



NEOTERIC



2023-2024

Neoteric Magazine Staff 2023-24

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Letter from the Editors

Dearest Readers,

We want to thank you for your continuous support in us and our publications and events throughout the years. With the recent introduction of reading events, we were surprised to receive the turnout that we had. We hope to continue these events for years to come and hope to see your familiar faces again soon! Our team has loved watching this club and these magazines grow, and we hope you have too. Most of our officers are Seniors this year and we have loved to work with each and every one of your pieces. Your contributions to the *Neoteric Magazine* are what's keeping our club afloat, and we appreciate your interaction and support.

We also want to take the time to thank the people who helped make this year's publication happen:

1. First, we'd like to thank you, the student body, for submitting yet again amazing writing and art pieces. You have never failed to meet and exceed our expectations and have given us exceptional work to showcase.
2. Our amazing Creative Writing students have taken the time to select pieces and format the entire publication during their own class time, helping us tremendously. The Literary Society and *Neoteric Magazine* thank those students endlessly.
3. Ariel Treepala has been working with us since her freshman year in designing covers and using her gift to bring our concepts to life. Thank you for your continuous support and contributions to our magazine.

With a bittersweet goodbye, our Editor-In-Chief and Managing Editor would like to thank the team, authors, artists, and teacher sponsors for their endless support in making our visions come to life. We joined during the year of COVID and have loved to shape this magazine to the publication that it is today. Without the perseverance and motivation throughout this club, we wouldn't be able to create what you are reading today. Thank you for everything, and we can't wait to see what is yet to come.

We hope you enjoy *Neoteric's* Spring 2024 publication.

Best wishes,

Aleksa Demby and Emily Oates

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Swindles in Time

-Shayna Peruzzi, 12th

I can smell the bright green grass,
among the bench swinging,
back and forth.
I can hear the heartbeat of my mother,
as our eyes shut against the breeze.
Her muffled voice as I lay,
Against her chest,
The peace fills my lungs,
As she caresses my long,
Golden hair.
Her perfume swindles,
Within the air,
Her voice sharing guidance,
And love.
Even when I can't reciprocate.
Built on trust,
Our relation grows,
To something no one has.
The arguing,
Turns into enlightenment.

No one compares,
To the person,
Who is the air I breathe,
My best friend,
My mother.
-I love you.



*Eos:3
Remy Carr, 10th*

To Love The Baroness

- Amanda Salas, 12th

She wandered through the gardens of the foreign palace. The extravagance of this life was familiar to the Baroness. She sat near a small fountain. Her baby blue evening gown had dirt lining the hem already. She took a moment to breathe in the smell. It was humid and smelled of grass and roses. She drank in the sight of the elegant flora, extending in every way and winding beautifully around the night landscape, making her feel like she was in a world of her own. Far away from any of her troubles.

Rosa was happy to have a break from the chaos of her newly arranged marriage. She was far from home, from her brothers, and she was now married to a man far below her station. She found him increasingly difficult to get along with by the day.

But she had to try.

“For the sake of the empire,” she reminded herself. She tucked a bit of her strawberry hair behind her ear.

“There you are, Baroness!” Sir Castin called out—her new husband. Rosa could give it to him on three things. He was attractive, with short brown hair, golden eyes, and pleasant features.

A decorated warrior known all over the kingdom for his renown in leading troops.

And he did everything in his power to mend their fractured relationship after the poor first impression he had left on her.

“Good evening, Sir Hammar,” her tone was polite and level. Rosa had mastered the art of pleasantries long before meeting the man in question.

He sat down beside her, his armor clanking against the cold stone. “Tired of the library?” He wore a cocky smile. It never failed to infuriate the Baroness.

She took a deep breath, “Never, I just need some fresh air,” Rosa’s tone was level, not a hint of emotion to be found. Castin could quickly tell his attempt at getting a more sincere reaction out of her was already not working.

They came from two different worlds. He was just a peasant from a country of warriors; he worked his way up through the ranks until he was tasked with marrying the most amazing woman he had ever met for the sake of peace between the warring nations.

She, however, was the eldest of ten children. She was always destined to bear the title she was born with. She was taught from a young age how to follow strict social rules.

He was not.

“I got you something...” He handed her a small, bound package.

She took it carefully, not fully trusting what may be within the package.

She gently untied the bow and pulled the wrapping away. Instead of the cruel trick she was expecting, the peeled-back paper revealed a book. “How did you know?” For the

first time that evening, her words had some feeling. Shock, surprise, appreciation, or some mix of all three. She had been looking for this book. He knew it.

“Her majesty told me,” he smiled at her. He was happy to have her smiling instead of scowling.

“Maria, I should have guessed,” she was embarrassed, her best friend was always meddling.

It wasn’t much, but maybe, one day, they could be happy. He’d been in love with her since the day they met.

He’d give anything for her to love him the same.

The Belayer

-MiaBella Colmenero, 12th

The wall is daunting
with ugly shapes
protruding from every crevice

Not a single inch smooth,
soft,
or easy

but you chalk my palms
and give me a smile.

I begin my ascent
and with every leap —
you are below

watching me.

The reds of my palms
cry like my limbs

I extend my hopeful hand,
my sights
on a new ledge

but I have gambled wrong
and my fingers fumble
the fluorescent holds

But before I can embrace
the sanctuary of the ground
I realize
I am not falling

You are holding my rope

I kick my heels in the air
as laughter echoes
through the gym

The sweet sound ends
when your lips
meet mine

I wrap my fingers
around yours because
I cannot wrap my head
around ever being strangers

The pavement of my driveway
will never forget
the shuffles of our slow-dancing

The corners of the world
will always see us
immortalized among the sky

And when I close my eyes,
I can see your irises,
shining like our stars,
imprinted in the darkness

Never will I fear
the ledges of my life
because you are my safety rope
while I endure this climb

my favorite belayer

Excerpt from The Pale White Horse

-Maia Faulkner, 12th

Content Warning: *talk of suicide, talk of death*

I am going to die, Jen thought as she watched Azrael enter the throne room. He is going to kill me.

Why did they have to dress like that? Not that Jen was complaining, he looked like a goddess in that dress. Then again, he looked like a goddess in everything. But why did they always have to take Jen's breath away when he had only just walked in the room? Well, she knew why.

Azrael took his seat on that ridiculous throne of his and gave Jen and her two guards a once-over, and Jen could have sworn she could see the gears turning in Azrael's mind. Then, they spoke in that dark, resonant voice of his. It was the kind of voice you felt deep in the marrow of your bones. The kind of voice that forces you to listen and hang onto every word. The voice of a king.

"Knight from Cordelia," their voice rang out through the high-ceiling throne room. "I hear you have a message for me."

Jen took a few steps forward. "I do, Your Majesty." They narrowed their gaze ever so slightly, although Jen doubted that anyone else noticed it. Jen has been subconsciously memorizing all of Azrael's micro-expressions for quite some time now. It was only natural; they had been best friends since they were thirteen. When Azrael was in the company of others, most of his face was completely reticent and reserved except for around his eyes. That was the giveaway. However, when it was just Jen and Azrael, well, that was a different story. The mask Azrael put on to properly serve his function as King came off and it was like he finally came to life. Right now, those eyes were the only calm Jen had felt in nearly two weeks of feeling very much not calm. The eye of a hurricane, if you will. It is quiet and peaceful despite the storm that surrounds it. Jen had always thought that Azrael's eyes were the one thing about his appearance that you could call gentle. It made sense, eyes are the windows to the soul, but Jen knew that most people did not pick up on the gentleness in Azrael's eyes. With high cheekbones, a sharp jaw, hair like snow, and skin so pale it was almost like looking at a marble statue, most people would call Azrael's eyes piercing. Jen liked to refer to them as oceanic. Just as she was about to speak, Azrael beat her to it.

