



2022



# Dragons' Fire Literary Review 2021-2022

I'm so excited to share with you all the 2021-22 Dragons' Fire Literary Review!

This year's edition captures a range of voices and experiences from our da Vinci Dragons. They write about being alone, forgotten, afraid, and misunderstood. They write poignantly about feeling disconnected from their bodies and disconnected from the people around them. Our writers also capture the joy and humor in their everyday lives. They express their appreciation for natural beauty, their striving for justice, and their connection to family. They give us glimpses into worlds they invent, with their fantastical creatures and relatable characters.

There is an abundance of heartfelt writing here. Much of it comes from the semester-long creative writing classes, in particular an assignment that had students write genre fiction. Other works come from ELA classes—in particular, an assignment in which Mr. Williams had students write poems in response to the poetry of Pat Mora. According to Mr. Williams, “Pat Mora is a contemporary Mexican-American poet. Some of her poems deal with issues facing teens and Mexican-Americans. Mora maintains that people’s identities grow out of the worlds they inhabit—the ones they inherit from the past as well as the ones they encounter as they grow through life.”

All the visual art was created by Maddie's ceramics and Kelda's visual arts students.

I hope you enjoy this collection.

Emily Conner  
Creative Writing Teacher

**Cover Art by Tsunami Oates**

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## **Under the Ice**

*Elliot Addison*

I was under the ice

The pond, safe to swim in summer,

has grabbed me with a cold fist and plunged me beneath the water and left me to suffer.

The opening through which I entered has disappeared within the vision of my blind eyes

Kicking with no feet

Screaming with no mouth

My punches do nothing against the constant waves that I am creating with my efforts

My body hasn't numbed and it feels as if it never will

Each slap of a wave feels as if I were swimming in a sea of thumbtacks

I guess I'll have to wait till next spring

The room becomes silent

Everyone's watching

Some appear sympathetic

Some annoyed

Some frothing at the mouth at the mere sight of action

I hear someone laughing

I went too far

I want to find a way out

Kicking with no feet

Screaming with no mouth

## **The Autumn Sun**

*Wren Alger*

I am grateful for the gentle voice of the wind rustling the crows' dusk black feathers as they soar overhead like an angry storm cloud

Leaves gradually changing from emerald green to blood red or jack-o'-lantern orange as they prepare leave their home and lazily float down to earth

The warm smell of cinnamon floating through the air like a pale white ghost who haunts an abandoned grave

Cold air biting at my heels as I walk through my yard, a sudden gust of frigid wind making my cat's black and white hair stand on end

And the sun sparkling like a firecracker,

reaching its long warm arms into homes, classroom and libraries to bring its warmth to everyone

And even at midnight when the sun is in slumber  
its warmth will still be there clinging to the air like mist

And when the sun rises again it will be with us, all throughout our day

## **The Grasp of the Woods**

*Wren Alger*

I lazily strolled through the forest, my gaze drifting from the peacefully green tree tops to the rust-colored soil that covered the trail I hiked. Birds excitedly talked with each other overhead, flitting to the ground from time to time to pluck up an unlucky worm. A pleasant wind carried through the trees, smelling of sunbathed soil and wild mushrooms.

There had been downsizing at work and even some of my friends had to leave. Hopefully spending the day in the forest would help me unwind. I couldn't remember the last time that I had gone on a hike but I'd missed it. Gentle rays of sunlight reached through the trees, making the amber leaves that coated the ground glow with ethereal light. I let my mind wander as I admired my surroundings; chipmunks and squirrels chased each other through shrubs and tree stumps.

The sound of rushing water grew nearer to me as I strolled past moss covered stumps and dark-emerald vines. After a few more minutes of walking I finally arrived at a clearing. At the end of it was a large pond, with crystal blue water dotted with yellowish lily pads. Small waves lapped up onto the shore, churning the dirt into shiny mud. I looked around me, noticing a large stone that protruded from the ground. Taking another glance around the clearing I noticed around a dozen of the same stones, the largest of which had what looked like a deer skull resting in front of it.

The skull's empty sockets bored into my eyes and I felt a chill climb up my spine like a squirrel would scurry up a tree. When I was a kid I was always fascinated by whatever might be hidden in the woods, and even though I was grown up my interest remained. My curiosity got the better of me and I found myself reaching down to touch the skeleton. A jolt of white hot pain shot through my hand and I leapt back, staring in shock at the skull. There was no burn mark on my hand and the pain was quickly subsiding but I didn't like the feeling that had sunk into my stomach like a dozen bricks. I scurried out of the clearing and began the trek back to my car. It was about an hour away and although I had wanted to stay in the forest for longer, my strange experience had soured my mood.

As I traveled back down the trail I began to feel silly for running away; it was just some old skull after all. A harsh tugging feeling abruptly jerked my foot and I



came crashing down to the ground. Twigs snapped under me and brambles scratched my hands as I pushed myself to my feet. I turned around, looking for what had tripped me. I saw nothing, no rocks or anything to trip on; there was a large clump of roots a couple of yards away but they were too far away for me to have tripped on them.

The wind had grown strong, and cold gusts blew into me like they were trying to stop me from leaving this place and getting back to my family. I pushed through the breeze and sped up my return to the car. I ducked low to the ground to avoid a branch, but when I passed under it I felt the bark snag at my coat and the vines at the base of the tree beginning to curl around my boots. I fought off a feeling of panic. I'm not a superstitious person, and I knew that the forest couldn't actually be trying to grab me but nevertheless I began to sprint down the trail.

Roots and vines seemed to creep towards me like snakes chasing their prey. At last I burst out of the trees, entering a field of tall waving reeds and grasses; the stems were blowing towards me and it felt like a million little eyes were watching me. The second I stepped into the field a stiff, jagged blade of grass shot forward and wrapped around my leg. More and more followed until my leg was entirely caught; I was able to wrench myself free but the grass kept tightening its grip until I could barely breathe. I felt my chest being compacted by the reeds that were suffocating me. The last whisper of air left my lungs and I lost consciousness.

When I awoke it was dark but at least I could breathe, although it was extremely cramped and my arms were pressed against my side. I unlodged my arms and felt the walls of this place; they felt like worn bark with rough edges and brittle lumps of wood. It smelled damp with the sweet spicy scent of pine needles. My breath grew panicked as I yelled and pounded at the bark. After minutes of this the air had grown thin and my breath was short; I needed to get out, to get home. I started to scrape at the bark, my nails breaking against it. My lungs spasmed and my legs gave out until finally the walls closed in around me for good.

## **Alone**

*Anonymous*

I walk to school passing by groups of kids.  
They were laughing, talking, having fun.  
And here I am.  
Walking down the street by myself.  
Alone.



Lily Wanner

## **Keys**

*Aubrey Barrett*

“Hey, world! I’m GAMER135, and this is the Keys challenge!” said GAMER135, smiling in the direction of her phone’s camera. She clicked the ‘GOLD CONFETTI’ button on the screen of her phone. “I heard of the game Keys, the popular online platform that came out in 2027. I started playing, when I realized that this would be a great challenge for my ViewCube channel!

“So I deleted my old account before I could uncover all of its secrets, and I’ll be showing you the new one I’m starting every step of the way.”

She scooped her Strawberry brand laptop into clear view of her phone camera. Luckily, the lighting had already adjusted when it was behind her.

“Last time I made an account, I found that ‘GAMER135’ was already taken, so my username this time will be different.”

Under the ‘NAME’ column, she typed in ‘ROCK1T4\_F4N\_14’.

She messed with the avatar for a bit, flipping through different pages and options with her cursor, and with the amount of effort she displayed, it was as if the keyboard were an extension of her fingertips.

“You can unlock this skirt if you complete a level,” she explained, adding a translucent, holographic skirt over the black tights. On the glowing screen, it had a bubblegum pink sheen that then changed to the same light-blue as a sapphire, simulating its change when it hits light in real life.

Her cursor hovered over a hairdo for a millisecond. It was wavy, light pink hair that was down, so that it covered the avatar’s shoulders. As if magnetically, the tiny black arrow clicked on a different do; faded, long mauve hair with bangs.

She scrolled through the options, clicking them lightning fast, now. She was finally satisfied when the avatar had a sweatshirt the color of a blueberry, pink-and-gold earrings that looked like upside-down lilies, striped, fluffy knee socks that were striped blood orange and a rusty orange color, and brown suede ankle boots with tasseled leather zippers and a high-heel.

She hit the ‘START’ button on the screen, and it began to load.

“So, for anyone who’s new to the game,” she explained while it was loading, “Keys is a game where you have to uncover hidden levels and secrets. In regular level, which will be labeled, you and anyone who you’re playing with team up to find a locked door. The key is somewhere in the level.

“For the first few levels, it’s right in front of the door, because getting to the door is enough. After a while, the keys are somewhere else, but they’re never too far from the door.

“After completing a level, whether hidden or otherwise, you get to keep the tiny gold key. After you collect every key in the game, apparently a giant door appears. I looked it up online, and all of your keys combine into a giant key, called the Mega Key, which opens the door.

“I have no idea what’s behind the door, but I can’t wait to find out!”

Her timing was perfect, because the blue ‘LOADING’ signal disappeared, and the server loaded. Someone else appeared in exactly the same instant, and a floating blue icon above their head read ‘W4LNUT\_TH3...’. Just then, the video zoomed in on just her computer. She was standing in the middle of the street, facing in front of a building with a pink and orange sign labeled ‘DUNCAN DOUGHNUTS’ on it.

“I’m playing with a friend,” she explained in the background. A box appeared above, and a girl GAMER135’s avatar wearing a headset waved, before the box disappeared again. “Playing with friends is probably the easiest. In some levels, you can either bounce off of walls, or get a leg up. Getting a leg up is just a little easier, in my opinion. You can even get a double leg up! The more friends, the better in Keys. Of course, some people prefer the wall-bouncing thing, so it all depends on you.”

The avatar made big movements, lifting their legs a millimeter higher and moving a millisecond faster than humans. The two avatars and the floating text made their way towards Level 1, clearly labeled when RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 tried to zoom out.

“You don’t get a map or phone unless you’re in a certain hidden level, which I’ll get to later,” explained her voice in the background. “So I’ll tell you a little bit about some of the buildings. The non-hidden levels are the only thing that’s labeled.

“Directly across the street there is an apartment, but you can’t enter those, so don’t waste time trying to. You’ll see a lot of those.

“Behind me and to the left, you’ll see Super Deluxe, a park just beyond it, a Dairy Queen, and a Burger King in the distance.”

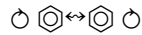
Her camera swiveled back to the front.

“Right in front of me and to the right, there’s a pet shop, Shanty Fou-Fou’s Shoppe, a Church, and a Possible Bald Mike Viewing area-- Mike is a CPU, and sometimes you can find him there. It’s more likely than, say, the DQ. As you can see, he isn’t there at the moment.

“Now that you get the gist of the area, I can go into Level 1!” RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 announced, and started to walk towards the small rectangular building with a flat roof. W4LNUT\_TH3... followed close behind.

Inside, the little house was dark. There seemed to only be one large window with no blinds, where the curtains were drawn. There were no lights, but the windows let in just enough natural light to see clearly. There were odd patches of lighter wallpaper, and the house had a carpeted floor. It was simple, and seemed fittingly small, with only that one room. The door had a golden key laying in front of it.

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 walked past the key, picking it up automatically. The key clutched in her hands, she walked a centimeter or so towards the door. It opened, and the avatar pocketed the key. W4LNUT\_TH3... followed very close behind, being sure not to run into RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 while still being almost close enough to step on their heels.



“Hi, GAMER135 again, and this is the 7th episode of the Keys challenge! Today, we won’t be doing any levels, but I’m going to show you all the stuff that you can buy!”

The screen crisply depicted the game, while GAMER135’s voice went on in the background. W4LNUT\_TH3... was not there today.

“I’m gonna start by explaining the concept of money. One of the cool things about this game is that there’s no in-game purchases. That also means, however, that you have to earn everything through Death Dollars, the Keys currency. You start out with 5.00 Death Dollars, and you can earn more through tasks and things.

“Once you earn enough Death Dollars, you can buy things. Anything in this game is rarely above 10.00 Death Dollars, but you usually get paid in 0.50 Death Dollars per challenge.

“I finally earned enough cash to buy some of the things I really wanted. Let’s start by going into Dairy Queen.”

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 jogged towards the Dairy Queen, an accurate model of a Dairy Queen in simulation, from the cobbled stone siding down to the large red, white, yellow, and blue ‘DQ’ sign that hung above the doorway. RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 opened the door and strolled inside, expressing little effort.

“You can buy products, but they have a limited menu compared to the real Dairy Queen,” her voice explained.

Behind the cash register, two people were visible.

One was a blonde teenage girl with long hair, a glossy red and white name tag that said ‘HELLO MY NAME IS ALISSA’, and a black uniform with short sleeves lined with blue on the underside that had a DQ logo on it. She also had on a white DQ visor. She didn’t look too happy to be there; she was slouching, eyelids drooping halfway shut, a giant frown on her face that almost reached her chin.

