. We aren’t close, and we will never be. Plenty of condescending comments flutter through my mind. This resentment towards this town has spread to the people that I know. I’ve started to see them as threats, rather than allies. I sighed. The keys jingle in my grasp, the tune of my escape.

“I can handle myself, Gary. I’ll be fine. Thank you for your help.”

The vast roads ahead call my name. The truck’s familiar purr feels foreign in my hands. I feel as if, for once, it is truly just me I had to worry about. With no direct destination, I leave my choices up to chance. For three miles I follow a compact, black, hatchback with a “Baby on board” sticker somewhat faded away on its rear windshield. Once it turns onto a side street, I set my sights on something else. Every three lights, I turn left. Every other green, I turn right. When I make it into the middle of nowhere, I'm not entirely surprised.

Around 8:30 p.m. and the 89th mile mark of my journey, I begin to become low on gas. I mentally curse Gary for not filling his tank before I received the truck. However, luck seemed to be on my side. A dingy, but well-lit gas station stands out amongst the endless rows of wheat and orchards. It isn't the most welcoming sight, but I knew I don't have any other choices.

I pull up to a pump and the truck halts with an annoying screech. It looks as if I might be the only one there. The cashier can be seen through a small window. She's reading a magazine. I didn't know people still did that.

My total comes out to be \$36.40. Luxury. I get back into my car with a soft sigh. I don't even know where I am going. So lost, but somehow on the right track at the same time. I pull off without a single thought left in my mind beside the rural paths in front of me. Dirt tracks behind the truck and for a moment I can almost convince myself that I know what I'm doing. Well, soon enough, my luck runs dry. The truck spurts to a stop and suddenly, I can no longer turn it on. I'm stranded in the middle of nowhere.

I could wait. Or call a tow. Then what? I call my dad and tell him that his teenage daughter has left home? God, he'd hate me. Probably wouldn't even pick me up.

So, I decide to wait. These roads or rather, paths don't appear to see many cars. The dirt shows my tire tracks and mine only. I could only hope.

About an hour later, I watch as two white lights begin to get closer to where I stand stranded.

For a moment, I don't think it's going to stop. My faith in humanity has been damaged, noticeably. Thankfully, the driver stopped. When she exits her vehicle, I notice that it's the woman from the gas station.

"You ok, darlin'?"

She's got that familiar southern twang that almost makes me miss Gary.

"Uh, yeah. I mean...well, my truck broke down and... I'm not exactly an expert."

The woman gives my truck a curtesy glance. Anyone and their mom could have told me this truck was done for. I admit to feeling a little embarrassed.

"Hmm. No offense, sweetheart but that thing looks like it's been runnin' on hopes and prayers for years now."

Yeah, pretty much. Who knows how long Gary had this thing? I'm not sure what to say so I just let out a soft laugh.

"Tell ya'what." She sucks her teeth. "I'll getcha' a tow and in the meantime, you can stay with me."

Funny. That's the quickest way to get murdered. Or worse.

"Uh-"

She cuts me off by putting one of her hands up, a gesture I know very well as her as of telling me to shut up. My dad used to do the same thing.

“I know what ‘cher thinkin.’ Crazy old lady invites you to her house— sounds like trouble, right?” She laughs, as if that’s any less concerning.

“Don’t worry. I own a hotel. It definitely ain’t anything fancy but it’s cozy. Could give you a nice place to rest since— well, you don’t look like you’re from around these parts.”

I suppose it’s pretty obvious. I look so out of place in my city attire. I begin to wonder why I even bothered going this way anyway. It is like something had called me here. I reluctantly agree to accept her help, although I’m cautious the entire time I’m in her car. She introduces herself to me: Reece.

We soon arrive at what physically appears to be a homeless shelter. It’s not trash that litters the halls, per say. It’s memories. Bikes, blankets, and a few pictures of someone’s grandkids. I feel bad knowing I had the privilege to live in a house that belonged to me, and I just left it behind.

I enter Room 109. It’s like every hotel I’ve ever seen. Two beds, burnt-sienna wallpaper, and a floral pattern on the bedspread. It reeks of fresh paint, but it feels welcoming. As far as I’m concerned, it’s somewhere to gather my bearings. Reece helps me into the room and even brings my singular suitcase into the doorway. I don’t plan on spending any more time here than I have to.

As I settle in, the light from a small fire in the middle of the parking lot catches my attention. People gather around it. There’s the strumming of a guitar and the clinking of bottles. It feels like home. I sense a community.

Sleep overtakes me. It’s the best rest I’ve gotten in days. When I wake up, I’m ready to leave. Almost ready. Something within me wishes to stay. I’ve only been here for a night, but the comfort within this small community overwhelms me. Reece helps me to my car.

“Hey. We don’t know much about each other, but I like to be welcoming with everyone I meet. I’d hate to send you on the road without at least offering you a room whenever you need it...” She sighs.

“The world is a scary place, but I’ve got a feelin’ you’ve got something special going for ya. Keep your head held high, ok?”

I nodded. Gary’s truck sits idle in the parking lot. I don’t ask when it was fixed, or who fixed it. All I know is that I had somewhere to go if I need it.