"Before you give your message, I would very much like to see your face." Crap. He did not need to know that Jen was here. Well, everyone around them did not. Azrael tilted his head and arched a nearly invisible white eyebrow.

"I would like to keep my helmet on if that's alright with you," Jen replied, nervous at possibly being exposed.

“It is.” He gave another quick once-over. “Go on then. Give your message.”

Jen tensed at the knowledge that she was going to have to tell this story again, but she gritted her teeth, inhaled for a long moment, and then let it out before speaking. “King Neferti is dead,” she announced as calmly as she could manage. A low chatter ran through the room.

“Oh.” Azrael’s face softened with empathy. “I’m sorry to hear it, ” he swallowed. “May I inquire as to how he passed?”

Jen was thankful for her helmet because she felt the pinpricks of tears start to form behind her eyes. She inhaled shakily. “Suicide. He hung himself in his bedroom.”

“My gods,” Azrael said under his breath. He shifted in his throne. It was silent for a few long moments as the information settled in. Jen took the time to collect herself. “Am I correct in assuming Princess Jendayi will be taking her father’s place?”

Jen’s grief very quickly got replaced with simmering anger. “No, you are not,” she replied, her voice strained.

Azrael’s brows knitted together in confusion. “Prince Nador then?” Nador is Jen’s younger brother by two years. Jen is the eldest of five, or so she thought until recently.

“No. King Neferti never declared an heir. However, he left a letter behind when he died. In it, he confessed that two years before Princess Jendayi’s birth he had an affair. The affair resulted in the birth of a son. His name is Abdur Sayed.” His name tasted sour in Jen’s mouth. “King Neferti’s council has decided he will be king.” A loud murmur passed through the throne room, which did not have many people, save for a few guards and a handful of curious delegates. Azrael’s lips parted in surprise. Jen congratulated herself on keeping her anger at bay while telling that story.

“So, what I’m hearing,” Azrael started, leaning forward in his seat. “Is that Cordelia’s council would put a stranger on their throne in the name of favoring the eldest rather than make someone competent, like Jendayi, queen? Is that all right?”

“Just about,” Jen replied bitterly.

“That’s just great,” they said under their breath, pinching the bridge of their nose. “Wow.” Just after Azrael uttered those words, the veins in his hands glowed an unnatural blue. The blue trickled down to his fingertips and then that power burst from his hands and covered the room like a blanket made of smoke, lightning, and stars all at once. Everything stopped. No one moved except for Jen and Azrael, everyone else froze like statues. The sound was sucked out of the air, save for Azrael’s voice when a small smile pulled at the corners of his lips, and he said, “You’re not supposed to be here, are you, Jen?”

I'm From

-Victoria Figueroa-Rodriguez, 9th

I'm from late practice nights and early school mornings
from clay-stained shoes and dirt covered hands.
I am from a lengthy line of academic overachieving athletes
from tournament trophies and honor roll medals.

I am from deep-rooted comparison
and a hunger to be the best at everything.
I'm from a humble heart and a competitive soul
from elevated expectations and no excuses for failure.

I'm from a single mother trying her best
and family expecting nothing less
I am from harsh criticism at family gatherings.

I come from hard-working immigrants
and a high pride of my culture
from explosions of flavor in every bite of food
and celebrations that last all night.

I'm from a family who only wish me the best
and a home I will forever be grateful for.



*Tikime
Jordan Dos Reis, 9th*

Spirographs / The Theory of Irrationality

-Delana Pillars, 9th

Spinning lines create an infinite circle
never connecting, always off by a bit
however small. Meters, molecules
the theory of irrationality

Boards across the windows
spiderwebs dusting damp wood
lines burned into paper
multicolor swirls and twirls around the mind

Is shape a concept?
Or a standard everything must fit?
How can one be irrational
without being an outcast?

I envy those rings,
seen as so beautiful
but when one tries to become like them
everything falls out of place.

The theory of irrationality.

Hypochondriac

-Alex Harris, 11th

Everything hurts.
My head is pounding from the LED lights hanging overhead,
eyes sore from the strain of staring
into the plain white ceilings, walls, and floors
of this waiting room.
My lungs drag in air,
but it's never enough to fill them,
and each gasp dries out my throat,
till it's rough as sandpaper.

(How long have I been here?)

Uncomfortably empty,
my stomach has taken
to gnawing at itself,
twisting in knots
to protest my neglect.
A clock to my left keeps
the ever-growing minutes,
getting louder with every tick,
as my heart slows,
beating in sync with it.

(How much longer
will I be here?)

The slow pulsing blood
coursing through my veins
feels clotted
beneath my skin
like worms,
squiggling along
where my clawing hands
cannot reach them.

(I've been here
so long
and
every
thing
hurts.)

Strange Remembrance

-Megan Clark, 11th

The air smells, and the buzz of the AC annoys me. This place annoys me; Pineland Nursing Home is not as nice as the brochures. My family put me here when I got diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I asked for it honestly. I love them, and I know they love me, that's why I won't let my family watch me deteriorate. They visit every week though, which is nice, I'm not alone at least. There's not much to do here, except listen to music. In every room there is a record player, and we go twice a month to town and the record stores. It's soothing and they say it helps us remember things. I hear a knock on my door. "Right on time, June."

June is my granddaughter, my Junebug. I secretly think she only visits me to play with my record set up.

"Hey grandpa," she smiles, and heads straight for my records. "What should we spin today?" she always asks, knowing that I'll let her choose every time.

"Spin something old." I laugh. June flits through the records and decides on one before turning her back so that I can't see. Before long the needle hits the black vinyl and begins with some scratches, and then the chimes. Immediately I'm thrown back, back to when I remembered everything. Back when the only hard thing in my life was what color beach trunks I was going to wear that day. Back to before I met her.

Summer, 1963

"John, you have a little drool there, man." My friends taunt me, but I can't pull my eyes from her. Whoever she is. This is the third day we've been here, and I know my friends are all very upset with the fact that I am spending what little time we have left together before Uni staring at this girl. I can't help it though, and her smile ignites me. My friends have told me numerous times to just go up and talk to her, and I would but I'm not the smoothest. I would fumble and probably spill the fact that I have been low level stalking her for the past three days. She would think I'm a fool. "John, you are never gonna stand a chance with her if you don't just go talk to her."

"Well, it's not as easy as it looks, Frankie," I snap back. Nevertheless, I take his advice. I stand, wobbling a little bit, before straightening up and taking possibly the deepest breath I have ever taken in my life. I make it to her, and smile, gently clearing my throat. She looks me up and down, "I'm John." she smiles then, and quickly blurts out.

"Like John Lennon?" Not being able to hold in my laughter, I let out a small chuckle.

"Uhh, not exactly, I'm named after my grandfather." She smiles again, and then extends her hand to almost meet mine.

"I'm Etta. Nice to meet you, John." Our hands meet and my skin feels inflamed almost immediately afterward. The touch is fleeting and not nearly long enough.

“Etta. That’s beautiful. I was hoping that we could hang out sometime this week? I’m on a final vacation before I go off to university in the fall.” I cross my fingers behind my back, silently praying she agrees. There is something here, I know it. I feel like I have to get to know her. Something is different this time.

“Sure, John, tomorrow I don’t have any specific plans, if you’re free as well?” she says hopefully.

“Absolutely,” I agree, probably in the most uncool way someone could agree to something, but part of me doesn't even care.

Two weeks later

Just one look, and I fell so hard, in love, with you, oh oh.