Next to her was a slightly older man with a blue shirt that sported the DQ logo, with the words ‘FanFood not fast food’ in white block letters underneath. He also had on a black visor with the DQ logo off to the side, and slight purple stains on his shirt and arm. He had light brown hair and blue eyes, and a subtle smug look on his face.

“If you try to talk to Alissa, a kiosk appears,” RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 explained, “but the other guy gives it to you. You can’t place an order through him.”

As she was talking, the kiosk appeared, and the avatar ordered a Reese’s cup blizzard, before the kiosk disappeared.

“You can only order one thing at a time, but the service is decently fast,” she added, “And it shows the money that you spent.” Sure enough, a ‘-3.00 Death Dollars’ sign flickered past on screen.

When they had the blizzard, the man in the blue shirt was about to give it to RoK1T4\_F4N\_14. Suddenly, his smug face twisted into a tainted smile, and they turned the cup upside-down!

“Yeah? See that? What ya gonna do about it? Huh?” he said in the most jerky way possible.

To RoK1T4\_F4N\_14, the face could only be described this way: think of a cow -- the judgiest animal. Not a happy cow, but a cow whose face was mainly used for assuming a slightly angry, slightly bored appearance. Now, imagine this cow with a look of sheer joy on its face. It was just like that; unnatural and taunting.

Luckily, the dense mixture was frozen well into the cup, and RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 was able to catch it before the ice cream could fall out. “That’s Kyle. Well, that’s not his real name. It never tells you his real name. That’s my name for him. Kyle’s kind of a jerk, but the game never lets your ice cream fall,” assured RoK1T4\_F4N\_14.

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 left the Dairy Queen, and continued down the sidewalk. When the avatar ate the blizzard, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 said, “You get a little sugar rush after eating ice cream. Unfortunately, after a while you crash, so this speed-boost works in reverse for 20 seconds after it wears off. It is temporarily postponed when you walk indoors.” Her avatar continued to walk down the sidewalk extra fast, she passed through the open doorway of a pet shop.

There were pets in cages lined about the room and by the windows. There were hamsters, mice, gerbils, hedgehogs, guinea pigs, and rats in silver cages with brown shredded paper at the bottom of the cage, a feeding cup full of treats, a sipper bottle, and a metal hamster wheel each. There were parrots, parakeets, canaries, cockatiels, finches, conures, parrotlets, and pionuses, each with a feeding station full of sunflower seeds, hanging water dishes, and a wooden perch. There were snakes and lizards with rough scales that almost appeared to be tiles on their backs, with water dishes and temperature controlling tanks. There were ferrets, rabbits, and chinchillas with water dishes and treats. There were salamanders and newts in cages, munching on a disgusting array of what they called snacks; shiny-shelled beetles that made a crunching sound as you walked past, wriggling earthworms, and live crickets that were swallowed mid-chirp.

“You can buy any of these pets, but to start out you have the option between

two. After your first purchase, you can have one, three, twelve, any amount that you want!

“I’ve been completing quests, saving up to buy a rat. They’re so cute! The other option is a canary, but I haven’t had enough for either one until now, so, for my first time, I’m going to show you how to get a rat!” exclaimed RoK1T4\_F4N\_14.

After clicking on the clerk, a kiosk appeared, just like at the Dairy Queen. When RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 selected ‘RAT’, the clerk handed her a dark brown rat with sleek fur and one of the cages.

“Its name is Bob,” the clerk announced, as RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 tilted her head to see the small rodent in the palms of her cupped hands.

Suddenly, the startled little rat jumped out of her hands! He scuttled across the polished concrete floor, claws clicking as he ran as fast as those little legs would carry him out the open door!

“WHAT?!” RoK1T4\_F4N\_14’s voice roared in genuine shock and anger in the background. RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 had no idea that this would happen, and this word, like hot steam, built so much pressure against her mouth that it was pushed past her lips before she could think about them. She saved up so much money for Bob, only to have him run off!

A map appeared on her screen, with blue letters at the top. It looked like a little GPS, except that it was titled ‘RAT TRACKER’. The moving destination was marked with the image of a rat’s tail and back legs in mid-run. There was a blue trail that marked the best route to get the runaway rat.

“This must be a hidden level!” exclaimed RoK1T4\_F4N\_14, obviously trying to keep her mix of excitement and anger hidden, though it leaked out slightly in her voice.

The avatar wasted no time walking out of the shop and dashing around the corner. Still running, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 clicked the corner of the screen with her cursor and the ‘RAT TRACKER’ appeared, with Bob moving exceptionally fast for something so small, turning around blocks at random intervals.

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 caught sight of Bob, but just as she approached, he veered off in another direction and disappeared from view around a corner store.

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 tried again and again, with the same results. It was all she could do not to cry out as she flew down the pavement.

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 finally stopped, turning on the RAT TRACKER. “Are his movements so random?”

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 moved her cursor around on the screen, and a dull muttering sound could be heard.

“He keeps turning in a pattern. Right, right, right, right, straight for three streets, and then left. Then the pattern repeats. So if I go up a street, I can catch up to

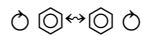
him. He'll come right to me!" RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 pressed escape and continued bounding down the empty street.

After a while, a signal flashed in the upper corner of her screen, warning her that the power-up would fade soon. Luckily, Bob just came into view.

Scrambling in his direction in a crunch for time, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 quickly met him and scooped up a confused Bob with her momentum as they passed houses, buildings, and apartment buildings. She finally began to slow down, her sugar rush done.

The screen zoomed to Bob, who looked around, shocked that he had been caught. A small golden key appeared, and Bob, identifying his defeat, crawled into the rat cage.

'MINI LEVEL COMPLETED' flashed across the screen in red block letters.



"Hi, GAMER135 here, and I'm doing episode 15 of the Keys challenge! Today, I'll be showing you some hacks for buying food!"

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14's avatar was looking around the simulated street on her screen. She ran abruptly and soon found a steady rhythm to her footsteps as she headed in the direction of a stadium. Soon, she had run past that, and found herself outside of a Burger King.

"Burger King has the best burgers in the game. They're cheap, but better than Dairy Queen's and Super Deluxe's in terms of mild power-ups. The only drawback is that, though burgers are the best boost in energy, they also give you a "food coma" if you eat more than 5 in one sitting.

"I'm going to show you how to avoid this," RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 said.

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 entered the Burger King. There was a smiling employee at the counter. As RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 clicked on her, the kiosk appeared. She clicked on the icon labeled 'BURGER' 5 times.

After receiving the food that had white puffs of steam coming off of it, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 slid into a booth and ate them all.

"But here's a way to trick the system if you need a huge energy boost," explained RoK1T4\_F4N\_14, getting up, the Whopper wrappers vanishing.

She exited the building, turned around, and went right back in. Then she ordered another burger.

Sliding into the same booth, she ate the burger without going into a food coma.

"See? This way's much better! However, Burger King isn't the best place for everything.



“You may be tempted to buy a soda or Milkshake, but don’t. Super Deluxe is the best place for that. They have sodas, but they also have even better, delicious drinks, like Strawberry, Marionberry, Passion fruit, and Seasonal fizzy waters, coffee, iced coffee, orange juice, and SuperTasties that come in Chocolate, Orange Cream, Central City Coffee, Vanilla, Strawberry, or Seasonal. Just like in real life.”

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 walked across the street and into the Super Deluxe, where they ordered a Chocolate SuperTasty.

“There’s a back room,” RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 explained, not waiting for the SuperTasty to be finished, “but it’s not that exciting or important. It’s just the bathrooms.”

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 walked into the back room. There was a door each leading to a janitor’s closet, a storage closet, an employee restroom, a women’s restroom, a men’s room, a family bathroom, a gender neutral bathroom, and a wheelchair accessible bathroom, all clearly labeled.

There was also a ninth door, but the image on it was faded. It looked like a restroom, but it was impossible to tell who should enter and who shouldn’t. Someone had drawn a wrapped mint in sharpie on the wooden door.

“Oops--” While running by, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 accidentally opened the door to the indistinguishable room.

Through the open door, a dirt wall was visible past some fallen tiles. And weirdest of all, instead of toilets, or even a floor, the ground transitioned into a wide spiral staircase leading downward, consisting of concrete steps.

“Huh. That’s weird,” said RoK1T4\_F4N\_14, investigating by walking through the doorway. The movement pushed her down two of the steps.

Soon, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 was making her way down the entire staircase. She ended up in a dark room. With the unknown in front of her -- RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 herself, who considered herself an expert after weeks of looking up what bits and pieces of the game meant -- she was on the edge of her seat with intrigue, but puzzling at the secrets of Super Deluxe in the gaps of suspense. She did her best to act professional as her avatar’s footsteps gave soft thuds upon contact with the ground; stone that crumbled into earth at places.

The walls were patchy. Cement and plaster covered them, and brown wallpaper covered a different material that was probably wood. The wallpaper looked darker from being damp in places, and there were no windows, smoke detectors, or heaters. Being a basement, there were many pipes coming out of the ceiling from the bathroom. The space appeared to be underneath all of the restrooms, but there was only one visible staircase.

The one light, a bare lightbulb held by a thin cord, shone above a dusty wooden desk. On the desk was a plaque that read ‘LaMenta’. There was a large wicker

wastebasket in the corner, and almost empty barrels behind the counter. Above the counter, hanging on the wall from barely visible wires, was a wooden sign that read ‘LE CAFÉ DE LA SALLE DE BAIN’ in dark brown paint.

A woman popped up from behind the counter. She must have been LaMenta. She was short, with a round face and pale skin. Her lips and cheeks were a vibrant shade of red. She wore a translucent, holographic skirt that was long and crinkly, and it matched her single long sleeve.

“How can I help you?” LaMenta asked.

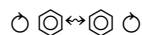
After clicking on her, the kiosk appeared for RoK1T4\_F4N\_14. There was only one item, labeled ‘MINT’.

Curiously, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 clicked on it. LaMenta produced a wrapped red-and-white-swirled peppermint. When she gave it to her, however, a golden key jumped out of her hands and landed on the mildew-stained floor.

“Cool! So, apparently, if you go into the unmarked room in the back of Super Deluxe and buy an item, you’ll get a hidden key!” said RoK1T4\_F4N\_14, walking up the steps to the main level. RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 grabbed her creamy iced SuperTasty, which was on the counter.

After leaving the Dairy Queen, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 felt around in her pocket, trying to wrap her fingers around it. But It was gone.

“Interesting,” said RoK1T4\_F4N\_14, “I guess I must have left it on the floor of the bathroom...” She suddenly gasped. “Which is probably where LaMenta found it! It’s a never-ending cycle!”



“Hey, it’s GAMER135 again, and this is episode 23 of the Keys challenge! We’re on level 21!”

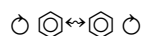
Around them, there was a nice house with closed curtains and a flower box full of red petunias outside the window.

“This is an easy level, so this is gonna be pretty short,” promised RoK1T4\_F4N\_14, walking around the room. “As you can see, the door is easy to find, but the key is elsewhere. Usually when it’s elsewhere, it’s close by and easy to see but not always easy to reach.

“This episode is to tell you— or refresh you— on the fact that you can check behind curtains. You click on them, and—” she clicked on a curtain, and it made a rustling sound as it displayed the disrupted fabric, “the key might be there!”

RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 grabbed the key and freed herself.

“It’s that simple!”



“This is GAMER135, and it’s episode 27 of the Keys challenge! Today, I’m gonna tell you a little bit about the CPUs, because I forgot to cover that a little more.

“You already know about possible viewing areas if you saw video 1, so I won’t be talking about that much today. First, I’m going to show you Shanty Fou-Fou’s Shoppe.”

Shanty Fou-Fou’s Shoppe was a cluttered, cozy little house-like wooden building with no counter. Instead, a young lady with a loosely woven, woolen purple beanie and short blond hair stood by the door, holding a scanner and smiling as the tinkling bell marked RoK1T4\_F4N\_14’s arrival. Each loosely woven thread on her hat faded to a cottony shade of white at different places.

Hats, mostly beanies, were being modeled by wooden mannequin heads. Most were shades of purple, but there was a blue-green one, and even one with panda-bear ears and eyes on them. The curtains were very long, draping all the way to the floor and hanging from hooks in the low ceiling. Each was a different color, including turquoise, navy blue and maroon. Upon closer inspection, oddly enough, they were not curtains at all, but aerial silks, quite out of place in such a small building. Wooden shelves had colorful pen holders and framed awards on them, including ‘OBOB 2ND PLACE 2022’ and ‘MATH STUDENT HONORS’. A staircase was roped off, leading upstairs to her house. The windows had a soft brown tint at the edges, and the wooden floor had a large rectangular macrame carpet on it.

“This is Shanty Fou-Fou. Don’t be fooled by the hats; this isn’t a hat shop. Shanti Fou-Fou is a hat-loving super-spy. She can teach you special moves, like climbing ladders and giving leg-ups.”

Clicking on Shanty Fou-Fou, she bought the move ‘BIG JUMP’. After the purchase was complete, she clicked the ^ twice, jumping almost twice as high.