“Thank you for your help, Reece. I hope to see you again.”

She outstretches her arms and we embrace. She has that motherly feel to her.

“The world waits for you, Aspen.”

The world.

BELONGING TWICE

Isabella Hart '26

At three years old, my little life fit inside a backpack. Stuffed animals, clothes, and a quiet knowledge that suddenly, home now came in twos. I remember the car rides and the travel more than the goodbyes, the windows a fleeting painting of blurred surroundings as I rehearsed how to belong in the next house. My preschool mates memorized the alphabet and rhymes. I memorized the rules and customs of two different houses. Two different rooms. Two different lives.

My dad was young, renting a temporary home big enough for just us, a new face to learn and play with every time I arrived. Perhaps my Nana, maybe an old high school friend of his, whom I knew as “Uncle,” followed by a first name. Sometimes, a new woman, never around long enough to be a role model, simply someone else who could finally play house with me the way I liked.

The air was always salty and bright, surrounding my life with my dad. Almost never in that little rental house, always driving and driving and driving. In his big Ram truck or my “Uncle” Charlie’s monster truck, many times in a boat in the Gulf. Always salty and bright. My skin was tan and warm, and my hair was always crunchy and blonde from the saltwater. I remember my life with him in vivid detail, always so eager to be at that little rental house because I was the only child in sight there. All eyes on me, all time with me. I felt special no matter how many unfamiliar faces were near.

My mom was five years older than my dad, already a mother to my older brother and I. Holding a surplus of maturity and preparedness—my dad was not gifted at the time—my mom never let us out of her arms or her sight. Stay with me, she’d always say. Hold my hand, look both ways. Stay with me. My mom valued safety over her young-adulthood, her title as Mother taking precedence over coffees with friends, clubs, parties, and dating; many things my dad still took a liking to. Doors clicked shut behind us, booster seat straps snapped into place, and her soft voice reminded me, again and again, that staying close meant staying safe.

In her arms, I learned every contour of certainty. Where my edges were, where hers began. I shared that cushioned, bubble-wrapped, second life with another child. A playmate, a friend, but another person to share only one parents' attention with. I never truly minded it, too young to claw at the concept of envy or attention, though I still have trouble recalling my time with them as easily as my time with my dad.

My small mind and body carried two sets of customs, two ways of belonging. Sometimes I found myself wishing for a single room that smelled of both that ocean breeze and Mom's clean laundry. A room where I wouldn't have to shuffle between selves when I was hardly conscious enough to find one identity.

But belonging twice taught me something I'd carry forever. Home is never an address. It is the pulse you recognize in the quiet moments between departures and returns. It is the people you share that space with and the lessons you learn there.

Now, when I step across a threshold, be it my own front door or a borrowed guest room, I pause to listen for that familiar hum. I've learned to unpack my memories first: a pinch of salt from my dad's laughter, a swirl of Lysol from my mom's tidy little kitchenette. Those scents blend into something wholly mine, a small sanctuary I carry wherever I go.

I don't crave perfection in my surroundings anymore, not since they remarried. Instead, I look for moments of welcome. Belonging twice taught me that home isn't built by walls or routines but by connection and trust.

FIRST LOSER

Cole Wilson '27

My entire life, I've always been behind—
second-best at most,
but never first.

I've tried,
I've trained,
I've studied,
and it's always led to the same outcome:
always the first loser.

The perception of my so-called life was diminished,
and to some extent, it still is.

My reality was shattered—
but clear—
like a bullet hole bursting through glass,
smashing everything in its path without consequence.

No time for pain
or reconciliation.

No time to get up and try again,
because that would be no use.

Being the first loser is hard.

It's a life of mediocrity
and letdowns.

It's a life that makes you think you can never do anything,
and you will never be anything.

It's a life no strong person could stand.

It's shame.

It's embarrassment.

It's never me.

I'm never the winner—

only ever

The first loser.

SHOPPING LIST

Ethan Garfias '27

8/1 – ~~Lemons~~

~~Onions~~

~~Vanilla Extract~~

~~Eggs~~

8/8 – ~~Ham~~

~~Apples~~

~~Potatoes~~

~~Pomegranates*~~

~~Yogurt (cherry and vanilla)~~

8/15 ~~Dates~~

~~Insurance (life/health)~~

~~Shrimp~~

~~Thankfulness*~~

~~Redo*~~

~~Eggs~~

~~Security*~~

~~Soup (the special kind he likes)~~

8/22 -~~Days*~~

~~Energy*~~

~~Able-bodied*~~

~~Tenacity*~~

~~Happiness*~~

8/29 – ~~Steamed vegetables (frozen – microwavable)~~

~~Optimism*~~

~~Redo*~~

~~Ramen~~

~~Orange juice~~

~~Wanted*~~

9/5 – ~~Ramen~~

~~Espresso pods~~

~~Garlic bread (oven-made)~~

~~Ranch Doritos~~

~~Energy drinks (2 Monsters + 2 Alanis)~~

~~Thyme*~~

*Store was out

LOVE, PATROCLUS

Ethan Garfias '27

You once told me that
you were going to
be the first hero who was
happy;

The first hero who had
both fame and happiness.