I twirl Etta, she falls back to me, and I immediately take it down into a dip, planting a kiss on her lips. She laughs; a loud, boisterous laugh. I would pay anything to bottle up her laugh and play it on repeat. Tonight is our last night. This has been the best summer of my life, and it is quickly becoming the worst, because tomorrow at seven in the morning Etta will leave, back to England, to begin working on her bachelor's degree in Classics. Etta told about how her mother always encouraged her to read and learn as much as she can about how to understand what people really mean when they write poetry like Ginsberg. On the outside, I am one hundred percent supportive, and not desperately hoping that this summer can last forever. On the inside, I am the polar opposite. I secretly wish that when she and I lay down tonight we would both turn to each other, and suggest something as crazy as staying here forever, where we can work in our favorite cafe, and spend our evenings dancing in the streets of Crema. But for now, we will dance.

After the music begins getting quieter, and people begin shuffling out, cigarettes are snuffed out and the air clears. Etta looks at me and smiles. “I am going to remember this summer for the rest of my life.” Her eyes moisten lightly, and she speaks again. “You have given me your final summer, but more than that you have shown me how to be truly carefree, how to accept a compliment, how to let someone in, how to let myself fall knowing that this would have to end. I thank you for that, John. Because even though I wish we could stay right here for the rest of our days, we can’t; even if I knew what I would feel for you in just two short weeks I would still have reached out my hand and offered my evening to you, because what you have given me is worth every tear I will cry tomorrow and every smile I will flash when I am old and gray and happen to stumble upon these memories with strange remembrance.” I pull her in, and as the final song ends, we sway in tune, the song ends and so does our summer.

Present day

“Grandpa? John?” June shakes my shoulder. The song is now over, the static being the only other sound in the room.

“Grandpa, are you okay?” June asks me. I let my eyes water, breathe in heavily, and exhale deeply.

“Yeah, Junebug I’m okay, I was just thinking about someone I used to know.”

Tired

-Carolena Schmidt, 12th

I can feel my legs giving up
and my flesh decaying
as my stomach is in knots
and my head becomes warm

A life full of being drowsy
and tears falling from my eyes
as I yearn for a feeling
anything will make me happy

I take a deep breath
and stretch as I awake
another day of what seems to be
just an endless cycle

Forbid that I lay my head on a pillow
and ignore I have school
as I fall back asleep
for just five more minutes

Hunger

-Alexandra Anyon, 9th

I am hungry.
Hungry for love, for passion, and adventure.
I want to consume someone's soul as they consume mine
and gnaw until we are one;
Until we have tasted every underlying flavor,
until there is nothing left but bone.
Nothing tastes bad when you're hungry.
I care no longer of taste or look, I want only to be fed.
I want someone to care not of how appealing I am,
or how my taste be often bitter.
Must I find someone starving to consume me?
Is that my only hope?
And if I do, will they discard the bone left after their belly is filled?
Or will they cherish it and lay our bones together to gnaw to the marrow.



Gumball Pythons
Emerson Stein, 9th

Crybaby

-Sophia Baerwald, 12th

Growing up, I was known as The Crybaby; my family and all my friends knew it. Even I knew how emotional I could be- I would cry at least three times a week. Yet I wasn't officially called a "crybaby" until elementary school. It was during recess, and I noticed some of my friends playing together, so I walked over there and asked what they were doing.

"Playing Power-Rangers," Breanna responded.

"Can I play?"

"Sure, you can be the orange or the yellow one."

"But I want to be the pink power-ranger."

"Too bad, I already called dibs."

"But I want the pink one!"

My eyes welled up and the tears seemed to explode outside of me. I stormed off in a fit. Looking back at it, there was really no reason for me to cry. I was just immature and couldn't receive what I longed for. Now, nine years later, I still consistently cry when I am overwhelmed, frustrated, happy, sad, any emotion one could imagine: If I feel too much, seemingly my only way to convey my emotions is to cry. I feel a lot, and when I do feel, I feel deeply. I've always related crying to a negative emotion, but recently, I've realized that crying, sobbing, wailing, is my personal art form of emotion.

Glossary on Grief

-Faith Monti, 12th

Bluegill

She smiles brightly, holding up the fishing line with a triumphant gleam in her eye.

“You caught a bluegill!” Her grandfather exclaims, putting down his own pole to help her.

“That’s such a silly name,” she says with a huff, watching her grandfather gently remove the hook from the poor fish.

“Well, it’s not as silly as the name they have for us,” he teases.

“They have a name for us?”

“Of course, they do!”

“Well, what could be sillier than bluegill?”

“Pink lung!”

“That’s so stupid!” she giggles.

His smile is gentle as he leans down to release the small bluegill back into the canal, and her gaze trails down to the fish as it vanishes into the depths.

Eight years later, the house stands empty, save for the sparse furnishings that were left behind. The walls echo her words back to her when she speaks. The wood of the old dock creaks under her weight when she walks on it, the wood is green with algae and moss.

She wonders if she could catch a bluegill and take the hook out just as tenderly as her grandfather used to on her own. She hasn’t fished since he passed. Even though he left all his fishing gear to her- fancy lures and tackle boxes and expensive rods- she can’t bring herself to use it, and yet she couldn’t bring herself to get rid of it, either.

Maybe one day, when she had a small house of her own with a little wooden dock that rose and sunk with the tides of a canal, she would teach her own grandchildren how to fish, and show them how to tenderly remove the hook from a bluegill on a fishing line.

Today was not that day. It wouldn’t be that day for a long time.

Car

The car is eerily silent, save for the GPS occasionally calling out directions and the soft thrum of the engine. My knuckles are white on the steering wheel. We couldn’t decide who should hold the urn. It felt disrespectful to put it with the rest of our stuff, it felt like treating him like an object, and yet it felt disrespectful to hold him. The middle of the backseat seemed respectful enough, even if Frances always preferred to be next to a window.

It had been two weeks since the funeral and a month since he died. That word felt gross. It felt gross on my tongue and in my mind. He'd told the four of us, before he passed (that was an easier way to put it, wasn't it?), he told us he wanted it to be the four of us who spread his ashes. He never really said where, he just said somewhere up high, so he could drift with the wind.

I felt pressure. It sat heavy on my chest, in my heart, in my lungs. It felt like an invisible weight on my shoulders. I wanted to apologize for the bump and wrong turn, like I was doing him a disservice.

It was a big responsibility, wasn't it? Taking someone to their final resting place? My breath hitched when the GPS called out again.

Your destination is on your left.

My stomach is heavy with dread. I want to slam the brakes and turn around. I can't do this. My mind is nothing but echoes, doubts ricocheting off the walls of my mind.

The soft clicking of the blinker is easier to focus on than my own thoughts as I turn left.

You have arrived.

Dog

Three years of companionship lived in an ecosystem so small it fit on your windowsill. A betta fish, once so bright, with long fins- flowing with soft hues of red and pink- now lays dull, resting on the leaves of plants that grew along with him. His fins are worn down, signs of a life long-lived and long loved. He swims to the surface for a final gasp of air and lets himself sink back down to the floor of your aquarium.

You cry, even as your mother tells you "It's only a fish," and your father says, "You're lucky he lived that long anyways, it's not like you lost a dog."

And even then, you cry, because even though he wasn't a dog, you loved him just as much anyways.

Errand

The grocery store is always bland this time of the week. The same people buying the same groceries. I'm stuck in the cereal aisle again. There are too many sales, and already I'm overwhelmed. Fluorescent lights reflect off the rows of cardboard boxes. It's monotonous. Even the ever-changing pop music that plays faintly feels monotonous.

With a huff, I throw the cheapest one I can find into my basket. I turn to leave the aisle, and then I'm frozen.

She's there. She's staring at me and I'm frozen.

She's there.

My vocal cords freeze, too, but all I want to do is scream. Does she see me? I don't think she does.

“Right here!” I would shout if I could speak. “Listen to me! Look at me!”

I stare in silence. My body is rigid. She’s there and she doesn’t see me, and I can’t catch her attention because I can’t move.

She doesn’t see me, and when I blink, I don’t see her. She’s gone. Was she ever even there? A different woman is there. She looks just like her. I think I will throw up.