“Next,” said RoK1T4\_F4N\_14, “I’ll show you how to unlock accessories, face paint, and wigs.” RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 walked out of the shop.

After walking for a while, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 found herself outside of a house made of dark, bare wood. It had a giant sign that hung over the doorway. The shape of the sign looked like the silhouette of shifting waves, frozen into a photograph, and it was painted a pale mint color. Plum purple letters in a loopy, thickly painted font covered about half of the sign, reading

‘Frederick’s Fantastic Finery’. Wooden shingles sheltered a strip of the sidewalk from rain.

Stepping inside of the shop, there was a strange man -- Frederick -- with glasses that had dark, thin, oval-shaped frames. He had on a plum tie and top hat to match the sign outside. He carried a walking stick that seemed to be just for show; it had a large glass amber-colored egg fused to the top, and the stick itself was made of

smooth black walnut wood, with a steel end that looked like it had been dipped in silver. He had on a bright turquoise pinstripe suit, and black loafers.

ROK1T4\_F4N\_14 walked up to him, and clicked on him.

“I have a quest for you!” he said.

“You can pick whatever quest you want, but you always have to find odd objects in unlikely places. Your prizes vary, so choose the quest that has the reward you want the most.”

ROK1T4\_F4N\_14 selected an ‘OPAL RING’. The opal was an oval-shaped white Fire Opal, flecked with little glittering specks of color and light deep within. It was attached to a very thick silver back.

“I’m missing my fake mustache! Help me find it, and I’ll give you this ring as your reward!” said Frederick.

ROK1T4\_F4N\_14 walked out of the building.

“I didn’t realize this at first, but objects can only appear in two kinds of places; possibly viewing areas and restaurants.”

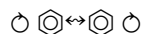
ROK1T4\_F4N\_14 ran in and out of restaurants, until she came to an area labeled ‘POSSIBLE BALD MIKE VIEWING AREA’. Looking in the field, she found a dark brown, fake handlebar mustache.

She ran through the field, picking it up.

“After you get it, you just talk to Frederick.”

ROK1T4\_F4N\_14 circled back to Frederick’s Fantastic Finery.

“Thank you!” said Frederick when she clicked on him, “Here’s your reward!” He gave her the ring, which she tried on.



“GAMER135, episode 36 of the Keys challenge! We aren’t going to do a level today; instead I’ll be treating us to an Allie Will-Dawg concert in a short video!” said ROK1T4\_F4N\_14.

She walked over to a giant steel stadium. Once there, she walked up to a ticket booth and bought a long red ticket reading ‘ADMIT ONE’ from an unseen CPU.

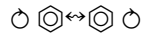
Inside the stadium, millions of people were standing, faces hidden from view in the blue-tinted darkness. They were all cheering and jumping around, facing a white stage with fog curling and flowing off of it like the foam on a fizzy drink that overflows the cup. The stage had a performer on it, and a beat blasted over speakers. Multicolored lights swooped over the crowd like glowing birds of prey.

Allie Will-Dawg was a balding man around 40 in a crisp button-up gray shirt with straight white lines crossing into perfect squares. He also had on baggy pants,

and a thick, solid gold chain around his neck with a gold rhinestone-covered charm at the end, forming the letters A, W, and D. Like tiny diamonds, the rhinestones were glinting silver as the bright lights hit each miniature face. He was holding a mic that matched his necklace.

Then, the rapper and model started rapping. The cheers quadrupled in volume, a steady roar that covered everything, hushing all other noises to a dull grumble that wasn't recognisable even if you were an inch from the person speaking. The excitement was contagious -- the noise crawled into your head, but not unpleasantly; it carried you along with its flow, making you want to push your way to the front.

As the concert continued, Allie Will-Dawg performed some of his hits accompanied with signature choreography, like So Classy and even a parody of a Hamilton song.



“Hey, everyone! GAMER135! This is part 49 of the Keys challenge! We're on level 44, so here's a walk-through!” announced RoK1T4\_F4N\_14. W4LNUT\_TH3\_... had returned, along

with new players; 5DR4WKC4B\_4.4, 5H4NT1\_5H4NT1, BoB\_TH3\_R4T, PLUSH13\_Lo\_3R, 1M\_LUCKY53, 34T\_TH3\_M1NT76, SoClassy12, and 4.423.

The group entered a tower with blue shingles on the roof, stumbling awkwardly through the door with PLUSH13\_Lo^3R at the lead.

Pretty soon, it was clear why this level was near the end. The key was nowhere in sight, but nor was the ceiling. The only footholds were the ground that they were standing on.

A text message from outside of the game popped up on RoK1T4\_F4N\_14's screen. It was from 5H4NT1\_5H4NT1, in a group chat labeled 'KEYS WINNERS'. It read, 'LET'S CREATE A HUMAN CHAIN.'

One by one, they formed a human chain by standing on each other's shoulders, with W4LNUT\_TH3\_... at the bottom.

After a bit of climbing, RoK1T4\_F4N\_14 got to the top. Right in front of her was a small platform with a door and a key on it, which barely came down to her midsection.

Jumping as high as she could, beating up the ^ key, she made it onto the platform and, once there, pulled the human chain up after her. The final level was complete!

5DR4WKC4B\_4.4 got the honors of turning the key in the lock with a

satisfying click for one of the final times. The door opened smoothly and hung ajar, wide open and waiting for them to walk through.

Back in the light of the outdoors, the group watched as a beam of light cut through the sky, slashing the shape of a doorway 792,000 times its normal size.

Millions of golden keys, each bent, shiny handle glinting in the fake sunlight, poured out of their pockets and formed a sphere midair, as if an air particle had suddenly become a magnet with the flip of a switch. The shape elongated and twisted, forming a key shape. The metal morphed and rehardened in the shape of a regular key, except about 31 miles and 15,850 inches long.

The giant key fit perfectly into the massive keyhole, and the oversized knob turned. The door opened.

A white light flooded out of the door as the group entered.

What was beyond the door was a mini game similar to an .io game. The avatars ran around on the gridded floor. A chat now appeared in the background.

“Well,” said GAMER135, “this concludes the Keys challenge. Thanks for watching, and special thanks to these guys, who helped me out on this level and other levels before that. Remember to smash that like button, and subscribe. Soon, I’ll be doing a video game tutorial on DizQuiz! Until then, signing off!”

## **I Wish**

*Sofi Bishop*

I hate my hair  
It's too straight  
Every morning I see the other girls with their hair  
curly and full of life and I hate how mine is so flat and lifeless

I hate my body  
My legs are like sticks, my arms as well  
"You should really eat more," my grandma says  
She doesn't understand  
I'm so tired of being tall  
Looking like a giant to the rest of the world  
Having to bend down to be seen in group photos  
I wish I was different

I wish

I wish

I wish

I hate my hair  
It's too curly  
Every morning I cover it in product just to tame it  
I hate my body  
My thighs are too big, I never look good in a bikini  
"You should really go on a diet," my grandma says  
She doesn't understand  
I'm so tired of being short  
I can never reach high shelves  
You can hardly see me in group photos  
I wish I was different

I wish

I wish

I wish

## **Big Whoop**

*Anonymous*

My parents are divorced.  
Big whoop, I know  
Half kids' parents are  
My situation is nothing special

My parents didn't yell  
They don't scream  
It was generally amicable  
but  
It still hurt

My parents sat us down at their counselor's office  
And told us the news  
I was in second grade

Even though they told us that it was ok to be  
Hurt  
Sad  
Angry  
I didn't want to tell them I was and make them  
Hurt  
Sad  
Angry

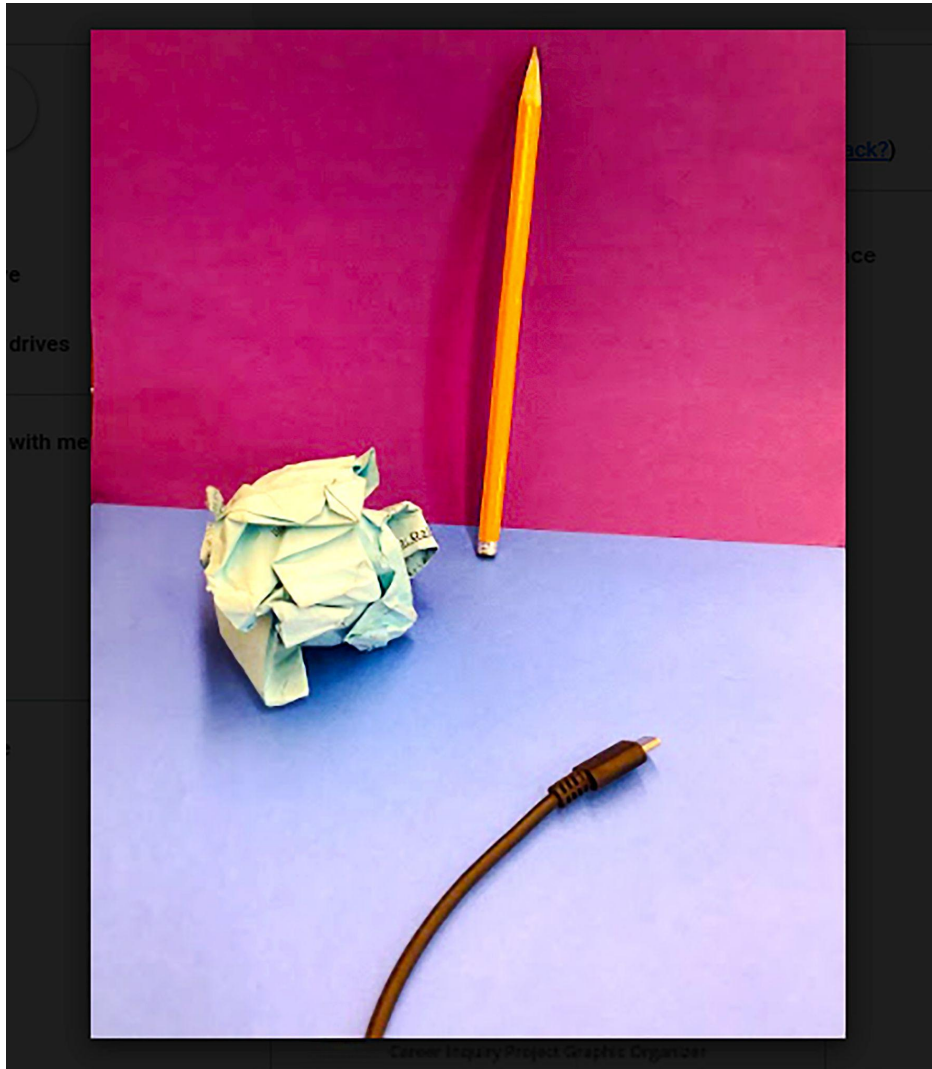
My parents are just the best people in the world  
I do love them very much  
But  
I just wish it never happened.  
I wish we could be a loving  
Family  
Together  
Though I know this is for the best

It all feels quite normal now  
But I wish it didn't.



**The Pencil**  
*Charlie Bovitz*

I get picked up and put down  
In a bag and on the floor  
Lost to someone  
Found by other  
Given to write  
Given to draw  
My use is the best for all  
I sharpen the mind



Ramio Bean Chanang

## **The Sun**

*Charlie Bovitz*

My rays bring joy  
I am water  
The earth is my glass  
I fill it up every morning  
I hydrate you with my life  
The plants you love love me  
Everyone loves me  
But I'll be gone  
But I'll come back

## **Piper Boyd Can Bake**

*Piper Boyd*

The sweet smells hit my nose  
Tasting the creamy batter with my whisk  
Whisking whip cream into fluffy clouds  
People crowding around to try what I've made  
Loving every bite of my creations  
I can bake



Otto Puente

## **Online School Dookie**

*Scout Brigham*

At online school,  
I dropped the kids off at the pool,  
But left them in the parking lot  
But suddenly I remembered that I forgot,  
I left my camera on, and my class saw my stool.

They saw it all, and heard it too  
They heard me plop my epic poo  
How I didn't know, I was such a fool  
I shouldn't have pooped during online school.

# TOM THE TEENAGER

BY SCOUT BRIGHAM

This is Tommy



Tommy is in 6th grade



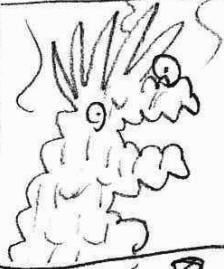
but one day Tommy changed



he got big and hairy



and sticky... lumpy...

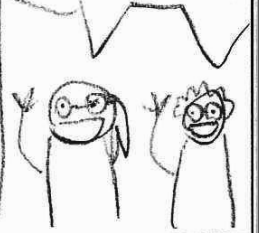


AND HE HATED IT



and when he got home from school, his parents said hi to him!

HI Tommy



I AM TOM!



BRRAA



he's a WFO!!!



he... he's A TEENAGER!



# THE END

Scout Brigham

# Real Boy

*Harley Brousseau*

Constricting, squeezing, binding  
Slithering around your chest like a snake  
Breathing is hard but it's worth it, right?  
Boys have flat chests and that what you are  
At least I think so  
Everyday you have to prove it to another person  
"Real" boys never have to do that  
in society's eyes you'll never be one



Aiyana Suh

## **Freckles**

*Harley Brousseau*

I wish I could change everything about myself  
My hair, my eyes, my body–

I like my freckles.

