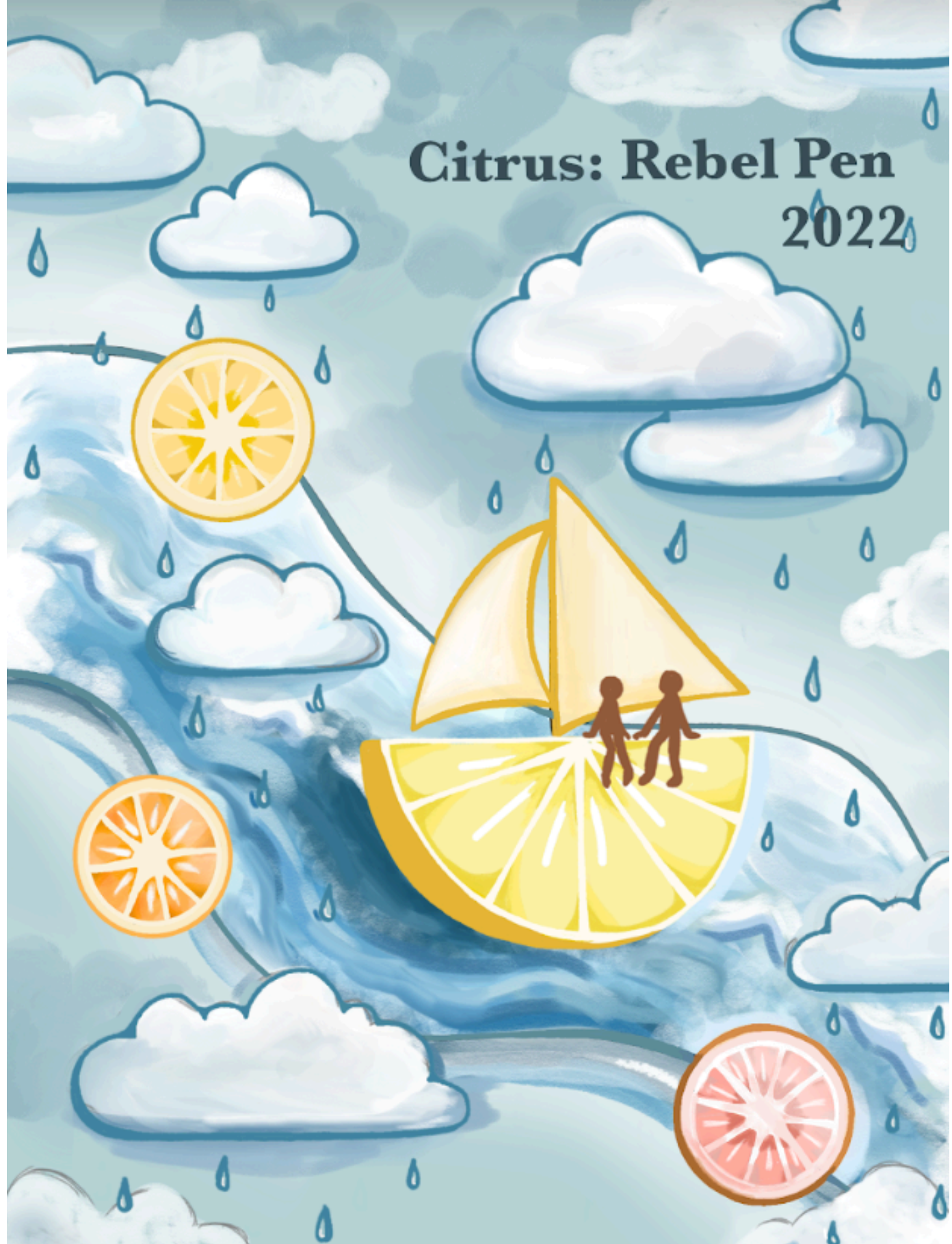


Citrus: Rebel Pen 2022



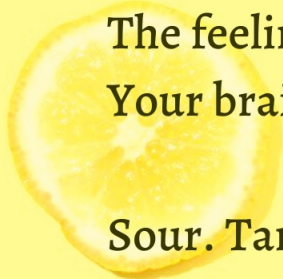
That hue that'll
Catch your eye
The smell that'll
Tingle your nose



Capturing you
In its folds
Showing off its
Hidden sugar



The flavor that
Floods your mouth
The feeling that awakens
Your brain



That little promise
It's all it takes
Just grab
It, get ready



Sour. Tangy. Sharp.
Fleeting. Bright. High.
Intoxicating. Soaring.
Shocking. Electrifying.



Let it flow down
Your throat
Let it fill your
mind



Bliss plays in
The song that
Makes you go for
More, you're *obsessed*

Listen to its
chant
And feel that
rhythm

Oh, it's new
It's freshly dripping
It's here
It's good



Open the door
It's isn't hard
Welcome,
Citrus



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Great Neck, NY

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Citrus: Rebel Pen

Art and Literary Magazine

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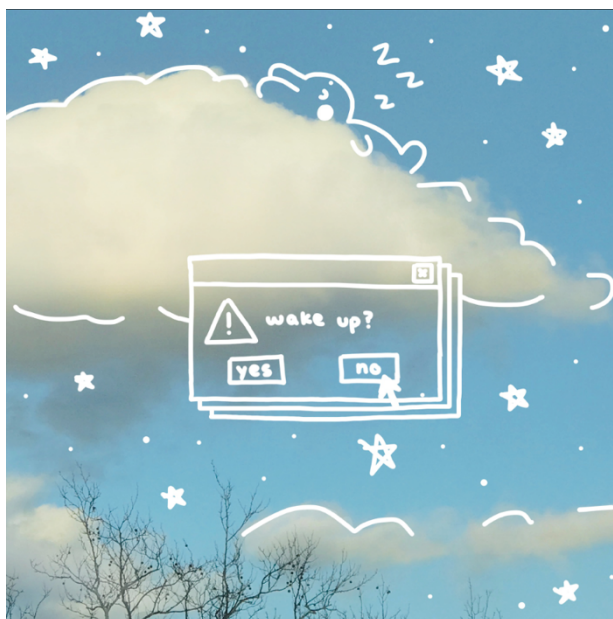
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Mixed Media
Cynthia Zhang





Poetry
Kylie Lam

Sometimes

Sometimes you don't know
What will happen when you fall
In a pit full of writhing snakes
With venom on the walls
You stand vulnerable
To what your fate holds

Darkness engulfs you,
A stifling blindfold
What will happen if you
Collapse or fall?
It's possible that'll happen
Pits are everywhere, you know

Sometimes a wisp of light
May slip in your mind
Not a guaranteed arrival
Your will summons it, you can decline

But if you open that wisp,
Stretch it wider and wider
You may slip through into light
From a different world.

Mixed Media
Addie Suggs



Photography
Anyi Gu



Portrait
Addie Suggs



Portrait
Elaine He



Digital Surrealism
Anishka Arolkar



Poetry
Chloe Lee

Little Acidic Thing

Was the room ever so caliginous
So bare, so bleak.
When a sharp tinge of acidic things
Hit the core from a mile back so very deep

It traveled through the little bumps
Swimming through the endless shore of bubbles
Down the abyss of a tunnel
And fizzing underneath

Goosebumps arose
A gasp, a shudder
And so very few words were spoken

A puckered lip or two
A little crease between the furrowed brows
And the pale, stricken face.
O' that face!

And yet with not another second
And a sprinkle of a little joy
Luminescence and rapture
Catching the light of the sky
In its ever so crystal-like texture

The acidic thing watered down
And the tang said goodbye
The fizzing calmed to a laughter
Until everything was upside down

It was not all so perfect
No, the occasional squint occurred
But the blend
O' the blend

Was ever so more euphoric

And without those puckered lips
And that little crease between the brows
The eyes stood in the wide open

There is the sun!
There are the stars!
There is the song of the robin birds!
And so pleasant that could be.

