

Inner Voices



Jennifer Chen '21

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Foreword

Converse. Feel the syllables shift under your tongue the way our world has shifted so much beneath our feet. It is a word that seesaws between to oppose and to chat, to let the earth rupture and divide, or to find common ground and see eye-to-eye.

Naturally, we thought it fitting to make *converse* the theme of this year's Inner Voices Literary Arts Magazine. In a world that feels increasingly black and white, we wanted to preserve that nuance, that liminal shade of grey, to find the thread that wrenches people apart or pulls them closer together. And as social distancing and shuttered stores and homes persist, the need for human communication is ever more vital.

The artwork and writing compiled in this magazine not only showcase the brilliant talents of Livingston High School students, but also demonstrate how we can continue to come together during a global pandemic to enjoy art and one another's company. Several of these pieces nod to the political and emotional turmoil our country has endured this past year, while others simply revel in the beauty and complexity of nature, of growing up, of forging new relationships, and of the commonplace. Nevertheless, they are united in their emphasis on the power of words to hurt and to heal.

The publication of this magazine would not have been possible without our advisor, Ms. Mary Brancaccio, whose unwavering support and attentive editorial guidance have pushed us to become better writers and editors. We would also like to thank our other advisor, Mr. Chris Iannuzzi, for beautifully pairing art and writing pieces and for preparing the magazine for publication. Most of all, we would like to thank all the students who submitted their work or were involved in the editing process — it is not always easy believing in your own voice.

Foreword

Though this is the second year that our magazine will be published digitally, we assure you that the words will rivet you, humor you, and move you just as much as if they were printed on paper. Until we can see each other in person, we simply hope you will read and listen and think about what these young writers and artists have to say. Happy reading!

Joyce He '21
Editor-in-Chief



Elizabeth Nugent '21

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Self-Portrait As Dizzy Gillespie

I found comfort in burnt toast and Sunday mornings
spent poring over yellowed sheets of music.
They weren't for playing, no,
I almost never read off of sheet music
but all music starts from somewhere --
a crisp summer night
spent with an aunt at a sensational
New Orleans jazz concert
when the only thing more exciting
than the sounds in the air
was the fact that I was staying up past curfew.
Or the books I used to steal
from the band room in grade school,
the ones my mother used to find
stashed under my bed.
The 45-records from the vinyl store
that I used to carry home, carefully,
beaming --
I'd beg my mother to listen to them
while she hovered over the sink
the skin on her hands dry, peeling.
She'd tell me to do my homework.
I tried, but my mind balanced
on a tightrope of dreams:
I'd put a record on
and jump around the room
or fidget anxiously
in my seat,
wiggling my fingers,
pretending I was playing
the trumpet echoing
in the back of the song.

Once, while I was dancing
I tripped and fell
on my trumpet.
It made an awkward squeak
and the metal was contorted
out of shape.
I couldn't afford another one
but it was alright with me
because when my friends asked
what happened,
I told them
that I'd used it to fight off
a stray pack of wolves
on my way home from school.
But the only real wolves
I'd ever faced
were my future days.
What might happen if I fell?
What if all those hours disappointing
my mother
practicing my trumpet
instead of long division,
reading music notes instead
of books
were for nothing?
It scared me more than anything.
But then I saw lights,
big cities, roaring applause
and a little boy, sitting in the crowd
watching as I played.

Katherine Li '23

Thief

As snakes learn to crawl and hatchlings learn to fly
I immediately moved my mouth onto more flavor
than the plastic of baby bottles. Papers were
maddeningly sweet, especially grade reports or good job stickers.
Finely printed resumes had the taste of addictive praise --
each line and curve filled my ever-growing appetite.
Mother teased I had a beggar inside me --
no, I had three starving, devouring beggars --
who moved from frosty streets to the heart of my belly.
But as I grew, my bumbo chair was taken away
and I had to, with greater fervor, build my own dragon's lair
far, far from the warmth of well heated milk and baby food
far from soft tip-taps on my back to coax a burp.
I missed the calloused warmth of Umma's hands.
In its absence I grew: scales covering my pale flesh
but now I had only a lair and no great wings to fly.
Instead, I gathered mountains of mouth-watering silver and gold
until all my treasures had been reduced to a lonely patch of dust.
That's when I learned a thief's footsteps are quieter
than timid moonrays creeping through an unlocked door
even though I had firmly closed it on my way in.
Just when I thought my treasure was full and enough,
it donned a pair of shoes and left its empty home.
Then I laid my head against stone walls,
sad emptiness of the lair reminding me
of just how long it had been since
I had seen my lair's worn wooden floors.
Too soon, or maybe too late. Time was precious.
And what had robbed me of my life
I had sworn to hate. Revenge

translated into regret, the bitterest song.
When I sniffed and scanned every trail of footsteps
I saw only mine, firmly implanted with black
and...God, I was the fool who left the door open --

Bobin Park '24



Hanna Torine '22

**you hold this heart in your hands
(but can i have it back?)**

on the tv screen,
i have seen marriages --
sweet and pure, tender and gentle,
fast and rocky, and i wonder
where i have gone wrong.

i see myself in the tv's reflection
and i look at my eyes: flat. flat. flat.
i track my movements and watch myself
bend my arm, wiggle my thumbs
and i wonder how to erase
these sad eyes of mine.

on the tv screen i see sweet marriages
and i yearn for something i've never had.
would it feel good to be looked at
like i hung the moon,
like i gave a present,
like i've done as he's asked,
like i haven't messed it all up?
would it be nice if i was swept off my feet,
held by the small of my back
and kissed, oh so very gently?
would i smile if he took my hand
turned it over, and kissed it
as we ate dinner -- solely to say
"it's delicious, thank you."
how would i feel then?

watching myself in the mirror
(after my startling sad eyes on the tv)
has left me pulling at my face.
i snarl. i smile. i laugh.
it's all posture. i tug on my earlobe
pull back my lip and stare at the veins
of my sad eyes.
on the tv screen, i see bad marriages.
they hate each other -- don't you see?
she turns away: a permanent icy shoulder,
a cold passion rests beneath her eyes.
he stokes the ice when he doesn't show up
or goes out and forgets. forgets what she likes
and her birthday and the anniversary
and her second middle name and her favorite
pizza toppings and...
at one point, he knew that their kisses weren't
a compromise, a way to cool icy flames
that jump, dance and crackle when trash
stays in the house. does it hurt
to be forgotten? or is it worse
to never be known?

i'm still by the mirror.
now i have a chair by my side
but i'm hesitant to sit
it reminds me too much of 9.
when i was 9, i struggled to spell.
sometimes, i was a messy eater.
i got spooked in the night.
but i remember getting a haircut.
and i can see myself hating it:
crying and screaming and kicking
with my little body. but i dragged myself

to church and i prayed i would still be loved.
prayed I could still grow
into my epic, my promised love story.
i ought to cut my hair.

on the tv screen i see
violence and hatred in love.
they are married to each other.
one doesn't exist without the other
and the fighting couples i see
know this to be true.
a bottle, a knife, bare hands.
she breaks the bottle over the vase
and he raises his hands with the knife.
nobody shakes. they attack each other.
his arms are littered with bruises,
her shoulders crack and ache.
their bare hands fly to each other
and in a caricature of love, they kiss.
it looks like it hurts and kills.
i am desperate to be a shining light
even if it's ugly, even if it's evil.
darling, raise your hands so we can
fistfight. does that give you passion?
does it breathe in life?

i don't know how i got to the store,
but i am still running.
i pick out a pink dye, bleach
and some watermelon gum.
i'm going to dig my heels in
so that I can yell.
for him, for everyone else.

i've cut my hair and i've made myself ugly:
again, i'm 9 in the mirror
so I eat chocolate
i'm 15 on the scale again.
I play the music loud:
i'm 17 and stifled again.
i hope the neighbors don't mind.

the thing about a loveless marriage is
you think you can fix it.
our wedding day will not be like tv.
i believe that even though i am flat
i can still have my love story --
he will look at me like i am radiant
but instead i fear i am the fruit
in a plastic bag that he suspects is dull
and when he removes my veil, i fear
the only thing in my visage he will see
will be my sad eyes, and he will wish
he'd never bought this fruit.

i have control. i know it.
when his eyes fall upon me,
i'll be seen: alive, even. i will whisper
say my name. say it.
say it. say it.
i'll stop running, i'll be in freefall.
will the sharks get me? maybe,
but i have teeth and claws
and memory.