They litter my face, my arms, my legs like soft fluttered kisses from the sun

Hundreds of them decorate my skin like a piece of art, unique to me

You'll never meet someone with the same freckles

These freckles are mine,

every single one of them

right down to the freckle on my lip

I always think is chocolate

## **The Last Green Leaf**

*Anika Campbell*

It's a foggy day in the park.

I'm surrounded by trees with fiery colored leaves that silently fall to the ground like little ballerinas dancing all around me.

I set down my umbrella gently, and jump up to catch a leaf.

I succeed.

I pick up my umbrella again, and open my hand to see what leaf I caught.

I am shocked at what I see.

When I open my hand I see a green leaf.

I expected to catch one of the red or orange gracefully falling all around me.

I gaze up at the trees around me again, wondering where it fell from.

I can't find any sign of where it came from.

I don't see any other green leaves.

I look back down at the vibrant green leaf I was holding.

I think it is a sign of luck.

The last green leaf.



## **Him**

*Arthur Cassle*

I can't describe how much I love him... I like to think he is my first love. I want him to be my first beloved. I know he loves me. I desire love. I need it. I need him in my life. I'm tired of others saying otherwise. I appreciate him; I never want that to change ever. I might hate some of the things he does, that doesn't alter my feelings for him.

How do people break up with their lovers? Why don't they value them forever? Do they love them truly? How can they leave? Would they miss them? Why wouldn't they request to stay together or be friends, and how come they can talk so poorly about them if they love them?

Passion is something we all have. When you have that unique individual, though, they are everything. They are very different from others. It's not like the other times you said you loved somebody. It is love, you don't have to say it because you both know already. With no words, it's the type of love you can sit for hours in silence. It will not be uncomfortable. It is so calm and relaxing. It's the sort of love where you want to see them even if it's for 2 minutes because they are worth everything. You don't care in those moments about looks or doing something embarrassing. You take a risk for them. You have focused on them only on them. Like a dream...

I can't imagine leaving him. I don't think I can don't have it in me. I wouldn't want to... If he left, I would agree to make him happy. I wouldn't want him to go, but for his sake, if it makes him happy.

I figured out what love is for me. It took 13 years... Is that short or too long? I am not sure.

## **Wrong**

*Jackson Clemmer*

There is a lot wrong with this school  
At breakfast, they take more than what's allowed  
They eat, but they don't clean  
The wrappers are left on the table  
There is a lot wrong with this school

In the bathroom in between classes  
On their phones  
They see your phone twice, it's gone  
There are a lot of loopholes  
There is a lot wrong with this school

Outside they eat lunch  
They eat and they leave  
The trash stays on the ground  
I pick it up and confront them  
They say they don't care  
There is a lot wrong with this school



Lucy Weaver

## **Goin' Back**

*Abby Davidson*

My friends and I peered through the windows of our old elementary school  
It looked different, all the walls were painted a sickly white  
The principal we once had was now gone, her place taken by nobody special  
All the good teachers replaced  
One thing seemed to have remained the same, the playground  
But we're older now, the slide was short, swings too small



**Tula Warner**

## **Duo**

*Anonymous*

[1] Why are you so perfect compared to me  
We used to be a dynamic duo  
We would talk for hours  
We would play and laugh  
It was you and i until the end  
But it wasn't really to the end was it

[7] We grew up and grew apart  
Maybe it's because i'm too weird  
Maybe i'm too loud or 'immature'  
Whatever it is, you don't need me anymore.  
You've found replacements,  
But i still need you  
i think i always will.

## **Friend-Zoned**

*Juniper DeMonte*

I am alone  
Even with you right there  
Side to side, arm to arm, thigh to thigh  
You say we're fine  
But now I watch my tone  
Now I walk on glass  
Closer than ever, but distant as ever

I watch you walk with him  
Knowing he's the only one in your eyes  
I watch him braid your hair  
Knowing he's the only one fair  
I watch you throw your head back  
Knowing he's the one who made you laugh  
Even with you right there  
I am alone

## **Cruel Experiment**

*Naomi Even*

The Beetles of Inopsia were normal beetles, dug from the gardens of Bellevue Hill Park. The Bees of Inopsia were normal bees, harvested from Dr. Trout's backyard. Those poor, unfortunate bees swarmed onto his apricot tree, thus starting the terrible, cruel experiment, the brainchild of Dr. Sardonymous Trout. Inuria University never understood his genius, he had convinced himself. His students didn't either.

"Ok, class, this is an experiment I've been waiting to do since I was first accepted into this godforsaken university. They just don't understand me or anything I do, any of my goals, nothing!" Dr. Trout boomed to his bored students. They sighed, and all somehow found something very interesting in their lap. They couldn't stand to listen to another lecture from Dr. Trout, trailing on and on like a madman walking through the woods with no map.

\*\*\*

"Ah yes, the experiment!" he concluded. "I have secured one fascinating chemical, hydromercublasphemine, for us to use this year. I will explain in one minute." Dr. Trout walked over to his minifridge—the only refrigerator the university would supply—and pulled out a tall, skinny beaker filled with a mercury-silver, spiraling liquid.

Finally, the students started to look up at him and put away their phones. They gasped in shock as he pulled out a box of buzzing bees and an old, moldy shoebox teeming with black beetles.

"Now, let's get going. We don't have all day," he grumbled, motioning to the classroom door as he led everybody out. "It's time to go!" he barked again.

Just down the fluorescent-lit hallway was an old, mildewy, abandoned room. When Dr. Trout asked for use of the room, the lady at the front desk, Maurice, looked up from her crossword slowly, gave a big, heaving sigh, and said, unenthused, "Ok." She did not care one bit, nor did anyone else.

Dr. Trout threw open the sagging door, and much to the students' surprise, he wasn't about to kill them, and this wasn't his evil lair. In fact, the only thing in the room was a child's playtable, all of the legs a different length, perhaps in a failed attempt to make them level, accompanied by a huge, teetering terrarium. The students started glancing at each other uneasily. Maybe he wasn't going to kill them, but something about this just seemed... unhinged. Random bees? Beetles covered in dirt? Some dangerous, unheard of, and ungoogleable chemical? Something was definitely wrong here.

"So, I suppose that you're wondering what all this is. Ungrateful twerps, need an explanation for everything..." Dr. Trout muttered, scratching at his thick gray

mustache, unsatisfied. “Well. I began devising this experiment in college when my old friend discovered hydromercublasphemine. He was a chemistry major and one day was messing around with a few things after class, and accidentally created it. He wasn’t quite sure what it would do, but when he accidentally spilled it on a mosquito flying through the air, it began behaving strangely and following him around, making odd, human-like grunts. That is the very reason we are all here today. I have two creatures that simply cannot coexist with each other: beetles and bees. In nature, they attack each other mercilessly, therefore in one terrarium, with such a small territory, they wouldn’t last a week together!”

Dr. Trout’s eyes started to light up, and for the very first time, they saw him display an emotion other than anger or utter boredom: giddiness.

“Now, we will feed each of the creatures some of this chemical to see how they react, and if it’s possible for them to coexist in my terrarium. And here's the best part: after months of them living together, we’ll take the bees away! Isn’t it genius? I’ll be featured in every chemistry magazine, they’ll finally understand my work! They’ll appreciate me!” he yelled, laughing maniacally, startling the students. “Now let’s get to work.”

\*\*\*

“Day 47, 6:53 am. This is PhD candidate Jackie Fontaine, reporting for Dr. Trout. I have discovered something amazing. This morning, I saw after days of them fighting or simply refusing to interact, that the beetles are walking towards the bees, vibrating their wings, and the bees RESPOND. They’re interacting peacefully! I have to go tell Dr. Trout!”

Click.

\*\*\*

“My god, if what you say is true, that means the experiment is nearly complete! But are you sure that they aren’t being aggressive?”

“I’m not entirely sure, Doctor, but either way you need to see this. I’m telling you, they’re communicating through the buzzes!”

\*\*\*

Back in the room, the bees & beetles were communicating, for sure. The rocky terrarium filled with burnt orange stone and hard, packed dirt was abuzz with life. In a matter of minutes, the bugs had lined up to meet the bees, chittering and flicking away with their wings. As soon as Dr. Trout walked in, his eyes looked like they wanted to pop out and walk away from him.

“Oh my god. Jackie. It worked. It all worked!” He said in a hushed tone, urgently. In a matter of seconds, he went from a smile the size of a watermelon, to holding his head in his hands, tears falling onto the dusty muddy floor. It was the first water they had seen in decades. “I...I thought it was failing. I thought they were going to fire me.

Now, I have something tangible! I can show them, show them all that I really am a genius. Jackie... thank you," he said earnestly, emotions switching like a kid flipping through an old jukebox.

Over the next few days, incredible events started to happen, and quickly. The next day, PhD candidate Boris Clump found the beetles helping the bees build their hive, as well as the bees helping the beetles burrow in the ground and rocks. After that, they found the beetle grubs being fed the bee's honey, and more and more kept happening until they seemed almost the same species.

\*\*\*

"Alright class, as you may have noticed, the beetles and bees have done more than we ever could have thought. Now, we're about to perform the third and final step: remove the bees. Jackie, you started this all, I'm giving this job to you."

"Thank you Dr. Trout! I will do my best."

"Well, your best isn't good enough. Now get to work. Class dismissed."

A shiver ran down Jackie's spine. Dr. Trout meant business, but she didn't even know what money was. How was she supposed to remove the bees? She didn't even have the gear, much less the knowledge!

"Uh, D-Doctor, Where's the gear? And where's the hive to move them to?"

"Well, if I knew that, I would've told you that wouldn't I?"

"Right. Sorry."

\*\*\*

The next day, Jackie had her work cut out for her. Armed with just a protective suit, a branch & lighter for smoke, and a home depot bucket, she was almost ready to take on the bees.

"Alright, Jackie, you can do this. If you can tolerate Dr. Trout for a semester, you can deal with a couple of bees," Jackie muttered to herself.

As she lit the dry, mossy branch on fire to start what would be a very painful process, Dr. Trout bursted into the room.

"JACKIEFONTAINEWHATINTARNATIONAREYOU DOINGTOTHOSEBEEES?"

"Dr. Trout, I'm r-removing them like you said!"

"NO! YOU'RE GOING TO KILL THEM! THAT'S SMOKE! YOU CAN'T BREATHE SMOKE!"

"No, Doctor, smoke calms bees down!!! I did the research like you asked!"

"Like hell you did!" he screamed, projecting little bits of spit through the air hitting Jackie as he took a long, intentional, stomping step towards her.

She almost fell backwards trying to step away from him.

"I swear! I would never hurt the bees! I loved them just as much as you!"

He took another. "I. DON'T. BELIEVE. YOU. You were jealous, weren't you?"

He took another. So did she.



“Wanted to take credit? The fame and fortune?”

He took another.

Jackie took a shaking step backward as he flew into a spitting rage. And another. And another, and another, until she could see the whiskers on his unshaven neck. As he screamed profanely at her, the last thing she was paying attention to was her surroundings.

“ANSWER ME! Were you or were you not murdering my precious experiment? The bees? The beetles? Does it ring a bell in that empty little head of yours?”

As he took his last stalking step forward, she screamed and tripped over the bucket laid right in front of the terrarium.

CRASH!

It felt like a fever dream. The teetering table folded onto the floor like a house of cards, and the terrarium smashed into a million tiny stars littering the night sky. Dr. Trout fell to the floor, sobbing in rage. The beetles and bees, like a school of tiny fish, swarmed out of the room together, as one, in a twisting, buzzing, scuttling path, out the door, never coming back, never looking back. Jackie followed suit. Dr. Trout sobbed for weeks. He refused to leave, almost stuck to the floor like a fly fallen prey to a spider. When his students came, he told them to get out. Nobody got credit for that class. The only reason that he ever left that room was because he was eventually reported and dragged out by security. Nowadays, the only thing Jackie and Dr. Trout have in common is that they will never talk about Dr. Trout’s cruel experiment.

## Epilogue

The beetles’ and bees’ lives were forever changed. As the bees searched and searched for a new home, and the beetles were to return to their old burrows, they each felt a pang of utter sadness. Was returning to their old hives worth it? Was returning to their former lives better if they didn’t have their beetle friends, their bee family? They decided not. Dr. Trout’s apricot tree was no longer an option, so they decided to make their home together in the trees hanging above the gardens of Bellevue Park. The bees were no longer normal bees, and the beetles were no longer normal bees, but at least they were abnormal together.

## **A Collection of “Inspirational” Quotes**

*Zahra Faruqui*

Sometimes we can all be a little stuck in life. And whether it's because of others, or yourself, we could all use a little inspiration. Now, there are MANY ways to get said inspiration. And one of those ways is right here! Below this masterfully written introduction, there are some truly inspirational, totally conventional, legit life advice for all of you amazing people! All of the following quotes have been said by yours truly! So sit back, relax, and get ready for some totally not out of context quotes to get you through life!