The daydreams,
Sweet dreams,
And soft dreams

The nightmares,
The ones that scare
The ones that scream upon the night

O' what a life it would be!
Like that zesty little acidic thing
If they could mingle into that semi sweet,
Melancholic yet blithe
Bitter yet bliss
Happy medium



Story
Zhishu Sun

Citrus

When I was young, my mother had always told me that before people pass away, memories come back. All the memories come back, the sweet and the sour, the good and the evil, the regret, the gladness, all of them came back. The memories feel like citrus, some sweet like tangerine, some sour like lemon. Now, I finally know what my mother meant. I feel my heart slowing down. It's harder to breathe with each second passing. The pain in my chest is growing slowly and finally to a point that it hurts so much that I start to think that maybe death is a way to release myself from the pain to stop when all the memories flow back to me.

Part 1 lemon: "If you live long enough, you'll make mistakes. But if you learn from them, you'll be a better person. It's how you handle adversity, not how it affects you. The main thing is never quit, never quit, never quit." – William J. Clinton

I fought to open my eyes to see the light again. I woke up in my own bed, not the bed in the hospital. I felt alive again with energy inside of me and strangely I felt like I am younger than I was. I was shocked. This was my memory. I prayed to God that this was the sweet memory, not the sour ones. I heard a gentle voice calling me in the kitchen. I wanted to respond to it, but I felt something take over my body and respond for me. Then I remembered that this was a memory.

"Loui, I made you breakfast. Come downstairs, you will be late for school," called out the gentle voice.

I knew immediately that this was my mother, because in this whole world there are only two women who would call me "Loui." One is my dearest friend Lilibet, and the other is my kind-hearted mother.

"Just another five minutes, mom. Please..." That was my voice as a teenager. I was so confused. Why is this memory so different from others? I can hardly remember anything that happened anyways.

“It is almost 7:15, if you want to catch the bus, you should hurry up, love,” yelled mother.

I remember I used to hate how my mother would call me “love” or “Loui.” Now I truly miss her so much. Then I realized what day it is today: January 28, 2011. This is a dreadful memory, sometimes I wished it was a nightmare. I remember waking up in the dead of the night and panting so hard from this “nightmare.” I heard quiet footsteps and my mother saying something about how she has to drive me to school today. I used all my strength to fight the force that is controlling my body. I want to wake up now. If mom never drove me to school, she would never have gotten killed by that terrible accident. It might seem like the accident killed her, but only I knew it was my childish action that had killed her. I always asked myself what if I would have woken up on time and taken the bus to school? She would have never been killed. I opened Pandora’s box myself.

Mother gently wakes me up. I slowly wake up, although I would have gone faster than I did 11 years ago. I knew what was coming I can recall it. She left the room after I started to get dressed and get ready for the day. I grab my backpack and a piece of toast. Mother was already outside warming up the car and backing out from the garage. I wanted to yell at her to get out of the car, but it was too late.

The truck hit my mother’s car in the blink of an eye; my mind went blank. The two of the car doors crack into pieces. Glass shatters everywhere; pieces scatter everywhere. I can see the blood on the part of the damage that the truck had done to the car. Tears pour out of my eyes. My heart is sinking into the bottom of my stomach. A wound might heal over time, but the damage is done permanently. The pain starts to come back. But it doesn’t take long. I am in another memory.

Part 2 tangerines: “Forgive yourself. The supreme act of forgiveness is when you can forgive yourself for all the wounds you’ve created in your own life. Forgiveness is an act of self-love. When you forgive yourself, self-acceptance begins and self-love grows.” — Miguel Ángel Ruiz Macías

The pain slowly dissolves. The next time I open my eyes, I am walking in the forest with Lilibet at my side. I want to hug her so badly. Understanding, self forgiveness, and self-loving would be hollow words to me without her after my mother had passed away. She is my dearest friend and the only person who truly understands what I have been through, but nothing more than that. I love the sweet scent of her hair. The scent brought me a warm feeling like the sun. If I am a tree, then Lilibet would be my branches and rattans.

The sound of the rustling leaves pulled me back from my thoughts. The silence between us is one of the best things I love. She never forces me to talk and she always leaves space between us. The sun, the trees and even the birds chirping is so peaceful and beautiful that I knew this couldn't last for long. The warm feeling filled my body like someone is holding me tight in their arms. I tried to grab onto this memory, but I was pulled back.

Part 3 Citrus: "Life is not always perfect. Like a road, it has many bends, ups and down, but that's its beauty."

"You think it's smooth sailing, but it was just others sailing against the currents for you. You need to learn how to sail smoothly on your own, Louis," a gentle voice ringed in my head.

I felt the tears on my cheeks, although I am trying to hold back my emotions. I am back to reality. Maybe I can hold onto the ones who are dear to me, but the memories and the people in my memories will always be alive in me. But am I ready to let go of the past just yet?

Digital Drawing
Lily Long



Poetry
Addie Suggs

Sweet in the Sour

Wear your mask, the doctors said
Get your shot, the nurses said
Stay apart, but above all
Don't let COVID-19 spread

First, came the exponentially growing numbers
Then came the bad grades and boring summers
No matter what we did, no matter what we tried
The coronavirus couldn't be put back into its slumber

So, you know what we did? We stayed inside
While the virus claimed life after life like flies
And throughout it all, we began to lose hope
That the sickness could ever be pulverized

Then came a night I could never forget
When my mother asked what's wrong but I remained tight-lipped
Yet, she saw through my lie and heaved a heavy sigh
Before telling me I really shouldn't doubt her wit

And she told me a story about her childhood
One full of poverty and fighting for as long as one could
While I was mad about the virus in a comfortable bed
She was worrying about what was even there to cook

So, I learned to be grateful for everything outside my power:
My phone, books and snacks and nice, warm showers
And though the world we live in is certainly quite grim,
I learned to see the bright side of things -- the sweet in the sour!

Story
Chloe Lee

A Summer's Peach

It was a fine morning. Sun blazing across the cloudless blue sky. Wings soaring from tree to tree, singing soft melodies. And everything was perfect...except a patch of storm, grumpily walking across the street.

She huffed. And puffed. And scowled at the thought of her parents. The parents who had made her drop everything and go to a whole new place...a whole new world full of strange people, animals, weather, trees, and houses. There was no more white, cold fluff falling from the sky. There were no more shivering days in front of the fire, holding a mug of hot cocoa. No more, no more, no more...

And she stomped her way down the street. Looking at the frilly trees that looked like the ones from the coconut ads. Hearing the birds chirp when it was already November. Smelling the fresh scent of grass being mowed. Looking at all the colorful buildings and the signs showing people laughing on beaches.

Laughing? Ha! What's there to laugh about? What's so special about water and sand? What's so great about drinking sour lemonade when you can have sweet chocolate?

The wind ruffled her hair as if to disagree. And it took her hat along with it. The hat that her grandmother had given her. Oh, her grandmother... what was she doing back at home? The real home...not the building her mother had labeled home...but the place that truly felt like *home*.

Grandma, if you can hear me, please pick me up from this dreadful place. Please...

But no one other than the wind listened. And it glided with the precious hat through the alien trees and too-bright houses...as if it were mocking her.

Stop! I mean it...You stop right there. I can't believe even the wind is teasing me! Gosh, how do people live here anyway?

She chased after the swirling breeze through alleys, big streets, crossings, and parks...all the way into a neighborhood. It wasn't like the city buildings...and the small apartment with a cheap welcoming sign on it. No...this was almost like home.

She walked up and down the quiet streets. There were little kids laughing while playing in the sprinklers.

Are they getting wet on purpose? But that laugh... that laugh feels so familiar.

There were people sitting on their lawn reading the newspaper.

Dad used to sit in front of the fire every Sunday – just like that.

There were friends walking their dogs along the stone sidewalks.

Is that how dogs play when they can't go sleigh riding? They seem so happy.

And there were so many people smiling. Smiling even though they really didn't have anything to smile about. Smiling just because it made them feel good...

Did I smile like that?

She kept walking down the rows of houses, each with a unique touch that gave life to the bricks and rooftops. The gardens, filled with flowers and butterflies.

And at last, she stopped at one house. A silent house with light blue walls and white pillars. Steppingstones led to the bright red door and a tall oak tree...like the one at her old house...stood towards the side of the front lawn.

And there sat a boy...reading a book...

Wait, that's the book I read in fourth grade.