Ada Ojukwu '21

The Little Things

we're sitting at the round table
passing the mashed potatoes
with specks of peas and carrots

dad prompts us to
share why we're thankful
eyes swivel to me
to signify my turn
and i take a breath
and say

house
family
friends

gazes drop to the table
where the turkey rests
its glazed, rugged skin reflects
dim light of our overcrowded dining room
an overwhelming odor
of perfume and thick cologne
clogs the air

mom opens and closes her mouth
three times
i counted

that's all?
she's disappointed.
but she doesn't know

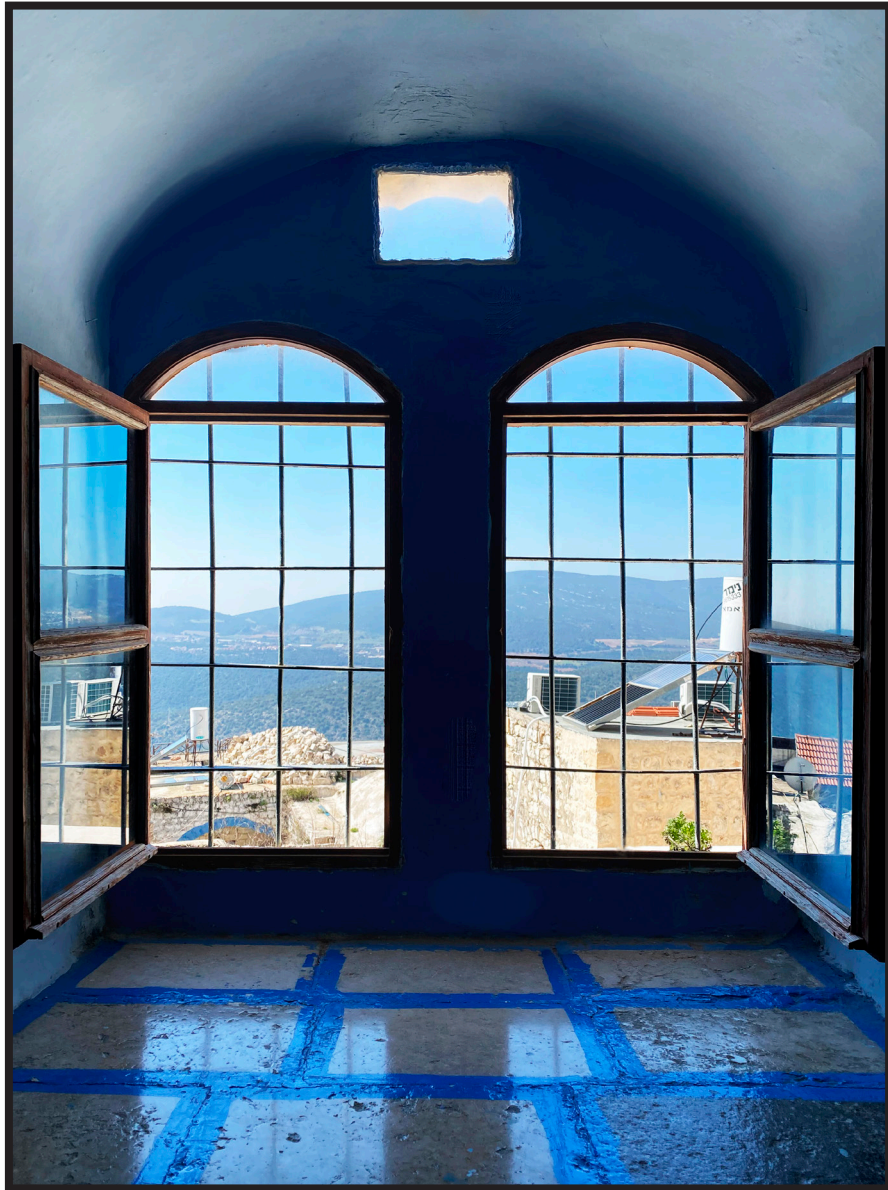
by house, i mean my bed that sits
in front of a glass pane
it shows everything and hides nothing
the sun plays peek-a-boo
behind my shades, paints
golden rays on my floor

by family, i mean the walks at 6 p.m.
after dinner mom and dad nag us
until paul and i give in and tear
our eyes away from luring screens
i always complain but i secretly
smile under my pout
stomachs tumble with food
sky drenched with streaks like cotton candy

by friends, i mean the never-ending
compilation videos that jayla
sends me, in hopes of a laugh in return
sometimes it's an airy chuckle
or a snort-like giggle

it's always the
little things
too small to see, too big to understand

Hannah Kim '23



Remi Marcus '22

Glass

she spoke in shards of glass
dainty and gossamer-thin,
each wishful fragment
sharper, more spiteful
than the last, splintering
and shattering
on her tongue,
scoring rivers of red
down her throat
leaving behind slivers
of what should
and shouldn't have
been said.

Stephanie Li '21

What's Worse than School Lunch, in Ten Steps

One. Setting. Cardboard lunch trays strewn across tables too narrow for two lunches.

Two. Us. Our shrills and giggles send echoes into the chorus of self-centered middle school convos.

Three. The scene. She's sitting right next to me. Sound drowns out my words and I'm shouting:

Four. The incident. OMG, remember when that time when we — Stop, you're so loud!

Five. Reaction. What?

Six. Processing. I'm loud?

Seven. The feeling. Her cry pierces my thin skin, shatters thin confidence wounded from her enunciated bullets that puncture the air between the accusation and my next breath —

Eight. Hurt. Does she mean it? Am I loud?

Nine. Processed. Lost appetite to flesh out a memory in all its giggly glory, only digesting her words

with the tasteless green beans. Lips churn out words disconnected from the heart, teeth crunching

on the hurt. It's tin on the tongue, a bruise fifteen shades darker than purplest one you'll find.

Ten. Epiphany. I thought she was my best friend.

Hannah He '24



Isabella Cendana '23

To Be Me

After Meg Kearney

I believe in a vulnerable state of mind, but never being
in a vulnerable state of mind. I have seen too much with my very
own eyes to let someone inside of my guarded castle. The knights I
have selected are not allowed to betray my trust. I believe in
spreading kindness like glittery fairy dust, I always carry
a small packet in my denim pocket. I am happy to refill someone else's
denim pocket, even if it is usually empty. Kindness should be earned,
not rewarded, but some rules are meant to be broken.

I believe in the power of music, of the healing, slow-paced lyrics,
the ones that nestle their head on your wounded heart. In my mind,
I see my father fumbling with the radio and then jamming
along with Kenny Chesney or Old Dominion, his
happiness afloat in the air. I miss that side of him,
the unbroken, maskless warrior he used to be.

I believe in missing someone wholeheartedly, but also
allowing yourself to miss the person you used to be. Unless
my mirror came damaged, I have not resembled that naive girl
in some time now. I believe in mascara tears on pillowcases.

After all, some tears in our souls are forever.

I do believe in grace, but broken hearts are not always so willing
to see past the agony caused. Shards are sharp and can cut
much deeper than one may have intended.

I do not believe in revenge for it is a sin, but
aren't we all sinners? Haven't we all sinned?

However, I believe in learning from
our wrongdoings, which starts with taking responsibility
for the mistakes that we have made. Faults allow for human growth.
How water and sunlight allow a flower to break free from the ground.

I believe that we are always protected, even by
the things we cannot see. I like to think that a special
angel is looking down on me, making sure I am safe.

Dylan Levitt '23



Romila Kaushik '23

1/6/21

Crash, smash, dash, people from everywhere
flooded streets and darkened pristine marble-white walls
with their shadows of hysteria. They tore down pillars of balance
and liberty, hid their monstrosity, as they were captured by only
their selfie sticks. They'd been enticed, incited, spurred on
as their crude postures and evil desires begging to be quenched
broke in.

The thirst, the need, the desperation to do something
anything to make a scene was...
revolting.

It was immense. It was insane
yet still they pursued it with an ugly pleading
for just one moment in the spotlight
to shine a light on their mistakes.
And ours.

At first, it was comical, appalling, intriguing
Then it was perfectly clear
that it wasn't. They were
unpredictable and radical and yet
simultaneously so engrossing
that one just couldn't look away.
I would not believe such events
could occur, such people could exist
if I were not watching it myself
But I was, as unfortunate or maybe...
sadistically serendipitous
as that was.

I watched as strong leaders we'd known cracked,
as a ravine as wide as the country
opened up in the ground.
If you didn't choose a side,

you were thrown inside,
forced to fall forever.
Now, it wasn't just rioters
who were watched, but everyone.
Everyone, as they clawed and grabbed
and stepped on the shoulders
of each others' belief, trying to
get ahead. But ahead of who?
The world was not so much a race
as an endless battle.
Coexistence can't occur
if we can't cooperate.