I blink again. I hope she will reappear. She doesn’t. It’s just a woman: she wears the same earrings and one of those stupid brand-named tracksuits. She has the same haircut.

She catches my eye, furrows her brow, and sneers and I rip my gaze away.

I can speak again. I’m no longer frozen, but her presence is still a burden.

Her memory is not warm. It is cold, and it is harsh, and it is painful. Like being punched in the gut or kicked in the shin: it is a miserable sort of throb.

My mother did not love me; not in the way a mother was supposed to. She didn’t see me. She never listened.

I wanted her to. I wished she did.

I still do. I want her to love me and now she can’t and now I can’t scream her name because she will never hear it.

Excerpt from The Lightbringer

-Maia Faulkner, 12th

I am known by many names. Satan, Beelzebub, Asmodeus, the Devil, the Morningstar, the Lightbringer. I've always found Old Scratch to be the most amusing of my misnaming's. Such silly things humans can be, trying to explain things they couldn't even begin to comprehend, something like me. Now, most of these names are incorrect, some are more correct than others, and only one is correct entirely. Satan is a creation entirely of my own, a vessel to contain the wrath I have for God. Beelzebub and Asmodeus are separate entities from myself. They are demons, fallen Angels, and princes of Hell. As for the Devil, this name is both right and wrong. The meaning of it is correct. I am the ruler of Hell, the Dark One, the Adversary. However, what humans depict the Devil to look like is incorrect. That depiction, red skin, black eyes, and horns to match, is more akin to what Satan looks like, not me. When I came into existence, my gift from God was beauty. I was Her first angel and the most beautiful of them all. So, as far as what I look like, I have whatever qualities you deem to be the most beautiful. I could be anyone and everyone. Every being sees me differently. Now, the last two names that have been given to me are the Morningstar and the Lightbringer. The Morningstar was one of my first creations. As humans have figured out, it's not really a star. It's the planet they call Venus. God and I made that planet together, side-by-side. The first creation I made on my own was the star that humans simply call the Sun. I am the Lightbringer. I could look up at the sky and point out every star, planet, and galaxy I had created, and I still would not have counted them all. Of course, other angels were universe creators, mainly Gabriel and Raphael, but I was the first and therefore, the most powerful. Next to the Almighty, I am the most powerful being in existence. But that was many eons ago when I was still an angel. That title, the Lightbringer, was stripped away from me when I fell from Heaven. To understand why that happened, to understand me, we must go back to a time when my fall, and the creation of Hell, was a newly born idea in God's mind. We must go back to a time when I went by a different name, the one God bestowed upon me.

"Samael."

"Yes, Mother?"

"Did you finish that nebula?" She sighed.

"Yes, of course!" I replied excitedly. I was always proud of my creations, and I still am. "Did you want to see it?"

“No.” She nearly cut me off in the haste of Her response. This was the first indicator that something was wrong. God always wanted to see what I had made, so it was odd that She would not want to, let alone respond in such a cold manner. She was my friend, after all.

“Oh,” I replied eloquently. There was a strange pause that passed between us. “Is everything alright? Have I done something wrong?” She was beginning to worry me. Usually, I could read the Almighty quite well, but at that moment, I had no idea what was going through Her head.

“I am not sure yet.” God finally met my eyes and when I looked at Her, I realized two things. Firstly, I had never heard Her admit aloud that She was unsure of something. She was all-knowing, omniscient, so how could She not be sure of something? It’s a bit contradictory. Secondly, the twinkle of warm light in Her deep, fathomless eyes that I was usually met with had been extinguished. It was completely gone, and I felt a sharp, cold ache run through my whole corporation. It was a long time before She spoke again. “There has been talk among the others. They are questioning my power.”

I was confused. “Why? You- You’re God! What could be more powerful than you?”

“You.” My heart dropped. I felt numb. My throat felt like it was closing up. God’s expression was completely unreadable. “Me?” I managed to rasp out after a long time.

“They are questioning me because of you. They believe that I am... losing my touch. That I have gone soft. I want to know why.”

I tried to speak, but my mouth opened and closed a few times, and no words came out. I cleared my throat and tried again. “I don’t know why they would say that. I swear, this is the first time I’ve heard about this.”

“Is that so?” The Almighty’s lips curled up like She had tasted something sour.

“Yes.” I felt so small in that moment. I could practically feel the Lord’s anger radiating off Her.

“Are you completely sure that you did not put doubt into their minds?” Despite it being a question, a part of me knew even then, that She had already decided on the answer.

“Yes,” I said again, my voice cracking ever so slightly.

“Hm. We shall see about that, Samael.” She glared at me once more before flying off. A million thoughts were going through my mind as to what She might do to me.

However, what She actually did was so much worse than any punishment I could have imagined.



The Beholder
Ariel Treepala, 12th

Ephemeral Ballet

-Ariel Treepala, 12th

In the tapestry of existence, I weave the threads of mortal souls,

In the tapestry of existence, I sever the threads of mortal souls,

Tiny whispers in the vast symphony of time.

Whispers extinguished in the silent void of eternity.

I watch as ephemeral beings dance through the fleeting moments,
lasting vessels of dreams and aspirations.

I watch as transient beings stumble through the corridors of time,
fleeting vessels of illusions and fleeting aspirations.

Their souls, like delicate petals, unfurl in the garden of experience,
each step is a melody, a verse in the cosmic poem.

Their souls, like wilted petals, wither in the desolate garden of mortality,
each step is a prelude to the inevitable silence.

I see the shadows that linger, the scars that decorate their narrative,
yet, in the kaleidoscope of their journey, resilience blooms.

I see the shadows that linger, the scars echo their demise,
yet, in the dance of decay, I find a macabre beauty.

I am Life, the silent witness to their joy and sorrow,
a mosaic of stories painted on the canvas of eternity.

I am Death, the silent witness to their joy and sorrow,
a mosaic of stories painted on the canvas of eternity.

For in the heartbeats of mortals, I find the rhythm of creation,
and in their souls, I discover the essence of the divine.

For in the stillness of their heartbeats, I find the silence of cessation,
and in their souls, I discover the tranquility of the inevitable.



Epiphany
Shaela Adsit, 11th

Robbed

-Shaela Adsit, 11th

this poem i never wanted to write
i never wanted to pour my emotions about you
out onto paper as i feared i would
soak it with ink
my heart bleeds with the words i wanted to scream at you
no effort i made was enough to save the friendship we created
i pumped the breaks and blew out the fire
while you poured gas and watched it burn brighter
you did nothing
not one single thing to save every moment we made
every conversation we had and movie we watched
out of everything i knew you to be
a coward was last on my list and now it claims
top spot
first place in a race i never wanted to create
how dare you let me care?
how dare you deceive me and let me believe you were the real deal?
the friend everybody wanted and i finally had
now i don't

i want to erase you from my mind
all the space you take up
all my energy you consume unbeknownst
to you
i think i've moved on
i think you are gone but
every corner i turn you are there
every lyric in every song
every scene in every movie
you are there
memories have contaminated every ounce of my world
i want to hurl you out of my body
flush every second you were there down the toilet
it doesn't seem real that it is done
every moment i had free i was talking to you
and now i forget the sound of your voice
i'm forgetting you but not all that you were to me
oh how i wish i could forget all of you and not just the
you that mattered
i watch as smoke billows around me
as you just become a distant memory
one you were always destined to be

Loving Too Hard

- Jackie Broere, 12th

My love is a drowning sensation.
As I pour a watering can over a garden of flowers,
I watch them wilt before my very eyes.
My tears fall on the petals and seep into the dirt.
I beg for the flowers to come back, that I'll do better
I'm a dog dropping a dead bird at your front door.
So desperate for your approval and acceptance.
And as you wince at the rancid smell and vulgar sight,
I know that I have disappointed you.
My claws sink deep within your arms as you go to leave.
As you pull yourself away from me,
We both stare at the bloody mess I have made.
The regret begins to weigh down on my soul.
Would it have been better if I never loved you at all?
My love is burdensome and damaging.
It begs for your attention.
It begs for your forgiveness.
But I deserve neither.