She stared for long minutes, wondering who he was. With tan skin from the hot sun and light brown hair that was bleached on the tips. Baggy jeans and a faded flannel shirt. And a peach. A juicy peach dripping down his chin as he munched.

He looked up to see her watching. He frowned, scrunching up his eyebrows. Then he looked confused. But..but he smiled soon after.

That smile.

He turned around and rummaged through the basket next to him, and pulled out a round peach.

“Here,” he said as he reached out to her. “Come on. I won’t bite.”

Cautiously, she slowly walked over and sat down next to him. She gently took the peach and gave it a bite.

Sweet like hot cocoa. Juicy like the snow cones she made when flurries came by. But a whole new flavor...a warmth that wasn’t from the fire. Something that felt friendly, like she had just received a big present.

She smiled at him. “Thanks,” she whispered. And slowly, as the sun came to a set at the horizon, blaring red and orange lights, she felt peace.

It would never be like the home she knew.

But no one said that she couldn’t have two places to call *home*.



Poetry
Bhuvi Kumar

If
Pt. 1
Haikus

If tears made oceans,
how has the universe not
drowned within my own?

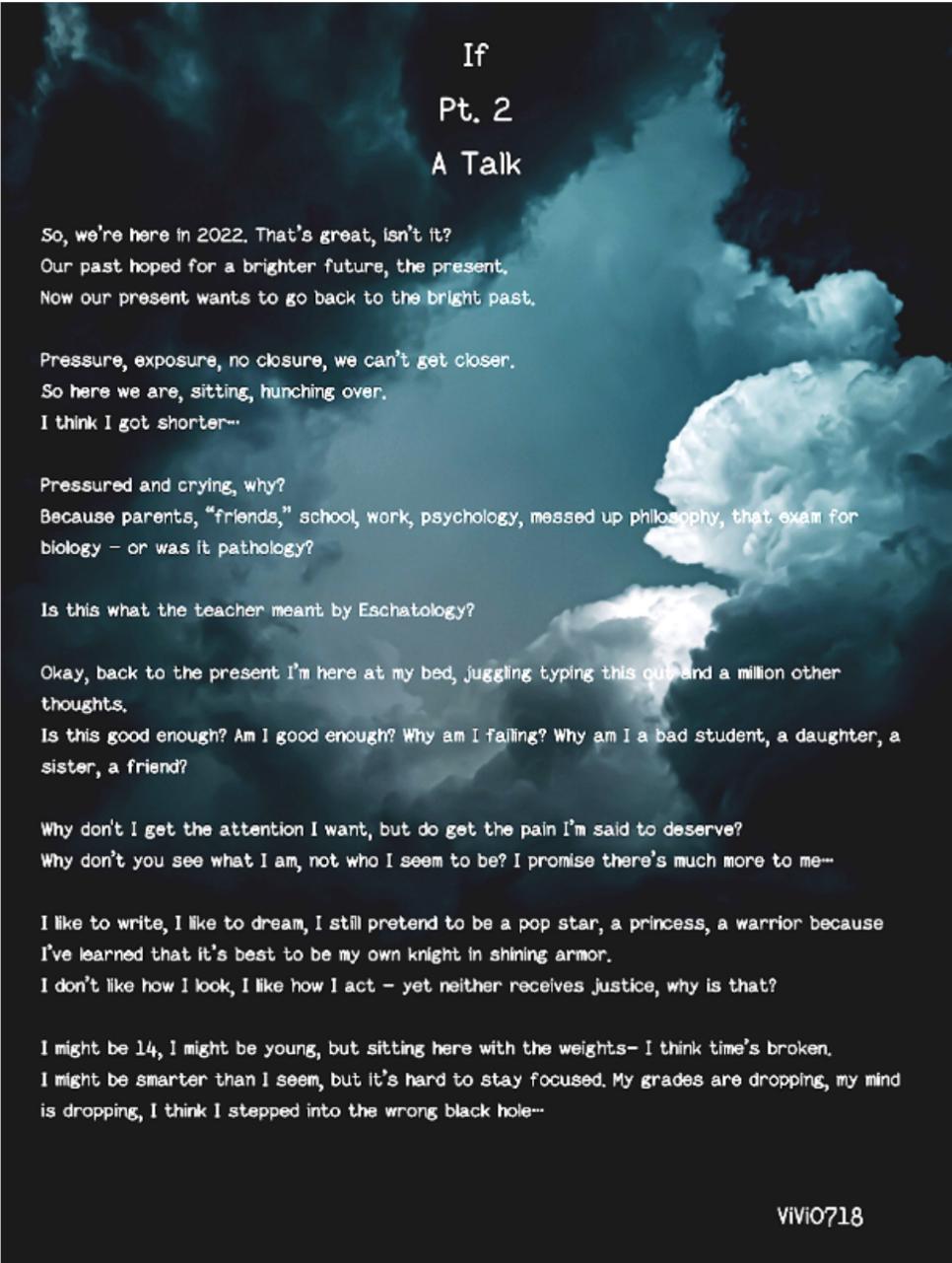
If the world saw then,
would it behave as it does,
today, and tonight?

If they tasted it,
would they still let the other
continue starving?

If things different,
would the powerful, be dead,
and the broken, bright?

If they listened, followed,
would we still be here? Masked and
distanced far yet, close?

Vivio718



If
Pt. 2
A Talk

So, we're here in 2022. That's great, isn't it?
Our past hoped for a brighter future, the present.
Now our present wants to go back to the bright past.

Pressure, exposure, no closure, we can't get closer.
So here we are, sitting, hunching over.
I think I got shorter--

Pressured and crying, why?
Because parents, "friends," school, work, psychology, messed up philosophy, that exam for
biology – or was it pathology?

Is this what the teacher meant by Eschatology?

Okay, back to the present I'm here at my bed, juggling typing this out and a million other
thoughts.

Is this good enough? Am I good enough? Why am I failing? Why am I a bad student, a daughter, a
sister, a friend?

Why don't I get the attention I want, but do get the pain I'm said to deserve?
Why don't you see what I am, not who I seem to be? I promise there's much more to me--

I like to write, I like to dream, I still pretend to be a pop star, a princess, a warrior because
I've learned that it's best to be my own knight in shining armor.
I don't like how I look, I like how I act – yet neither receives justice, why is that?

I might be 14, I might be young, but sitting here with the weights– I think time's broken.
I might be smarter than I seem, but it's hard to stay focused. My grades are dropping, my mind
is dropping, I think I stepped into the wrong black hole--