“Don't cry about the past, cry about the future.”

“Screw wheels vs. doors. Are there more Tik Tok users, or people with brains in the world.”

“If you think you're a failure, you probably are.”

“Anyone with AutoTune and a Guitar can be a Musician.”

“Anything is free if you can run fast enough.”

“The Middle Ages proved that idiots can play Chess.”

“Hot pockets are just Italian burritos.”

“You don't need to negotiate when you have fists.”

“Dental hygiene is a government conspiracy.”

**At Moonrise**  
*Shanti Fauser*

At moonrise  
you'll find—

an owl,  
gliding silently  
above

a finch,  
softly asleep  
in its nest

a girl  
in their bed,  
thinking of

the Orca  
who breaches  
one  
last  
time,

before settling  
down  
for rest

## **The Forest**

*Maya Fox*

She has hiked many trails  
And tamed many forests  
These woods are dense and brambled  
But still she seeks to claim them

People disappear there  
The locals whisper  
But she doesn't listen  
She isn't scared easily

The trail is off the road  
Well-groomed and well-trodden  
Yet not on the map  
No brochure or trailhead sign

But she goes in anyway  
The trees close in on her and she feels  
Instead of peaceful  
Intimidated

Something about their bare branches  
Or maybe the way they claw their way out of the ground  
Like skeletal hands  
Reaching for the cold blue sky

Maybe it's because there's too much space between the trunks  
Space where there should be foliage  
And shouldn't there be birdsong  
Instead of this eerie lack of noise?

And shouldn't there be screaming  
As the branches reach for her  
Instead of her statue-still figure  
And dead-eyed stare?

And wasn't there a trail here?  
Off the road and into the woods?  
And wasn't there a girl  
Who owned that car?

People disappear there  
The locals whisper  
She didn't listen  
And so the forest claims another



Oliver Darnell

## **Untitled**

*Luca Frixione*

Mothers will always care,  
Through the longest days of the year,  
They take us on trips to see our grandparents,  
Even on their own trips they call,  
Ask us how we are,  
Mothers still care

When we need it,  
You ignore the cost and take us to get help,  
As they draw my blood,  
You hold my hand and say,  
Don't worry, it's all going to be okay,

They take us to the back of the busy ER,  
You hold me tight as the doctor declares the bad news,  
As we drive to the next hospital,  
You comfort me on the way there,

As I prepare for the surgery,  
You remind me this will be over,  
We will be home by tomorrow,  
And that you love me,

After the operation,  
I only remember you,  
Waiting patiently for me,  
You were caring

## **The Third Wheel**

*Anonymous*

I am the third wheel.  
I am the lonely,  
The never invited,  
The walk in the road,  
The talked over,  
Sit behind you in class,  
Unwanted friend.

I am the second choice,  
The backup plan.  
I'm the mediocre,  
Isolated friend  
Who has nobody to talk to.  
I am the third wheel.

## **Rain**

*Lilac Hampton*

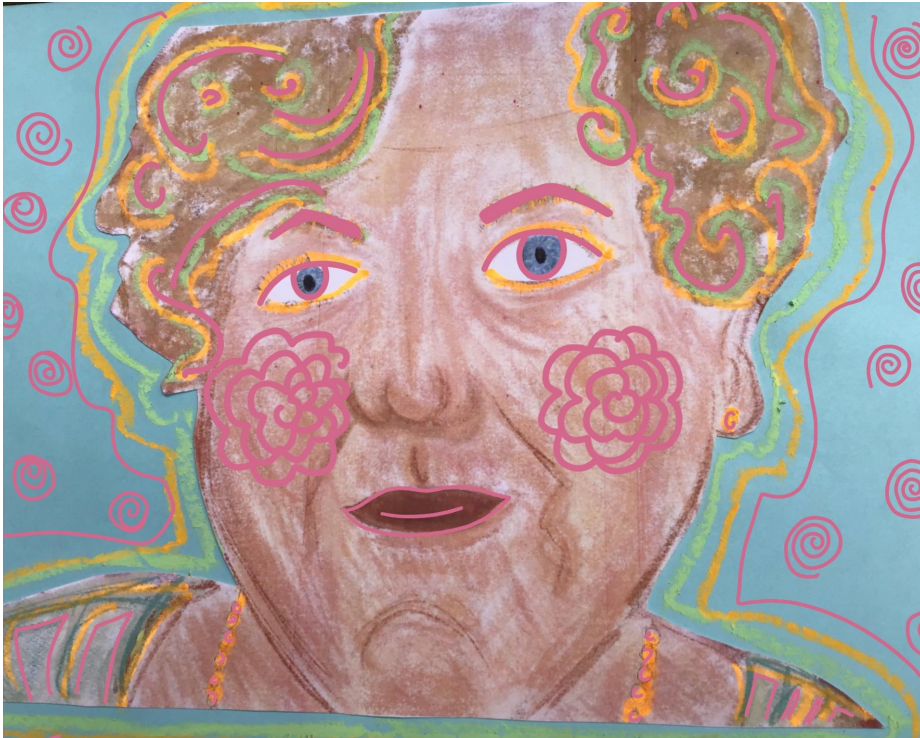
When rain hit your window the loud noise was alarming.  
Yet the soft sound of pitter patter on the pavement outside was relaxing.  
When you got outside in the rain, the yellow rain jacket you wore  
Was almost immediately soaked and so you took your hood off,  
Letting the rain drops hit your head and cover your hair.  
You frolicked in your chunky rain boots, likely kicking a little  
Water into them each time you lifted your feet.  
The crunch of the gravel underneath your boots when your feet hit the ground,  
you slightly lost your balance, sending one of your feet forward and catching you  
before an unfortunate fall. The small celebration of your reflexes let you to mutter  
“Yes!” You put your hood back up and ran back on the crunchy gravel road  
in the delicate rain relieving into sunshine.



## Flowers

*Lilac Hampton*

When I walked by your house you waved, I waved back,  
the house looked different though,  
the colors have changed with the seasons.  
When you were here the flowers were in bud,  
The house looked brighter when you were inside.  
The fun days I spent here, the memories aside,  
I wish you were still here so the memories would feel more alive.  
Now when I bike down your lane and see the ghost of you outside,  
the flowers bloomed as you smiled  
and I biked by.



Ellie Lepore

## **Lost**

*Parker Heintz*

I never felt connected.

I am shunned constantly because of my weight.

They think I don't hear the things they say.

They think I believe it's all in good fun.

They exploit my lack of friends.

I have to give and give and give.

They only ever take.

I hide my feelings with jokes.

I don't think it's fooling anybody.

## **Untitled**

*Ruby Holmes-Shields*

Brisk wind flows through me like a ghost

Sunlit clouds shimmer down on the crunchy scarlet leaves

I sit down on the rustic wooden bench by the shining shimmering lake

And I think to myself

It feels like autumn

## **The Yearly Rounds**

*Sophia Hooford*

The girl emerges from the shadows, a rusty pipe in her hand. Her skin had been converted into an almost blue color from the drug, her hair is ashy brown, and there's a sharp scar straight down her arm. I'm pretty sure she can already smell the blood on me. "Great," I think. I'm about to be killed by the strongest of the ten.

We call it the yearly rounds, when they gather up 18 people of certain age groups. The ten are the ones that get drugged and programmed to kill me, and everyone else.

She's muscular and at least a few inches taller than me, looks about 19. I remember her from the car ride here, she had stood out by far. She was taller than most of the boys, and could definitely beat me in a fight, weapons or not. It doesn't really matter now though, considering I was almost dead already.

Every two years, Indacas, the medical research lab in New York, does tests on twenty people from the Carem. After the Induro virus hit America, Indicas began testing twenty people to make a medication. At nine years in, they had perfected it, with one dose I would be cured of all diseases, Induro, Corona, even the common cold. But with perfect health there are almost always side effects. If I were to get the drug I would go through life with perfect health, but I would have the desire to kill everyone I see. Luckily, they caught this side effect early before they distributed the drug.

Every year since then they have constructed tests with pre-approved people from each town. 10 towns, two from each. And set them in what used to be Demad, the biggest town in the city until the fumes from one of their factories started a worldwide pandemic and killed half our population. Now each year it's fenced off and used for the tests.

The girl approaches me. The broken Pipe in her hand, visibly dotted with blood. She turns around and around, her eyes big with slight insanity. Then she sees me.

It being far too late to run, I lunge at her. Grabbing a broken bottle as I get up, the red liquid pouring out the same color as the dried blood on her pipe. She runs to me, the veins of her muscular arms bulging.

I sense my opportunity as she trips on the rubble. I take my bottle and puncture her in the chest, a gash expanding each time I stab her. She groans while I pick the small shards of glass out of my hands, her eyes darting around and her hands shaking. She begins spitting out words I can't understand, about her sister, and the people working for Indicas.

She pants as I pick the shards out of my one bloody hand.

“Finish,” she says softly, her hands bloody and calm. She’s very visibly desperate, the wound on the left side of her chest gushing blood. And I lift the bottle above her throat, killing her instantly.

\* \* \*

I wash my hands off at the lake, the eerie sounds of the water making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I walk through the broken buildings and into the street, the rats scurrying away as I walk. I walk to the right side under the shadow of a mattress store. I walk with the dead broken pipe in my hand, In case someone were to jump out at me.

The streets are bare, only small pieces of trash and rocks cover the pavement. I walk through the next two blocks, only pausing as I see the imprint of a body lying on the ground. Then another after it, and 17 more. All of them lined up surprisingly straight. All except the one I killed 45 minutes ago. I walked past them, trying not to look them in the eye. I walk, 4, 7, 12. As I approach 16, I see the boy from my town. We did a school project together once. His name was Jasper. I look down at the others. They all look smaller now that they're dead. Less threatening. I walked by as Jasper grabbed my ankle by the hand.

He stares at me. "Please kill me, I've been laying here for days, I can't get up, but I can't die. please."

Startled, I stepped back. He eyes the pipe in my hand, murmuring please again. I pick up a sharp rock, and crouch down closer to where he is.

He has dark blond hair that falls to his ears, and dark blue eyes that seem too. As I reposition my arm, his dark, dirt covered hands reach up and grasp my throat. He's sat up now, his grip having tightened on my throat. My hands grasp this as an attempt to free myself, unsuccessfully. His fingernails dig into my skin and the feeling of bruises forming on my neck.

I feel my mind getting fuzzy, suddenly realize I'm losing consciousness, I'm dying. Nothing like what they had described in books, being choked. It's not like you losing the sensation of breathing. It's like gasping for air and nothing coming out, or like wanting to cough but not being able to get enough air. His face starts blurring, and I wonder if this will be the last breath I attempt to take. I wonder what it would be like being dead, I hope I'm not a ghost. Then I would have to roam these ruins forever and watch other innocent people die. Maybe they'll die the same way I will. Jasper tightens his grip and digs his nails deeper into my flesh. It's a smart plan really, playing dead. Pretending to need help but really just needing a fresh kill. I should have noticed his skin. I see now that it is the same shade as the girl's. She probably had a family that needed her too, they'll probably get a letter saying that

their daughter sadly died and have to go and watch the footage just like I did. Watching their family die. I had to do it too. Watch my older brother die from a girl with a switchblade. I watch the blood ooze out of his veins and paint the concrete red behind him. My eyes feel as though they would pop out of my head, and the last thing I see is a small smile on the boy as I black out.

## **Pac-Man**

*Rain Hoogen*

Inspired by Pat Mora's "Safety"

I used to play Pac-Man as a kid  
It was on one of those old, rusty game machines  
With the joystick attached that got jammed at random times  
I didn't understand how to play, I was maybe seven or eight  
But I do remember being scared of the ghosts, and desperately wanting to get as far  
away from them as possible

So every time I started the level, I would go to the same little corner  
In a c-shaped wall  
Nothing could get me there, I couldn't die or lose the game

But I couldn't win either  
I would be eternally stuck in that same corner,  
Staring at the screen, waiting for the game to get easier  
Waiting for the ghosts to go away  
But they never did

## **The Last Day**

*Case Howser-Daunt*

I leave the school tired and worn  
She is frantically looking through the crowd of young adults  
She sees me and her face crinkles with happiness  
I run and jump into her arms and she holds me tight  
Te quiero  
Te quiero  
Te quiero  
She whispered in my ear  
I relaxed my face but not my arms  
As we hugged I started feeling warm  
Was this embarrassment or love  
yo también te amo I whispered in her ear  
Then I pulled away and said that we should head to the car  
She frowned slightly but nodded  
What if I never left the safety of my mother's arms?