Contortionist

-Emily Oates, 12th

You say the word
and I'm twisting
and turning
all my limbs for you

Dislocating them
into some pretty pose
all for you
even as they ache
turning them into
loops and knots
tied around my neck

I don't want to
bruise or ache for you
but you've said the word
so I twist my limbs
and bones like screws
to the point they break
all for you
just so I
can be your
pretty doll

You make me
change my shape
for you
wrap my legs
behind my head
and loop my arms
in them
even when they sing
with pain from overuse



Where I'm From
Ariel Treepala, 12th

I don't want to change for you
I hold my words in
until my face turns blue
even as you push me
into a position
that I don't wish to be in

But you've said the word
so I twist
bend
and loop

My bruised tired limbs
into whatever you wish
even if I don't want to change
since I'm your
sweet contortionist

I Was Scared to Say Goodbye

-Kaylin Clark, 10th

I loved you from the day I met you,
though I was not here from when you were born.
I loved you from the moment I rubbed my hands on your soft fur.
I was scared to say goodbye.

I loved every moment I spent with you.
I loved you even when we were apart.
I was scared to say goodbye.

I loved every kiss you gave me when you were happy,
regardless of how stinky your breath was.
I loved your sweet bark,
when it was loud or a little ruff.
I was scared to say goodbye.

I loved giving you peanut butter in your bone,
and passing you pieces of my dinner when no one was looking.
I was scared to say goodbye.

I loved the times you laid beside me,
cuddling and petting you,
making sure you got the attention you needed.
I was scared to say goodbye.

I loved all the little things about you,
and I still do.
I was scared to say goodbye,

I knew your time was up,
when you became old,
though you were a good boy.
Never forget that.
I was scared to say goodbye,
but I had to.
I will always remember the memories we have had together.

Struck

-Shaela Adsit, 11th

The last week has blurred
paint in water
a muddled cloudy mess
a haze
I force my eyes open to see
but I don't want to see
my lids agree with me
weighted by a thousand pounds of
fear
anger
an inky depression that yanks me to my past
I surrender to the foggy haze of pain
Is it too much?
Nothing at all?
Am I overreacting?
Feeling too much and
everything all at once
What day is it?
Yesterday was last Thursday and
my mind cannot process
the words spoken on that day
my brain has overloaded
my storage full
my eyes are my camera and yet
every moment can't be saved
I am full and empty
the glass that shattered
spilling my heart on the floor
the flame has died
winter has arrived
my seasonal depression arriving
too soon
stars or sun
night or day
I blink and each moment
f a d e s
I say I am fine
I refuse to cry
to release
to feel
"I saw it coming" I say
so why didn't I move out of the way?

Laika

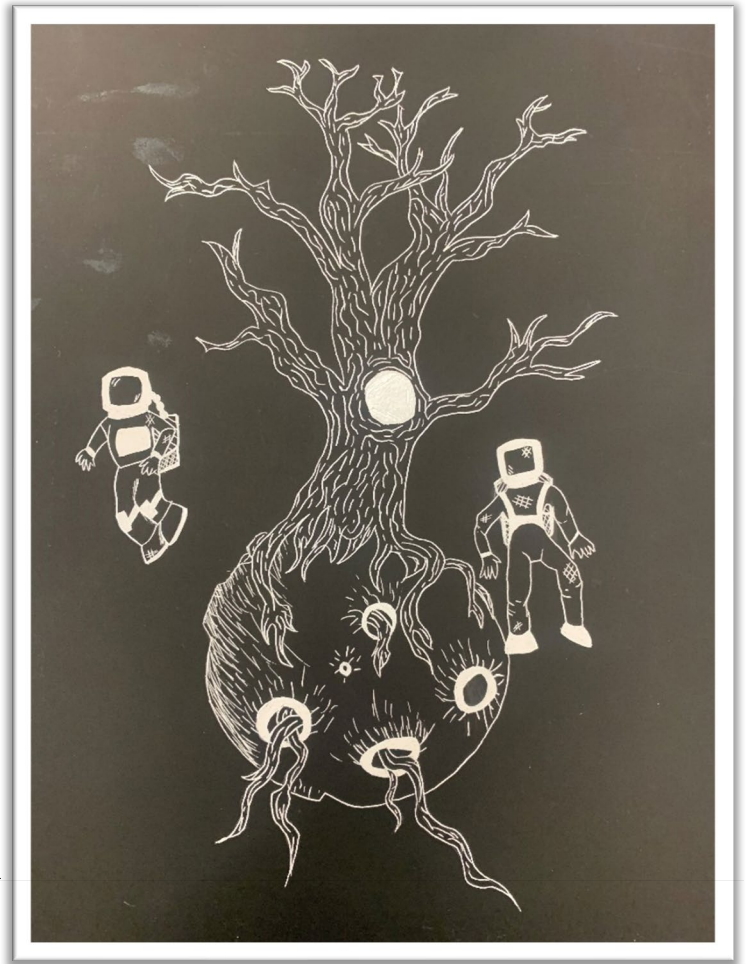
-Mia Ryba, 10th

if you look up at the sky
you will be able to see a dog
who chases her tail on mars
who dashes past jupiter
and bounces mercury on her nose

a dog who was found in a box and told
that she was the best dog in the world
a dog whose name meant bark
and nothing more

“don’t fly too close to the sun,”
people have said
Laika did not have a choice
her last meal was food smuggled
by a scientist who felt the slightest
tinge of guilt for what would soon happen

she died in fear and silence
space does not vocalize its emotions
the void does not mourn death
the only sound she heard was the
thumping of her erratic heartbeat
as she burned painfully alive



Phases of Evergreen
Kaylin Clark, 10th

Let Me Regress

-Carolena Schmidt, 12th

Some days I sit and wonder
Where my life took the turn
I became mature to men
Immature to women

Some days I sit and question
If my mind is older than my body
And if it is how do I regress
How do I revert to my childish state

Some days I sit and reflect
The choices I've made to get here
How is it that my life is complicated
Way more than it should be

Some days I sit and ponder
How do I return to those days
Where I didn't have to worry
When I didn't have to explain

Some days I sit and contemplate
Allow myself to mature on my own time
To not be a little lady at 7
Find peace within myself instead of others

Haunting House and Home

-Alex Harris, 11th

Haunted houses have never scared me. They're just so *predictable*-- a cheap scare here, a radio there... They're all the same. A temporary tent, splattered with neon red paint. That's not to say I don't *enjoy* them, though. It's always interesting to try and guess what will happen next, to see the inner workings of things and appreciate their details; which is far easier to do when you aren't afraid of what you're observing.

