

# SOUNDINGS

SARATOGA HIGH 2023

BURNOUT





Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 2023 edition of the Soundings Art and Literary Magazine, an independent student publication of Saratoga High School.

This year of the Soundings Art and Literary Collective was like no other. In the first year back to normal—actual normal—our staff took the opportunity to bring major changes and expansions to Saratoga High School's largest creative arts group.

We hosted our first ever Art and Literary Exhibition consisting of poetry readings, art auctions, a ceramics sale, and live music, raising a total of \$2,000. We launched a brand new website, [saratogasoundings.com](http://saratogasoundings.com), to provide an accessible means of engaging with our content; all past issues and future work will soon make its way to this permanent archive. In addition, we introduced both a Winter and Spring online issue of Soundings, allowing more work to be published than ever before. And, of course, the Soundings magazine continues to live on.

Soundings is a nautical term referring to the depth measurement in a body of water. As the title of our decades-old art and literary magazine, Soundings refers to the depths that featured works reach and the waves they make throughout the creative world.

The depths of the work in our student body is unparalleled, but also undercover. In a STEM-dominated environment, Soundings seeks to elevate and highlight the creativity of our students from those depths onto the bright shore. The experiences of our students find a new voice, a new home in our collective, where deep-cutting themes and hard-to-explain issues can flourish.

In this year's magazine edition, students unpacked mental health issues, examined academic cultures, explored their body image, and identified their sources of happiness. Through all the published works, we saw a common theme: Burnout. Students are tired and broken down, seeking an avenue of escape. In this year's issue, we display works that achieve the purpose of initiating important conversations about such topics. We sought to take these themes from the depths and surface them to view.

Thank you to every student artist, writer, staffer, and editor that helped make this year's Soundings Art and Literary Collective possible. We'd like to give special thanks to our adviser, Ms. Amy Keys, for her strong support and direction. And, of course, thank you to you—the reader—for continuing to support our work.

Sincerely,  
The Soundings Editors-in-Chief  
Christina Chang (12), Anastasia Panidis (12), and Shaan Sridhar (12)



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View past, current, and future works  
at our online collective:

<https://www.saratogasoundings.com>

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Cover: Burnout (Christina Chang)

## How Are You

Christina Chang (12)

How are you? The answer is always Good.  
Because it's not a genuine question, by design;  
It's an act of courtesy — they ask because they should.  
Even if you're in the midst of a tornado, dismiss it as  
simply not your prime.  
Don't be a burden; they don't want to hear you whine.  
It is not a question so much as a half-hearted,  
obligatory survey.  
So when the spotlight comes on, it's always clear skies  
and sunshine!  
By routine, you say you are okay.

But beneath the fabricated facade, gone is the  
happiness of childhood.  
Fake it til you make it; when the drapes are drawn  
open, honesty's a crime —  
You will never be understood.  
And try as you might, you will never reach the finish  
line.  
This is your new normal; your energy is draining with  
time...  
So you succumb to the darkness — you are the prey.  
Who cares if there's light at the end of the tunnel?  
Reaching it is an endless climb.  
All you can do is hope the storm will eventually go  
away.

Because even if you want to yell for help, it's not as if  
you could.  
It's tempting to scream, reach out for a rope, give a hint  
or a sign;  
No — we're all pretending in Hollywood.  
Tell yourself: You are on cloud nine.  
Careful, people are watching! Stick with the storyline  
As you rush to meet the deadline.  
Go on — Hurry! A production is underway!  
Quick! Craft a sensational headline!  
Lights! Camera! Action! You're an actor on broadway.

Don't blow your cover, even if everything is frail, held  
together by mere twine.  
So what if the stage is on fire? So what if the sets are  
crumbling? Keep the pain at bay.  
And keep telling yourself you're fine —  
Even if you're struggling day by day.

## Permanence

Dyne Lee (12)

*"You who read me, are you sure of understanding my language?"*

— Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel"

They say that the Library contains every possible  
combination of text  
and so its shelves hold every book that has ever  
been written,  
and if computers can transform images into text,  
pixel by pixel,  
its walls are lined by every photo that has ever been  
taken.

And so, deep inside the Library must be the  
panorama I took of  
my grandparents' green-gray backyard, its bushes  
and pebbles,  
after my grandmother said that she was selling the  
house  
because it was too big for her alone.  
Because I know too well that memories decay  
into shapeless blurs with faded hues  
and polaroids age and wrinkle and tear  
but splashes of color on a screen are immortal.

What are we if not simply  
collections of what we remember?

So when the black stone plaque engraved  
with my parents' names crumbles to airy dust  
and its shadow preserved in the corners  
of my consciousness slips away in the rush of time—

What meaning does our flesh have  
if it is empty of our memories?

—I will walk down the infinite hallways of the  
Library  
and open the yellowed pages of a book  
to relive my grandmother's rows of corn stalks  
and the pine tree planted on the day I was born:

Crystalized shards of myself, frozen, immortalized,  
scattered throughout the spiraling  
hallways of the Library.



Grandma's Apples  
Mason Wang (12)

## Rat King

Anais Sobrier (11)

"They didn't treat the kids good here, did they?"

"Nope. Only the rats," Vernier quipped as he chewed gum. Jean pressed his glasses up and chuckled. Martin, who had a frown permanently etched onto his thin face, followed behind Jean and Vernier, the tallest and roundest. The three of them, all policemen, had been sent to investigate the abandoned, two story hospital in the countryside of central France.

The dirty confinement, covered in torn wallpaper and painted with feces, reeked with a putrefying neglect. The three men closed their mouths to the air that tasted of expired milk. A small room on the right of the hallway was full of broken, overturned cribs and had a missing door, leaving only rusted hinges. There was a subtle, static sound of scratching. Dust came in through shattered windows and lingered in the early morning light. As they walked through the building, the men's leather shoes stepped over diaper cloth, paper, planks of fallen wood, and scurrying rats.

"What's worse," added Jean, "is that these kids stayed here 'til eighteen."

"Sick orphans?" Martin asked, gripping his flashlight with clammy hands. He slowly passed the light across the ripped wallpaper.

"Both mentally and physically," Jean mused as he checked the undersides of his shoes.

"Wouldn't be surprised if we found an adult skeleton in a crib." Vernier gasped on his gum from the piercing stench. A shiver reached up their backs, clasping

their necks. "Just check the whole building." Vernier weaved through piles of unidentifiable waste. "Neighbors been reportin' screams 'round here."

The group continued down the hallway toward the only remaining door in the establishment. When Vernier opened it, an acute odor ignited the structure, drying their throats, nauseating their minds.

Vernier covered his mouth. "Damn, now I know why they hollered for police." He spit his stale gum onto the floor and quickly took out a new piece from his pocket.

Jean looked at Vernier, his face contorted in revulsion. "Some guy came up here to investigate about two weeks ago and disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Martin's eyebrows raised.

"Could've just been wanted by nearby gangs or somethin," Vernier figured.

"Then do we call for backup?" Martin panted.

Vernier sighed and Jean let out a scoff, though Martin worried one of them might have whispered "coward" at him.

The men continued to move, their feet whispering on the ground. The flashlight beams explored the spacious room, pausing upon powders, pill bottles, empty syringes—a silhouette scurrying across the light.

Martin inhaled sharply, jumping back.

"Nother rat," Vernier observed in an irritated tone. Martin frantically scanned his flashlight on the ground.

"Hey, relax. They won't kill you. It's not like we're dealing with a criminal case." Jean looked up at the scratch marks on the ceiling. "Though I really wish we had a criminal case," he complained.

"Why is anybody worrying about shouting in here when no one in the right mind would come here?" Vernier posed.

Jean cackled. "Maybe this town is out of their mind."

"But," Martin hesitated, "they've been reporting shouts for a while, right?" He tried to swallow down all the doubt he had in his voice.

"There's nothing much here, just shit everywhere," Vernier concluded.

"That's all?" asked Martin, standing at the center of the room.

Vernier's eyes dulled. "What?"

"We're here to inspect," Jean clarified. "Not help." Vernier raised an irritated eyebrow.

"C'mon," Vernier groaned. "We've basically seen everything." He and Jean turned off their flashlights and went out to the surrounding field of bare, crooked trees.

Martin watched them leave but hesitated to follow. "I'll finish checking this room," he shouted after them. Vernier, facing away, waved his plump hand in a goodbye.

Martin stayed inside with his light on, scanning the building's scars. The floor's creaking evoked a deep dread within him, but he knew that once he saw everything, he could reassure the neighborhood with certainty.

creak creak creak

All at once, the patterning of nails and the thudding of feet grew louder. A deformed accumulation of rotting human bodies, both dead and alive, covered in stains of dried blood emerged from the corner. Its limbs were entangled together, forming a grotesque collection of

bodies that acted as a singular being. Ribbons of flesh sticking out from its chests embroidered its skins. Mold grew under the assemblage of emaciated limbs, bare torsos, and hollow faces. The rot of the bodies smelled of all imaginable secretions — sweat, urine, blood.

It scurried out towards Martin. Shot by bullets of adrenaline, he turned his back onto the naked mammoth and sprinted out the doorway. His voice was trapped in his dry throat, and his legs were pumping with an indescribable fervor that had stricken his entire body.

The cries of the warped bodies rapidly neared, reducing the gap between predator and prey.

Martin's eyes darted back at the flailing mass chasing him down the hall. He threw himself into an open room in a desperate frenzy. A shattered window urged him to seize his chance at escape.

The running monstrosity, shaking the hallway with its flailing arms that hit the walls, swerved to the left. A wet hand grabbed Martin's ankle, dragging him across the floor and back into the somber hall. With his eyes protruding from his skull, he let out a breath so

heavy it crushed his heart.