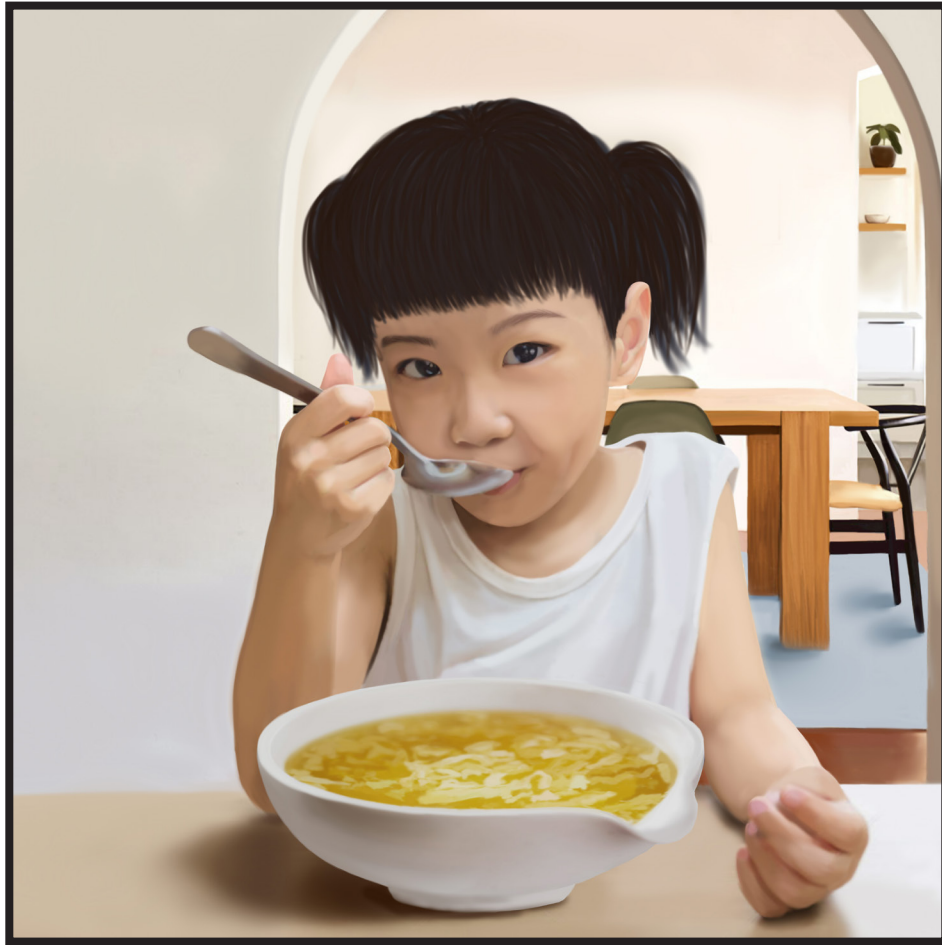
Anger. Attention. Annoyance.
Anonymous protests mingled online
and were whispered in the ears of those begging
to be corrupted.
What was so important to them
and what put their minds at ease
and their hearts at peace --
If no one else believed them,
At least their sickly souls would know
the "truth."

The lies. The lies that spread and festered and grew
until It wasn't clear what was right,
only what was wrong.

1 day, and weak ties reinforcing the utopia of our nation
snapped.

How do we possibly begin
to put it back together?

Miriam Grodin '23



Lucy Xu '21

Smiling Faces, A Prose Poem

inspired by "Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins"

*Oil Painting by Ronald Carl Anderson, 1969
National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC*

A smiling face is always better than a frowning one, that's what I've always said. So I wasn't surprised when my buddies told me I should go to the moon, better to smile up there than down here. Because at least then lots of cameras would see it. I appreciated their joke, but I may have humored them a bit too much. I signed up, successfully, to go to the moon. And I got my buddies to come along too. We smiled when we passed the entrance exam, we smiled in the training room, and we smiled in our giant white suits marching towards a rocket. It was quite the large machine. Designed to put people on the surface of the moon. The culmination of the genius of the greatest minds of our time. We climbed up the rocket. We sat down at the helm. I looked out and saw the blue sky. What would be beyond it? What would I see on my way to the moon? Will this even work? Could it kill me? I almost lost my smile in that moment. Then the rocket took off, and it took our smiles all the way to the moon.

Jonah Feldman '23

In Praise of Spiral-Bound Notebooks

Your crisp, white pages are pristine --
Untouched, uncontaminated, unwrinkled.
I am hesitant to scribble my thoughts and to-do lists
On your empty canvas.
Will I turn you into a masterpiece and do you justice?
Will I screw up and be forced to tear out
One of your precious sheets?

I fear dark, inky marks left by
My ballpoint pen will soil your pure surface.
Are my ideas worthy of your pages?

Nevertheless, I bare my soul to you --
The therapist who lives in my backpack.

You know stories of my childhood, my friends,
My hatred for Rory Gilmore from Gilmore Girls.
You've heard my dreams --
I tell them bright and early, every morning.
You know my most peculiar inquiries:
Did dinosaurs have hair that nobody knew about?
I tell them before I go off to bed, late at night.

Your gray-and-white cover stands as
A cardboard guard of my deepest secrets.
For sixteen years and four months, you,
A mashed-up corpse of a tree,
Have kept them safe.

Thank you, Dear Diary,
For just letting me vent a little.

Sophie Kasson '23 Inner Voices 23



Dana Saparova '23



Jodi Tang '24

Birdwatching on Sycamore Street

jerry the old man
always leaves his apartment at five
to play checkers at the library.
he crouches down to pick up
unclaimed newspapers plastered with leaves

sonya the mother
works two shifts a day
there will come a day when
her calloused hands can no longer be so agile
and she is aware. she dreams of living
in a city where bills are not a common word
but her infant's cries always shatter the safeguard
of her thoughts

abigail the child
of mr. and mrs. park
trots to her elementary school at eight
each morning, her pudgy fingers coiled around
her mother's steady finger. she was called into
the principal's office for punching a girl
who labeled her spoiled

i scribble the observations
in my journal:
chicken scrawl.

birdwatching only works
when you remain hidden

Hannah Kim '23

Remember

The second it takes to stare at the sun
The second it takes to misstep
The second it takes to fall
The second it takes to smile back

All of these take time to adjust to
Your eyes taking in the vivid colors on their own
Your feet and arms pushing away gravity
trying to find ground
Your mouth staying firm, unwilling to try

Sometimes, we don't succeed
In that split second
We look away into the ground
We slip from the stairs
We sink into the water
We silence

But these happen to us so often
We already lose count
How many times did you have to close your eyes
To chase away the sudden black
splattered on your eyes
To get a Band-Aid and cover the wound
and not mind the pain

It really isn't just a two-way road
You can walk away from the mess
You can accept someone else's hand
You can hide behind another conversation

Imagine why we have words
That describe the human state as cowardly
Because we do that so often we sometimes forget
When we see blood and let it dry on skin
When we walk into an awkward silence, and let it be
When we hurt and hurt that we forget
that we are forgetting

Bobin Park '24



Madison Dulman '22

An Ode to the Beach

In the morning, the lingering urge
to watch your sunrise,
your eyelids slowly fluttering open
new day no longer hidden behind a crotchety cloud.

You possess a small, white boat with
chipped paint, faded black letters and
a mutilated engine
showing the world that even broken things
exhibit grace. Grains of rough sand placed on
their floaties wave
to their parents sipping mimosas
on your sandy shore, and join
the fishies for their daytime swim.

Your radiant sun casts a beautiful glow
against the ocean, newfound light
brightening my blue eyes. I whip out my
phone to take a selfie,
and softly curse the sun for its magic trick
gone wrong. I go to touch fingertip to
my red face,
your summer warmth piercing my skin.

A soft kiss of peace on your shore
allows the goddess of new memories to
break free. With your luscious sand,
the bustling family can fabricate
crooked sandcastles,
a pelican can chew on a half-eaten
french fry, a baby can dip her feet
in mysterious blue water
little giggles escaping her
sunscreen-covered face.

Your mouthful of broken seashells,
sprawled out gracefully by the ocean,
has me reflecting on past days with my grandma.
You gave us opportunity to make memories,
to collect those seashells together.
We still smile over those memories.