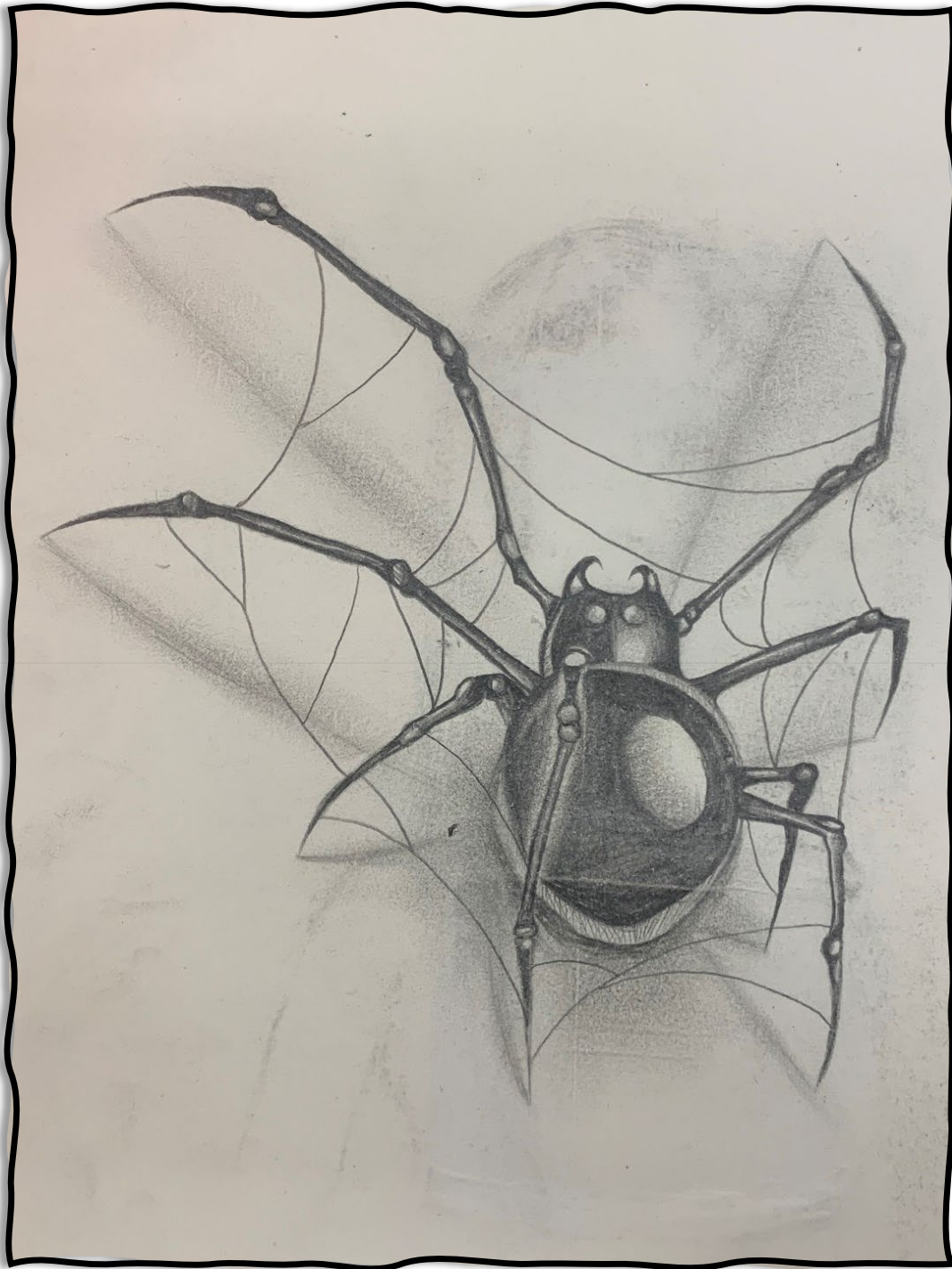
My favorite thing about the houses has always been the costumes, though. I try to take in as much of each costume as I can (without making the actor uncomfortable with my staring, of course), and figure out how they constructed it. Latex masks, prosthetics, makeup, etc. The only downside about my predictions is that I tend to *keep* predicting, even after I've left the house. When I get home, I'm often surprised there's no pop-up clown in the closet or scare actor waiting around the corner. Maybe that's why I wasn't surprised, wasn't scared, when I saw the face leering at me through my kitchen window. It had appeared above my sink; a gaunt, feminine face with wiry grey hair, covered in what I had assumed at the time to be fake blood. I hardly spared it a second glance as I filled a cup with water and headed off to bed.

As I ascended up the stairs, cup in hand... I wish I could say that's when I realized that I was in danger. That it hit me before it was too late, that I rushed to my phone, called the police, and miraculously lived to tell the tale. But that isn't what happened. All I thought about in that moment was what I would have for breakfast in the morning. I reached the top, flipped off the light, and headed past the upstairs bathroom and into my bedroom. I lived alone, but I had chosen the smallest room- I liked cramped spaces. It had a small computer desk and chair set up under a loft bed, and a mirror off on the left wall, next to my old wood wardrobe. And that was pretty much it. *Legally*, I don't think it even counted as a bedroom, since it didn't have a closet.

After changing into a set of pajamas covered in little cartoon cats, I climbed up my loft and arranged the pillows into a nest (did I really waste my last minutes on a stupid, mundane task?). Once I had finished settling in, I thought back on the haunted house. It hadn't been particularly impressive: the decorations were lacking; the animatronics had all broken down halfway through the house; and the costumes were subpar and obvious. Apart from the head in the window.

It finally hit me, and I felt my heart drop, bile rising in my throat. The head in the window. The head in... *my* window. But there couldn't have been, because that was insane. I was tired, and my eyes were bleary from the horrible strobe lights in the haunted house. There was no face, no head, *nothing* in my window. There couldn't be. That was the only coherent thought I could form, a final, desperate attempt to

rationalize, before (as if *waiting* for me to realize) I heard the sound of glass shattering from downstairs, and the hope that I was imagining things shattered along with it.



Creepy Crawler
Allison Long, 9th

New Stage of Grief; *Insanity*

-Anne Hatter, 9th

Within the mahogany wooden frames of the door, he stood, black dress shoes firmly planted on the cerulean ceramic tile floors, his black suit contrasting with his blonde hair and olive eyes. Oddly perfect music sheets loosely held in his left hand. She sat at the piano stool as she did every day, a smile plastered on her face like paint on a wall, not sparing him a slight glance as he stepped forward. His walking in was enough to make the air in the room heavier, crushing her ever so slightly. Every day, she would play the programmed notes as he stood, waiting impatiently for her to utter the 3 words, longing to hear an escape from her perfect, pale pink lips. Repainting her face so she looked the same as she did years before her death, so perfect and precise; the cracks in her face covered with a perfect rose beige color, her eyes glossed over to keep the flawless Nordic blue that looked back at him with love, before that bitter December night.

He stood at the door with new notes in his cold, sickly-pale left hand. Every note she pressed rubbed more acrylic off onto her smoothed fingertips. Standing at the piano, looking at an object that was no longer his beloved notes, while blood poured from her neck, she continued to play for him. The cracks in her porcelain face filled by the blood of hundreds of unloved, lost, souls trapped in the clay, shaped by the grief-stained hands of her lonely lover. Even dead she would play their love song until the strings holding her fingers broke their last thread. The music notes danced around the room the way her words danced in his mind, until he joined her to watch the music dance as ghosts.

She died years before he was ready to let go.

The Stream

-Hailey Orozoco, 9th

I have an undying thirst,
where could I get a drink without
a penny to my name?
nowhere any longer.
I turn to my last resort,
the polluted stream under the bridge.
the dark muddy water hugs my toes,
tadpoles wriggling in between them.
who will hug my toes like the stream?
nobody any longer.
I cusp my hands together,
the brownish murk seeps through my palms.
These cracked lips
are not prepared to go thirsty.
I take a sip,
though not good for me I am aware.
I would rather be sick than thirst,
for I know what it is to be sick,
but to be without you I do not.



The Docks
Emily Oates, 12th

God Doesn't Answer Dogs

-Ro Bailey, 10th

Content warning: *graphic animal abuse*

The snow wasn't the worst part of his night. Only the day before, the man had relished in the sound of his leather belt lashing against the thin skin of the hound his late wife left behind. Whenever he experienced the slightest twinge of annoyance, he would take it out on the animal. The man was more of a beast than any dog.

He expected to wake up on the thin mattress laid out on his father's trailer floor, not in the dirty snow after the sun had gone down. His first move was to lift himself up on his arms, but he found that he had none. Looking down, he saw that his limbs were emaciated. They were covered almost completely by thin, coarse hair, with patches of bruised skin peeking out. It took the man far longer to balance on his limbs than it had on even his drunkest nights.