The unknown consumed Martin until nothing was left except his leather shoes.

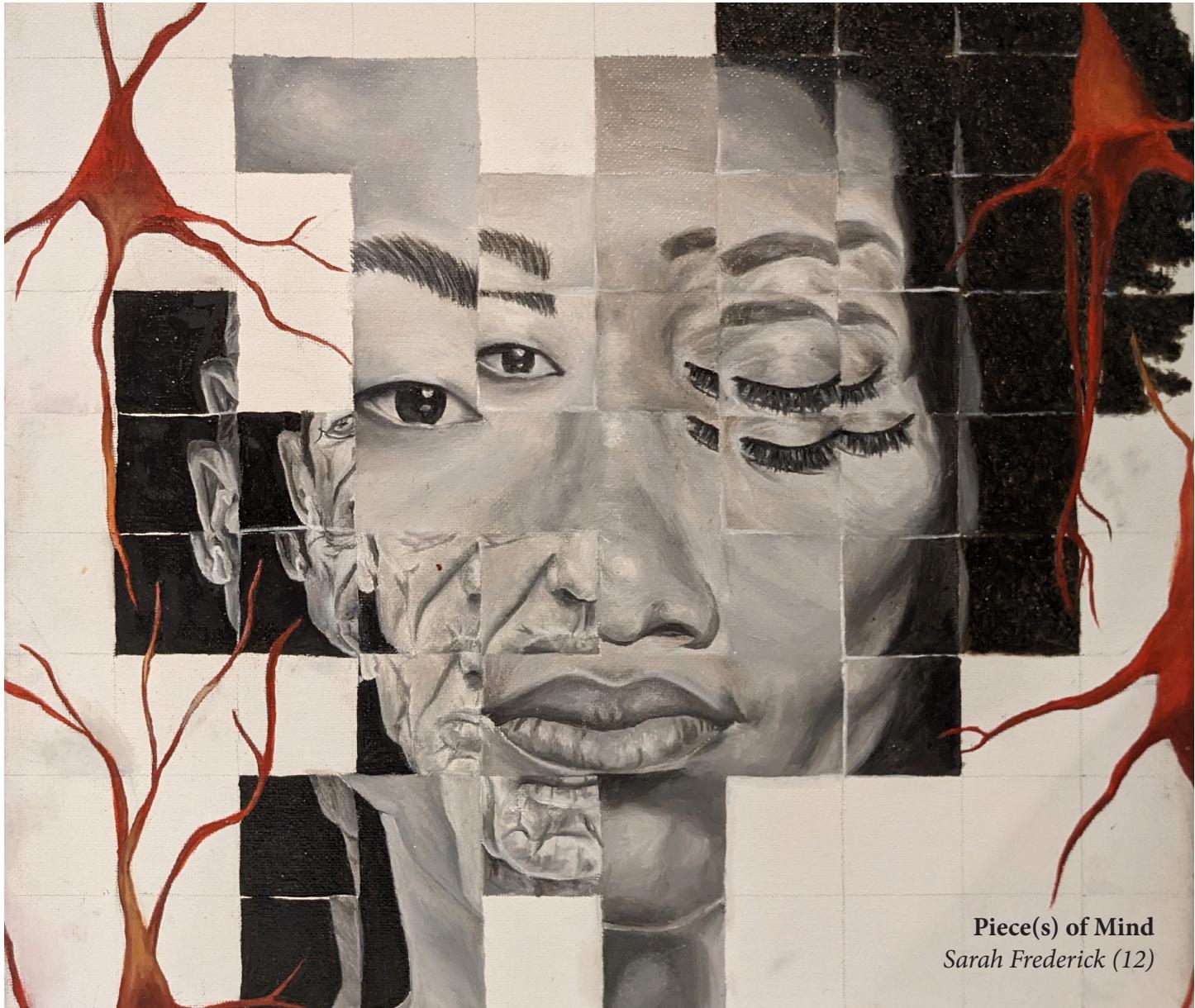
Outside, Vernier and Jean were by their car, smoking cigarettes as they waited for Martin to come.

Jean pointed his nose up.  
“What’s that smell?”

“Never smoked before?”  
Vernier joked.

“No, no. It’s coming from the building, but it’s not the same as before—”

“Prolly the rats.”



Piece(s) of Mind  
Sarah Frederick (12)

**an ode to the miscellaneous  
stuffed animals stowed in my  
cheetah-print hamper**  
*Eva Ruemmler (12)*

you are the enlivened  
menagerie motley,  
long-term members of the  
hibernation hamper.

a pillar of zoo life,  
a breathing totem pole,  
you shapeshift from robin  
to golden retriever  
to arabian horse;  
the swishing of wings  
evolves into  
a wave of golden fur,  
a prance of dancing hooves;

neighing imbues my dreams.

you are also

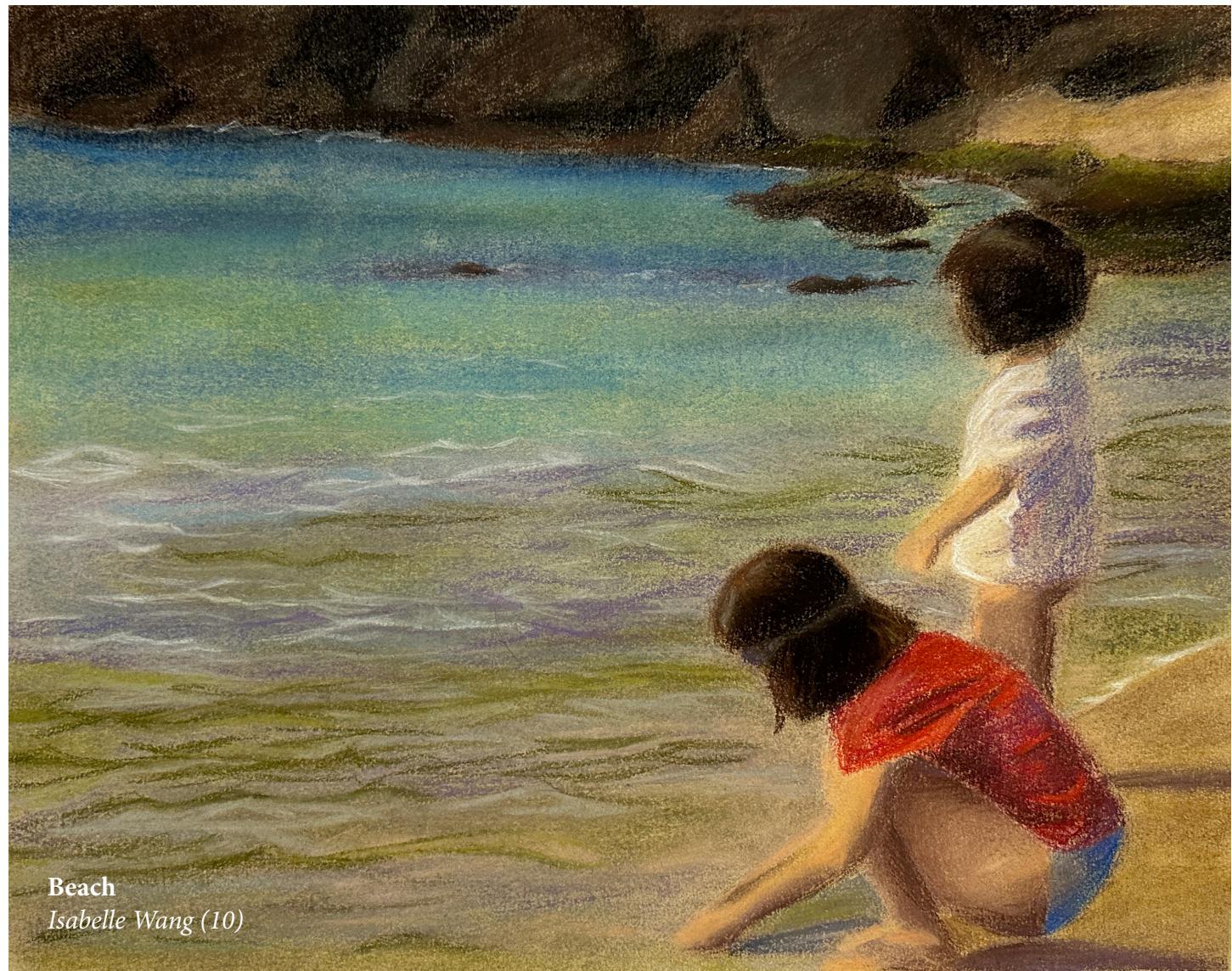
"choco chip number 2":  
king of the furry mound,  
adopted and welcomed  
into my webkinz realm —  
you, the understudy,  
my interim comfort,  
until the shih tzu glued  
to my bedroom walls  
and outlined in gold stars  
clips to a leash held in  
my own two loving hands.