Dylan Levitt '23



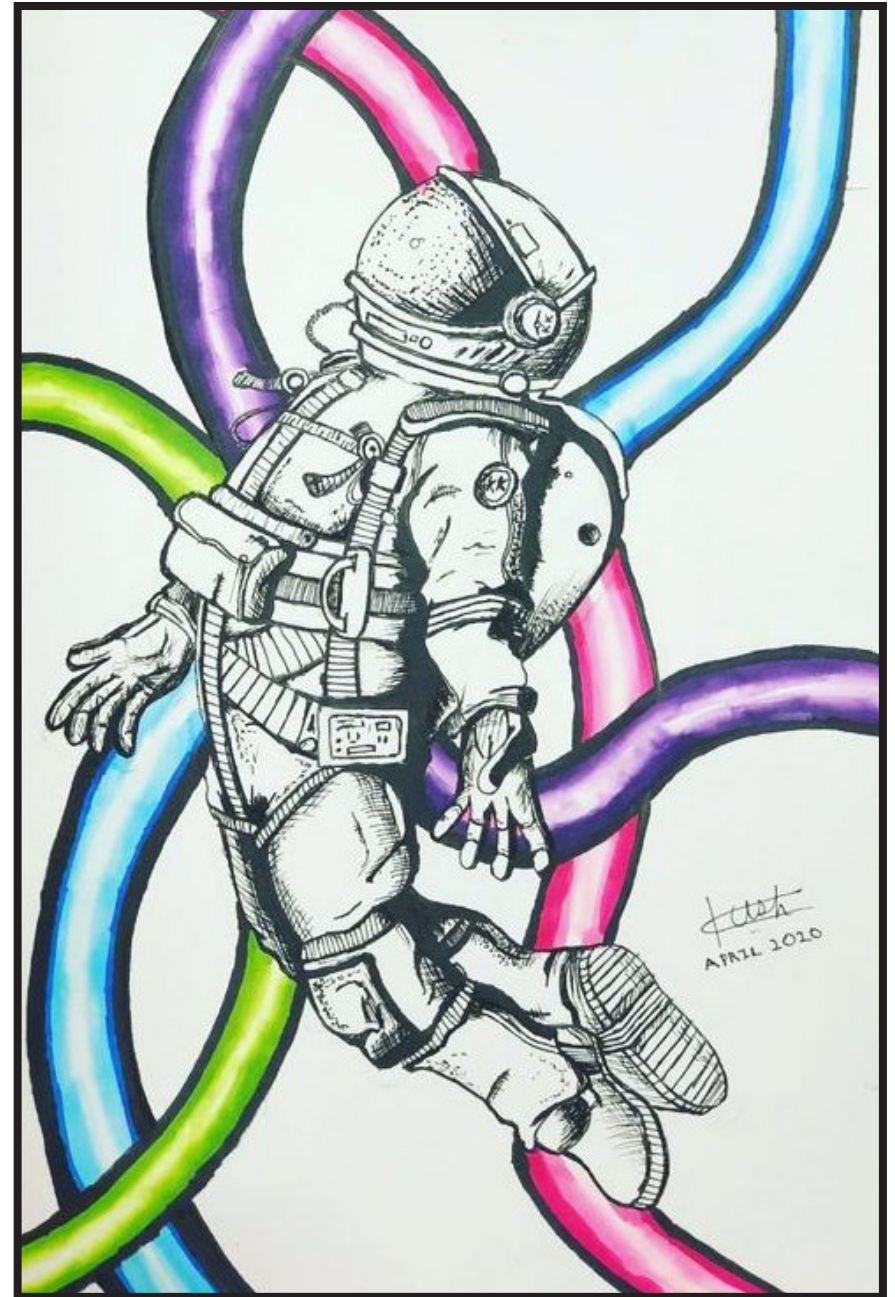
Alex Gertler '22

The Artificial Sun Shines Brighter than Anything I Have Ever Seen Before

When I was a kid
I would stare straight into the gleaming sun
Allowing burning rays to destroy everything in my periphery
Until all that was left was pure shiny pain
The sun's shape seared into the back of my eyelids
As I wondered why my mom was scolding me.
My glasses prescription arrived soon after.

Though I really do wish I had never stared into the sun
You can't blame yourself for not knowing better.
But now I don't look into the real sun anymore
For the artificial sun is my everything.
It shakes me awake with its violently sharp song
Dictating my entire day, my tasks trapped within
Giving me wounds only it can heal
Until it finally tucks me in, kissing me goodnight with its blue light.
I'm helplessly spinning in orbit around it
And when I try to slip away
Its gravity pulls me back closer
Searing a familiar headache into my defenseless brain
While the bloodshot veins in my eyes bulge
From hours of staring right into that beautifully destructive glow.
This time my mother can't scold me for it.
She's in orbit too.
How could anyone ever not be?
We're all just helpless planets.
It is the god of our religion
That we can't remember being baptized into
And it shines brighter
Than anything I have ever seen before

Katherine Chiparus '23



Kush Khedkar '24



Sophia Miller '21

Soft Rain

The gateway between drizzle and storm
Hazy skies and clouds forlorn

Rinses sun a cobalt gray
A polite guest with welcomed stay

Converses with sunbaked grass
Sage green washes yellow brass

Bringer of nature's subtle perfume
Sultry earth and flowers abloom

Of dewy glass and window panes
Forever lover of soft rain.

Katie Li '24

The Wicked Winter Wyvern

Have you heard of the Wicked Winter Wyvern?
Whose wondrous white scales soak up the morning sun
And shed snowflakes when the moon comes along.
His breath, as cold as ice, could put a firetruck to shame,
Effortlessly quenching even the mightiest of flames.
He's not afraid of fire, no, not one bit.
Although he's seemingly made of ice,
Heat just doesn't make him flinch.

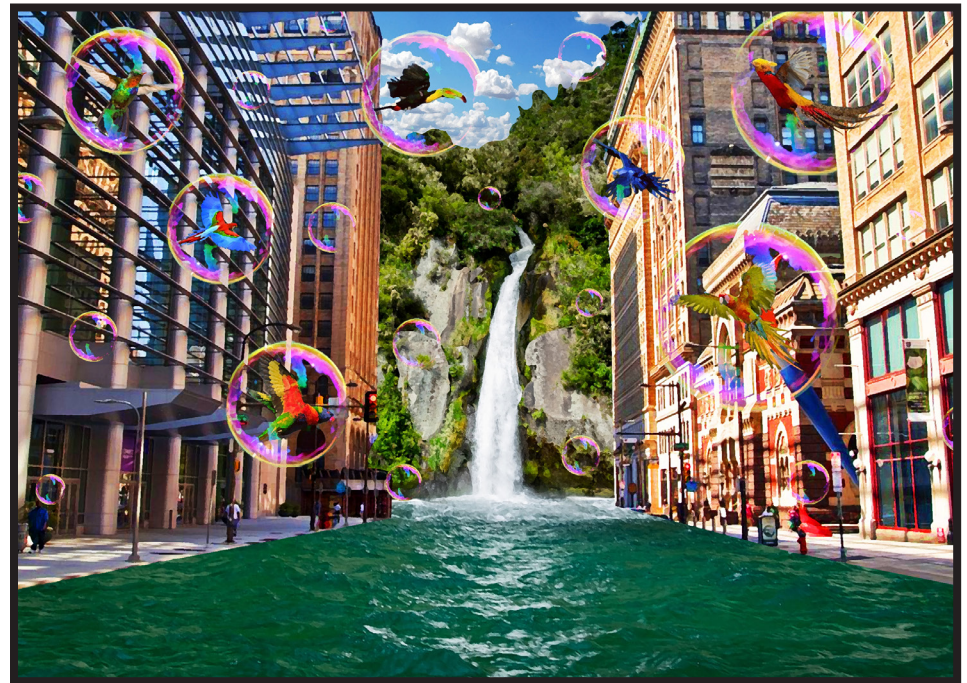
The Wicked Winter Wyvern is an absolute beast.
His wings are wide and sleek and glorious,
Each easily measuring thirty feet long.
His claws look like they're made of diamond
And his horns are translucent
Like gigantic icicles that sprout from his head,
They're sharp and pointy and can pierce through flesh.

But the Wicked Winter Wyvern is not carnivorous.
He eats elderberries, huckleberries, blueberries too.
Chokecherries, cloudberryes, even saskatoon
Are all treats the Wicked Winter Wyvern consumes.
He only drinks water from clean running streams
Made of melted ice from the tippy top of his mountain.

The Wicked Winter Wyvern's mountain is a humble home,
He has his own cave and allows other critters to roam.
There are no humans or predators;
Only peace and tranquility can be found.
His cave is grand and covered in crowning crystals
That shine brilliantly, but not as prettily
As the Wicked Winter Wyvern does.

The Wicked Winter Wyvern isn't very wicked,
So I can't help but wonder why he's called that.
Maybe it's because those daring enough to find it
Never seem to make it back.

Sydney Goldstein '21



Hannah Mattam '24

Remote

I sit in my bedroom alone
but the focus of so many people.

Their faces are tired, bored
Their eyes are swimming
Their cameras don't do justice
to their thrown-together outfits.
I feel my eyes wander
to the phone next to me. It baits me
it calls me, it begs for me to flip it over
and hungrily stare at the screen
for everything I've missed.