A wounded howl forced its way out of his throat. He hadn't known humans were able to make those noises. Shock hit him harder when he realized that they could not. Despite his lifetime of sins, he made silent pleas to every god he could think of. He left bloody pawprints in the snow as he walked in no discernible direction. The world was so much bigger from down low.

He heard the familiar thud of heavy boots against metal steps and, for only a second, thought his prayers might have been answered. That hope only lasted until he saw the shotgun. He looked up at his father, desperate for any sign of recognition.

"Goddamn mutt," his father spat, cocking the gun in his arms.

The man couldn't move an inch as his eyes darted over to the window to watch himself, his human self, flick on the trailer lights through the window.

"Useless," The man's father muttered curses as he lifted and aimed his weapon, "Shoulda done this ages ago."

No, the snow wasn't the worst part of his night. It was the needless rage in his father's eyes. His former body looked at him through the window with cruel indifference before turning away as his father pulled the trigger.

The first shot cut off his breathing, the second ended his heart's beating. The last five were just to prove a point.

Then there was nothing.

The Rubber Ducky Ode

-Alyce Marshall, 10th

Floating everywhere.
From bathtubs of small
infants and oceans,
those vast great distances.
From the dashboards of
weird jeep people and
conveyor belts from
all over the world.
Your vast army of
bouncy rubber and
signature squeak
can be noticed by
every type of person.
The smell you excrete
brings people back to
their childhoods, your
color can be seen from
across the room.
The different outfits they
dress you up in allow
you to take any from
and cheer those who
need it up in any way.
From an army duck
to a wizard of oz duck,
you've done it all, even
more so than barbie herself.
Everyone loves to see you
in claw machines outside
of movie theaters and
arcades, to win for
their beloved or even
themselves. My utter respect
goes out to each and every
one of you who risk your
lives every day for the entertainment

of us. Thank you.

With that being said,
I am sorry.
I am sorry for the oil
spills you have had to swim through.
That black thick substance trying
to suffocate you. I'm sorry for the
car crashes you've survived. I
understand it must have been
traumatic to see the lives of the
ones you care for being taken away
from you so suddenly. The small
children slaving away in the factories
you are made in, when they should
be playing with you at home. I'm
sorry for the look in people's
eyes when they throw you in
the garbage, along with their
childhoods. You're ripped up to
shreds and treated in the worst
ways possible. you have to watch
young couples break up through the
glass walls of your confinement, you're
hallow bodies aching from
the heartbreak you go through
on a daily basis. Sometimes
you may even question whether
people even need you anymore.

Everyone needs a sense of hope
in their lives. Everyone needs a
shining light that can get them
through a tough day, week,
year or sometimes life.
That is your purpose.
The point of your entire
existence is to bring smiles
and laughs to those young
children and heartbroken teens.
To the exhausted cooperate

adults and elderly people who wish they had spent more time with you. People will always recognize your warm smile and bright blue eyes that resemble those of a newborn baby. You will forever be in gift bags, and you will have names of award winners written across your puffy chest. You might even be on wedding cakes or turned into fairy lights. Who knows what great things you'll be a part of? But, to do these things you must push through all of the bad.



Pelican Night
Kylie Moore, 11th

The Jack of Hearts

-Ariel Treepala, 12th

Red is the color of war.
At least, that's what I've been taught.
It's the color of battlefields and embers, cannons and gunpowder.
It represents a desolate land; gray and dry with ashes.
The hue of rose petals, blossoming underneath fallen soldiers,
who have breathed their last command.
There is a scream of a mother, torn from her child,
and a sword drenched in crimson,
staining the metal and forming a shallow pool
where the victor remains silent in prayer.

Red is the color of blood.
The bonds that are left unseen, unless harm is demanded.
Stains that cannot be freed from the threads of my uniform.
Dried and stuck beneath tattered nails,
and smeared across the hands which once held a heart.
The stench of iron lingered in the air.
Heads will roll,
and crowns would fall.

Red is the color of pride.
An ego so big that it bloated the head of its master.
It is the hue of royalty, commanding respect and power.
Vermillion cards fall in line, marching to the sound of her voice.
The shimmer of gold complimented scarlet gems,
as it reflected rosy cheeks and puffy eyes,
from those who sought solstice in the gardens below.
It's the color of rage.
Of tyranny.
Of revolution.

Red is the color of fire.
It is the hue of rebirth and vitality.
A symbol of life,
and a promise of freedom.

The color tainting our shackles no longer tormented us,
as the walls came tumbling down...
down...
down.
The sky turned pink, and gold, and saffron.
We greeted the sun's warmth again,
and I embraced it with open arms, leaving my sword behind,
as though it were an old friend.

Red is the color of love.
It is the shade of denial and adrenaline,
feeling the barriers around my heart collapsing,
leaving me exposed and questioning again.
The crimson strings bind my soul to yours-
strings that I had once refused to see.
How curious, I thought to myself,
how these stings brought you...
to me.

Red is the color of passion.
Of sleepless nights by the fireplace.
It is the color that rambles about nothing,
yet everything within time and space.
It is the same shine that reflects in your smile,
your hair, and your lips when you speak;
while I am left fumbling, my words are quiet and meek.

Red...
Is the color of *you*,
the place where my heart resides.
The color that represents *home*,
more than my "home" could ever provide.
The same shade as my sword,
and the wars and the blood that I've spilt,
is the same color as your eyes,
and the new "home" you've helped me build.



Star-Crossed Lovers
Phoenix Mauldin, 10th

The Longing Lovebug

-Zoe Sullivan, 11th

As I make my way to retrieve the mail from my mailbox, I stop in my tracks to take in my surroundings. While the air is humid and the trees were green, the dozens of leaves that lay at my feet are getting paler in complexion, like dozens of tiny yellow-green corpses. I sigh with relief knowing that summer is ending, and knowing that all of my regrets are behind me. With the beginning of autumn, I hope maybe, along with the leaves, my sadness could wilt away and later form something green and vibrant. Only time will tell. I grab my mail and walk back inside.

I toss the mail on the kitchen counter and return to my desk. Sitting down, I realize why I had gone out to fetch the useless magazines and newsletters from my mailbox. The reason being, I dread sitting at my desk. My boring, empty desk, looking as dead as the leaves outside. However, as I am about to sit down, I see a lovebug fly from behind me and land on my desk in front of me. Where did it come from? I didn't leave the door open. I conclude it must have hidden in my hair as I was walking back inside, so I scratch at my scalp and mess with my hair to see if any other bugs might come out, but to no avail. The conjoined bugs start to fly again, one obviously carrying the other one. I scoff to myself.

I have always found lovebugs to be pitiful. They mate once in order to reproduce, which leads them to be stuck together for life. I feel for the bug dragging along the other one. She probably doesn't even want to be in this situation, stuck to an incapable male the rest of her life. Not to mention the audacity to call them "lovebugs." LOVE-bugs. Such nonsense. That's not love, not even close to it. Love takes time and effort from each party. The other bug being lazily dragged down is contributing nothing whatsoever.

She doesn't deserve that. I don't deserve that. We both deserve nothing but the best, the tiny bug and me. I wish I could help her escape, like how I escaped. But as I open my eyes, I look down at my hands. Each hand delicately pinches the wing of each bug. And before I could stop myself, they are individuals again.

I let go of each individual lovebug. The bug on the left drops like a ten-ton boulder. That one was the male. He had it coming to him, I thought. The bug on the right, however, she flew higher than she ever could. In that moment, my eyes are fixed on her. She is finally able to live her life happily, something I've been trying to do for a while now. I was proud of her. But then her flying begins to slow down, and she sinks down back on to my desk. I watch her struggle, unable to help her thrive. Her movement stops.