"favorite nose hair lamby":  
synthetic fabric sewn  
into a loving lamb

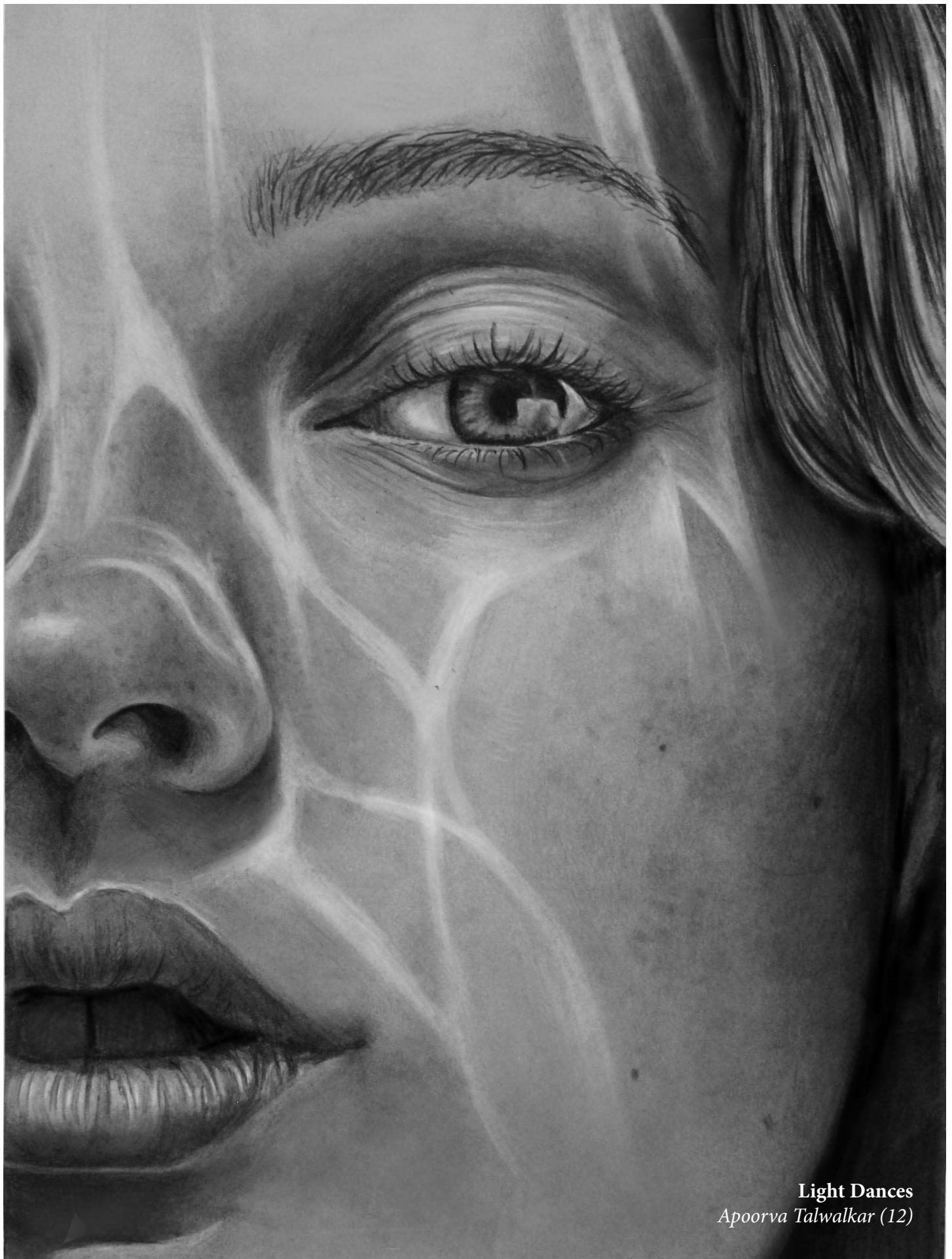
with ears rubbed soft and smooth.  
embroidery thread loose,  
your ears my true solace  
and your faded pink fur —  
evidently loyal.

and "the forgotten ones":  
hidden beneath the peak,  
crushed beneath competitors  
yet dutifully aiding  
as underlooked support  
beams upholding a circus  
and the eldest critters.

to my little guardians of the zoo:  
continue protecting  
from the coziness of  
your cheetah-print hamper.



**Beach**  
*Isabelle Wang (10)*



**Light Dances**  
*Apoorva Talwalkar (12)*



**Tongue Tied**

*Carine Chan (11)*

## Something Waiting

*Florence Wei (9)*

The day I started kindergarten, time was already ticking. We stood in straight lines by the door, backpacks too big dangling on our shoulders. The sky was gray, yet clouds danced whimsically above us as if taunting us, fine strands of cotton taking us to places we could never go. Glass windows stood behind us, doodles of flowers in frost. We spent five minutes watching the clouds drift from one place to the next, slow swishes against a pristine canvas. Five minutes to watch the spread-winged crows glide across the expansive blue. It was a scene from a distant land, marveling at the two-toned sky, painted with perfect shades of evening.

Wide-eyed stares scanned the endless sky, trailing to the end of the farthest field, where caws were heard, crisp like bitter winds. The caws eventually faded and gave way to a humming silence. All that could be heard was the rustle of leaves against the gentle breeze, an ode to silence, a psithurism

whispering words only nature would understand. Finally, the door opened. Teachers greeted us and the effect was imminent. The magic was over. In those days, five minutes felt like hours and hours on end.

Time never slows down for anyone. Things I thought I would always remember spill like raindrops, falling out of my grasp and onto the blacktop. Thoughts fade slowly, a slight sprinkle of hours, a downpour of days, a deluge of months. Years flood one after another, another, and another. Until one of these days, I find myself dreaming of an ocean's worth of little moments. When did this happen before?

The present moment hits me like an unstoppable metal truck. It runs into the past, sending waves of a new reality forward. Just as the present washes to shore, it recedes into gentle foam, drifting from my mind until it disappears completely into the past. The instant it becomes the past—the split second—I begin to forget. And once I forget, there is no way to remember.

I only faintly recall what caused

me to smile on days of sunshine. Each beam stays a precious feeling reminiscent of childhood, a feeling of comfort like no other, falling from my grasp yet never fully leaving my palm. I hardly dream of the wispy, dancing clouds that made me laugh in kindergarten. I can't remember the victorious feeling of finishing an important task. There is no way to recover the warmth of a beautiful moment. Only that time ran with memories in hand, pacing relentlessly past the most triumphant and most difficult days, scaling mountains of relief and pressure. It swims through rivers of longing yet continues through skies of bliss. Time stops for no one; it runs, runs, and doesn't pause.

The days I feel the present is leaving me for the past, I am reminded that something is always waiting for me. The coming days of happiness remind me of that moment in kindergarten. Moments when nothing happens at the same time as everything does. Moments when just for a second, everything falls still.

## Rainy Days

Aneri Shah (10)

You're sitting on a cold bench, slightly shivering in a skin tight jacket, which, unfortunately, was soaked through by the rain. Most of the streetlights are off, save for a couple, and traffic has mostly gone. It feels like it could be just you, alone in the glimmering city, glistening with the sky's sadness. You sigh and rub your arms in an futile effort to stay warm, but to no avail.

When you realize it's no use, you instead turn your attention to observing the weather, fixating on every drop to give your mind something else to focus on, other than the cold, and the other pressing issue on your mind: the messy fight you just had. YOU did not mean for the date to end as it had, you just got so frustrated at Brandon's lack of understanding of something really important to you: your sexuality. He couldn't understand that you could be attracted to two genders, didn't understand that you weren't "a stupid cheater who could leave me at any moment." .....

At least the sky matches your mood. You can see the raindrops falling down, down, down, hitting the ground like fat teardrops too big to stay on the sky's face. You giggle a little at your internal poeticness. That's not going away, despite Brandon saying "you need to grow up".

Quickly sobering up, you start to feel hot tears prick the back of your eyelids. It feels like a million ghost peppers at once. You just want to go home. You just want the bus to come. You just want to be warm. Slowly dissolving into your own thoughts, you feel a panic attack coming on. But suddenly, out of the gloom of night, your eyes make out... another person?

The seemingly person-shaped shadow makes its way towards you, and you feel a mix of emotions. Scared,

happy, excited. They come closer, step by step, shadows getting smaller and smaller, until finally, finally, you suddenly feel a little less cold and miserable and all things bad. After all, it can't be so bad with another person.

Finally, the person stops. Right where you are.

Eyes drawn upwards, you see a person, a lady standing over, her gloved fingers curled around the hook of an umbrella, the loveliest creation known to mankind (or so it seemed to you at that moment)

For a second, a millisecond, it feels like the world isn't the only thing that's frozen

Then she plops herself down.

She doesn't say anything at first, just simply holds out a gloved hand, and turns to face you, with eyes that look like warm pools of hot cocoa you could drown in for hours.

Breath catching momentarily, and cheeks flushing fire engine red, as an unfamiliar, but not entirely unwelcome sensation digs its way into your stomach, you slowly reach out your hand twine it around hers.

You both burst out laughing breathily at the same time. Who would've thought a cute meet could happen at a bus stop? Not Sandra Bullocks or Tom Hanks or any other famous actor or actress in a rom com, that's for sure. She smiles and says

"I'm Vicky. Well, technically it's Vishwa, but my friends call me Vicky. And you seem like someone in need of a friend right now." Her eyes flick downwards towards your lips at the word friend, and you smile a little.

"I'm Emily. And yes, I do need someone right now. Well, I might need your umbrella more but I'll take you (and your number) as an added bonus"

As Vicky smiles and reaches out for your phone to add her contact in, you smile. Somehow, wait for the bus? Doesn't seem so bad after all.



Rebirth  
Amy Pan (10)

## **They Sold Her Arms and Legs**

*Florence Hu (9)*

The clouds kept secret the fury of the ocean. Anything beyond a few hundred feet offshore was hidden away, but for the glimmer of sunshine reflected on the ocean surface, meekly leaking through. Cold, stormy silence hung in the mist. Rounding a bend around the shores, Mama nodded her head sideways at an odd, broken down van. Fractals of rust sprouted from the edges of the windows and doors, absorbing themselves into the vehicle the way a parasite seizes their host. The faint turquoise coloring had made no effort to peek out through the overgrowth of their invaders, dark and ferocious in their shades of burnt clay.

Stay away from the cars that look like those, Mama said. I pulled down my hood, glanced over her head and eyed it carefully, remembering the stories she had told years ago.

I was only a few years old, then.