I know now that could never be true.

As my ghost lingers around your — our — grave,
I am left only with
the memories of a life
lived with you.

I am made of memories,
but memories of you are not enough.

They are not the same as
feeling your supple skin
against mine, watching as
your olive-green eyes
drink in the crimson blood
of the battlefield.

I understand why
you died, but only wish
that you would have chosen
to live on, even if you died
for me.

You went on living
to kill the man who killed me,
as usual you succeeded.
But failed to find a reason
to go on without me.

The moment his arrow pierced
your body — the moment the skin
on your bones was cut through,
like knife through canvas,
you smiled.

Even in death, I have never
seen something so
beautiful.

You knew you would
reunite with me,
and I could never in a thousand
years wish for the same.

I only wished that you
found your fame and
your happiness without me,
even if we swore we would
always be together.

But seeing your body
draped across the
flat Anatolian grass, I realized
then that even in death, no amount of
blood, broken bones, or rage
could mar the beauty of your soul.

You let the arrow pierce
the painting of your back
because after death,
you found only
fame and happiness in the comfort of
holding me, and yet — even in death
I am late to the call of your arms.

Achilles,

Forgive me for loving you,
and for bringing your death
all the same.

Forgive me
for the countless
nights we spent together in
boyhood, skipping stones
and stealing kisses.

Forgive me
for dying a gruesome
bloody death, and for swearing
to always be your happiness.

Achilles,

I stand here alone
at our grave, past my life,
and only wish I could stand here

with you.

Find joy in the underworld.

I know you will be
celebrated as a god,
the way you were
to me.

Always and forever,
-Love, Patroclus

PALE PRINCE

Lily 'Ana Garced '28



CUPID'S ARROW

Cole Wilson '27

They gave Cupid an arrow so he could strike people with love,
not knowing the impact—

An arrow still hurts.

Even if it is laced with love.

Because love is five minutes of pleasure for a lifetime of pain.

Love is what keeps you up at night;

it's the pondering and reminiscing about when Cupid will shoot,
without thinking of where Cupid will shoot next.

It's a risky game, impaling the heart,

because there's no coming back from the keen limerence an arrow holds.

So, I keep it in—

The arrow now consuming my valves, leaving my heart swollen and bare.

Even if Cupid shot one more arrow, ripping through the air,

he can't hit a bullseye in the same spot as the last.

So, I use Cupid's arrow to hold my love for you—

In the future, present, and past.

PROMISE

Arabella Reece '28

The first few days of moving in were a blur.

My mother and I first arrived at our new neighborhood a couple days ago. We traveled with our medium-sized U-Haul truck for fifteen hours on the road, stopping only for quick bites in between.

I helped her carry all the heavy boxes and furniture inside, including our sofa and the rocking chair that Dad used to sit in when I was little. I would sit on his lap before bedtime, and he would tell me endless bedtime stories from when he was young, or just simple ones like *The Three Little Pigs* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Once I fell asleep, he would carry me back to my bedroom and kiss me goodnight.

Now I wonder if I'll ever experience the type of love my father gave me ever again. Since he and my mother divorced, he got the rights to our house, and unfortunately, we had to move away to a new location. Somewhere unfamiliar that my mother and I weren't ready to adapt to yet.

The following morning, my mother came to wake me up, telling me she wanted to get some breakfast before we continued unpacking for the rest of the house.

She drove us to this cozy, homey type of diner that made my stomach feel at ease. Maybe this place wouldn't be so bad. After all, inside the place it smelled like fresh cinnamon and coffee being brewed from the pot. That was, until the waiter decided to try and ask my mother out on a date that it hadn't become my favorite spot in the town.

We quickly resorted to buying breakfast sandwiches from the store, packing them in the fridge for the time being until we could find a decent enough place to eat breakfast at. One that doesn't have flirty waiters and the irritating clanking noises as the food was being made in the kitchen.

Fast forward to now, we've officially moved into our new house. It's been two weeks, and my mother found a stable desk job at one of the post offices to keep herself occupied. Meanwhile, all I have is school, and this cherry oak tree keeps me company.

I visit this tree every day after I get dismissed from school. It helps me relax my thoughts, not worrying about the move so much. It's stressful moving to a new place in such a short time. I know this by the number of times I've cried in my bedroom the past few nights.

I'm in the middle of doing my pre-algebra homework, figuring out the relationship between linear and non-linear, when I spot someone out of the corner of my eye approaching me. He takes his time walking across the freshly cut grass, when he finally comes to a halt in front of me.

I glance up at him, taking him in bit by bit. Brown hair takes over his head, soft and bouncy curls on the ends. Blue eyes that remind me of the ocean on a sunny day at the beach. The transition from turquoise to a deep blue is a stark contrast to my green ones. His tanned skin in all its glory in the sun; his broad arms stretched out as his hands are holding a football in them. He stares down at me like I'm a new creature he's discovered in the wild, and I'm the prey that he's ready to hunt down. He observes me for a second before raising his left hand in a wave.

"Hey."