ViviO718



Digital Drawing
Celine Campos



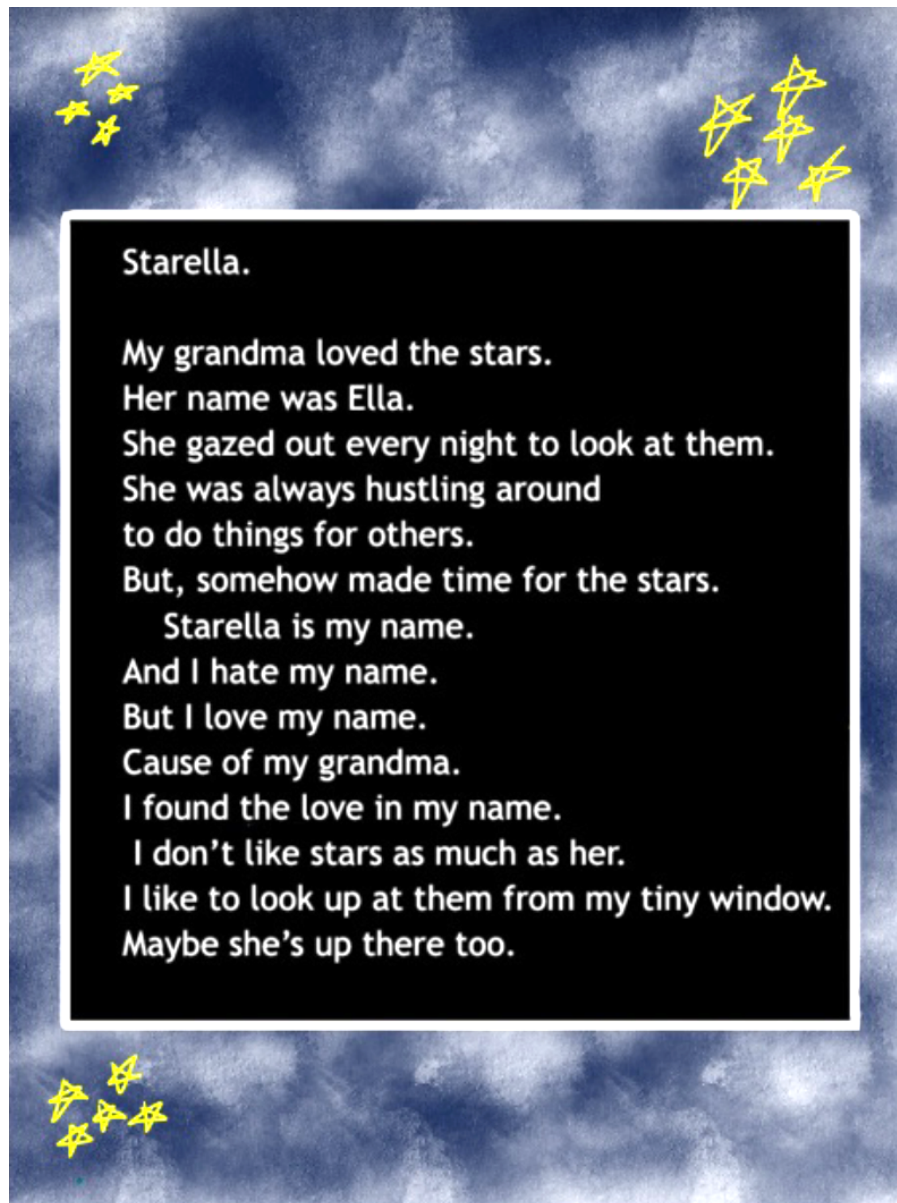
Digital Drawing
Anyi Gu



...It wasn't
exactly the worst,
either.



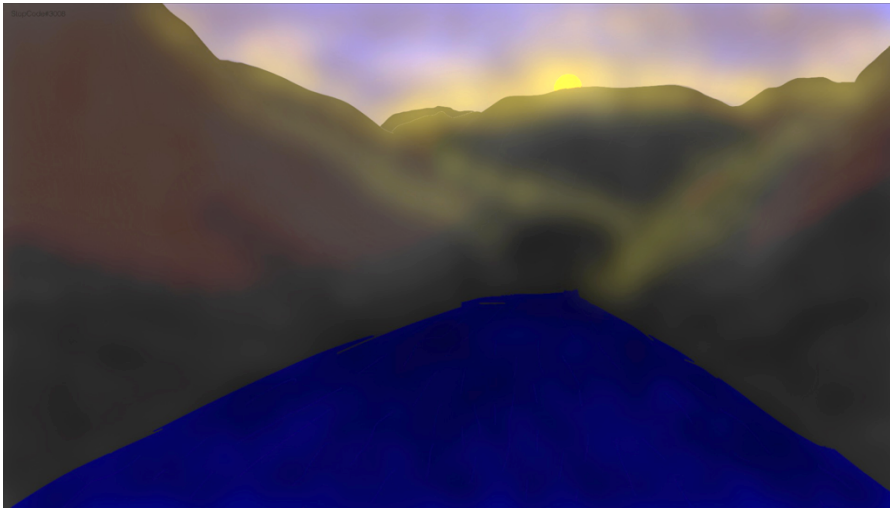
Mixed Media and Poetry
Claire Min



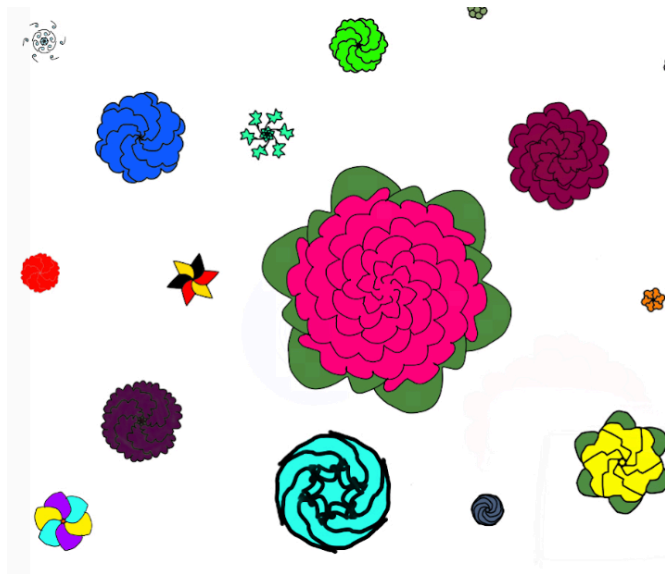
Starella.

My grandma loved the stars.
Her name was Ella.
She gazed out every night to look at them.
She was always hustling around
to do things for others.
But, somehow made time for the stars.
Starella is my name.
And I hate my name.
But I love my name.
Cause of my grandma.
I found the love in my name.
I don't like stars as much as her.
I like to look up at them from my tiny window.
Maybe she's up there too.

Digital Landscape
Darius Lieu



Digital Drawing
Isabella Kim



Story Excerpt
Kylie Lam

Roses

Sophia plucked the translucent threads wrapped around the loom. *Tick Tick Tick*, the soft plucking of the strings vibrated through the wooden-boarded room.

“Sophia, time for dinner!” Thomas yelled.

No reply came from Sophia. She stared through the window, watching the birds on the cherry tree chirp. They were cute little things, hopping and flying from branch to branch.

“Sophia!” Thomas rushed into Sophia’s room in a very panicked state. “Oh, there you are.”

Sophia awoke from her daydream. “What’s wrong?” she asked dreamily.

“Nothing darling, it’s dinner time. We are having Soupe à laignon, our family’s favorite dish.”

“Okay, I’ll come in five minutes,” Sophia replied.

“Okay.” Thomas left the sun-lit room.

Sophia looked fondly at the intricately carved wooden loom. It was the family heirloom of the Labelle family. *Épines sur une rose* was written on a copper plaque on the side. “Thorns on a rose.” She waved her right hand over the translucent threads. It twitched. Most were weaved tightly together, but some were loose. They twinkled then flickered in the sun, looking almost iridescent. “Hmmm,” Sophia mumbled. There was still some work left.

She walked regally into the dining room. The train of a flowing white dress trailed behind her, decorated with colorful silk flowers. A crystal chandelier hung high above their heads, a marble table in the middle, with

silverware neatly arranged, and two ornate wooden chairs on opposite sides of the room. Sophia Labelle sat down on the chair facing Thomas.

“So...How have you been feeling, Sophia?”

Sophia picked up the spoon and started eating. She looked up, staring vacantly at Thomas. Thomas glanced at her and turned his focus away. Her blue eyes looked faded, missing *something*. Wasn't she fine before? Well, it was that time of the year again. He got up and started walking swiftly towards his study.

He stopped at the exit, “I have some work to do.” Sophia didn't reply again. Thomas let out a sigh and shut the door.

Thomas knew that as her uncle, he should care for her. But why was he stuck here, with this *brat*? He thought it would be easy. That it'd be only for a year. But, the contract was signed, the papers were stored away.

“Uggh, how annoying!” he shouted as he kicked the door. The sound of the impact vibrated through the walls of the dining room.

Suddenly, a voice cried out, “Uncle Thomas, I'm going out for a walk.” It was Sophia's melodic voice, resembling her mother's, but with a lower tone. Thomas thought it was a sickly, sweet voice but never noticed the birds singing with it.

“Okay. Remember to come home before dark. Don't venture past the meadow and Dr. Mark's farm.”

“I know,” Sophia said as she went out the kitchen door.

She daintily stepped on big flat steppingstones as she walked into the garden. Birds and butterflies flew past flowers and plants. Sophia Labelle knelt down on the side and started to pick a red rose. She felt the soft velvety petals, layered in a spiral, and worked her fingers down to the stem. *Épines sur une rose*, she thought as the thorn pricked her little white finger. A drop of dark red blood emerged and trickled down, a sharp contrast from her pale white skin. She licked it off, it was a rather metallic taste. Blood was no different from roses, especially the blood of the Labelle family. Sophia pulled the rose off, “It was mother's favorite flower,” she said as more blood trickled down her hand. There was a movement in the window of the house.