*Beep, Beep, Shhh* and the mesh security door opened noiselessly. Beyond the heavy oak doors, Mama sat her preschooler and toddler down and whispered, *Qiān wàn qiān wàn* –take care ten thousand times– to never let go of my hands. Each of our tiny hands held on to two of her fingers as she walked through the streets, I on her right and my little sister on her left. Young women in heels and makeup strolled past, bending over occasionally to glance through the windows of the beauty salons and jewelry stores. My sister and I watched the events unfolding around our eye level, the dirty,

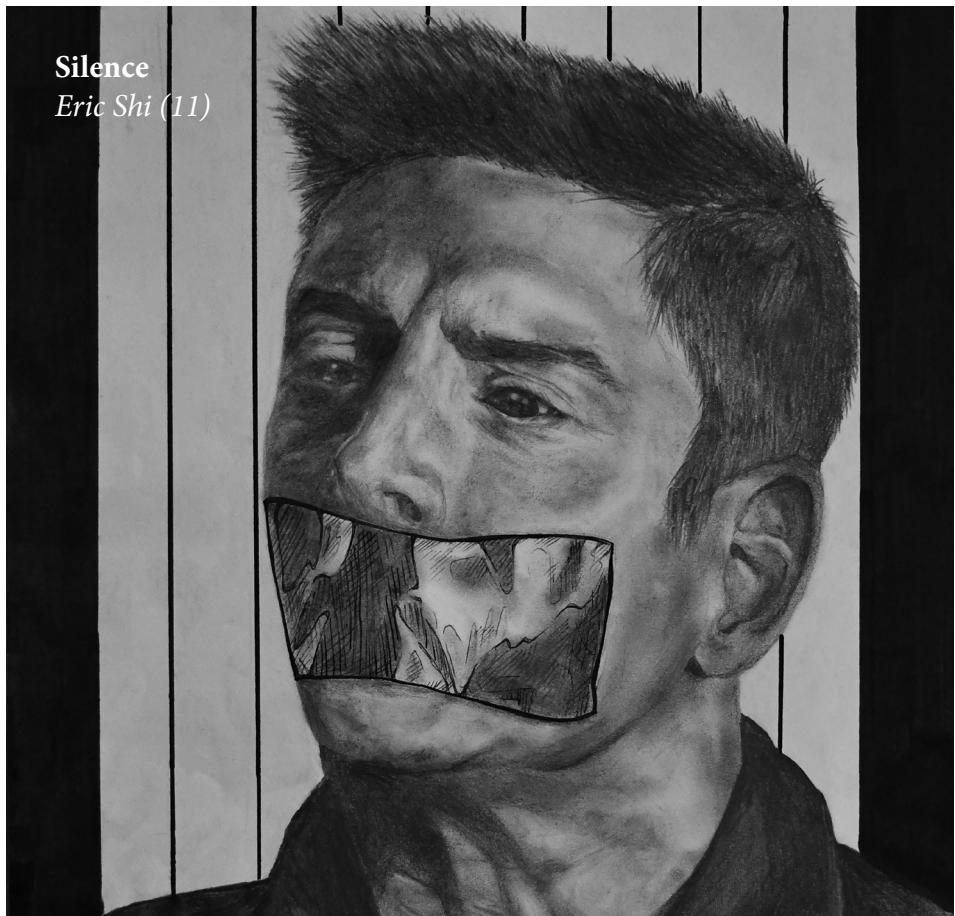
unshaven men that sat on the ground slumped against the trees, smoking cigarettes and growling at the skeptical buyers that looked at their walnuts for a second too long without buying. Xiǎo xīn, careful, she warned us. Here's your money, thank you, and as she took the bag of walnuts she suddenly turned and said TanTan, huí lái, come back, where did you go? I watched her heart freeze.

Back inside the secure oak doors, Mama sat us down and exhaled out of frustration. She tried to breathe out the shock before she said, Do not let go of my hands. You have not seen it in the news, the lost child reunited with her parents after eleven years. Without any limbs. Do you know, it all seemed so innocent. Waiting for her mother, the child fell asleep and the mother left her behind by

accident. And they just put a piece of duct tape over her lips –Mama clamped her cupped hand over my mouth tightly– and they took her away and sold her on the black market. Just like that. Listen to me, Baobao, this is for your safety. The girl passed through dozens of hands, she slept in the backs of dozens of trucks. And one day they just chopped off her arms and legs right here –Mama flattened her hand and made a cutting motion across her shoulder– and the bad guys sold the limbs on the black market and left her to die in the basement and if the police didn't find her then she would have died. Are you listening? I'm not trying to scare you.

Stay away from those people, those people who look drunk in rags and pretend to be asleep. Do not ever let go of my hand.

**Silence**  
*Eric Shi (11)*



## **My Ten Spoons**

*Kyle Olson (12)*

“Now spend this money wisely.” I hear my mother say As she hands me 60 dollars in preparation for the day Where I leave her nest and venture to DC and then New York With a group of my own classmates who to me were all just dorks.

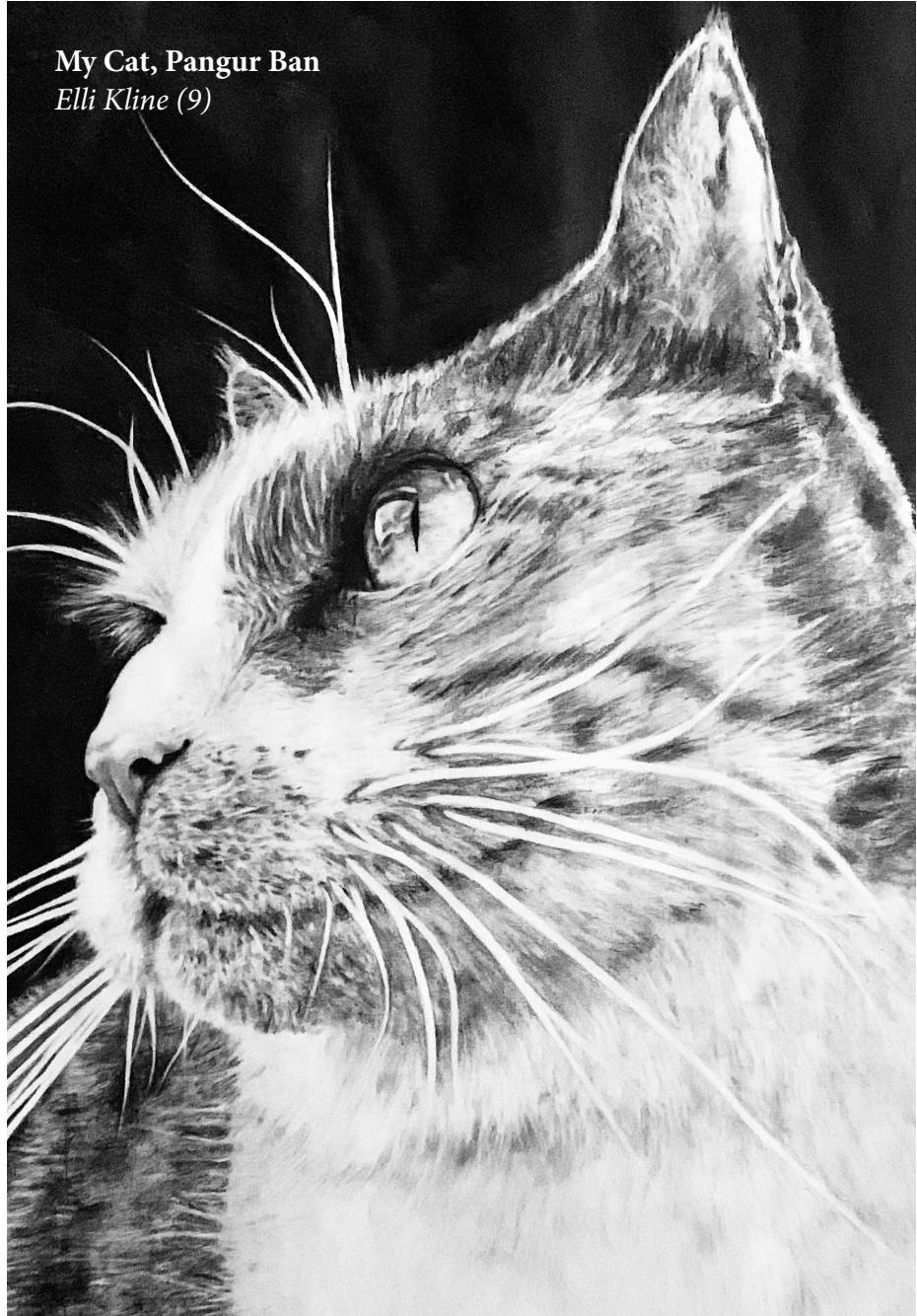
“Be careful now,” I think to myself, “I can’t be unwise or hasty.” And so I swear on my own life to prove myself to be thrifty. As I venture down Times Square, it is a time most opportune! And so I make the prudent purchase of ten collectable spoons.

One is silver, the other gold, inscribed with lady liberty. “Looky here!” I brag to my peers, boasting my newfound vanity, And no amount of their ridicule can possibly change my mind. For I have not a single regret for my substantial find.

My parents and I unfortunately do not see eye to eye. “A waste of money!”, “Rip-off!” I hear them scream and cry. They just don’t understand their worth, for the only memory that looms Is of the time that I purchased ten collectable spoons.

## **My Cat, Pangur Ban**

*Elli Kline (9)*



## **Phoenix**

*Simarya Ahuja (11)*

She was only thirteen. Young, dumb, and naive. I wish I never used to be her; she was happy, but she was weaker. Heart broken in two; she had no clue.