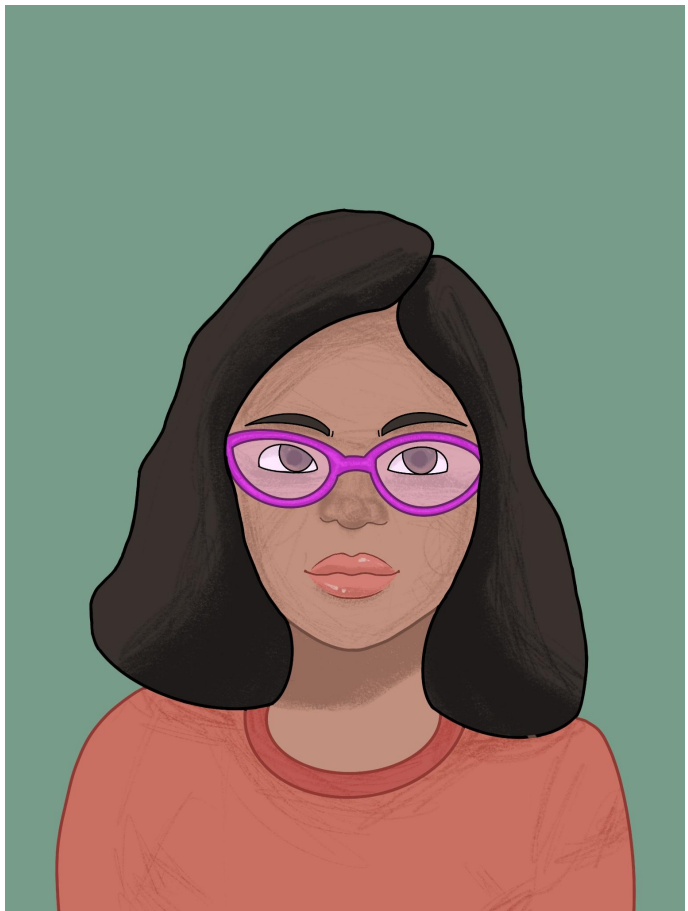
## **Growing Up**

*Bella Johnston*

I do not like growing up  
No, not one bit  
I don't like to eat my broccoli  
And being forced to babysit

I don't like doing my homework  
Or reading chapter books  
I don't like writing poems  
Or coming up with catchy hooks

I do not like growing up  
Not one bit at all  
But growing up is what I'll do  
I start 9th grade in fall



Asher Ladygo

## **A Dragon's Fire**

*Anona Kerrigan and Eli Yeager*

A dragon's flame is a show of pride  
A burst of light that's hidden inside  
Something never meant to hide  
Reach up and look to the sky

A little warmth in the cold  
A dragon's flame, an honor bestowed  
The dragon's fire is something to behold  
Light laced with red and gold

A dragon's flame hidden away  
Scared since the time of Pompeii  
But bright enough to turn night to day  
Don't allow your love to fray

I will share the love that's mine  
I will always try to be kind  
Our confidence like sunshine  
Our love greater than the tall pines

But still we light our flame  
I only wish for fame  
Not to play the humans' games  
I try to push away my shame

And to fight  
For what's right  
With all my might  
Our fire lights up the night

## **Stranded**

*Nila Kwa*

Me in the corner,

Alone and stranded.

Them, talking, sitting together at the table.

I don't know why I invited her if I knew they would both ignore me.

This is why I don't hang out in groups of three.

It's always me who's left out.

Why me?

How would they feel?

## **Baltimore**

*Pema Lauder-Dean*

when i was young  
i lived  
lived in an old house  
in a city  
a city i called  
home  
on a street  
don't remember what street  
my closets  
filled with wigs  
i put on my wigs  
and pretended to be  
someone i was not

now i live  
live in a house  
on a different street  
in a town  
not my own  
but i still  
put on my wigs  
put on my wigs and think  
of the old house  
in a city  
i once called  
Home

## **Stranger**

*Anonymous*

I sit in my own home  
Feeling like a stranger  
I hear my parents talking  
Long slow words  
My brother sitting in the kitchen  
I get up  
And leave  
To hide  
In my own home,  
Feeling like a stranger



Nex Remsberg

## **The Opposite of Joy**

*Cadence Leonard*

My mom

My dad

The car

A wave of emotion yelling flailing

Yelling

Flailing

Crying

Sobbing

What am I supposed to feel?

Happy?

Sad?

Am I supposed to cry?

I don't know

I don't know

Why do parents have to be so annoying!!

Oops

I said it out loud

Sorry

I'm sorry

I started to cry

## **The Pumpkin Man**

*Quentin Leroux*

On a late October night, around the 15th or so, maybe the 13th on a Friday? I don't know. I sat on my sofa, cat sleeping to the right, a calm, sleepy, peaceful night that made me feel alright. While watching the news on channel 3 or 4, I heard something crawling on the other side of my door. I supposed it was a trick or treater, so I yelled, "come back on Halloween if you want candy that's sweeter!"

I heard them leave so I went back to my seat. But when I sat down I realized I needed something to eat. Off to the kitchen I went to grab a slice of pie, but when I opened the fridge I saw something out the corner of my eye. A vine that wasn't there before... I wanted to investigate more. I opened the door and there it sat. An orange pumpkin, tall and fat. I didn't know where it came from but I didn't care. When I looked away and back I found it wasn't there!

"Must be a Halloween trick someone's playing on me! Come out, come out you prankster kiddies!" When no one responded I just said, "oh," so I went back to the TV to watch another show. But when I sat down I realized the cat was gone. I knew that something was really wrong. Then I heard it, a loud meow. I shouted, "This prank isn't funny now!" I ran outside and heard a loud crunch, but what I saw made me lose my lunch.

The cat was being dragged behind a tree. I grabbed the cat and pulled it free. I saw what grabbed the cat, it was that pumpkin again. But then it grew tall, about 7 foot 10. Its eyes glowing, its teeth pointy. It said, "I'm here for revenge on those who tried to carve me." In a rush I ran in the shed. But it crawled through an open window and said, "You're dead!" I felt like a character in a thriller. But then I saw a can of weed killer. I sprayed the whole can and it melted with a scream. But as it became a puddle of goop, it said, "I'll be seeing you in your dreams."

### **3 Years Running**

*Aleixo Lovato*

6 years running The Tomboy  
but I didn't know  
6 years running "girl power"  
cuz I didn't know what else to do  
6 years running  
I take pride in who I am  
but I'm still uncomfortable  
Then  
one day I almost shout  
"I'm not a tomboy, I'm a real boy"  
And ev er y th in g  
Be gin s to  
Fa ll  
A p a r t

3 years running I pretend  
that it never happened  
4 years running I put on a mask  
To hide the truth  
3 years running I'm confused  
I don't understand  
4 years running I don't search for an answer  
I just act like it never happened  
4 years running Scared  
I don't know how to react  
3 years running uncomfortable  
starting to realize don't feel comfortable in my body  
3 years running  
from myself

3 years ago  
I started to question  
Non-binary?  
Might have lost a friend  
for identifying as that  
not quite sure  
why they left



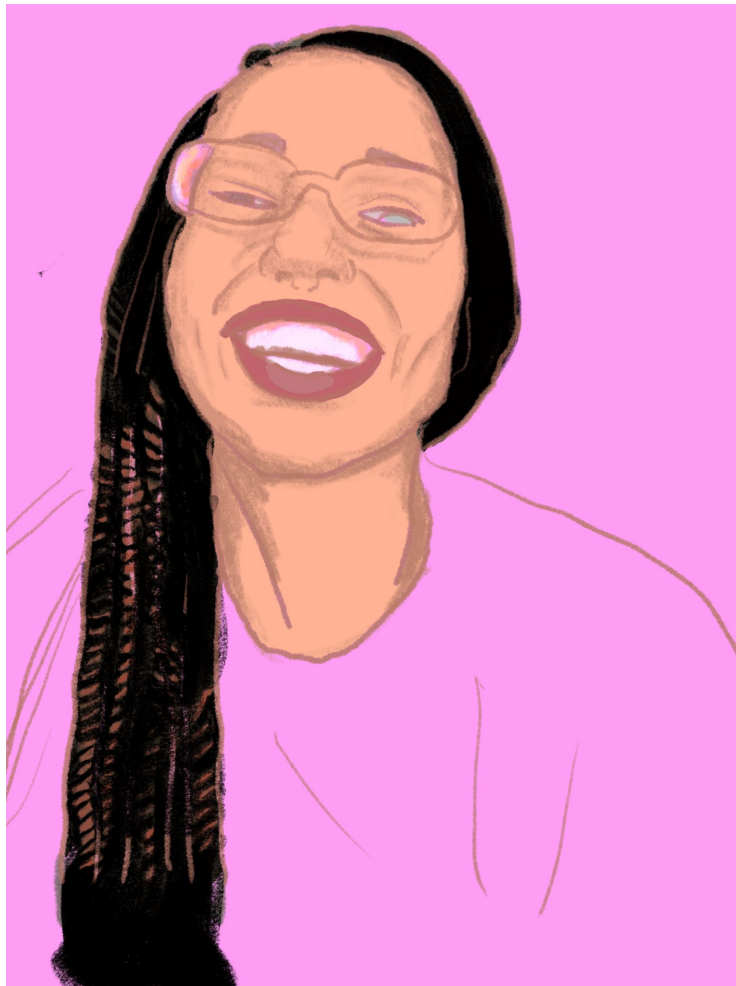
Then  
I hear the word  
“transgender”  
feels familiar and right  
the answer to all the questions

6 months running  
what should my name be  
6 months running  
binder?  
6 months running  
feeling less confused  
6 months running  
I finally take off that mask  
6 months running  
acceptance  
6 months running  
I am finally  
me

## **This is Me**

*Jalayja Lowery*

I can't write it in down in words  
I need to say it out loud  
I want to be understood  
I don't wanna be ignored  
I want to be loved  
I don't wanna be hated  
I don't wanna be judged  
I want to be me



Payton Nabors-Hilburn

## **Family**

*Djuna Martin*

Parents

They yell

They punish

They're unfair

They make you cry

They ignore

They don't care

They hurt you

They change you

They hold you back

They don't help

They disregard you

They hate you

They push you off track

Parents are the worst.

Children

They whine

They complain

They cry

They're too much work

They only see the worst

They don't care that you try

They demand

They fight

They NEVER ask nicely

They persist

They blame

They hate you

They resist

Children are the worst.

Family  
They cry  
They support  
They help  
They give  
They ask  
They care  
They understand  
They see you  
They love you

Family is the best.

## **7th Grade**

*Finn McArthur*

7th grade isn't the worst  
but it isn't too cool  
It's just in the middle  
of my years at this school



Sky Foster

## **Appearances**

*Finn McArthur*

I'm not entirely content with the appearance of myself. I wish I had less zits, and my hair is just a little too short. I also don't like how I have a bit of a unibrow, and my torso is too long for the rest of my body, and my legs a bit too short for it. As I look at myself, taller than the shelf behind me, and wider than the other mirror behind me, I say to myself, "Oh well. This is me for the time being. I'm sure I'll grow out of it by the time high school is over. It won't stay like this, at least not for the rest of my life."

## **Always Alone, Always Invisible**

*Sierra Miller*

Everyday is loneliness.

I do stuff alone.

on my trampoline

alone,

I sit in my room almost all day

alone.

No one pays attention to me.

Always alone, always invisible.

This isn't at school

This is my home.

## **Friend Lottery**

*Anonymous*

First day of school, look around your class  
It's time to play the friend lottery!  
Because once again your best friend has moved away  
or you're starting at a new school ...again  
Sit down next to someone that seems cool enough  
Strike up a conversation, after all this is your best friend  
Well, for the next year or two



**I Remember**  
*Georgia Myers*

You love the movie Ice Age,  
I remember.  
Your favorite song  
is All Falls Down  
by Kanye West,  
I remember.

But you don't remember  
that my favorite flower  
is a poppy.  
That my favorite smell  
is a brand new book  
being opened for the first time.  
You don't remember.



Lena Knappe

## **The Trampoline - a collection of haikus**

*Lil Nelson*

Gossip and ice cream  
Laughing on the trampoline  
Sun glinting off our hair

Warm sunshine dances  
The dark green leaves above stir  
My gold hair flutters

A shriek of joy rings  
As two young girls jump and play  
Games only they know

The rusty springs creak  
Not used to the adult's weight  
A giant to the kids

The moments fly by  
And too soon the laughing ends  
Trampoline empty

A pink petal falls down  
Joining its fallen sibling  
All left undisturbed

## **Beaches**

*Lil Nelson*

### **At the beach**

**The waves push and pull**

**The ebb and flow**

*it tickles my feet*

*the water swirls*

*creating holes around my soles*

**Towels stripe the sand**

**Looking like band-aids**

**Patching up the holes**

*i stare at the horizon*

*the sun ever getting closer*

*to the line where sky meets sea*

**Small crabs scuttle**

**Hurrying to their holes and homes**

**While the little bugs squirm through the sand**

*when i sit*

*the waves try to pull me in*

*but i hold still*

**People pack up their bags**

**The hustle and bustle of their day at the beach**

**Quiets as they leave behind naught but memories**

*soon its only me*

*same as always*

*but i dont mind*

## **The Winter According to the Student Six**

*Tsunami Oates*

The young NightWing sat with content, looking at the stars and curling in her bed. The animals of the night spark conversation with one another while the 4-year-old dragon eavesdrops on this ambiance. SecretKeeper wrapped her wing around her daughter as the moons took the place of the sun and moths fluttered where butterflies once did. The RainWings climbed into their treehouses while NightWings crawled out of their huts to start their day. MoonWatcher saunters out her door into the brisk winter air for some fruit.