A pleasant breeze flew in Sophia's face, leaving blonde hair flying and shimmering in the golden light. Sophia walked on and eventually reached the end of the property. She hopped over the old worn fence and landed on a yellow patch of grass. The sunlight revealed the cuts on her hand - an open bloody wound, and the light reflected off a gray slab of rock.

Engraved on the rock wrote "Marie Labelle, beloved mother." Sophia came closer to the rock, an ominous, grey cumulonimbus cloud loomed over the horizon.

"Hello, mother, it's Sophia." A white dove landed on the tombstone. Its wing was broken, and the poor bird chirped at Sophia. The clouds rumbled.

"Shoo. I have no business with you." The dove was struggling to stand up and lay on its side. Sophia could tell it was dying slowly and painfully.

"Fine. I will spare you of your pain. But, this tomb is already taken."

Sophia Labelle took up the dove with her hand and hurled it on the ground. *Thump*. The dove chirped weakly, the light faded from its eyes, and it died. Sophia used her foot to turn the dove over - stomach side up. There were metal gears and rivets exposed. White ruffled feathers surrounded the opening on the underside of the wing.

Meanwhile, Thomas was at home looking at a screen, "Dove 34 is down, Dr. Mark, Professor Jones, Ms. Ortega." He continues to speak into the microphone while eating cheese puffs. "Dispatch drone 58. Surveillance on subject Sophia Labelle."

A voice came in through the speaker, "Surveillance starting."
Back to Sophia.

"Oh my," Sophia thought, "you are not made of blood and flesh like me." Sophia examined the dead bird even further; its eyes reflected the sun like a lens. Her face was indifferent, a little inquisitive, but still calm and composed. She turned to the tombstone again.

"Mother, today's my 13th birthday. Seven years ago, you promised to take me to New York - your old home, on this day." The gray cloud was coming closer to Sophia. "But is it just a broken promise? I'm still waiting."

Digital Drawing
Celine Campos



Story Excerpt
Hannah Cheng and Riya Thawani

Eternally

Chapter 1: Sayuri Tsukamoto

“Sayuri! Help with the food!” my mom calls.

I groan and stand up, checking the time on my phone. 7:34, Thursday, November 23rd, 2113. The delicious scents of lemony turkey and herbs fill the air and waft into my nose. My mouth waters again, even though I’ve just been eating.

I look past the bustling kitchen to the window. Outside, orange and red leaves pile on the sidewalk. The gentle swish of the leaves falling is nearly inaudible in the commotion of the kitchen, but I can still hear it, and my breath begins to slow after the familiarity.

“Sayuri!” My mom’s snap jolts me back to the present. “Bring the potatoes to the table.”

I nod and grab the dish of potatoes. My hands heat up immediately, and I lift the potatoes as my hands warm. I cross the kitchen and move to the table, asking, “Who wants some?”

“Give,” Yoshi demands, eyeing the tray of potatoes.

I lift up the serving spoon and dump the contents onto Yoshi’s plate. “I’d like some, too, please,” my sister, Izumi, requests without a hint of respect in her tone.

I hate you so much.

“The potatoes, please,” Izumi presses. Her eyes meet my chocolate brown ones.

Spoiled brat.

I spill a spoonful of the food onto her plate. But I intentionally pour it onto the very edge of the plate...

...and the food all spills over Izumi's lap.

Izumi stands up at once, her face turning beet red. "You dared-"

I'm really starting to question that phrase. Why do people always use the "You dare?" line? Can't anyone come up with their own mottos? "I didn't do anything," I say, stepping back. But I can't keep the faintest hint of triumph from reaching my eyes.

"What's all the commotion over here?" Mom asks, appearing in the doorway. Her eyes immediately travel to Izumi, who's still standing and staring at me with her mouth open.

"She- she-" Izumi sputters, glaring at me.

"Sayuri, did you spill the food over her?" Mom questions, looking at me.

"No." But as her eyes scour my face, I know that she's looking through my mask.

"Go to your room, Sayuri."

I'm not surprised. I turn around and walk straight to my room without a noise, clutching onto my dignity.

I arrive at my room and shut the door behind me, sitting down on my bed. Insults race through my mind for a few minutes. Footsteps pound up the stairs next to my room faintly, jolting me back to real time.

Maybe I'll just entertain myself for now, until my family leaves later. I reach for my bookshelf and try to pull my favorite story off the shelf. But...

It's stuck. The bottom corner is just stuck to the shelf. I pull harder. The bookshelf swings forward. I stumble back. There's a whole room there.

I step inside and glance around. A light switch is visible on the opposite wall. I walk in that direction and reach the switch.

But I can't press it. Because all of a sudden, I trip over something on the floor. I expect my face to crash into the floor, but it doesn't.

All my senses are as blind as my sight as I close my eyes and fall down.

Digital Drawing
Celine Campos



Story
Elaine He

Nine-Hundred Miles Away

It's eight-forty-five in the morning, middle of August, and my home is silent. Save for the faint chirping of birds outside and the quiet hum of the fridge, there's nothing. The air is still; it settles like a blanket over me. I'm alone.

I pour myself a bowl of cereal. It's a pretty standard breakfast, especially during the summer where my sleep schedule isn't skewed enough for me to sleep in until ten-thirty whenever I don't have school. I leave the bowl in the sink once I've finished, brush my teeth and my hair, get dressed for the day, and entertain myself with a cursory scroll through Twitter.

All of this is to say that it's a perfectly average morning, with just one caveat: my brother is newly away for college in Georgia, nine-hundred miles away.

My parents are still asleep, having awoken yesterday at way-too-early-o'clock to drive him. They've been nervous about sending him so far, but he'd insisted; for what reason, I don't know. The past week or so has just been an onslaught of packing and moving and their fretting. "Do you have everything you need? Your laptop? Enough clothes? Will there be a refrigerator there? Are you sure? Are you sure?"

I can recall them being like this when my sister left, as well—though those memories are significantly more dampened by age and time—and I can still remember the day she left. The entire family had gotten into the Sienna for the whole three-hour drive to Boston together. I'd refused a similar send off for my brother. I told my parents that there was no way I'd get up at seven in the morning during the summer just to go to the airport. But now?

I can't help but feel a bit guilty.

I'm not particularly close with my brother. When we were younger, perhaps less so; I can still remember me spying on him playing Angry Birds on the tablet, and him trying to shoo me away; us hanging out in the middle of the night when we were both restless with jet-lag; splashing in the old blow-up pool that my parents have long gotten rid of now and trying to outswim each other across the tiny thing that couldn't have been more than a few yards wide. These are my fond memories of childhood, rife with nicknames and laughter and him bullying me in the way only older brothers do.

My sister was always a bit too old for us to really spend time together much, but my brother was my one companion until I started school, and who stuck around for quite a few years afterwards as well. I'm not sure when we truly started to grow apart, but as time went on, it'd just... happened. We'd both shrunk into ourselves. He'd thrown himself into schoolwork as he began high school, and I'd never made an effort since to reach out. A mutual parting-of-ways, I guess, and I'd been fine with it.

And now we're here. I've lived in the same house as him for my entire life, yet I can't remember the last time I had a conversation with him past one or two sentences since I was eight. I don't know what interests he has outside of school, I don't know who he talks to, I don't know why he wanted to go to Georgia for college; the list goes on. We barely know each other at this point. But yet...

The house feels empty with one less person in it. It's too quiet, too still. No click-clacking of a keyboard from across the hall, no warm yellow light peeking out from below the door, no need for me to race to the shower. No one for me to casually ask a question, no one messing up the bottles in the bathroom, no one to occasionally back me up in debates with my parents. What I've never realized is that even without speaking to someone, their presence can still leave an impression in your life that, once they've left, leaves you wondering where this strange lack came from. The devil's in the details. All these tiny little things that I've never noticed before, these small imprints created, that are now clear as day. We didn't talk much, but at least that was an active choice. At least he was there. Now? Who knows if I'll ever get to know my brother again. He'll be off, nine-hundred miles away, and we'll be a pair of siblings no better than strangers. Is that really how I want this to be?