In the wrong people, she put her trust, her pride burnt down to ash and dust.

The scars heal after all these years, revealing her blood, sweat, and tears.

She knew she had to start anew.

She died, and I was born from the ashes.

The fire inside me burns brighter than matches like the phoenix I am. I grew up too fast, determined to bury and burn down the past. I grow through what I go through.

## All I Want for Christmas

Adam Xu (12)

Snare drums, jingle bells, non-alcoholic beer  
and Mariah Carey's sharp falsetto voice  
fill the classroom with Christmas cheer.  
By the board, my classmates rejoice:  
I watch a mosaic of sneakers and skater shoes  
tap along to that nauseating, overplayed tune.

*enjoying it back here?*

yeah, really the same as usual  
*you know it's only you, right?*

*everyone else is up front.*  
uh, yeah, i guess so.

*did she just look at you?*  
who?  
*her!*

uhhh...?  
*the one in the red sweater. you didn't see the momentary glance, the fleeting second of pity, the—*  
jesus! okay. i'll move up.

I'm a master of timing. Wait until their backs turn, their attentions sway, or their eyes drift off elsewhere—then gently, oh so gently, tip-toe my way toward a red-clothed tabletop. It's

adorned with a sharpie-scrawled 'secret santa' and small gifts.

*well done! i don't think anyone noticed.*

thanks, that was kind of what i was going for

wait. why's my name on the table?

*everyone's supposed to get a gift today*  
oh. but my name doesn't have anything by it.  
*i guess you didn't get one.*  
oh.

It's not a big deal. How are you supposed

to get a gift for someone who barely exists?

It doesn't really bother me. I'm relaxed. Composed.

Who cares? I'll just stand here. With curled fists.

It's no biggie. I'm forgettable. It was probably forgotten. So I'll just stand here. With no gift, oddly.

so why didn't you get a gift  
i don't know

a mix-up with another student?  
could be

maybe it just slipped their mind  
likely

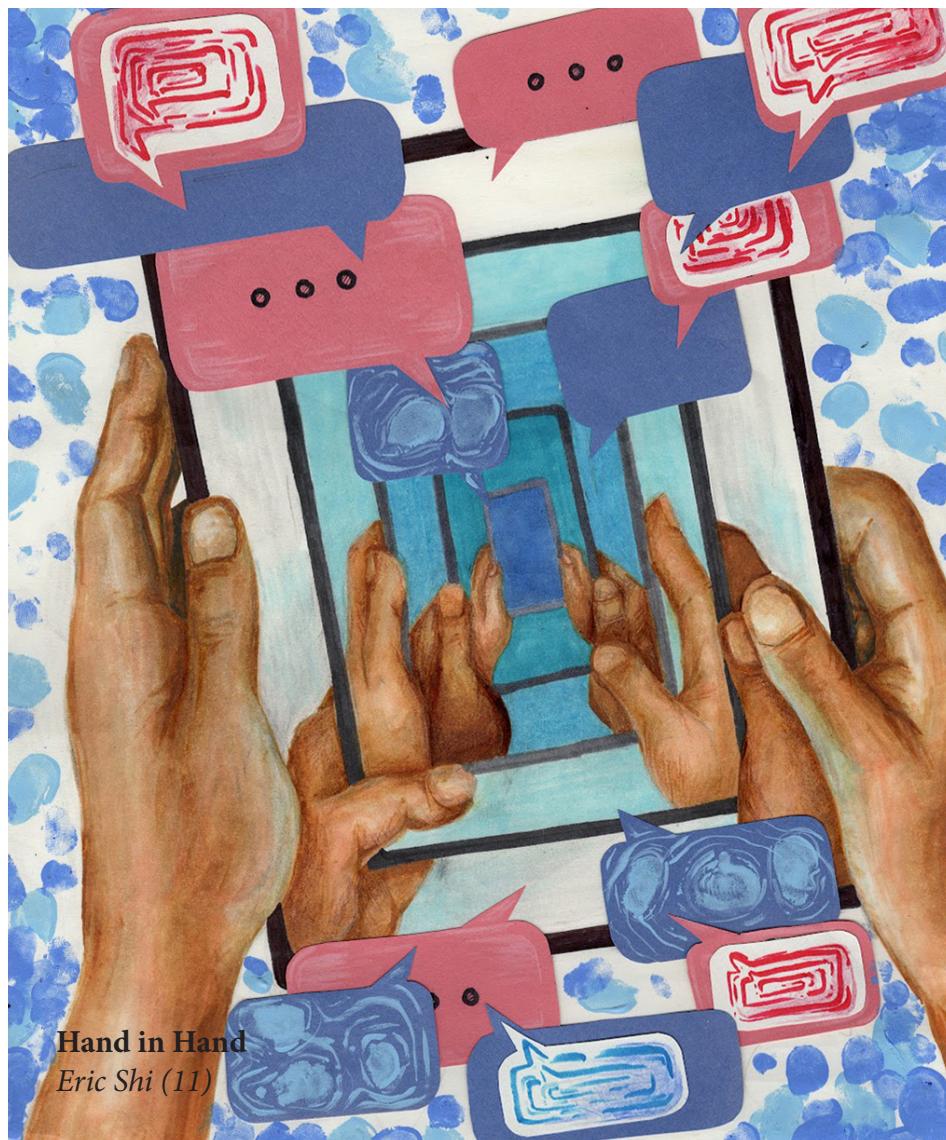
or they couldn't think of what to get you  
maybe

or

*you're just a complete weirdo, and everyone knows you're a freak, including your 'secret santa' and even they know that you're not*

*worth a dollar tree gift*

...



**Hand in Hand**

Eric Shi (11)

**Ace**

Dyne Lee (12)

The dealer deftly spreads her cards out wide  
and flicks them into a pile. Is that an ace I see?  
She deals the cards. May luck be on your side.

The man in the trench coat squints, cross-eyed,  
and slides a chip into the center. Raise by twenty.  
The dealer smoothly spreads three cards out wide.

Flop, she states. His hazel irises are liquified  
greed, but he raps his knuckles reluctantly.  
She shuffles and discards. May luck be on your side.

The fourth card. He frowns, but his pride  
forces itself down his throat. Fifty: a last-ditch plea.  
The dealer teasingly spins the cards into a cascade.

River. He leans in, his grin unapologetically undignified,  
I'm all in. Her lifted eyebrows are of silver filigree.  
She runs her fingers over the cards. May luck be on your side.

He flips his hand: Straight flush. Her lips: a vicious tide.  
He stacks his chips into a tower, the foundation shaky—  
the dealer deftly spreads the cards out wide—  
she deals the cards. May luck be on our side.

well, if that's the case,  
It's all thanks to you. Thanks to  
when you  
press my chin into my neck,  
breaking gazes  
and pitching my eyes away from  
anyone but you.  
When you grasp at my legs, pulling  
me away  
into discreet crannies and corners.

You know, you're kind of a lousy  
demon.  
Where's the spiritual power? The  
possession?  
The glowing eyes, screaming  
children,  
horrified scientists recording their  
impressions?  
All you do is mutter in my ear and

drag me  
down. Maybe I just need to stop  
listening?

where's your clever response?  
“Hey!”  
“H-huh?”

I turn on my feet. My eyes meet a bright  
red Christmas sweater with locks  
of brown  
hair draping down its embroidered  
sides.  
Cold runs down my back. Oh,  
God, calm down:  
yet my legs tremble. My eyes, they  
avert,  
and just standing there, my ribcage

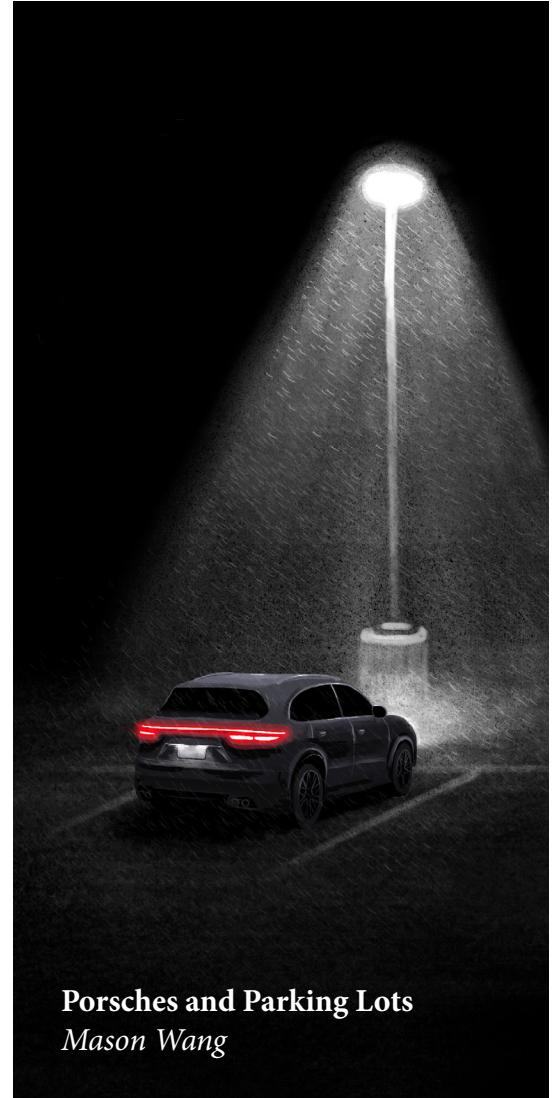
**Porsches and Parking Lots**  
*Mason Wang*

exerts—  
in, out, in out

“I'm your secret Santa. I was  
waiting for you to come up here  
before giving you your gift. I'm  
glad you did.”

“Oh. T-thanks.”