I blink twice, waving back at him, my hand moving back and forth more than intended. I place my hand back down on my pre-algebra notebook, my other hand clutching my pen in a chokehold.

My palm starts to sweat, so I release my tight grip on it some.

"Hi."

"I'm Dean, you?" he asks, running a slow hand through the tangles of his curly hair.

"Persephone," I answer, ruffling my skirt out so it doesn't look all crumpled.

Dean smiles at me. "That's a unique name. I haven't heard that one before."

"You think so?"

He nodded. "I know so."

We sit there in silence, just staring at each other.

"So," he breaks the silence off, tossing the football into the air, catching it after, "you visit this tree, too?" he asks, planting himself down beside me. He crosses his legs, placing the football in the middle of his lap, ocean eyes still focused on me.

"I do. It's very peaceful here." Setting my notebook aside, I cross my legs diagonally to face him. He smiles slightly at me, looking me up and down before nodding in agreement.

“Sometimes when it becomes too much for me as team captain, I come here to let my thoughts run wild. The expectations, the pressure... Let them run around and just give me time. Time to be myself,” Dean tells me, fingers drifting over the stitched parts of the football.

I understand where he’s coming from. The pressure of us moving away so quickly from our old house was unbearable, and to a new place that I’m not familiar with. It’s a lot to handle, since my dad was no longer the man that I saw him as before. Being here under this oak tree lets us be free from it all. Free from the constant naggings of life.

“I discovered this oak tree a week ago when I transferred here,” I tell him, picking up a pink petal that fell from the tree. I trace its patterns and lines across it. “After dismissal, I found myself walking around outside the school grounds, until this tree caught my eye, and it became my spot of letting go of everything.”

Dean listens to me closely; his gaze focuses on me the entire time I’m talking. It feels refreshing that someone is listening to what I have to say for a change. People that I’ve talked to never bother to listen to the full thing, just parts of it.

“We just moved here recently. My parents divorced and my dad got rights to our house. He had an affair with my mother’s friend from work, and she found out a week later.” I fiddle with the edge of my shirt, twirling it with my fingers. I bite my lips anxiously, hoping when I tell him all of this that he won’t judge.

Instead, he does the opposite. Dean sets the football down to the side and engulfs his hand with mine. It feels soft and warm against my cold hand from the breeze of wind passing by.

“I can’t imagine what it feels like to be going through all of that, I—” He pauses, not knowing what to say. He stammers a little before making up his mind to speak again. “It’s not, not... A great feeling to feel.” His awkward grin shows me that he’s pretty shy in deep situations like this.

I chuckle, folding my hands together. “It’s horrible.”

“Yeah, it really is,” Dean mumbles, going quiet for a moment.

We sit there, his warm hand still hovering over mine as his mouth starts to move. I don’t get to hear his words as I’m too distracted by our hands so close together. It’s only when I glanced up at him that he finished his sentence.

“Sorry,” I apologize shyly, swallowing. “Can you say that again?”

Dean laughs, then starts to repeat what he said before. “How about we come to this tree every day after school together? If we’re busy, we can always find different days to come. We won’t have to deal with the pressure all alone. We can get through it together.”

His words make my stomach turn. Me and him? Go through it together? I hope I’m hearing it right, because he starts to talk once more.

“All I’m saying is that going through tough times alone isn’t easy. Sometimes you need someone by your side to help you get through it. A friend. Let me be the one to help you, Persephone,” he offers, staring at me with those endearing eyes. He wants to do this for me; someone he just met.

A kind, caring guy that just met me relates to my problems and wants to help me get through it.

But what about him?

“What about you? Can’t I help you out in return?”

“Yes, together, Persephone. If you let me help you get through this hard time, and we help each other out, we’ll come out strong together.” Dean squeezes my hand reassuringly. “I won’t let you fall out of reach or let you suffer.”

“Promise?” I whisper, holding his hand tightly in mine. His words are on repeat in my mind.

“I promise.”

WHAT IF

Sia Henges '29

What if, when we fall asleep
our dreams deceived us
instead of made-up stories, they were warnings screaming at us
from inside our own head to learn our lesson.
Begging for us to wake up.
Scripting uncanny scenes behind our eyes to jolt us away
from our dreamscapes
and show us the true nightmare that surrounds us.

What if, when our eyes drift closed,
the sky turns a bloodstained red
and the moon wakes up and grins, knowing we are defenseless.
What if she spins around in the ashy dark, saying hello
to the creatures of the night
that run around and uproot the trees of reality
to make space for their own hostile branches.

What if, when the day fades,
nature reveals its true nature
it sheds its honest form under the blindfolds of doubt
that our eyes refuse to double take
and can stop pretending, if only a few hours a night.
while we cannot see, some divine force unbinds its shackles
and lets it rampage wherever it chooses
after being a prisoner of the golden eye in the bright blue day.

What if, when the sun's rays go to rest,
the grass withers out immediately
and loses its bright green flare
what if acidic blisters fill the grounds instead,
capturing any of morning's critters that somehow escaped
and burns them until they are nothing but piles of ember,
smoking in the endless dark plains.