The dragon that was named after the season stared outside his tower. He yawned in the morning light and the sunlight danced within the clouds. He climbed down the stairs into the dining hall and enjoyed a frozen strawberry kebab for breakfast while Queen Snowfall smiled at him. He felt the sunrays scatter through the stained glass windows and onto his fur. He smiled at the fact that his mother will probably no longer pester him about his ranking, as that system was abolished by Snowfall. Winter of the IceWings sat with a hopeful expression on his face as the sun climbed up the sky.

The fierce firescales felt the snow under her feet melt into mush, and the grass below turned brittle. The sun was at its daily peak and sunbeams rained down without disdain. She wandered to a river to get some fish, and breathed a large plume of blue fire in the water, and then a bunch of fish bodies floated on the surface. She snapped up a salmon in her mouth, but left the scarlet cods alone. She thought of her parents Soar (chameleon) and Kestrel, and she shook them away. No time for thinking of your relatives, you gotta survive. Then, Peril flew away into the sky.

He felt the calm ocean lick the sand and his talons as he sat in the shade of a palm tree. The sun in the sky started to slink down, preparing for sunset. His face relaxed as the scenery wrapped its invisible wings of serenity around him. While the shade of the palm tree sheltered him and the sunlight warmed his talons. He thought of his mother, Coral, and hoped that one day she may talk to him again. Turtle then refocused to the scene and relaxed.

The sunset was creeping below the horizon, a hot desert wind picked up and swept over the courtyard. The shutters were going up in case of a sand storm, but there was no risk right now. As the sun's rays began to die, the lights in the palace began to light up, and they looked like lanterns in the night. He, Sunny, and Thorn were sitting under a ledge, admiring the sunset, almost forgetting the past abuse his biological mother put him through; he was glad Thorn adopted him. Qibli's eyes darted to and from his family and the serenity of the sky before him, and relaxed.

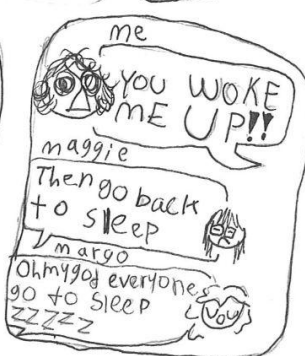
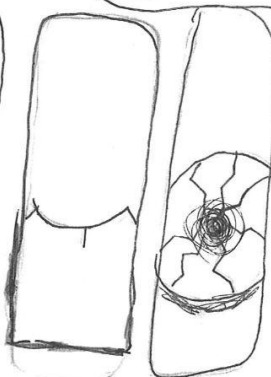
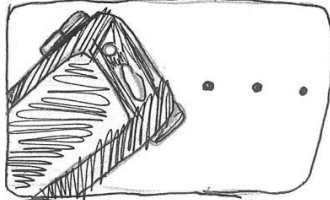
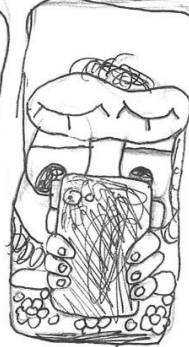
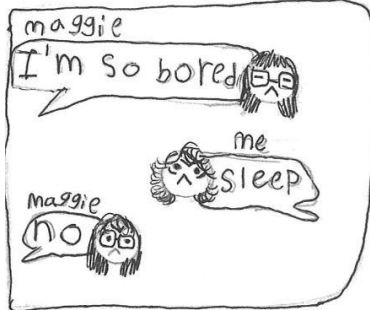
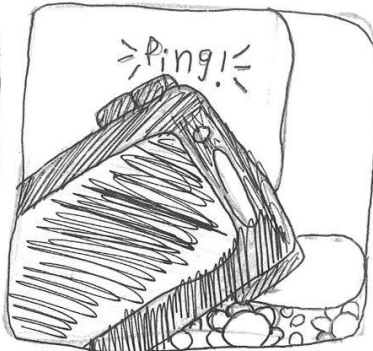
The young Rainwing dragonet climbed into her tree house as the moons peeked over the trees. The aftertaste of mangos and bananas clashed and the army ants on the ground started to pile up near roots. Her frills fluttered and her scales bloomed into lilac and midnight purple as her body drifted into rest. The RainWings climbed back into their bungalows and Nightwings resurfaced, baboons and snakes traded places with fireflies and jaguars, as the rainforest started to change its voice. Kinkajou observed MoonWatcher climb out of her treehouse, and she drifted into dreamy sleep, dreaming of her parents and dragons from the other side of the world.

## **Honey and Chocolate**

*Olivia Paynter-Welch*

Her words are melted chocolate  
warm and sweet  
dripping out of her mouth  
The sun licks her arms with glowing kisses of light  
so bright  
Her auburn curls dance in the breeze  
Her eyes turn into honey in the sunlight  
She is made of honey and chocolate  
sweeter than a suckle's nectar  
Butterflies at her feet when she walks  
Her smile is full of candy

# LATE NIGHTS + JOILY RANCHERS



~ FIN ~  
\*all of these people are still my friends I promise

## **Alone**

*Ruby Peters*

I stand by myself

Outside

In the cool crisp air

Alone

I eat breakfast,

My cereal,

Without milk,

Alone

I go for long,

Never ending,

Walks

Alone

No comfort to have,

No comfort to give,

Just me,

Alone



## **My mother and I**

*Taliyah Pratt*

Beep, beep, beep  
We laugh together, just like old times  
My mother and I

Beep, beep, beep  
We watch movies together, to pass the time  
My mother and I

Beep, beep, beep  
We worry together, because we know you don't have much time  
My mother and I

Beep, beep, beep  
We talk to each other, just one more time  
My mother and I

Beeeeeeeeep  
I held her hand, just like old times  
—When it was my mother and I

## **Wallflower**

*Taliyah Pratt*

There you are, leaning against the wall at the party

It's quite lonely, isn't it?

If you left, it'd be embarrassing, your friends will ask you where you went the next day

They were probably having so much fun they only noticed after the party that you were gone

Are you spiteful? Angry? Upset that you took time to get ready, walked over here

And your fantasy didn't come true?

If you tried to dance, or talk, you'd make a fool of yourself, and then you'd be all alone

And embarrassed

You're jealous your friends are having more fun than you, aren't you?

In your mind you thought you'd be the main character and drink until you blacked out

Maybe if you walked out there and tried you would, but you'd only look dumb

So stay on the wall

Stay a wallflower

Stay alone

Blame everyone else

Try to look cool and pretty on that wall

There you were, leaning against the wall at the party

You're quite envious, aren't you?

Looking at that door you wish you could just go home

But in your mind you say you'd only look like a fool

So stay a wallflower

## **Who's the fool?**

*Brianna Quiroz-Alvarez*

I waited for you  
Why couldn't you change  
Longing for you  
Yet still you stay the same

Helping you  
Through the tough times  
Why couldn't you do that for me  
I guess I'm not worth your time

After all the broken promises  
You said you would change  
I trusted you  
I loved you

I guess fools never change



Wren Wright

## **If Only Every Story Had a Beginning (Lesbians in the Woods)**

*Megan Rose*

The Amber glow of the sun illuminates through the thicket of trees. Her sun-kissed skin and reflective smile. Her eyes are pieces of coal ready to become diamonds. My mind whirrs not in the way of a clock-work engine, but in the way of preparation for a question that will never come to be. Her eyes lift to me, her hand in the grass. My mind is not clouded but the still opposite of clear. Our hearts are racing calmly.

“Why can't we stay here forever?” she asks, yearning in her voice for the eternal peace of the glade nestled in between mountains and worlds.

“Because school is starting up again soon. And life and time along with it,” I reply, soothing and spiritual and patient. Not with her but with how fast time is moving.

“I suppose ‘Nothing Gold Can Stay,’” she quotes definitively from the famous Robert Frost poem. Her intellect is far superior than even that of the lost Library of Alexandria.

Out here in the perfect silence, an hour can be years and years can be an hour. Time is only relevant to how much thought you give it. If only everything structured could be like this, timeless.

“But the world is such a dirty place of grief and might, both handed to the wrong people.” This small wisdom she shares is enough to make my soul weigh down, but my heart is lifted by her poetic brilliance. I would describe her as light, not in the way of ignorance but in the way of someone who knows there are terrible things in the world yet has overcome them and is still shining brighter than before. Someone who will share this light with as many people as possible before it is extinguished.

Her dress is green, not in the way of unnatural dyes but in the way of flower stems and newly born leaves. I can imagine she made it herself, the silk of a thousand toiless worms all giving their life willingly to her beauty. Though I will never know for sure.

My world will be a much stranger place without her, but college calls and all of the hounds respond. Perhaps I will return and she will still be here, but it is more likely that I will be killed by the color of her lovely dress.

“You know I only have four weeks left. I want to make them count,” I say, not sternly but sorrowfully, with as little emotion in my voice as I can muster. Her voice is softer than the silk of her skin.

“Four weeks are as much time as we need. For time is as much as you give thought to it,” she replies confidently, confiding in me.

“If only I could stay, but I’m not even close to gold, so what does that say?”  
Her eyes soften and I gauge her response. However, her mind is clearly as open, as mine is defiant of the principles of all, but her.

“For the next 4 weeks,” she declares, “this Valley is our world.”  
And it was thus.



Leo Furchner

## **Three Stories**

*Luella Rotondi*

### Secrets

The landlord showed me the place, a basement apartment with no view, no windows out of sight invisible to the world, it was perfect. Just three rooms. One with a ricked old bed, moth-eaten mattress and tiny closet, the other with a lumpy armchair and rusty metal table. The final a small bathroom lacking a bath or shower. It was just the kind of place that I had been looking for, just the place to hide out in.

In a week, I had moved in. Bringing only my old briefcase, stuffed with clothes, some personal belongings and of course, it. I walked into the bedroom and opened the door to the closet. I set my briefcase down on the floor of the closet, away from the cobwebs, and carefully pulled the necklace off of my neck. The necklace with the key. I unlocked my briefcase and began to place my clothes and pictures on the floor. When the case was empty of clothes, I stared down at the object, the object that had changed my life forever. Carefully, I picked it up and placed it on the highest shelf. Then, I closed the closet door, locked it, and flushed the key down the toilet.

### The Worm

They were good friends, and they had been for a very long time. Their families had taken a trip to the Oregon coast together. To stay at a rickety rental house, a 5-min drive away from the beach. It was the second day of their vacation and the two kids were taking advantage of their location. Splashing in the water, throwing the sand up in the air. They were right in the middle of digging a hole when they found it. Or rather, them. They weren't noticeable at first, but as the hold grew deeper it became apparent that there wasn't just sand in the pit.

“Look!” one of them shouted, pointing into the hole. “It’s a worm!” If it was a worm, it was a strange worm, long and smooth the color of concrete. The girl frowned and picked it up, passing it from one hand to the other. The girl jumped up from the place in the sand and ran over to where her parents sat, the boy trailing behind her. “Mommy look what I found!” she said, jumping up and down.

“What is it dear? Is i-” the girl's mother stopped talking and her face paled. “Put that down,” she stuttered, standing up. The girl opened her palm, and let it fall to the floor. Just after it left her hand the place where it had been touching began to change color. The flesh on her hand twisted from its natural cinnamon color to the same grayish as the worm had been. The color slowly began to creep up her hand. “Get in the car!” the girl’s mother whispered, but the girl didn't answer, mesmerized by the color now creeping up her arm. She scooped up her daughter and her friend

and raced them to the road where the car sat parked. The girl and boy seemed unable to talk as the girl's mother sped along the road, going as fast as the small car could move.

In the back seat, the girl watched as the concrete color continued to spread, and at this point, it had reached the girl's face. He watched as it covered her mouth, sealing it shut. She collapsed onto the ground just as they reached the rental house. The mother looked into the back seat and saw her daughter, engulfed in the gray cocoon. She fell to the ground and began to cry.

### Shadows

They were known as the shadow kids. They were just always there, lurking in alleyways and back corners and abandoned buildings. They had blank faces and wore dark clothes. There were lots of them, and they seemed to be a different bunch every time. But nobody seemed to be able to figure out whose kids they were. They were not dangerous, just kind of there. One minute they weren't, the next they appeared. Nobody had ever gotten a good enough look at them to know for sure what they were. Some people said they were aliens from an unknown planet. Others said they were androids, or experiments gone wrong. Most people agreed that they weren't human. But some people thought they were just plain children who had somehow lost their way. Even though most of the town had accepted their presence, some weren't so open to it. I didn't know what I believed, I suppose that I saw the truth in all of the theories.

But I didn't really care what they were, I didn't even care that they were. They were a part of life here, and I knew that wasn't going to change anytime soon.

## **Swallowing Love**

*Hope Schamber*

The question “What does love feel like?” came up in class. Everyone turns their head down to start writing and sharing their thoughts. People started to chatter talking about how love feels like a warm hug, how it looks like a relationship where their “soulmates.” Some students said that true love is looking into someone’s eyes and feeling warmth and safety.