She slides an oblique red box into  
my hand.  
I can't tell what it is, but whatever  
it is,  
it doesn't matter, no matter how  
bland  
or generic because to be  
completely honest,  
whatever it is, it's all I really  
wanted for Christmas.



## Hear Nature Calling

Jonny Luo (11)

Go on an adventure, to the wilds beyond:

Drive the winding roads up Highway 35,  
That redwood forest tucked between  
The Christmas tree farm and cozy town  
And broken signs and rolling ridges.

Breathe the fresh morning fog,  
In-out in-out. Focus. Ground yourself.

Shhhh. Watch. Listen. Feel.  
Get off your phone. Take out your earbuds.

Watch. Watch the redwoods rustle in the breeze,  
Leaves spiraling down like dancers on set,  
Trunk so wide ten of you could fit inside.  
Watch. Watch the sun climb the mountains,  
Light speckling through the canopy and  
Onto the fall leaves littering the trail.  
Watch. Watch the little brown fawn  
Bound across the trail in little hops,  
Following its mother to green grass.

Listen. Listen to the crystalline sound of the wind  
blowing through the leaves and branches,  
Playing a melody on a piano only it can see.  
Listen. Listen to the valley stream,  
That rushes across stones and falls  
And covers your toes in cold water.  
Listen. Listen to the crunch of your footsteps  
On top of dirt and sticks and stones,  
And step into a puddle from recent rains.

Feel. Feel the bark upon your skin,  
As you hug a redwood older than the Romans,  
That will stand in this forest for millennia.  
Feel. Feel the dappled light of the sun,  
As it warms your skin in the frigid morn,  
Before a cloud covers its embrace.  
Feel. Feel the summer breeze, warm on your face,  
The winter rains, knocking on your jackets,  
The spring breeze, refreshing and cool.

Shhhh. Watch. Listen. Feel.  
And be at peace.

## Across the Desert Expanse

Layla Proffitt (11)

I had to avert my eyes at first glance  
as I stood atop the rocky ridge, squinting  
at the sun blazing dying orange across the  
desert expanse.

To climb this hill, I jumped at the chance,  
but the endless sand had sun rays brightly  
glinting;  
I had to avert my eyes at first glance.

Once I looked up from the boulder to the sky  
I entered a trance,  
and through my closed eyes the red sheen  
was hinting  
at the sun blazing dying orange across the  
desert expanse.

I had researched the timing of my climb in  
advance,  
but the sun was already setting as out of my  
car I was sprinting;  
I had to avert my eyes at first glance.

As the sun lowered, the colors continued to  
enhance,  
the scrub-brushes and joshua trees warmly  
tinting  
at the sun blazing dying orange across the  
desert expanse.

And even as the night at the corners of the  
sky continued to advance,  
and tiny pinpoints of white on the advancing  
dark were imprinting,  
I had to avert my eyes at first glance  
at the sun blazing dying orange across the  
desert expanse.



**Auburn Leaves and Lonely Benches**  
Atrey Desai (12)

**When the Drifts  
Take the Dandelions**  
*Arnav Swamy (12)*

I have heard tales of those who do not have tears to shed when they discover how to cry.

Father says that their lives have disintegrated, like riffling through the books that write them in velvet and mansions. The womb has always been

stained with faded ink.

My fingers feverishly flip my fate, which swims in ear and tints my sky. I am not an uncommon monstrosity: my peers and I stand together as

we gaze incredulously at the stars. And so, my fable begins like this. It begins on pastel tangerine horizons, grinding coffee with a pure unknowing that suns

never set. I yearn to pick up the pen, press fresh ink down till dusk. But I've listened to them. I've learned from them. Pens are for the vulnerable. It is a chant that flees lips though it was never uttered.

And it echoes.

So my collar tears as I am dragged into a good life, tearing like the postcard I'd meant to stamp to Father animating a story of glory.

He's heard them all. They wrote a good life, so I must plow through alien corporate soil, flail for that tangible thing of respect, and splay damp bills on tables for a landlord that's been seething since divorce.

It is a good life, but I weep tears laced with bitter dregs, for A woman has at last found the key to a heart I had locked away and no one told me how she did it. I can finally slip that diamond on her finger and I can finally lift my baby boy, though he is blemished by the faded ink that marred me.

I didn't realize Father has been watching me silently. Why can I not recognize him? Teeth bared, tinged grape pink... giddy mumble... he can't. I peer into a mirror when I clench his hand, which only slackens when

betrayal constricts his will. He had lived a good life, they said. So at last, I raise my pen: I lay him beneath the dandelion field I had never noticed as a child.

... My tears are at last falling. He had lived a good life, they lied. A blazing gash of twilight scarlet pierces my sky for the first time.

\*\*\*

The sunset prevails.  
Dandelions,  
Shimmering,  
wind blown,  
Life.

**Time**  
*Yash Pai (12)*



## White Light

Joanne Zhang (9)

there's a monster in my body  
who wears my face,  
but it's not mine.  
it can't be mine.

there's something repulsive  
about looking in the mirror—  
at least, why couldn't she have  
been  
a giant cockroach,  
a yellow-eyed creature with green  
skin?

it's hard to tell  
where the world ends and  
where I begin and  
what is she, anyway? a puppeteer?

in some dizzy dream,  
she paints on a different face  
for each person I know.  
no one can tell the difference but  
me—  
liar.

she says I must be a collage,  
a splintered mirror, a hundred  
silhouettes,  
words and perceptions and  
idiosyncrasies,  
glued together haphazardly.

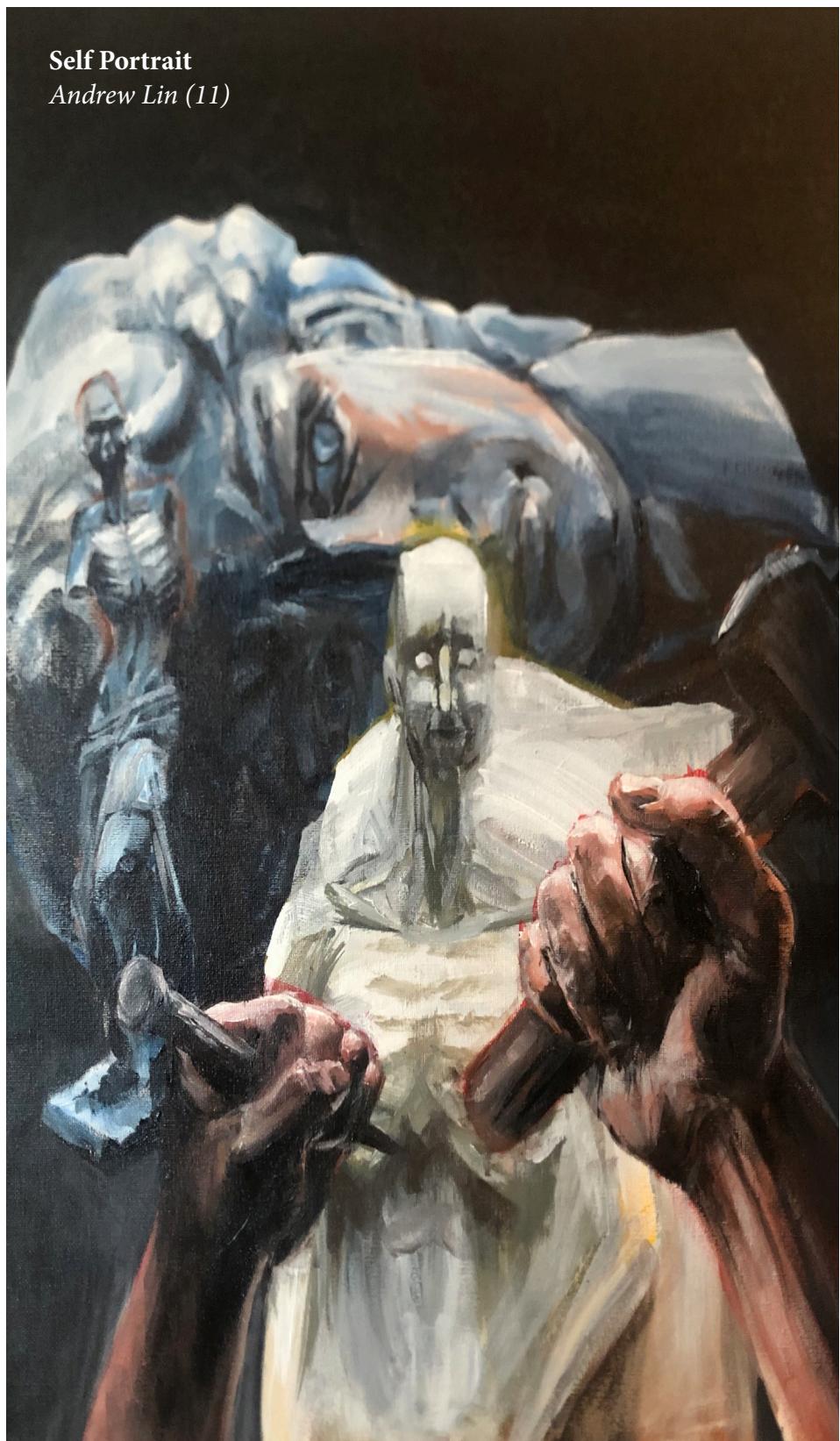
I pull on the strings  
and she tugs at the same time  
our frozen joints sit at odd angles,  
painted faces perfectly set.

if I grip the strings until they  
leave marks on my fingers  
will I find her? except—I'm the  
puppeteer,  
and control is in *my* hands, so—

—I call for her and there's no one  
to be found but me, and if so, then,  
here. construction paper, glue,  
glitter;

## Self Portrait

Andrew Lin (11)



am I not the one with the pumping  
heart?

in the mirror, the face the monster  
sees  
is mine, more me than me.

if I pick it apart I find white light,  
unperceivable, unknowable.

then there, she must know  
that is the color that lights the stage  
and slackens every string.