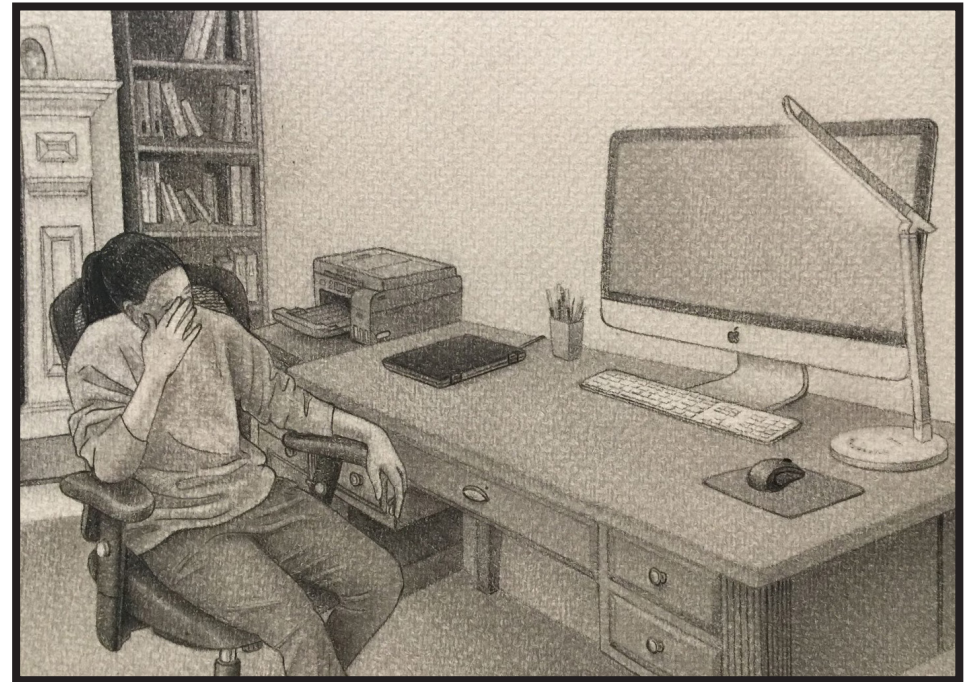
The teacher is speaking --
Well, attempting to. In the background
a student's phone rings
the product of a microphone forgotten
to be hushed. My heater is going off
so loudly, creating static that exists
to make concentration more difficult.

I sit at my desk, the same spot I've sat in
every minute of every day for the past 11 months.
I glance to my left, but even the allure
of the open window beside me
isn't enough to distract me anymore. I've gone numb.
Now, all that fills my vision is the clock:
I count down seconds until the bell doesn't ring
and the day doesn't end. Not really.

Actually, it's funny.
The novelty has worn off, the school
days have grown longer, harder.
Communication through a computer is
not as cool when it's your only communication.
Maneuvering from bed to desk in two seconds
seems less like an achievement now --
it's just pathetic.

That's the moment when it begins to click,
We're not just virtual -- we're remote.

Miriam Grodin '23



Rebecca Liu '24

The Truth

After Meg Kearney

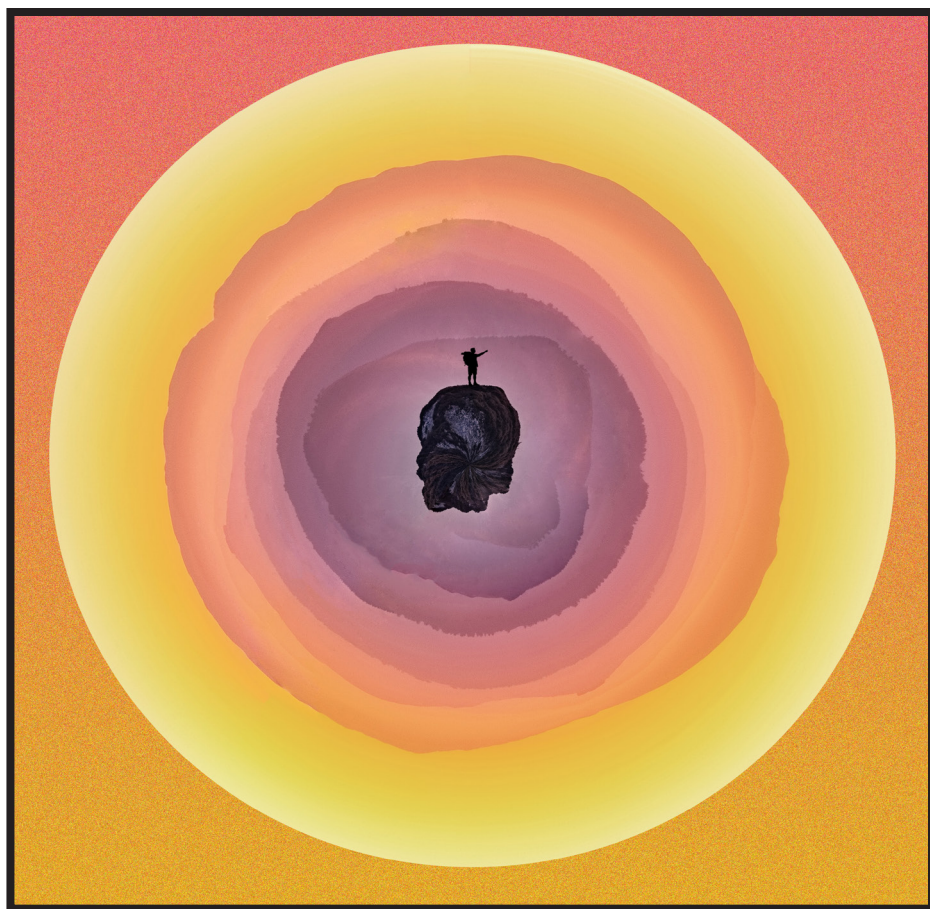
I believe that I have never known anything to be true and I have never known anything to be false. I believe that I am a dust speck walking around on a dust speck that's floating through a sea of dust specks, so nothing really matters anyway. I believe that I've never been in love and that I fall in love with every person I meet. I believe that I am my own soulmate and no one will ever know me like I do. I believe you're not in the dark if you can still feel your way through. There'll always be an exit sign looming overhead. I believe that I'm trying way too hard, but that my effort will never be enough for you. I don't think I've ever cared about a single subject I learned in school and it's unfair to make me try so hard to memorize facts I will forget the day after the test. No pair of eyes will ever see the world the way that mine do, and every pair of eyes is designed the same. I believe that fear was created so one man could feel power over another. I fear everything and nothing, everyone and no one. As hard as I will work to find it, I even fear the truth. I believe that every human was put on this Earth without any purpose other than to find their own. I don't believe in God...or maybe I do. Maybe I'm God. Maybe you are. Maybe I'll never find out the truth. Maybe I'm not supposed to. I believe that my mother was right when she said: "Life sucks and then you die." I believe I'm at the part where life sucks. I'll keep you updated on what happens next.

I believe that with every laugh, I let out a tear and with every tear, a dying breath. I am always dying to find answers, dying to find the truth. I believe that I'll never know anything to be true and I'll never know anything to be false.

Max Dansky '23



Danielle Meyers '21



Chelsea McCormack '22

The Black Oak

After Mary Oliver

When the tall oak
Struck the morning road
And the squirrel narrowly escaped its wrath,
Losing a tail --
Greed, that is how it happened.

Now the oak lies lifeless
Useless to the blue jay that has called it home.
I imagine this bird lost,
Searching for a new abode.

He is as worn and structured, the tree
as my own grandfather.
He is as rigid
as the unbending mattress I lay on.
I leave his hollow skeleton

And continue on the path, thinking
about greed: its power
its terrible grip
its certain havoc. Yet behind

my smooth exterior burns a kindling of guilt
that I have always carried.
It is the story of intense care.
It says to morality: not me!

It is the light at the core of all man.
It is what pushed them to massacre the tree
sending it down with a thud --
happy to take their land
before the oak could protest.

Veronica Shrayman '22

Promises to My Future Teen Daughter, a Ghazal

No matter what you do or say, know I'll always stay.
Even if you run away, know I'll always stay.

I would never hate you if you told me who you love;
For sharing or choosing not to, know I'll always stay.

When you're anxious and cry about a simple thing,
I'll smile. You're like me; please know I'll always stay.

If you break my favorite mug and I find it on the floor,
I'll help you sweep it up, know I'll always stay.