No. No, it isn't.

I pick up my phone and scroll to my contacts. His name is listed plainly; no nicknames or emojis or whatnot. I got his number from my parents after I received my first phone, and I haven't touched it since.

I tap on his default profile picture. The text cursor mocks me as it blinks, my mind completely blank of what I could say. "Start simple," I mutter to myself. Finally, I settle on this:

so how's college been so far?

It really isn't much. Maybe even too little, if we're being honest here. But... at least it's something. Perhaps he'll respond, and it'll be a completely perfunctory one, with no invitation for further conversation whatsoever. Perhaps he won't respond at all. But regardless, I refuse to willingly estrange myself from my family. If this is all for naught, if I never really get to know him again, then at least I can say that I've tried.

It's nine-seventeen in the morning, and my house is quiet. The air is still; I'm alone. There's no one around for me to talk to, but as the birds chirp and the refrigerator hums, I feel a sense of togetherness.

Digital Drawing
Bhuvi Kumar



Story
Sarah Joseph

Forever

I look around. All around me an infinite wall. I can't think further, see further, or do anything more than those barriers could let me. I try to break through, but I can't. Whenever I do, I feel sick, and feel like I'm suffocating. It's like how a normal person would feel having to leave their most dearest home, that they've been in forever. It's my dear own bubble, that I genuinely hate. During the days when I would trip upon my own toes, I would look past those very walls, imagining what *they* were doing, the freed ones, unlike me. Yearning to be like them, I realize I am trapped, and always will be. I would look with longing in my big, hopeful eyes at the walls surrounding me, thinking, "Is this all?" I would look at the wall to my left, my right, waiting for a hero to liberate me, like the ones from those fairy tale books I read. But nothing. I realize that my life is nothing like a fairy tale. Now, time flies past, and I drag by. I feel nothing, unknown, hidden. I grow older, smarter, cleverer, and bigger, but those walls don't care, they assure me that I can't step out. They make sure I am locked in.

I feel helpless, frustrated, and depressed all at the same time.

The world sees me as something I really am not. I wait for a kind eye to look around, see this little child trapped. But no one cares. I am in darkness. I am desperate to get out. I know I can, but I can't get myself to do it. My mind cannot grow more than these walls around me would allow. I am like a small meek plant, longing for just a drop of water. But I know this is my home. My home forever. I cannot leave. Soon, I grow restless, wanting to get out of this small, cramped space. My mind needs to grow beyond these boundaries. I am more than this; I have to show the world who I *truly* am.

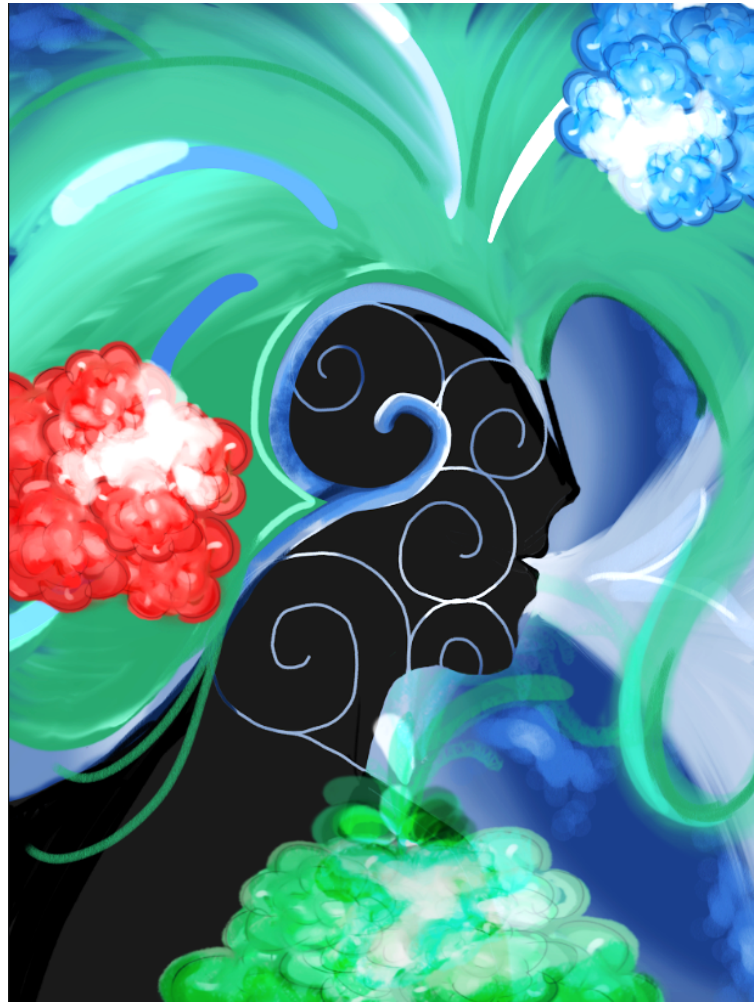
For the first time in my life, a strong, but meek thought floats around in my bare head. It's vibrant, colorful and gives me a sliver of hope. I am called to "step-out" of this thing I had made for myself. Something I have never thought of before. What if I step out? What do I have to lose? I have nothing. I would take the risk. I start to realize that I fear getting out of

this home that I have been in for my entire life, even though deep down in my heart, I know I can and I wish to. That hope I had from so long ago, fills me up again. It fills me and I feel a hint of joy, something quite unknown.

Realizing this, I fearfully but hopefully, lift my hand to eye level, examining my soft, delicate fingers that have gone unharmed for so long. I am safe now and here. But I am a risk taker, an adventurer at heart. I have to go. I slowly move my trembling hand towards *my* wall. As I near, I feel a freeing sensation rising through me. I am going to be free. Soon. As my fingernails touch the cold dry wall, I become unsure if I should leave my dearest habitation. My sweet home. I recall all the memories I have made here. The good, the bad, and the ugly. I feel nauseous, and dizzy. This all seems like a dream. I feel like my feet are moving on their own accord. My heart is pounding with every step, and each step away from my old home leaves me with a mix of freedom and fear, thinking about this whole new world. As I take my final step out, I am free at last. My mind bursts, I dance, sing and run as I realize this unknown feeling. I could never look back. I will keep dancing towards the sun, forever.

Surrealist Portrait
Bhuvi Kumar





Faint Breaths

At night, when you go to sleep, your imagination takes hold, letting you dream. This girl is the dreamer, locked in her imagination that she's breathed life into. The hidden, preserved beauty of the flowers stand out, too, calling you to attention because of their bright colors and highlights just as happiness does. Even when trapped in a nightmare, there will always be a lit corridor in the near future.

Poetry
Madeleine Lennox

The Paradox of Sleep

She's running away from me, scared, but I'm chasing after her, terrified.
Please let me tell you, please let me explain to you.
She's gone now.

I wake to the wall of my bedroom, still shaken.
I realize I've just woken.
It takes time; I adjust
as sensations and my forgotten sentiments permeate my brain.

I reassure myself while
Clashing against falling asleep again
to leave this bad dream and reside in a good one.

During the tranquil of the morning I lay,
Drowsy, dazed, and unrelenting.
Unable to get out of bed,
Petrified of falling asleep again and igniting another nightmare.
I fixate on my broken clock, adrift and lonely,
desperately trusting it will tell me the time,
bringing my compass back due North.
The only thing that snaps me out of this purgatory is my schedule,
but without one, my will is waning.

Sleep intrudes, breaching my semi-consciousness.

It's 7 o'clock again, or 8, or 9, or 10 in the morning.
I'm unaware. I've just woken up.
A day has passed and my nightmare still taunts me
Crooning of my defeats, failures, and weaknesses.

This middle zone between consciousness and unconsciousness mocks me
Each side beckons me to join it,
but Sleep always wins.

This time I've forgotten to study for a test.
The teacher's disappointed face breaks me, rousing me.

A new nightmare has joined the cacophony.

The next day is quiet and still,
It starts off drizzling, but shifts to faint snow.
I'm surrounded by the love of my friends and family.
I neglect the nightmares for a day, fixating on school.