## **Green-Blue Unified**

*Layla Proffitt (11)*

there's a certain type of fate, of improbable probability, of impossible connection,  
the kind that comes of realizing a friend of yours from one context knows another from another,  
the kind that lights the screen of your phone with the message from a childhood friend long-gone all those years  
later,

the kind that made me half-heartedly half-seriously joke about my painting that one day:

what if one of the people in it sees it, somehow? is that weird? would that make it wrong?  
is it still wrong if they don't know?

if a stranger painted me, i'd never be angry, or confused. it would feed into my desire:

how am i perceived? what do i look like through your brushstrokes, your sketch?  
please, tell me more about myself.

when i walked into that room it felt like i was walking directly into the aquarium tanks,  
comforting, a wild green-blue envelope, toned down, unified. i walked away to climb higher.  
on the balcony, i looked down at all of the green-blue unified people and thought about it.  
how many strangers' photos have i been the subject of?

what do they think of the girl in their photographs, hunched over, turned away, off guard?  
i didn't know i was being immortalized. i would have posed if you had asked.

do i look good to you?

do i look like i want to?

how can i control somebody else's perception?

the blurriness, the constancy. how many people pass through this room in a day?

am i in any of their photographs?

do they know that they will live forever as simple rough ghosts of memories on a tiny canvas?

do they know they're in this poem right now?

do they know that they are the letters and the lines and the spaces?

do they know that they are forever unified blue-green,  
interlinked,

in the atmospheric cohesiveness of this aquarium room?

## **One Dance**

*Dhilon Prasad (11)*

His eyes are open wide  
Now he shuts them tight  
He bows his head down  
And listens to the feet shuffling  
across the stage.  
He hears the cheers and claps  
pulsating from the crowd  
He hears "I love you" from the  
family behind him  
And he whispers it back.  
He remembers the hours that  
led to these minutes  
The practices dragging on and  
on, not only from the laziness

but also from the joy  
The food, the music, the  
costumes  
He also remembers the fear  
but he leaves it in the past where  
it belongs.  
The blinding stage lights start to  
dim  
As he sends up a prayer.  
He knows he will remember the  
people  
He hopes that this dance with  
them will not be his last.  
He thinks it's ironic  
That he didn't even like dancing,  
That he's an introvert inverted  
on the biggest stage for miles

around,  
That simple movements can  
show who you really are.  
The lights flick back on  
The cheers become more  
pronounced  
Music bouncing around in his  
ears  
Some people might be afraid of  
failure  
But he only expects success, no  
matter what he's doing.  
He raises his head  
Smile fixed into place  
A facade? He thinks so  
Yet the eyes that are shut tight  
Are suddenly bursting to flutter



Watching/Watched  
Layla Proffitt (11)

## The Boy with Many Faces

Jex Popov (9)

Once there was a boy with a face like ocean waves  
When he smiled, they split open at the middle and  
light shone through. When he cried, a whirlpool  
opened and the coral flashed bright red

A lovely face can stretch to much proportion, but  
most faces he possessed were on the inside: The  
anglerfish and creatures at the bottom of the well  
A storm may rage outside but on the inside quiet  
waves lapped at the fish, and seaweed gently swayed  
The ones with different face molds asked him; "Boy,  
why are your eyes like thunder? Have we inquired  
upon the ocean's wrath?"

But the boy held no anger for the gods. His thunder  
was a cackle of joy, the only way he felt at home was  
under storm clouds

He wondered what mysteries another's seas betrayed  
The sunny day's shore, the shallow pool, the patch of  
rocky salty mist

What secrets laid beneath the waves?

He loved the shallows more, for the boy with many  
faces could not swim, and yet he wanted to explore the  
ocean floors

The ones with different face molds asked him; "Boy,  
come along! We know you can, just join us in the open

sea."

But there are many things he couldn't do, the face-full  
boy

His fingers trembled under the weight of aquamarine  
mist and tight, tight choking foam  
the time, the noise, the blinding lights and endless  
depths beneath his feet

This beauty was his death

From under the mermen the seafoam turned to candy  
and parted like a mother's hand  
the boy's many faces weighted like bricks, unmade for  
a world of porcelain and mask

Those beautiful, hideous faces which falsely flashed  
and cackled

He went down like a rock into the depths, where  
bones of other face-full creatures rotted in silence  
The boy despaired not, for as frightful as it all was, as  
hopeless

Boats bobbed up and down on the surface, seeking to  
comfort the drowning mass

Perhaps he was never meant for the depths of sea, and  
there perhaps his heart will remain

But he'll be ready when he comes back to the shallows  
And maybe he will find somebody waiting for him at  
the shore

Same eyes, same face, same way of being  
All faces flashing back



Blue Waves

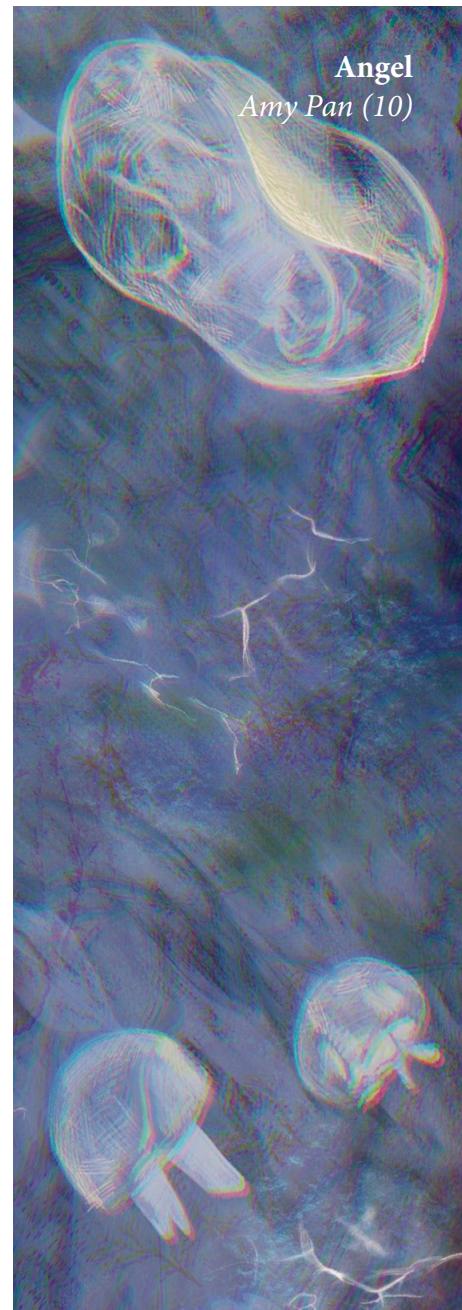
Apoorva Talkwalkar (12)

## **Intoxicated**

Leyna Chan (11)

No number of shot glasses he  
poured chock full of serotonin  
would alleviate the sheer depth of  
that gourd in his rib cage  
Seated neatly between folds of  
marrow and ziplining on nerve  
endings  
was a nothing that manifested into  
something  
Too nothing to extract with the  
precision of a scalpel and tweezers  
but something enough to keep  
his eyes glued on the ceiling on  
tranquil nights and on sheer  
heights in the daylight  
the minuscule ant-like passerby  
on antique model streets, the  
microscopic foam of churning  
torrents, the familiar burble of the  
creek over no-longer-jagged rock  
Raised a glass to everything that  
could be just about nothing  
Poured too much and let the  
packet's contents splash onto the  
floor around his feet  
Shards cutting away at him as they  
fell  
Tiles tainted crimson mixed with a  
salty transparence  
He stared down the sunset and  
waited for the sun to wake the

hell up, only to wonder why he  
bothered waiting  
Was getting harder to pinpoint  
why he waited when it did not  
hesitate to leave him sitting alone  
in the dark days and days on end  
Getting harder to pinpoint why he  
could stand at heights when every  
neuron in his head wanted him  
to stop with the shots and realize  
he belonged down there with  
everything insignificant  
Harder to pinpoint why he had  
nothing worth getting drunk on  
serotonin for  
To pinpoint the nothing as  
his story's antagonist made no  
difference  
So he pinned it on himself instead  
Rewrote the narrative for someone  
forgotten and misunderstood  
Pondered, doubted, then promptly  
erased it  
Recycled the sheet in the kitchen's  
bin  
Closed the door behind him  
Dangled legs over the railing  
Poured the last shot down and  
stepped onto the breeze after it  
Ignored the sheer heights, the  
wind whipping at chapped ears  
Chased nobody into the depths of  
nothing to escape  
something?