And what if, when we arise from our dreams the next morning,
and look through the window,
the mess has cleaned itself up.
The crimson overcast cleared back into an overly bright blue
to make up for the monstrous environment it had just unleashed
to make up for the horrific scene that would incinerate a human's eyes
if looked upon.

Now, the birds chirp
and the sun glows
and somehow, we don't notice
anything has ever changed.

THE OTHER SIDE OF A DREAM

Sia Henges '29

An earthy carpet below,
where stems proudly raise their soft early petals.
The only tears shed are the droplets that
fall from the waxy surface of the leaves.
The sun never burns here,
no matter how long it blazes along the airy trails of sky.
There is no reason for it to bring forth any pain
when it knows worse is around the corner.

But how could anyone ever guess
there would be traps and danger waiting to be fed like poison from a chalice
in a world that's only ever bore flowering sweetness?
You can't imagine nightmares when you have only ever known dreams.
So you stride forward believing the world will still catch you
in a blanket of clouds if you fall.

You don't take worry when the saturated green gives in to a cold, rotten brown.
When the swallow's song chokes up and ceases from the air.
When the shimmering blossoms wilt away from the sun
and back towards the sunken Earth.
Their thorns reveal themselves once their costumes of color slip away.

You don't notice just how aggressive it is,
like an insect, unsuspecting of the shoe about to crush it.

Everything will seem fine until the greenery finally lashes out,
choking your limbs and dragging you down,
or when the sound of swallows returns in screams as their beaks slash skin.
Shock so great, it seizes and paralyzes you,
so that there is no hope in running back the way you came.
It's the first time you learn the world can turn on you, and it scorchingly burns.

THE THIRD RIDER

Marley Swartz '26

The swing in our yard still moves, even when no one touches it. The chains squeal like they still remember us. Two kids, two shadows, fearless, chasing clouds and daring gravity to catch us. We believed the swing would carry us anywhere in the world if we pumped our legs hard enough. And it was in those moments — nothing could separate us. We were a force. I can still feel the summer heat pressing against us as we flew, as if the air itself wanted to hold us in that moment forever.

But time built a wall between us, invisible but heavy. Now you pass the swing without a glance; I pretend not to notice. The creak is slower now, heavier, almost mournful as though it misses us too. Sometimes I sit on it by myself. Sometimes I'll try to swing high enough to find our old bond, but it's not the same. Maybe that's because regret sits with me now. Regret is the third rider on the swing. It is heavy and invisible, pressing down with every movement, making every creak a sad goodbye for what was before.

HOLLOW'S EVE

Allen Berberena '26

Rainfall during autumn— naturally, one would think it'd snow with how cold it gets. But that's not the case in this town, where shadows crawl along the walls and sickness clings to the air, paired with the scent of burning wood and rain. In the middle of the grey town resided a cathedral. Some say that it was haunted by the ghost of sinners who could never be forgiven by their graceful and all-loving God.

And in that church resided a man. A man who came to the town one day, seemingly out of nowhere. As if he had come from the very heavens themselves, which, oddly enough, was in fact the case. The man called himself Askan; he had snow-white hair that fell over his shoulders in neat braids. He had bright, warm eyes that matched the color of the grey church and town they resided in. His skin was fair, untouched by blemishes and imperfections, a warm ebony color. He had never asked anyone for anything, but when they came to him, he did not hesitate to help them with gentle words, and sweet conversation.

Personality alone is what allowed Askan to gain popularity quite easily; his name drifted around the town in feverish whispers, laced with adoration and perhaps something else. When Askan assumed the role of Cathedral Dean, nobody was surprised. If anything, his authority brought a bit of color to the sorrowful town of Domkloster. The church had many sessions from the day Askan became its Dean, sessions that consisted of confessions, praise, and atonement. Lessons were taught and learned for years. The town had finally been able to experience peace and become the God-loving town they've always wanted to be. But nothing lasts forever.

When rain turns to snow and the seasons change, the air itself seems to shift in its atmosphere. Recently, Askan noticed more crows appearing over the horizon. The messengers of death had made their presence clear by singing into the sky during the dead of night, under the moon's cold embrace. This did not trouble the angel, however. This only strengthened his resolve to further purify the town he resided in. Its people would be cleansed soon of any sinful thoughts and ideals.

The devil was near, but surely it would not be the devil himself. Every angel knew that Lucifer could not enter any churches, since their graceful God had gone out of his way to set forth and bless every church built in his honor and image.

Oh, yes! What a wonderful and loving God he had been, Askan thought to himself.

Walking through those arches of the church would bless and purify anyone's spirit and aura. Askan had blessed the church himself with the graceful permission of his God. How kind was it of his loving God to give him, an angel, permission to bless a church! Waltzing through the very doors of the cathedral filled Askan with happiness and a sense of security. Nothing could ever harm him in the house of God.

On the day when the snow seemed to fall heavier, a strange man found his way into the church. He was tall, but not slim. The black suit that clung to his limbs showed otherwise, tight against his arms. His eyes were dark but not hateful; the orbs seemed to reflect the weight of his past. The skin under his eyes carried a red hue to them. His skin was not dark, but not quite pale either; he had wrinkles as if he had been born scowling. His hair was brown but held a red undertone, curled and unruly locks fell over his shoulders and eyes. When he took his seat in the back of the chapel, nobody bothered him. Nobody had even paid him any mind, all except Askan. The snow-white haired man took his seat besides the stranger with a calm air about him.