Night brings promised rest, but
I'm awake as dawn overtakes the sky.
Too early to get ready,
too late for more rest,
I lie in the in-between.
Until my dreams come.

They only greet me when I'm part awake,
only sing when they know I'll remember,
reminding me of their might and power.
Who creates these dreams I love?
Who destroys them and turns them into nightmares?
Where is the line between awake and asleep?
and why can't I seem to draw it?

The terror they bring is unnerving,
but the feeling I get when I revisit them is even more so.
I love the places I visit, the dark mansions I call home,
the people that I meet, and the mystery that envelops them.
But why do I revel in something that scares me?
Because it begins pure and delightful,
but delightful quickly decays.

I decide to burst free
Releasing my dawn daymares to the world.

I tell my pen pal first,
letting her hold my darkness instead of me.
To her, they are tales,
Each nightmare is strange and dubious even to me at times,
but full of brilliant streaks.
I choose the endings,

excluding the dark fragments.
She lets me see them as vibrant.

My loved ones know, too, because this is my story.
I can see what is reality and what can't be now.
I'll direct my attention to my dreams or my life, one at a time.
It'll stop the two from tearing each other apart,
because in the end, it's all in my mind.

I fix my clock and get a new notebook.
They'll root me to the life in which I live.
There will be days when I lay in my bed,
too tired to get up in the morning.
I will succumb to sleep
drifting in that dark in-between.
The nightmares can visit then,
and I'll write them all down.
The vivid colors and places I travel will surround me,
and I'll tell them as stories and change the ending
Because I'm no longer stuck in that dark dream.

—

I wrote about the distinctions between being awake and asleep, the conscious and unconscious, and my personal relationship to the “light” of dreams and the “sweetness of life” and the “dark” of nightmares and its turbulent “sourness.”

Poetry
Michael Sun

One, Hopeless, Turtle

One, hopeless, turtle,
Craning his neck towards the waves that splash him,
Struggling to get away from the scorching beach,
Waiting for a miracle to happen,
With eyes praying for the sea.

One, hopeless, turtle,
With helpless feet flipped upside down,
And a protective shell on the wrong side,
Waiting for something, or someone,
To pull him out from the torture.

One, hopeless, turtle,
Asking for luck to find him,
As people bypass him, ignoring him,
Waiting for a person to notice,
The dark dimension he was in.

One, hopeless, turtle,
Still no sign of blessing,
Desperately waiting while the heat wears him down,
But he wouldn't give in to it,
And stayed hopeful.

One, hopeless, turtle,
At last, the hopelessness falls away,
As a breeze blows upon him, rolling towards the welcoming ocean,
And he dives into the highest wave,
With his mouth speaking thanks.

A Flame in the Ice

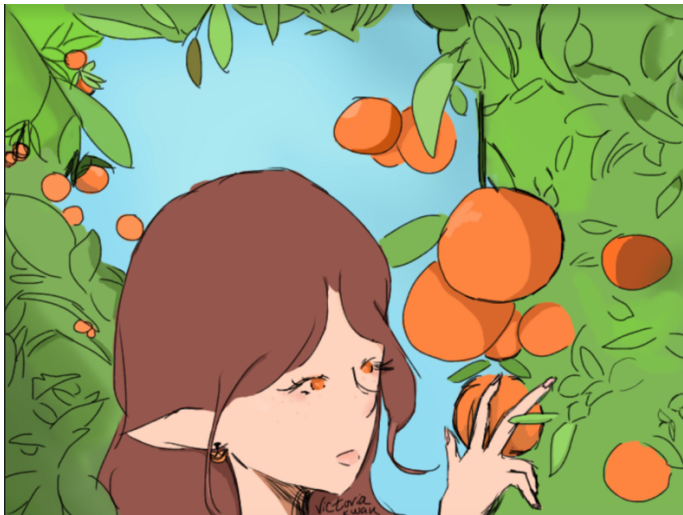
Walking slowly through the tundra,
Shivering from the freezing cold,
Holding my sled rope tightly,
Not wanting to slip on the ice and snow.

Barely withstanding the rapid winds,
As I try to ignite a flame that will glow,
Waiting for a spark, hoping for a fire,
That'll warm me up and cook my dough.

I keep on trying, with a determined spirit,
As I shiver in clothes that I've outgrown,
But a spark appears from the obsidian coals,
Sizzling into the wood that I placed below.

The fire ignites, like my strength,
And I watch it flame, and burn, and grow,
With eyes that have seen wonders and truths,
I again turn towards the snow.

Digital Drawing
Victoria Kwan



Story
Xuan Liu

3:02 a.m.

An alarm makes a piercing ring through the empty city. A bird is startled and attempts to fly away, forgetting that they have 3 wings and lives within the remnant of the unfortunate city that has now been turned into a biohazardous ruin.

A man sits up in a bed, startled. He looks around his room frantically, as if forgetting something important.

He sets his eyes on a post-it taped to a wall in a random manner. Moving quickly to the wall, he rips the post-it off, tape and all, along with the paint, and starts whispering the text on it to himself.

“Good morning, survivor. It is currently 3:00 am in the morning.”

He looks toward the still ringing alarm, and slams the top of it.

The alarm still goes on. He slams it again. It stops.

He looks at the time, checking if what is written on the post-it matches up with reality.

“3:02 am...” He looks at the post-it again. “Of course. It’s off by 2 minutes again...”

He continues reading the post-it. “If you’ve forgotten, your name is Liam Trewin. You are 27 28 29. You are a refugee from the U.S after the first Blight dropped. The Third Great War has long since ended now, but you mustn't attempt to escape the city, or else your presence will harm all the people around you. Your mother is: Abigail Trewin. Your father is: John Aucksburg. Your brother is: Adam Trewin. They are alive and well outside of China. 3:00: Begin preparing to continue scavenging within the city. 3:30: Exit your bunker. Take this post-it with you as a schedule to follow.”

The text gets cut off there. Liam gets up from his bed and peers into his closet. A weathered down hazmat suit is the only thing left hanging in his small closet. Taking the suit out gingerly, he reaches inside it, looking for something.

Another small post-it sticks to his hand. He takes his hand out and looks at it.

On it, a small calendar of 30 boxes looks hastily scribbled onto it. At the bottom, it says, "Expires in 30 days. Make sure to replace it on the 22nd day of using it, to prevent risk from extended use."

The first 21 boxes of the calendar are all crossed off. The 22nd box is circled.

Liam puts the post-it on the wall, along with the 29 other post-its with calendars on them.

Sighing, he puts on the hazmat suit. *Another task to do today.*

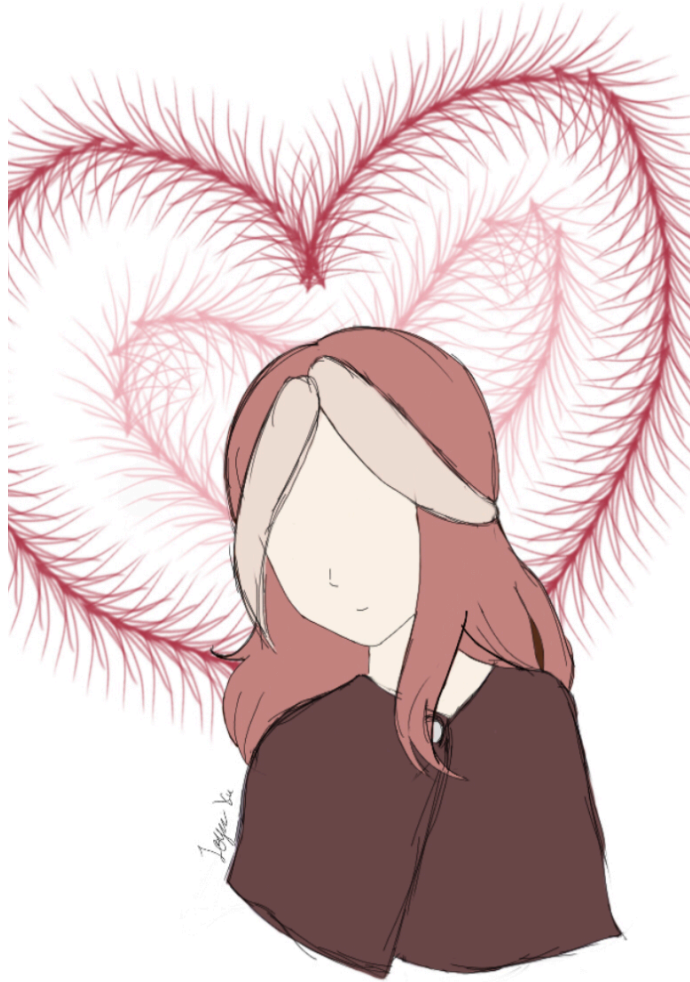
Before he leaves the bunker, he looks at an actual calendar hanging on a wall. It was the 29th day of February 2043. There was a small line of text on the box for the 29th day, saying "My birthday. 30 years old!!!" In the 17th box, it says, "Adam's birthday. 26 years old."