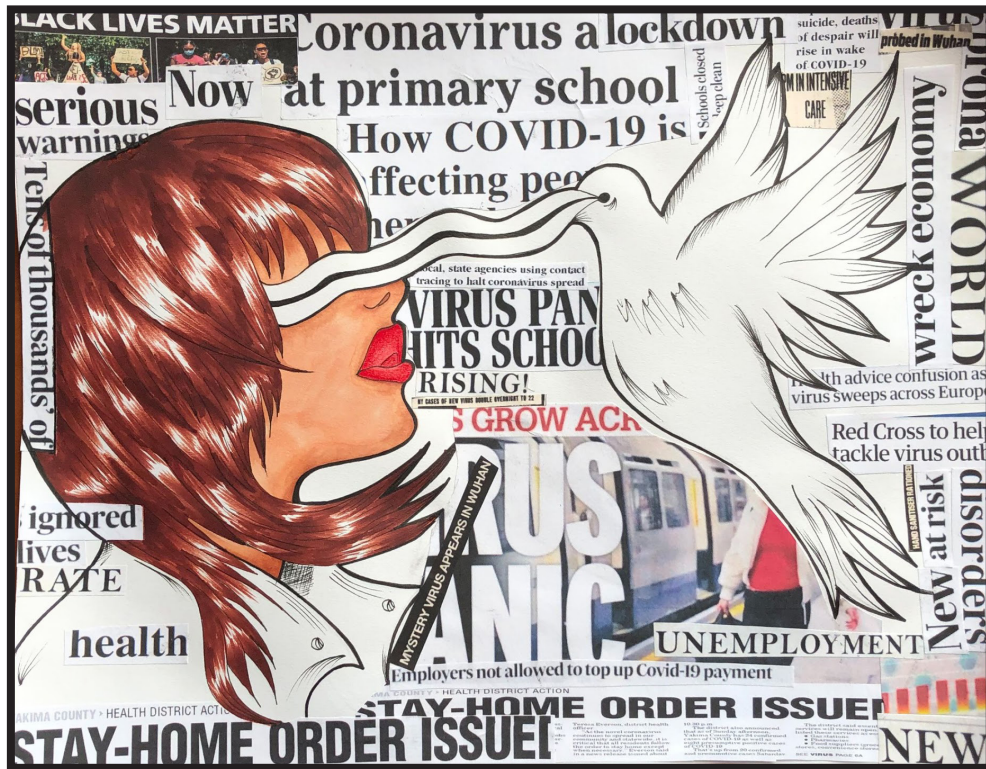
Get what you want from life when you leave the nest;
I want you to be happy, free; so know I'll always stay.

Being a teenage daughter is never an easy time,
I am here to wipe your cheeks, know I'll always stay.

Priela Safran '21



Harris Yelen '22



Anna Giambattista '23

Madness

Am I insane? I am insane.
 My blood doth boil,
 My skin hath rot,
 My eyes turn upside down,
 And ghosts revel in my brain.

The moon's madness spawned
 From bowels of night.
 Not fight or flight,
 Just fright.
 Why hath I been wronged?

Now I mumble in my sleep,
 Of the eldritch,
 Of the extraordinary,
 And the unexpected.
 Thoughts my reaper reaps.

Letters and numbers jumble.
 I carve the walls with unspelled names.
 With piercing scratches of chalk and nail.
 I crack upon my canvas.
 And to dust I crumble.

Jonah Feldman '23

Starry Skies and Love Letters

Sitting on your deck, necks craning, we stare
at the midnight blue above.

A chilled breeze cuts through my shirt
the smell of outdoors penetrating my lungs.

You ask me a question, voice but a soothing whisper.
My response trails off, becoming one with the stars.

The stiff metal chair presses deeper into my neck
as I bend backwards to study the stars behind me.

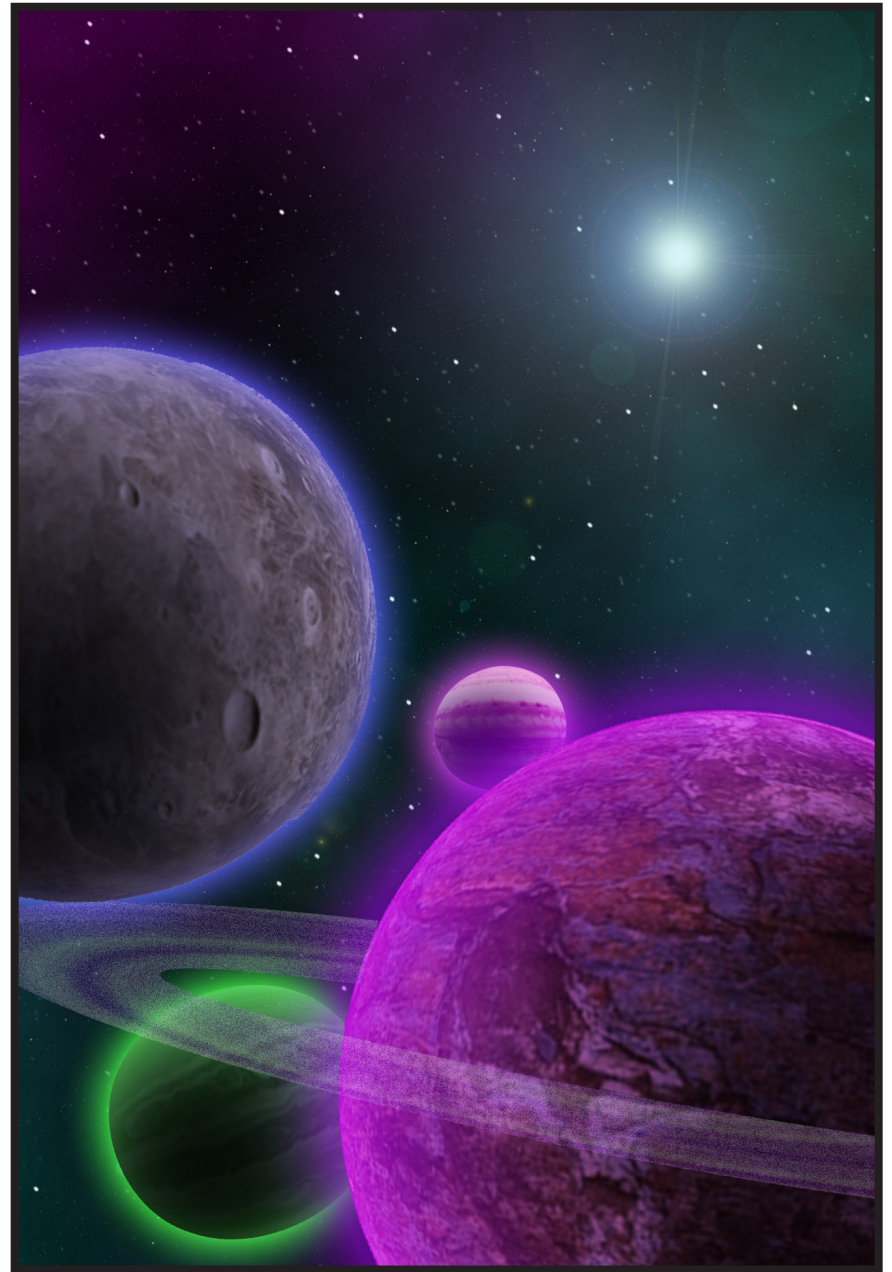
Crickets chirp, leaves rustle in an autumn melody
our breaths in unison -- In. Out. In. Out.

I stretch out my arms, extend my fingers, ensuring
that every part of me soaks up the sky.

You look at me and smile, promises in your eyes,
love letters on your tongue.

You pull me out of the sky, silence louder than words
and rejoin me soon after in counting the stars

Priela Safran '21



TJ Katz '23

A Ode to Marigold

In the wake of the dead
A flower blooms
Springing upwards from the dirt
Leaves unfurling
Bright orange petals peeking out
Making their way to the sunlight.

Flowers of the dead, reborn anew.
Digital petals floating around
A herb of the sun
Dipped in warmth.
A love charm of sorts
A flower to wish good luck to

A flower to seek
The desire of Mary's gold.
Passion to find
To be creative
So divine.

Like the movie from a time ago
The dead roam free
Make a trail of orange sun to where they should see
Gather many vibrant sun-touched petals
With old skeleton guitar
To remember me.

Its beauty is what is favored
With a pom-pom appeal.
Clustered together in golden petals
Golden hues echo a summer's day
Warmth and happiness felt
Pollen glazed lighty petals
Lucky flower of 14

And yet in a past time
A young girl hunched over
Drawing like a maniac
She makes her 1st ever good-looking flower

Orange hues bright strokes of her plastic pen
The screen glowing, showing off her masterpiece
Her treasure that she sought to find
A fake stained-glass look was what she wanted
Vivid colors grasping at the eyes of those passing by.

With chromatic colors
It blossoms --
The flower that borrows the sun's rays
Reaching for the heavens
The clouds smiling upon it:
Marigold.

Hanna Hantman '24

Three Different Worlds with a Common Goal

Outside the window lays an empty street,
The birds chirping blissfully uninterrupted.
The blue sky and the trees meet,
No airplane leaves white streaks erupted.
Inside the window is a family in seats,
All facing a computer with faces to see,
The screens replaced schools and offices.
No person has been able to foresee,
The future of billions with no promises.
However, there is another world.
A place where doctors work hard.
Ventilators and wires are uncurled
Face shields and goggles are blurred.
As the world join hands as one globe,
To someday see a light of hope.