“You know you should not be here,” Askan reminded the man.

The corner of the strangers' lips curled upward into a slight grin. He didn't turn his head to look at Askan; his eyes remained forward.

“I believe this place is open for all, no?” the stranger quipped.

Askan chuckled and shook his head, setting his gaze forward once more.

“Well, yes. This place is open for all humans.” Askan looked at the man beside him.

“You, sir, are not human.”

The man's eyes remained forward as Askan spoke, never straying from the large cross over the arch of the cathedral. His green eyes fixed on one destination. His smile never wavered. He inhaled shortly and sighed, closing his eyes.

“Neither are you, dear angel,” he replied smoothly.

Askan stiffened; his blood ran cold in his veins somehow, affecting the rhythm of his heart. The stranger chuckled, sensing that he had created an air of unease between himself and the angel.

“Struck a nerve there, did I?” the stranger asked, his voice low like a whisper, and smooth as an apple.

The angel suppressed a shiver he felt rising from the base of his spine. No, he would not allow himself to be swayed by a stranger, by a devil at that. Slowly, the others in the cathedral piled out in groups, chatting softly amongst themselves.

Askan watched them leave, his grey eyes warm as they looked at him before leaving. Once the cathedral was empty except, the ghosts of the guests, Askan, the strange devil and the eyes of God. Askan rose from his seat and sighed.

“You have tested my patience, devil,” he warned calmly. “Now, you must atone.”

A snow-white feather fell onto the lap of the stranger. He looked down at the soft plume. When his gaze returned to Askan, the angel had gained large, angelic wings. The devil smiled eerily; Askan narrowed his eyes at the smile.

“Be still, demon,” Askan commanded, raising a hand against the man.

The stranger cocked a brow; he scoffed sourly before standing himself. He rolled his head a bit to ease the tension in his neck. His eyes remained shut but only momentarily. When he opened his eyes soon after, the hues were now a burgundy shade rather than that dark evergreen they were before.

Askan flinched at the sight but remained steadfast. His heart hammered in his chest; his breath caught in his throat. Before his eyes, the stranger gained two black wings, tattered and sullied from years prior. Black as the night but twice as angelic as his own set of wings.

“How do you — ” Askan began but was cut off by the stranger slamming him into the nearest wall of the cathedral.

Askan winced, feeling his breath being forced out of his lungs in one hit. His head spun and his throat burned, his lungs begging for air that couldn’t quite reach his mouth. The stranger had his forearm across Askan’s neck, staring into his eyes with no real malice behind the green hues. Askan stared back, his silver eyes wide and confused. Who was this man?

“I never quite understood why Mother allowed such idiotic birds to plague her court,” the stranger commented bitterly.

Mother? Askan thought. Who was this man's mother?

“What does your mother have to do with any of this?” Askan demanded, though his voice sounded anything but strong in this moment. If anything, he sounded meek and breathless.

The stranger tilted his head to the side slightly at the question before slowly forming a smile on his face. “That’s because, little angel, my mother is your—our creator,” the man responded simply, as though answering a math question.

Askan froze. His creator? The Almighty? God had created an angel who had black wings? But that was impossible! The last angelic being to have wings as dark as night was...

“Obviously, you haven’t been studying history, little angel,” the stranger said, sneering softly while his nose scrunched in distaste.

The man reached out, grabbing Askan by his throat. His palm pressed tightly against his Adam’s apple, making Askan squirm in his hold with wide eyes. He felt trapped, like a lamb to the slaughter. The stranger noticed this. His eyes softened just a fraction.

“Dear angel, be not afraid,” he whispered, though his grip did not ease up in the slightest. If anything, it was a mockery of the word angels use to calm humans upon being spotted. But surely this man was no angel.

Askan flapped his wings wildly, in a futile attempt to shake off the stranger's grip around his neck. The man grunted and pulled Askan closer, glaring down into his eyes.

“Lucifer,” Askan whispered.

THE VALLEY THAT CHOKES ON WATER

Lucas Buyea '29

The fleshy dead meat of a god,
pooled into the heart of the valley that chokes on water.
The valley bleeds for a time before,
but it knows that it will never be enough again.

You know who I am,
but do you ever ask if I was who you thought?
A sentiment written to the mother of a flower,
who lives with the prayer for an angel.

My bed is my kingdom,
but I am a drunken prince.
My betrothed lays on the farthest hill,
in a meadow that I can't help but burn.

Why am I this way, we ask?
I could tell you,
but I know you wouldn't wish to know.
I ask the valley,
"How do you accept your fate?"

But only the winds reply:
"One day, the eyes of heaven will open
and see they have left a child behind,
the child who has grown wrong,
his roots bent and his flowers dry.
But they still leave him.
Then that day,
you will see what the valley sees."