Liam sighs again. *At least my family gets to be free, outside of this prison of a place*

Taking the first post-it with him, he tugs open the bunker door to the inside of what was once a cozy little house. The only things that remain of it are tiny pieces of charred wood rolling around in the dusty wind.

He looked out at the city for the 1147th time since he had been stuck here.

Drawing
Joyce Xu



Story Excerpt
Riya Thawani

Nightfall

“Miyako!” a voice calls. I recognize it as Ryo, my brother. “We need to talk.” I swallow down my anxiety and head over to his voice, pushing through the groups of conversing prodigies, all of them preparing for battle.

“Yeah?” I ask, as I find Ryo. His hair’s a coffee brown, almost as dark as mine. He has double eyelids, with copper eyes peeking out from underneath. And, of course, he’s as tall as Mount Fuji. We both inherited our father’s height, and he was 6’4” or something. Nice technical advantage, I guess.

“Do you have a plan?” he queried.

“We’ll head to the palace and scout the area. Stationing lookouts comes first, then we’ll figure out a way to break in.”

“All right, that’s taken care of. You handle the battle training part.”

“Kay.”

“We should get going now.” Ryo glances at his watch. “If we don’t hurry, we’ll be off schedule.”

I nod and head to one of the open areas that we use for training. There are dull gray walls, chipped after a year of weapon throwing, graffitied with bursts of rainbow. The room smells like fresh paint, mingled with sweat. All I can hear is low conversation, footsteps, and the occasional cough from the dustiness of the room. The damp air lies heavily on my shoulders - it is the basement of Nightfall, this organization of prodigies, outcast by humanity. At least forty people, by a rough estimate, are waiting here. Some of them look extremely nervous, others excited for their first battle. I recognize some older members weaving through the younger teenagers, comforting them and giving them advice. Thank Amaterasu for them.

After doing an actual count of the people, ensuring everyone's ready, I work my way through the crowd back to my brother, greeting him with a salute.

"Ready?" he asks, meeting my gaze steadily.

"Let's do this."

Drawing and Poem
Nandini Khaneja



Red

A faint trickle
Moved beyond its confines
Past my chapped upper lip
It slowly drips from my skin
Preparing itself to fall on the blank paper beneath me
After the short drop
The red fluid feathers out
And the process repeats

My mind is occupied by a complex daydream
As it usually is
I do not realize why I feel a bit tired
Maybe I'm dehydrated
Another girl realizes this before me
And begins to unleash a horrified yelp
At the sight of blood beginning to pour from my nose
At my nonchalant attitude
At my unawareness
I leave my imaginary world
And regain the ability to pinch my nostril shut
Attempting to stop the flow
I rise from my miniature yellow chair
In an attempt to find a tissue
Nearly every set of eyes turned
To find their bleeding classmate
Next to her shrieking counterpart
And soon the room erupts into a cacophony of high-pitched screams

The teacher is pushed to her wits end
Frustrated by the overreaction of my peers
She turns in a swift motion
And her eyes widen
Reflecting the faces of the other students
And suddenly
It all made complete sense

Panic written on her face
And obviously unprepared to deal with the situation at hand
She screamed at me to leave
And go to the nurse's office

But not before asking if I was dying
Expecting me to be just as worried

With the stack of tissues I was given
I walked down the nearly empty hallway by the main office
Conscious of the strange looks from the ladies working there
I rounded the corner, two doors away from the nurse's office
Hoping that there was not much cause for concern

As I entered the room
My nose recognized the odor of alcohol pads and iodine as it permeated
the air
And my eyes fell upon the sniffing children holding ice packs to scraped
knees
It had already become a familiar setting

The nurse put down the telephone
Visibly irritated (again)
“Look Naan-dee-nee, I don't have time for this”
“Take a tissue and sit down”

I obliged

A few minutes passed
“Ma'am, it's not stopping”
“Yes, it is.”
“B-but it's still pouring”
“You just don't know how to do it right”
“But-”
“I don't want to deal with this, I have other things to do. Tilt your head
back.”

I obliged (again)

Blood poured down my throat
Almost making me gag
I coughed into the tissue
All that came out was a clot of blood
“Ma'am, I'm going to puke”
“No you're not, just rinse out your mouth in the bathroom”

I obliged

I let go of so much blood in that sink
Every exhalation left a new splattering of blood in the white porcelain
I cleaned it up as fast as I could
As my dizziness increased
And I struggled to keep my eyes open
I mustered up enough strength to leave the bathroom
Bright red droplets fell onto the floor, a sign I was not yet in the clear
“What are you doing? I thought you dealt with it already. You’re doing something wrong”
I wanted to say something, but she cut me off
“You are being so disrespectful right now; you should understand that you are taking away time from everyone else because you can’t handle a bit of blood.”
A bit of blood...
A bit...

It took all I had within me to not shake this woman and ask what a bit of blood was to her
I’m too young to understand what a bit of blood means
To the 4-year-old me, it seemed to be a lot
Dripping for far too long

I didn’t oblige this time

“I have been doing all I can to stop this, and it won’t stop. I leaned back and I nearly puked.”
“Stop whining, you have missed so much class time with your little joke”
Joke
She thinks this is a joke
“Maybe you put some marker on your hands to fake it, I don’t know, and I don’t care. Stop wasting my time.”

I shoved a crumpled tissue up my nostril

It was now decided
I was not staying there any longer
She could not be reasoned with
She didn’t seem to care

I covered my nose with my hand

And told her my nosebleed was gone and left
Picking pieces of tissue out of my nose occupied the rest of my day
But anything was better than going back to the smell of alcohol pads and
iodine

Poetry and Digital Drawing
Abigail Badalov

As long as I remember-

I think about the summer breeze,
Melodies that would swing the trees
And honeybees

Citrus skies
Crystal salt
Visions of the Piave
While goosebumps trail down my thighs

I remember the way I felt
The swinging trees
And honeybees
Could not compare to his enticing stare

Love song.
So loud he would smash the snare.
But my heart beat faster
Than the drum
And I preferred to smash the cymbals

Until it was done.

It was her-

It was her who squeezed lemons in my eyes
Blinded me into thinking I was alright
While I couldn't bear the sound of my cries

It was her who crushed my soul

Who made me think I couldn't let go
And who made me realize her heart was as black as coal

It was her who blurred my mind
Her who controlled my life
While all I did was be kind

But now that I pushed away
It's what keeps my mind awake
Thinking about it all day

It was her.

The Summer of 1983:

The soft dew in the sun
turned my eyes the
color of chamomile tea.

how could I not understand?

we're in northern Italy in the summer of 1983.

I sent a letter at the dawn of the season.
sugar fruit on picnic blankets and citrus ice.
living in the decade of Polaroids and the spark of living.

existing was merely a feeling that pulsed through my body.
A feeling of being free.

How could I forget: the sweet humming of radios in red mustangs. The
apricot baskets and the running through lemon trees.

Those memories they will never understand.
Because somewhere in Northern Italy
In the summer of 1983
You'll know where I am.

Lemons and Views:

As I wallow in the quiet, in the dark
I try to remember
To make lemonade from what life has granted me
And to wait for the rainbow after an eternity of downpour.
But I apologize if I cannot bring myself to believe
That life gave me any lemons worth squeezing
Or has any rainbows in store worth sticking around long enough to see.





sunsets ✨

are proof that endings can often
be beautiful too.

— Beau Taplin ✨