## **Ophelia, Drowning**

Dyne Lee (12)

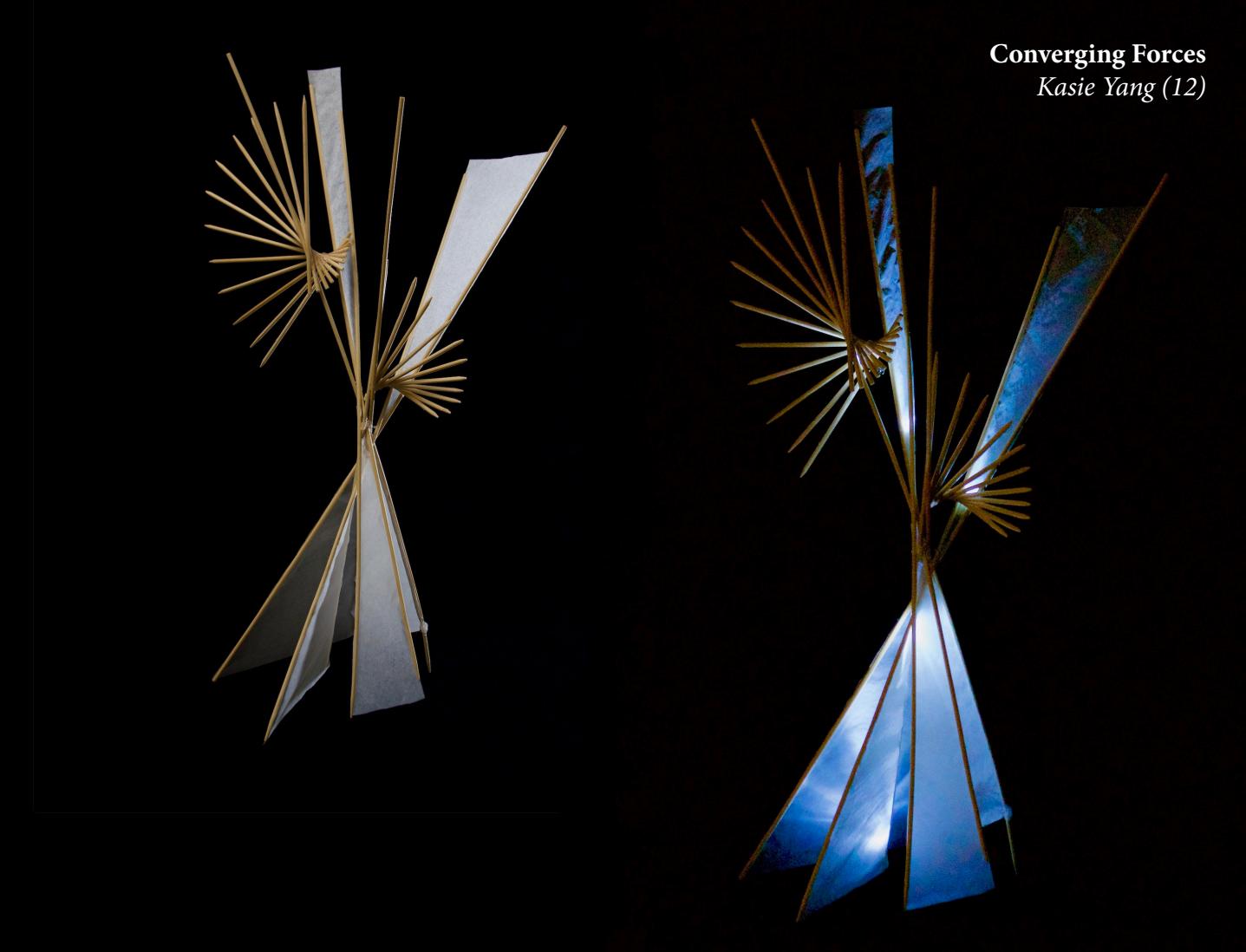
ophelia, drowning

in her fountain of blood unfurled flowers petals of flint mouths of steel virginal lust. sacrosanct sin.  
spurting the water of life from her fingertips liquid greed falling from her eyelashes her frosted breasts  
float like ice in the ocean and her skin melts into consonance damned flesh.

o filia.

sanguinem funde—

feel it, Father. my chest rounded by an amalgam of guilts. the tissue calcified with eve's condemned  
blood. Mother, sing me a psalm.



**Converging Forces**  
*Kasie Yang (12)*

**self portrait as the present inside the amazon box  
that says fragile**  
*Jane Lee (9)*

the delivery man dumped me on your front porch. he turned on his heel and continued his day; slammed on his gas and sped to the next neighborhood.  
you opened the door, yelled thank you at his back, and carried me inside.  
your golden retriever sniffed me and sneezed and barked.  
fragile, my box says.  
handle with care.  
with not a glance at my sticker,  
you rip me open, shred my box apart and carefully

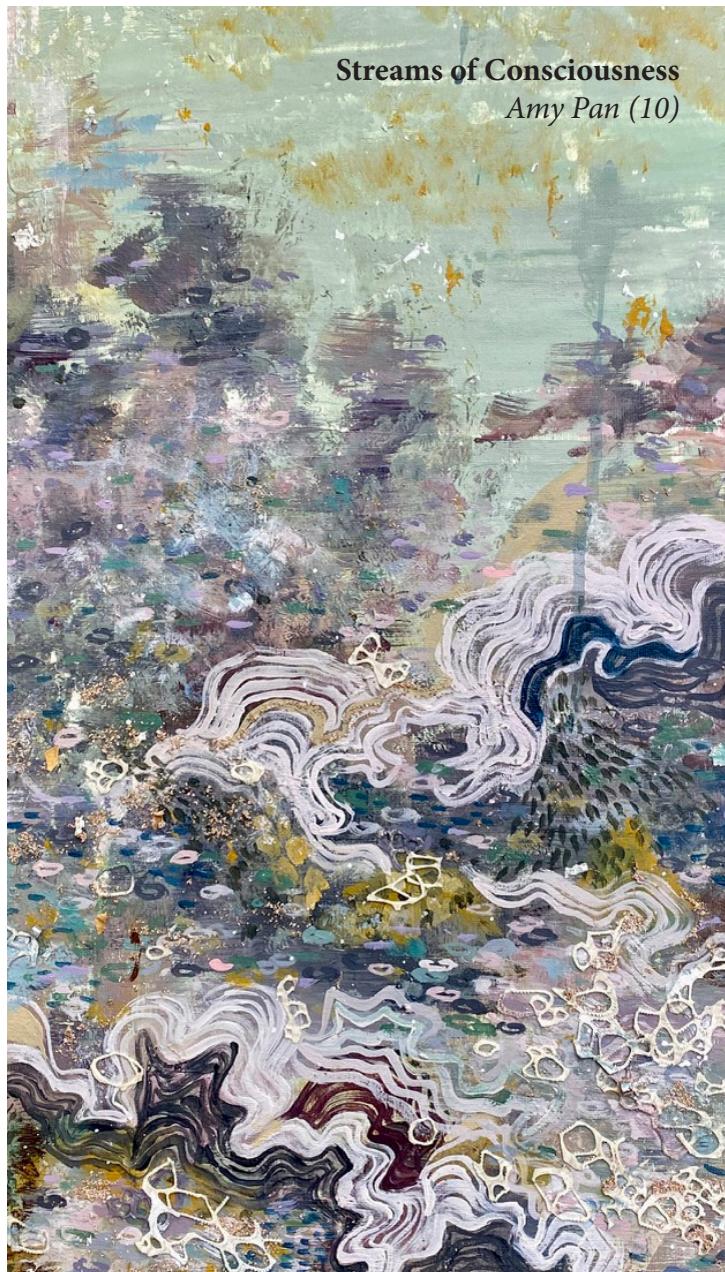
reach  
into the styrofoam and bubble wrap,  
lifting me up into the air, a first place trophy.  
you are carefree and young,  
high-spirited and optimistic.  
you place me on your top shelf with pride.  
i am nothing but a glass figurine inside an amazon box.  
but to you,  
i am the opposite of your soul:  
delicate, transparent, sharp.  
i am a bridge between your childhood,  
your future, and your in-between.  
i am a reminder of youth,  
i am a prologue to adulthood,  
i am your everything.

## **Curiosity Killed the Cat**

*Christina Chang (12)*

It is said “Curiosity killed the cat.”  
I’d always pictured it happened suddenly:  
A cat lured into danger, chasing a rat —  
But what if death snuck up slyly, gradually

Eroding a facade of tenacity?  
Ambition’s akin to curiosity;  
Straight A’s and splendid extracurriculars...  
A burnt out high schooler silently suffers.



## **Pressure**

*Kylee O’Brien (11)*

Words muddle together  
Thoughts merge with the paper  
Pens tick on the table  
Friends whisper their answers  
Head spins in circles  
Eyes darting desperately  
Shoes squeaking, again and again  
Phones light up in their hands  
Questions have no right answer  
Lights turn on and off  
Scribble, scribble, you have no hope  
With every answer, the future is far

Papers are passed, hand from hand  
“This one’s yours, this one’s mine!”  
Hopes are high, the score is not  
Red all over, along with blue  
The pain spreads everywhere  
Their eyes glued to your hands  
Red with regret and damp with fear  
All the voices quickly run  
“Don’t worry, don’t worry”  
“It doesn’t matter”

Letters, letters, they all look the same  
Lower and higher, up and down  
Drip down to the ground, your fears are real  
There is no joy, there is no mercy  
Crumble, crumble, it won’t change  
Page over page, filled with pain  
Eyes cast down, look around  
At all the happy faces  
No one cares, it’s not their fault  
The fault is only yours  
Your luck is fake, it’s all your fault  
Fall to the ground, all around  
It is only you  
No one else will give a glance  
At such a pathetic sight

stress. People more frequently experience physical symptoms such as tension, fatigue, and irritability. Stress can also lead to emotional problems like depression and anxiety. Chronic stress can contribute to the development of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

Stress can have both positive and negative effects. Positive effects include increased motivation, improved performance, and enhanced problem-solving abilities. Negative effects include decreased motivation, poor performance, and difficulty concentrating. Stress can also affect physical health by causing muscle tension, headaches, and digestive problems.

Individual differences in stress responses can be influenced by various factors, such as personality traits, life experiences, and cultural background. Some people may be more sensitive to stress than others, while others may be more resilient. Stress can also vary depending on the type of stressor, such as physical or mental stress, acute or chronic stress, and short-term or long-term stress.

Managing stress is important for maintaining physical and mental health. Techniques for managing stress include exercise, relaxation techniques, time management, and seeking support from friends and family. It's important to recognize the signs of stress and take steps to address them before they become overwhelming.