BLOOD AND FLOWERS

Mary Yassa '29

Ashina continued to walk in the white void; her mind was hazy. She was dead. That she knew. She was sure she would end up in hell for what she did. At first, she just stopped and stood there, not knowing what to do.

Then she heard it. That sickeningly familiar music. She turned her head and saw a familiar figure playing the harp and behind her, a large oak tree. She was the same age as her, with short pink and green hair adorned with flowers, and light green eyes. She wore a silk robe. Her skin was unusually pale, and the ears on her head were pointed. She was an elf, after all. The only thing that was different was the large red gash in her chest.

She knew how that gash got there, after all, she was the one who killed her best friend.

“What are you doing here, Vedia?” Ashina asked, an edge in her voice.

Vedia stopped playing. “This is the space between death and reincarnation,” she said. “Those who have the will to live after they die come here before they are reincarnated.”

“Then why am I here?” she asked. She has had no will to live since her pack abandoned her. She gladly accepted her fate when those hunters came and killed herself, Yolani, Katrina, and Noxara.

Vedia looked Ashina in the eyes; her gaze was serious. “Your sister went insane after you died,” she said, causing the werewolf to tense. “I had my own sisters. Three of them died, but my living sister stopped yours and reset the world. Now all those who lived in that world are being sent to the new realms.” She played a string on the harp, humming softly. “But your sister’s greatest wish was for you to be alive. So, by her and my own sister’s will, we were sent to be reincarnated. Same would have happened to your sisters.”

Ashina just looked at Vedia. Those kind eyes, never once holding anger, malice, or fear. Not once when the people of Arcadia slaughtered her sheep, not when she learned who Ashina really was, and not when she faced the Cursed Dragon of Wrath and Flames himself. She was the most understanding person she knew. And she hated that.

“Why aren’t you mad at me?” Ashina asked. “I killed you and the rest of Arcadia. Twice. Just lash out at me already!”

Vedia looked at her. Was that sympathy in her eyes? “I don’t blame you for killing me,” she said. “I blame the world for driving you towards insanity.” She then turned towards the large tree behind her. And behind it stood a dark figure. “But I think there’s someone you should apologize to.”

The figure stepped out from behind the tree, revealing themselves to be a young girl with white hair and pale blue eyes, ones that should hold anger but don’t. “Hello, Commander.”

She knew this girl all too well. Who wouldn’t know one of the daughters of Isis? Ashina had practically raised Kamari after her father had abandoned her, and Ashina was the reason she became a knight. But when everything went down, Kamari...

Ashina looked away from the giant gash on her head.

She felt her arms wrapped around her. “I don’t blame you for killing everyone. You don’t have to regret anything.”

Ashina didn’t say anything. She wanted to cry, say something, but she had run out of tears and words.

“I’m sorry.” That was all she could whisper.

Vedia smiled.

Then the world went white.

“Hey, Neo, can I ask you a question?” the green and red-eyed girl, Solana, asked her sister.

“You just did,” the blue-eyed girl, Neoma said.

“You know what she means,” the girl with green and brown hair, Iris, said.

“Fine, what is it?”

“You said you were the second female Guardian in your bloodline,” Solana started. “So, who was the first?”

Neoma stopped for a minute. “The first female guardian was also the first guardian ever,” she said. “My grandfather told me that she was one of the daughters of Isis, but she was also the reason why our bloodline had to end.”

“Why is that?”

“Because she was a victim of one of the Pillars of Insanity, more specifically, The Werewolf of Pain,” she continued, “ ‘If one who shares your blood died by insanity’s hand, you are destined to die.’ That’s what I was told. The only reason my family lived so long was because she was known by The Shepherd of Flowers.”

“What was her name?” Solana asked, genuinely curious.

“The Shepherd of Flowers?” she questioned.

“No, your ancestor.”

“Oh,” Neoma tried to remember, “I think her name was... Kamari.”

ETERNAL SUGAR

COOKIE

Delana Pillars '27



AT WHAT COST

Mackenzie Luster '26

You want land but at what cost?
Does it compare to the millions of lives lost?
That are buried six feet in the ground,
never to make another sound

Land but at what cost?
Does it compare to all the damage done?
That has left only gravel on the ground,
caused by sounds that were just too loud

Land but at what cost?
Is it worth the loss?
Of mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers
never to return home
leaving their loved ones alone

Land —
I hope it was worth the cost
because if it's not
then the homes that have been broken
and the families that will never be reunited
were all worth nothing.

So was land worth the cost?

MORE THAN THEY SEE

Kennedy Oley '29

Everyone thinks I'm quiet and shy. I sit in the back of the class never to cause a scene. I smile when I need it, too. Never show my true self behind the scenes. Most people think I'm a nice person, but if this is what they think, how come, no one ever comes to check on me, see how I'm doing or anything? Everyone acts nice, but in reality, they are all selfish and don't understand the true value of friendship, or even understand the people around you.

Inside, the part no one is ever going to see, I am loud and stubborn. I overthink every situation and think about the possible outcomes that are not likely to happen but are in my mind. My favorite thing to do is read and draw. When I am, everything goes silent and I don't feel anything when I am reading or drawing, I feel calm and safe, like whatever I do nothing can hurt me.