Kristen Ngai '24

The Captivating Escape

notes slipped in pockets
the shades are drawn
furtive photographs
on the neighbor's lawn

scintillating smiles
for the cover of vogue
you cry yourself to sleep
no one would know

diamonds falling from the sky
empty promises to alibi
red hot lips and Paris trips
the life everyone wants

champagne parties
floor-length ball gowns
you're living the life of a Barbie
characterized by nonchalance

Sasha Culver '22

Running

Sometimes, in an alley
you see a mugger
who is very threatening.
His wide smile a crazy
threatening grin.
He says:
*do you have anything good
in your purse?*
You sprint up the fire escape.
You can't let him rob you or
catch you. Run until he has
become exhausted.
Run until
you have left him, quickly
instinctively, like a cheetah
you find in the savannah, in the wild
running and hunting
and escaping predators.
Sprint fast. You wander the street shook
by the stranger
the creepiness of his smile.
When he's far away, you stare like a child
into the musty clouds:
with the purse of your belongings
the purse you saved:
the deeply dangerous savannah
its familiar buildings solemnly standing
hundreds of feet above.

Leo Stern '23



Emily Wang '24

The Zoo

Elephants and Donkeys amok in a zoo
Tugging the white dove's wings.
Amid our supposed "ethics" and supposed "truth"
Strangled, it starts to sing.
Drowned out by jeers and cheers of the crowd
Caught in the hype of such fun.
To their brothers, an allegiance vowed
While all sisterhood is shunned.

Nishna Makala '24



Blake Dworkin '23

Painting Our Pasts, Presents and Futures

Why do we rinse paint off
Brushes after using them?

Why do we wash our hands
With the same soap every time?

We clean and we erase, wiping
And polishing the flaws from our hands.

But sometimes soap doesn't get everything,
Leaving a present behind

And we end up staining
Our paintings gray

We paint over it, but
Still something peaks through --

A history of mistakes
That cannot be erased.

We speak of great leaps
But sometimes we fall short

And we try to pretend
We didn't fail more than once

But once, we did fail. And try
As we may to cover it up --

To the people that
Peer into our achievements --

Our hideous colors
Will shine through:

Our problems will be
Our victories.

Sheryl Liu '24

A Warmer World

Mara sat with her back against the synthetic, nylon wall of her tent. It was bright blue and just, so fake. But then, everything was so fake. There were no plants, no grass, any tree they saw was cut down and used for supplies, and all that was left was the never-decomposing plastic that was choking their poor planet. Mara would have left a long time ago if she had anywhere to go.

"Hey, Mara."

Jade sat down next to her, pulling her from her thoughts. She'd come over from where she had been helping some children and she seemed exhausted, in every possible way. The way Jade looked as she sat down was how everyone in that camp felt: defeated. Even the young children had lost a lot of their joy.

"Sometimes, I just wish we could abandon this dead planet, float off into space, you know?" Jade grinned, but her mouth slowly sunk back down into a frown.

Of course, Mara had thought of that too. Forgetting everything that had happened, relinquishing her connection to Earth? It seemed like a dream. But that could never happen. They had been given this planet and they'd run it into the ground. Now, they had to live with the consequences.

"Believe me, that would be amazing. But that would never happen."

"Obviously," Jade retorted, coughing, "but if we don't have ridiculous dreams, what do we have?"

"Heatstroke?" She was only kidding a little bit.

"I don't know, I think it'll be a cold night tonight."

Mara scrunched up her eyebrows, looking towards the sky. Cold? It hadn't been cold in years. If it was supposed to cool down, the sun didn't seem to realize. Or maybe just didn't care.

"Here's to optimism, right?" She turned her head, startled by the noise coming from the center of camp where people were beginning to gather.

It must be time to ration out their food for the day. They always shared, because none of them wanted to see anyone else suffer anymore than they already were. When they'd first come together in this camp, there were groups: families, friends and acquaintances, enemies. But now, all that was gone. There was no room for that when there was limited food and limited water and limited everything. And so, they simply banded together, because then at least, they wouldn't be lonely as they toiled away hopelessly.

"C'mon Jade, aren't you hungry?"

"Starving. But...I figure there's others here who need it more than us. We can have what's left." She stayed sitting, and Mara sat back down next to her. "So Mara, humor me: How would one go about floating off into space?"

"Well...I think it's a matter of asking the right people."

"Ah, I see." Jade was silent after that, as she stared up at the red-rimmed sky. The sun would be setting soon, and then it would begin the cycle of another day. Monotonous, awful, and so, so hot. "I always thought the problem was more about responsibility."

"Responsibility?" Mara gaped, "What do you mean?"

"Well..." Jade's gaze found the small children

lining up to get their rations. She pitied them. This world was the only one they'd ever known. The broken, devastated one that she just wished she could abandon. They'd never know the joy of sitting and eating a drizzly ice cream cone on the beach at sunset, or the pure bliss, the exhilaration of riding a sled down a snowy hill. There was no snow now. Certainly no ice cream.

"I think it's about our responsibility to our Earth. Our world. We've always lived here. We were the ones who killed it. Now we've got to live with the consequences."

"Yeah, but that Earth? That world is gone, and I don't think it's coming back." Mara breathed in heavily.

The whole conversation was laughable, joking around about floating off into the atmosphere? It was impossible. But it was a lot better than accepting the truth.

Miriam Grodin '23



Dajana Kim '22



Scott Schroeder '22

The Walk Back is the Worst Part

After "Pothole" by Modern Baseball

The fossil of my footsteps will be unearthed on a far-off day unknown. The flurry of snow falling from the sky covers my tracks. It erases any indicator I was here at all. The only light guiding me is the far spaced-out street lamps. Old and dim they only illuminate a small splotch of concrete at a time.

My hands grow cold and numb despite my gloves; my nose and cheeks burn. The small puff of fog from my mouth is the only indicator of my sight.

I like the silence. I like the empty streets. Sometimes I need a moment to feel like I am the only person in the world. At the same time, it's a moment where I wonder if I'm even alive. The frostbite and sound of snow crunching under my boots are the only signs that I am.

She had watched from the living room window as I walked away. She said nothing as I walked off in the opposite direction of my house. Maybe she didn't know. Maybe because she thought I was taking a shortcut. Realistically, she just didn't care.

It was the silence on the walk to her house that broke things off. A wordless agreement of thoughts unsaid hanging in the air. It was over and we both knew it. Three years...

Three years of what?

Three years of good memories?

Three years of wasted time?

Three years best left forgotten?

The thoughts I can't quite reach float above my head, carried off by the wind. I pull out my phone, surprised it still has life left in it. 1:27am. No calls, no texts. I wonder how long I could stay out here. Would I freeze in the forest before anyone asked me when I was coming home? It doesn't really matter. A yawn escapes me and I decide to go home.

Imprints of the soles of my boots follow me. A moment caught in time. Something to let someone know that I was once here. That I existed, that at one point I was alive. Though part of me knows it won't remain. The flurry of snow falling from the sky covers my tracks, and just like that, I am gone.

Zoe Statmore '22

Parallel Lines

I glanced at the clock for the 900th time. “Only two o’clock?”

I stood up and walked around the room, in search of some sort of “pizazz.”

“Mooooommmmm!”

“Yes, Sweetheart?”

“I’m bored. Like really bored.”

“There’s so much you can do! Play with your dolls, go outside!”

My dad pulled the phone away from his ear for a split second, “Go outside kiddo. Get some fresh air!”

Ugh. I stomped through my house, tied my shoes, and slithered outside. I laid down in the grass and let the sun kiss my face.

I thought of things I could do to ease my boredom.

“Play soccer? Can’t do that alone. Go for a walk? Boring. Jump rope? So tiring.”

I turned over onto the concrete and watched the ants traveling to their food source in a tight pack. I always loved nature. The outside world is quite astonishing when you open your eyes. I don’t have many friends, so I spend a lot of my time watching. And when you notice all the simple things that make the world around us, it’s hard not to fall in love with every detail. So with curiosity, I watched the ants flow onto my driveway like an oil spill.

“Hey... hey, kid!”

I sat up, “What was that?”

“Hey, kid. Down here.”

I look down, “Is that an ant talking to me?”

“Pssst. Yeah, it’s me.”

The ant crawled onto my shoelace and gazed up at me.

I couldn’t take my eyes off of it. I was like a baby meeting a puppy for the first time. Everything around me became small, and the ant somehow became the biggest thing in the world.

The ant, unphased, kept talking, “I’m not supposed to be talking to you, so zip it, kid. And wipe that pale look off your face. I just couldn’t listen to your complaining anymore. I spend every day admiring human behavior. But you people are so ungrateful!”

I stuttered over my words, “H-how do you know all that? You’re only an ant!”

“Don’t underestimate me. I spend every day longing to be human. Everyone always seems to be going somewhere. Always meeting new people, learning new things. I envy your childhood.”