As the room grew quiet I felt stuck. Something grew empty in my stomach. What is love? Have I truly felt a true connection? Was it the warmth and safety that my classmates had been talking about? The questions grew in my gut and the topic lingered in my brain.

Is love real? I love my parents and I love my friends, but is that true love? Is true love my first crush in the 2nd grade? Or the ex I let slip away too quickly? The thoughts began to consume me. Am I connected to anything? Do I feel a true connection?

I took a second to chew on my cheeks and try to swallow my thoughts before the teacher called on me. What am I truly connected to? What do I enjoy? I love music, warm sweaters, the rain, art, late nights? But I can't be in love with any of that. The thoughts rambling in my head, I hear a voice coming from the surrounding of my thoughts.

It’s the teacher calling on me. “And what about you?” he says as I feel the eyes from the back of the class room come to a stop on the back of my body.

“Perhaps I don’t know what it is. Maybe I don’t know what it looks like or what it feels like because I haven’t experienced truly loving someone. But I have come to realize that maybe I am truly in love with myself. The art I create or how my small hips jump and twist while pretending I’m at a concert in my room. Or how my hair falls on my shoulders. I love how I write and how I feel. And that’s what love is to me. It’s me.”

That’s what I would have said if I wasn’t so anxious about sharing my thoughts with people. Instead I answered with “Happiness and hugs.”



## **The Tale of Artemus**

*Geneva Shrall*

My name is Harper Dane, pronouns she/her. I live in Dallas, Texas, in a small flat with my mom, my sister, my best friend Tanya, and her mom, Kara. I used to love my life, my school, and my family. Right up until yesterday evening.

My friends and I were sitting in class, laughing through our masks and ignoring the teacher, when I got taken to the principal's office on an "urgent matter." I sulked through the door, annoyed to have to leave my friend's conversation. Then I saw Kara sitting on one of the plastic chairs in the office. Kara's face was raw from crying. I looked at her, and she looked back, not saying a word.

"What happened?" I asked. Silence. So I asked again. "What happened?!" More silence. "What?!!" My face became red with anger. She started to cry, and I didn't know what to do.

Then she said, "Tanya, she...she was found... dead in the Artemus Mansion."

I started crying. "You're lying!" I yelled. Slowly, she shook her head. I was mad, mad at myself, mad at the world, and most of all, mad at Tanya. I had been best friends with Tanya and her big blue eyes ever since she flipped off a kid who was bullying me in the first grade. We're now freshmen in high school. Well, now I guess just I am.

I stood still for a moment, then ran out of the school, the principal chasing me. I ran far. Far enough away to get to my flat. But I didn't stop there. I stormed into my flat, grabbed my bike, and sped away from my mom, yelling from the balcony. She yelled consequences that deep down, she knew I didn't care about. I sped away from the park, with the shirtless old geezer jogging laps with his one-pound weights. I sped past the supermarket, full of crying kids, pleading for candy. I went even farther, all the way to the creaky, deserted Artemus Mansion.

By the time I got there, it was dark. I set aside my bike as I went inside the mansion, the brown, mossy, fading mansion. It started raining outside. Tanya loved the rain, I thought to myself. Something in me, well, snapped. I started screaming. "Why, Tanya?!" My voice got quiet, tears welling up inside me. "Who did this to you?" I ran inside the mansion and looked upon the shattered window at my reflection. There was an eerie silence—something was off. A creaky sound echoed amongst the floorboards. Someone was coming. I swiveled around, trying to see who it was. I tried to scream. Nothing came out. An eerie darkness crept around my eyes. Darkness was all I saw, nothing else.

## **My Histories**

*George Silva*

“Remember, always remember, that all of us, and you and I mainly, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists.” -FDR

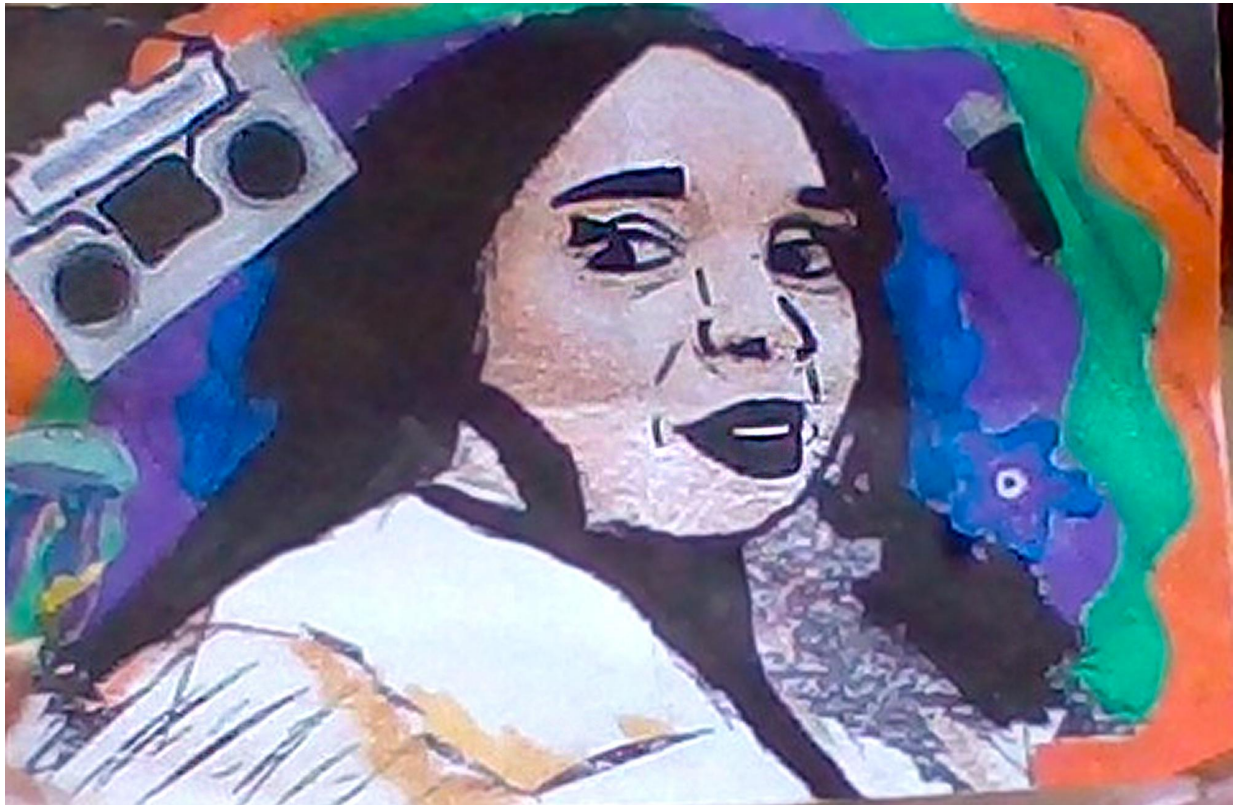
My History wasn't just when I was born in 2009. It goes back hundreds of years in Norway and England and the Netherlands and Sri Lanka. It's the European side of my family, all slowly moving to North America while my Asian side stayed in Asia until in the late 60s, early 70s. My grandparents and grandma's sister moved to the USA to avoid raising their children in a war-torn nation. It's my grandpa dodging the Vietnam draft due to his bad back. It's my great-grandpa being a nurse in WW2 in a nuclear weapon testing zone. It's my great-grandma developing skin cancer.

“Yes, people pull the trigger - but guns are the instruments of death.” - Eliot Spitzer.

My personal history started when I was born on January 21st, 2009, at 5:16 AM. It's when my entire family rents a house on Mt. Hood for Christmas. It was me in a mall at the wrong time on December 11th, 2012. It was my little brother who was born on October 21st, 2014. It's me developing an unknown liver disease. It's my little brother having a seizure when he was three. It's me being in the backseat of our car, checking to make sure my little brother is still alive while we drove to a hospital. It's my grandpa surviving his 7th heart attack and me watching naked and afraid with him in the hospital. It's me getting Lyme Disease and needing to take medicine three times a day for three weeks straight. It's me not being involved in my own culture. It's not crying at my Great Grandma's funeral. It's me being picky when it comes to food.

Our personal and family History has effects on us that we may not even notice. Watching my little brother nearly die makes me scared when he leaves my sight, and it makes me nervous that he's not breathing. Being in a shooting when I was only three years old made me hyper-aware of small noises. It makes it so I can never have my back to the door. Me not being connected to my own culture makes it so I don't feel my race. It makes me not think I'm Asian since I don't like my cultural foods and don't ever wear my cultural clothing. It's my “picky eating,” making me prefer not eating over eating food with a texture or a smell I don't like.

Our History isn't just after we were born. It's our ancestors and where they came from. It's our parents and aunts and uncles. It's who we are. It's our ethnicity. It's us and everything that makes us, us. We are our ancestors. They live inside of us through their struggles and trauma and their victories and triumphs. We help them live on no matter how long that they've been six feet under.



Shamiah Rivers

## **Softer Sheets**

*Deanna Todd*

You don't know my favorite color anymore  
I changed it  
Red was the same as yours  
Now it's green.  
I got new perfume too  
it smells like vanilla  
Not like the rose one you used to love.  
My bed sheets are different too  
They aren't the red ones with daisies,  
The ones you used to tangle in,  
They're green now, and softer  
And they smell like vanilla.  
I bought a new phone  
One that you haven't called.  
I changed a lot of things,  
Since you left.  
I find comfort  
in the fact that you don't know me anymore  
Just like I no longer know you  
But the only difference is  
I changed because I had to  
And you changed because you wanted to.  
At least I have softer sheets now.

## **Friends**

*Lila Villagran*

You and I are good friends  
Even though I think about your eyes in ways that friends do not  
We eat together at lunch  
In a hopeless love web I have been caught  
I'm happy we are friends  
But it would be nice if we were more  
You're so nice to me  
Yet all the signs you ignore

## **Wondering**

*Tamia White*

wondering  
if this is the day  
i get raped  
wondering  
if this is the  
i get called a n\*\*\*\*\*  
wondering  
if this is day  
i get kidnapped  
wondering  
if this the day  
i get pulled over for no reason  
but it's never the day  
so i keep wondering

## **Friends Forever**

*Ava Wilken*

Me and Julie have been friends for forever. No, seriously. Since the beginning of time, until the end of the earth, me, Lisa Webber and my best friend, Julie Simmons have been connected. Still not convinced? Let me explain. It all started during the summer of 2022, right after school got out.

“Ready or not, here I come!” I called, as I jumped up, and started looking for Julie. It was June 13th, the day after school got out. Me and Julie were playing hide and seek in Lucky Park, and she made me count. I started looking for her, behind trees, under the playground, curled up under the bridge, when I spotted something behind a tree.

“Julie! I found you!” I waited for her to come out, when someone tapped me on the shoulder. I spun around, but it was just Julie. “Oh, hey Julie. I was just looking for...” I stopped. If Julie was behind me, she couldn't have been behind the tree.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, as I stared at the tree.

“There’s something behind that tree.” I said. We walked closer, until we came up to the item. It was a round black disk, with a shiny silver ring around it.

“It’s a Roomba!” Julie exclaimed.

“A Roomba?” I asked. Julie was obsessed with anything that had to do with tech, especially robots. “That is so, not a Roomba.” I told her, kneeling down to examine it closer. “Besides, what would a Roomba be doing in Lucky park?” I ran my hand along the edge, when I felt a small switch. “Julie, look.” She sat down beside me, and looked at the disk.

“Ooh, a switch!” Julie flipped it, and the disk came to life. A blue ring appeared around the disk that was as tall as I was, and a holographic picture of a dial appeared on the blue.

“Whoa. What is this?” I reached my hand into the blue circle, and out to the dial. It felt 3D, like I could actually turn it.

“Look,” Julie said. “There’s little numbers!” To the right of the dial, the numbers went up, and to the left they went down.

“No Julie, not numbers. Days.” I looked her in the eye. “Do you know what this means?”

“Yup. We just found a time machine.”

“ZAP!” Me and Julie fell to the ground, the dirt hitting our faces.

“I’m never going to get used to that, am I?” I sat myself up and looked around. After messing with the dial on the time machine, me and Julie accidentally ended up

visiting the dinosaurs, living in the renaissance, and going way into the future, 7037, all in one day. At this point, we could be in outer space and I wouldn't question it.

"Where are we now?" I asked as I wiped the dirt off my shorts.

"Actually, don't you mean when are we?" Julie giggled.

"Yeah, yeah." I don't know how much more of that joke I can take. I say to myself as we stand up, and look around.

"At least here there's some sun," Julie says. "The ice age is not my favorite place to be in shorts and a tank top."

"Actually, I think we might be back home." I look around, and sure enough, there's the worn down, mossy sign for Lucky Park.

"Wow, I never thought I'd be happy to see that sign."

"You know," I say, "time traveling is fun and all, but right now I could really use one of your homemade peanut butter cookies."

"One batch, coming right up!"

"Race you to your house?"

"Oh, yeah, it's on!"

As we run back home, peanut butter cookies in store, I smile, knowing that since the beginning of time, and until the end of the earth, me and Julie will stay friends. Forever.