Last week in class, I was going to raise my hand and speak up, and that's when they started staring. Why are they looking at me? Did I do something wrong? I decided not to raise my hand; instead I got home and wrote all my thoughts and feelings in my notebook. This later turned into my diary. This is now how I express my feelings. Most people have friends or family to talk to about anything, not me. I have nobody.

I grew up in foster care my whole life; I got passed around from home to home never feeling at home. I never had a bond with my brother or sister, always moving around kept me from making friends. So, I had to learn how to do everything on my own, and I did. Silence doesn't mean weakness. It shows you how to express yourself in a better way.

It took me too long to realize this, but I have, it is ok if people don't see the loud, outgoing version of ourselves all the time. The version they know keeps me safe in a way. But sometimes when no one is watching I let the real me breathe. And maybe one day I'll show that part of me more, quietly, in my own way.

CARRYING THE LIGHT

Marley Swartz '26

Being the oldest feels like walking with a flashlight that's too dim. I hold it out in front of me, trying to light the way, but the beam only reaches so far. Behind me my brother trails trusting that I see more than I trust myself. His footsteps are steady, certain, while mine trip over cracks I can barely make out. Every choice I make feels like a stone in my pocket, heavy and clinking louder the farther I go. My shadow stretches longer than I am, as if even the sun insists, I should be taller, stronger, wiser. Sometimes I wish I could trade places and let someone else walk, first just for a little while, just long enough to rest.

My mom once told me about the baby who came before me. I think about the baby more often than I should. I think about how different it would feel to follow instead of lead. Maybe an older sibling would've shown me how to carry all this weight, how to make it look easy. Maybe I wouldn't feel like I'm inventing this strength I call upon daily. But that sibling isn't here, and the role is mine. The chair is empty, the path is dark, and the flashlight is in my hand. I will carry it because I must. I carry it because my brother may be watching, because someone has to step first, even if they don't always know where they're going.

SMALL LIGHT

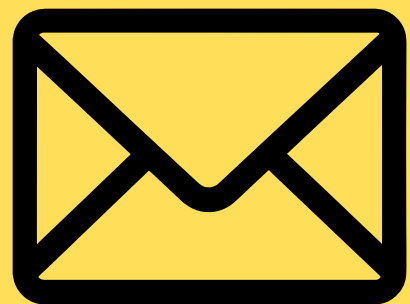
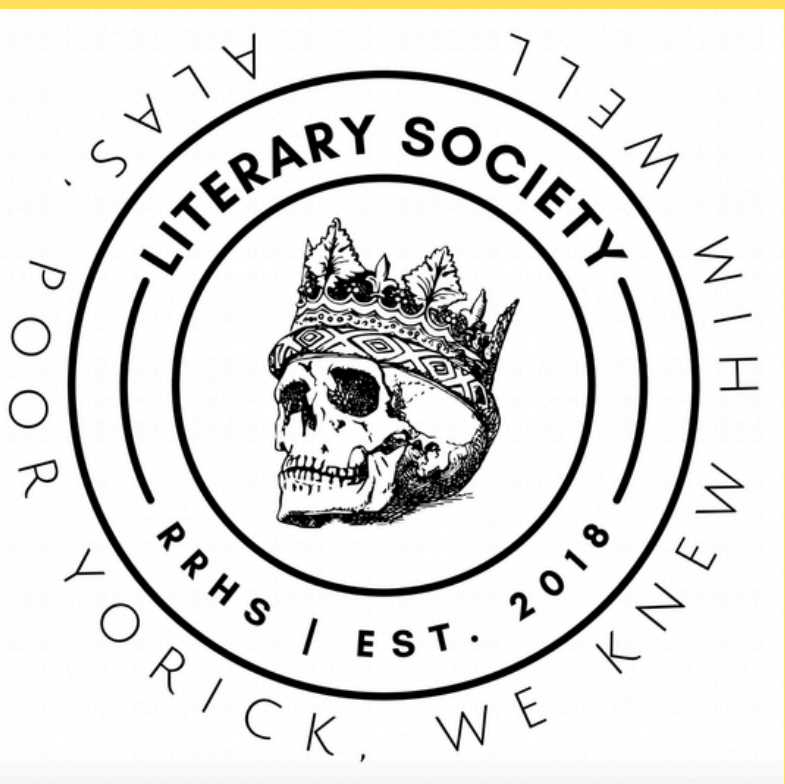
Kendall LaPrade '29

Hope is not a spotlight.
It is the shred of light at the bottom of the ocean.
It sounds like a whisper after a long silence.
A whisper that says, “keep going”.

it's not loud,
it doesn't promise life.
It can sneak up on you,
like a storm on a sunny day.
Hope is the seed that splits open
after being buried in the dark underground.

it doesn't look promising,
but it will be beautiful.
There are days that feel like winter-
cold, lonely, darkness.
But the warmth will return,
and come back warmer than ever.

One day,
when the whisper says “you made it”,
and the seed grows into a tree,
and the winter transforms into a bright summers day,
you will look back and see that these struggles didn't hurt you,
but have carved you,
into something infinitely stronger.



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