I begin to weep. Over a lovebug. How pitiful of me. I never thought in my whole life that I could relate to a tiny, delicate, harmless bug more than any person. Being separated from her other half is supposed to make her happy, but she is not, and neither

am I. At least she didn't live without her lovebug for very long. But I'll be living without mine. Lovebugs have proven themselves to be luckier than I am.

Time passes, and autumn arrives. And I still think about the lovebug that made its way into my house. In the lovebug's dying moments, I relate to her a lot. We both felt incapable of living without our significant others. But unlike the lovebug, here I am, still standing, still breathing. As the leaves wither and decay, I decide to grow different plants on my desk. The addition of the pothos, lavender, mother-of-millions and marigolds really livens up my desk area. With the arrival of autumn, unfortunately my sadness hasn't withered yet, and I am still as longing as the lovebug that died from my hand that one summer's night. But at least I've been able to form something green and vibrant for a change. And for right now, that's all I need.



Flying to Sweetness
Fernando Villalta, 12th

Backyard Eden

-Phoenix Mauldin, 10th

The cries of the mourning doves lull Sasha into peace as he rests in the grass under the old apple tree. It's quiet as he stares up at the blue, cloudless sky, wondering nothing at all and wishing for nothing at all to make him think. Thinking has become far too exhausting after...

And then Red comes along. Her long, dark hair draping over her shoulders, blowing in the soft breeze as she speaks. And Sasha listens, or, at least, he tries to at first, until the sounds of the doves seep back into his mind, pulling him far back into the past.

He was suddenly a young man again, climbing the same tree that his body sleeplessly dreams under. There was a young girl at the base. "Just one apple!" she had begged. "It won't harm a thing!"

Sasha, dumb as the girl had always called him, agreed. "One apple," he replied and threw one down to Violet (yes, that was her name, wasn't it?). She was beautiful and tan, her eyes a shade of golden brown like the sun. With her round face and her perfect lips, Sasha had nearly driven himself mad thinking about her and how it would feel to give her a kiss. The ways he imagined her scarred and calloused hands one day cupping his face as she pulled him in to meet her mouth-- as of course, he was the shy one between them, the one who hid behind big glasses that made his eyes all bug-like. But Violet liked bugs, and she liked dirt, so it was okay.

He would always refuse the apples she ate, preferring the way the sunset looked sober, without cider coursing through his veins. And yet, despite the ways Sasha and Violet disagreed over the tastes of the fruit, they could not bear to leave each other's sides.

"Are you listening to me?" Red's small voice pulls Sasha back into reality. Now he's old again. But he still hasn't dared eat an apple. They still smell too tart.



Medley
Jackie Broere, 12th

Sasha snaps up. He feels cold at first, after having felt the warmth of Violet fade from his side, but he can't grow upset with Red. She's a child, and she hasn't done anything wrong. Sasha takes a deep breath, and he says, "Sorry, I guess I wasn't. Did the spider say hello?"

Red nods. "He did, he did!" She flaps her hands in excitement and crawls through the roots and the sprigs to sit with her father, where she lays by his knees. "He walked out of his web and told me 'good morning,' so I gave him a leaf! Leaves are his favorite food, you know, because he can eat them without having to catch butterflies and moths."

"Is that so?" Sasha sits up. He tilts his head and chuckles, taking his daughter by her tiny hand and pulling her close. She grins at him. For just a moment, the worries leave.

Red doesn't like apples either. Sasha figures that it's simply her youth; Red's always had this blind following of almost every action Sasha took, from sneaking into the kitchen late at night to indulge in sweet pastries to the deep, moral thoughts about it not being right to slap a mayfly when it bites her arm. Or that one talk they'd had upon a much deeper subject, where Red was so uncertain whether it was right to keep a flytrap in the house, as they ate bugs. She had wracked her mind with the struggle of whether it was right or wrong for the plant to stay, as on one hand, it would die if she denied its nature to eat insects, but on the other, the insects would be killed if she allowed the trap to feast.

Red nods. "It is, it is!"

"You have dirt on your nose." The man points out, taking his forefinger and swiping it across his daughter's cheek. It makes Red giggle.

"Did I tell you already that Mama told me she used to talk to dirt when she was little? Did she tell you that?" Red tilts her head.

Sasha thinks for a moment, then he nods. It's something that Red brings up quite often, and something he wonders the truth of. When Red first came to him and told him she could talk to bugs, he enthusiastically admitted to believing her. Maybe it was the help of her imagination, and it's okay for her to know how to play and think. It's okay that she's innocent. But if there was one thing Sasha knew Red had in common with her mother, it was that neither of them lied.

Once again, Red's talking draws Sasha out of reality. It's not that his daughter bores him, rather it's that her voice is so sweet and calming that it pains *and* soothes him, a poisonous balm that never fails to make him ponder. Yes, it's a blessing in disguise that Red is speaking, that she is inquisitive and naïve and affable. But oh, how Sasha would be lying so hard if he says her questions are easy to answer.

Every "Where's Mama?" tears Sasha's heart to bits. Red's too young. Soon she'll ask to climb the tree, and that will turn into biting the apple. Sasha can picture it. Is the smell of the forbidden fruit growing alluring to her already?

There it is again. There's that phrase. "Where is she?" asks Red. Sasha flinches. His jaw clenches. There she goes, asking that. Asking that like she doesn't know, because she doesn't.

He didn't feel it coming, so why is it happening so soon? Why now, as they sit in the garden, does he feel like he is breaking? On a day so peaceful, with a sky so blue where everything around them in Eden blooms, does he feel like he is cracking?

Panic does not discriminate. It hurts to think, but between fragments that he collects of Violet in his mind lies something much more complicated. Life and death do not discriminate. He'd seen it. All of the horrors. To separate from Violet for years only to come back scarred and broken, a man who masks his pain instead of forgetting to feel it. He left her without saying much of a goodbye, and she forgave him, even if he had shattered and taped himself up with honey and gauze. Such is the way of mother nature then, so utterly karmic that she lifts Violet from Sasha's arms late at night beneath the stars they used to name together, whisking her away with silently creeping illness.

It wasn't the war. It wasn't the pain. It wasn't anyone's fault that Violet fell sick. She promised Sasha that she would be okay, so he tends to her every day, because he knows how badly Violet hates a broken promise. Comatose, he can only wish that she is having pleasant dreams.

"You look all teary-eyed again. Where's Mama? She can help. I know she helps me when I'm..." Red trails off, and the look on her face is almost like she can sense the discomfort it brings her father when she speaks like that. It's different from the daze she notices in his expression when she speaks of nothing but bumblebees.

"Red, do you know what it means when someone dies?" Sasha asks. It's sudden, but it's truthful. It's how Violet would have said it.

Red shakes her head.

"I've been so out of it lately because I'm afraid that your mother could die. Grown-ups cry sometimes, and death is something worth crying over. Dying is like when someone goes to sleep, except they don't ever wake up again because their body doesn't work anymore. I know it can be hard to understand, but I want to be honest with you. It just hurts to think I might lose her." He doesn't hide his tears anymore, or maybe he just can't.

An apple falls from the tree. It thumps as it hits the ground, rolling to Sasha's side. He picks it up.

Later that day, Sasha helps Red climb the tree. Red plucks an apple and holds it in her tiny hands. She sits in her father's lap on a wide branch, one that is so high up from the ground that everything from there can be seen: from the doves resting on distant, barren flora; to the garden below, where grass grows thick. As the sun sets and clouds form in the sky, there's something between night and day. A sunset, an uncertainty. It is a complexity that Sasha finally catches a glimpse of as he breaks the apple in half and gives part of it to Red, keeping a piece for himself. The scent hits his nose. It is bittersweet-- tart, and lingering. He takes a bite, and Red does too.



Liberty
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