My shoulders relaxed, “Oh c’mon, ant life looks great! You get to relax all day!”

The ant looked past me. “Go grab that soccer ball and bring it back here.”

I quickly dribbled back with the ball.

“Now, imagine if you asked me to get that ball and bring it back to you. We’d be here until next Christmas!”

“Okay, so I’m a little faster than you. It’s just because I have longer legs!”

I plumped down next to the ant, and he gazed up at me. “Being a human seems amazing. Aside from various noises that leave your body to communicate with each other, you also use fingers and body language to describe emotion. I learned that if someone raises just

their thumb in the air, they're doing good. But if they raise the middle one, you better run. They don't like you. That is a bad finger."

"Why are you telling me all this? I am a person... remember?"

"But I'm not. I learned all this by watching. That's what ants do. I can't use fingers to describe my emotion, I don't even have fingers! You people live your ordinary lives and never stop for a second to be grateful. Let us try this. Are you hungry?"

"I guess so."

The ant waddled toward my house at a painfully slow pace. I impatiently tiptoed around him, trying not to murder my new friend with the bottoms of my Converse.

He eventually made it into my house and crawled onto the kitchen counter. "Now, make a sandwich."

I used mom's home-baked bread and generous peanut butter filling. The sandwich was made with real love. I placed it perfectly on the plate and slid it across the counter. He crawled on top of the sandwich and took a few bites. I watched his tiny body attempt to devour a ginormous sandwich.

The ant grabbed his stomach and turned over. "Whew, I'm stuffed."

"Stuffed? You had five bites!"

"But I can't help it, I'm on a diet!"

"Really? Ants go on diets?"

"I'm just messing with you, kid. That was the most food I've ever had in front of me, like ever. You've got any food you want at the tip of your fingers. Look at this! We're sitting in a room dedicated to eating!"

I couldn't help but giggle.

For the next few hours, the ant and I spent time together showing each other different talents. I watched him crawl up a tree, and he watched me draw.

We laid down on the driveway where we first met. He began to speak softly. "Treat your boredom as a blessing. Let learning and adventure be a gift. It just takes a little patient observation to discover what you love. And if you ever need anything, I'll be around."

Out of everyone I know, somehow a small ant made me feel the best.

"I was never the best at making friends, so I'm not sure how friendship works. But I appreciate our friendship, and I admire you. But wait -- I never got your name!"

"I appreciate your appreciation of me! Our new friendship gives me some sort of value, considering my size. And by the way, it's Edward."

I watched Edward return to his friends. An ant isn't an ideal friend for an eight-year-old, but I sure did learn a lot from him. I guess friendship is so much more than size, age, or even species.

And I found a new activity for when I'm bored. I make a mouthwatering peanut butter sandwich and place it on the driveway for my new friend.

Parallel lines aren't supposed to intersect, but I think there was an exception made for Edward and me.

Lindsey Lenchner '23

Penny Jar

If she had a penny for every sigh that escaped her mother's lips, she'd be rich. Filthy rich. She'd be swimming in more cash than the amount of bills and overdue fees that have piled up on the kitchen counter, threatening to swallow the first person who walks too briskly past them. Water bills, property taxes, cell phone service. They kept her company, a daunting reminder of adulthood -- and more often of her mother.

It's winter and she finds solace in breathing on the window panes, watching giddily as the glass fogs up and then freezes again, a steady rhythm embedding itself in her brain. Creeeeak. She hears the old, wooden door open. Her mother is finally back. Quickly, she pulls herself away from the window and plops into her chair whilst picking up a pencil and scratching away at her homework. Her mind drifts elsewhere. $y=mx+b$. The scent of her mother's cheap perfume. $y-y_1=m(x-x_1)$. The unzipping of a jacket. $Ax+By=C$. The sound of footsteps coming up the creaky stairs. She peeks up as the footsteps pass her door. Her head droops back down as the steps fade away.

It's nighttime and she hears scuffling downstairs. Angry curses, bellows and shrieks, the crash of a lamp as it shatters on the wooden floor. *The monsters are fighting*, she whispers to herself, burrowing deep into her blankets. The next morning, she greets her mother at breakfast (a feast of Cheerios without milk). Her mother sighs in response before gingerly touching her right eye that dons new shades of black and blue. Silence falls.

When you grow up, her mother starts abruptly, her breath reeking of alcohol, marry someone rich and live an easy life. Not someone like your father.

Her mother's eyebrow raises as she gets up from the table and comes back with a half-filled penny jar. *Would you take me to the fountain in the plaza? If I throw all of these in, maybe your wish will come true*, she asks her mother.

The big, foolishly serious eyes of her daughter rekindles a lost motherly flame. Regretting the words she said earlier, her mother ruefully agrees, but during their car ride, she steals glances at her daughter, contemplating the wonders of childhood innocence.

A sharp longing blooms in her. A longing to restart her life. When her daughter jumps out of the car at the plaza's fountain, she almost reaches out a hand, as if to hold onto the remnants of a fantasy lost.

Just as her daughter approaches the fountain, a momentary slip in time causes the penny jar to fall from her hands, shattering into a thousand broken pieces, like dreams in the face of reality.

The bronze pennies glint tauntingly in the sun, only a step away from the fountain.

Grace Hu '23

The Curry 4's

They sit at the pit of my basement—almost glacier-pristine, encased and embalmed like twin mummies. Except instead of linen and fragrant spices, they're wrapped in tissue paper and the faint scent of maple floorboards. The cardboard sarcophagus is inscribed with hieroglyphics of basketballs, hands, and a cryptic message: "6.5Y, UA GS CURRY 4 MID."

Those Curry 4's were my first and last pair of basketball shoes, an artifact of a single season of freshman basketball. I had meticulously hand picked them from a sea of iridescent, beveled, and paint-splattered sneakers, swimming like tropical fish on the floor-to-ceiling shelves at my local mall's Finish Line. I had visited nearly a dozen different stores on two different shopping trips spanning two weekends. I had spent countless hours researching, reading reviews, and compiling detailed descriptions of the traction, durability, appearance, and of course price, of a bevy of shoes in a 20-page Word document.

And I had conquered the seemingly unconquerable—convincing my mom why it was both extremely necessary and rational to fork over \$120—a \$40 disparity from the most expensive shoes I had ever owned—when I already owned a pair of perfectly good sneakers.

"But they're not basketball shoes," I insisted. Just like I wouldn't wear slippers to church, I believed it was simply heresy to play basketball in my running shoes. In a sport that involved rapid side-to-side cutting and demanding vertical leaps, I couldn't afford exposed ankles and flimsy cushioning, or else run the risk of an

almost certain ankle sprain or the "fracture of my fifth metatarsal base."

More than that, I knew deep down that the sneakers I had just wouldn't cut it when on the first day of practice, the ten other girls on my team wearing color-coordinated outfits and with hair pinched tightly under Nike headbands began pulling out their basketball shoes. I waited off to the side, shuffling nervously in my faded t-shirt with "Venezia" peeling and my non-basketball shoes. I watched them, envied them, for the way they stepped so surely in their sneakers, the way the ball cut so cleanly between legs and laces, and the way they'd sail up, up, up, so smoothly for a layup that I could practically see wings sprouting from their heels.

I already felt like an outsider in many other ways. I was one of three Asians (a number surprisingly on par with my town's Asian makeup), I was oblivious to rap culture references, and I had only a year of eighth grade recreational basketball and a two-week YMCA basketball camp under my belt. Most of my teammates grew up carpooling to basketball clinics and practices while I spent my Saturday mornings and weekday nights going to Chinese school, taking art classes, and chatting on Hangouts with a group of friends whose parents had all played Chinese poker with mine at some point. These were differences tethered to the way we breathed and believed, a culture we could not pass to each other as easily as a flick of the wrist and a chest to chest pass.

Like dye spreading through a napkin, the desire to have basketball shoes became my paramount concern. I believed so fervently that they were two steps

closer to becoming a more serious basketball player, that I'd raise my right hand and place my left on a shoebox, as someone would secretly swear me in and say, "Welcome to the team."

When I finally received the Curry 4's, I gently lifted those marbled eggs from their nest of tissue paper, and slid my feet through the ankle-hugging woven collars—they were very ankle-hugging—oh, how I loved them. They were white and blue-soled, with black riding up the throat and clipping the heel. In their color and sleekness, they were almost penguin-esque. By the looks of them, they could cut through air and water. Most of all, they were the type of shoes that could keep a straight face but also show off a little swagger. They were the projection of who I dreamed I'd be on the court: power rippling beneath a cool facade, a flash of black and white, the ball ripped away one second then plummeting through metal and net the next.

When I pulled them out of my drawstring bag the next day at practice, the girl next to me looked up and said, "Are those new?"

"Yeah," I said.

She half-smiled: "Cool."

And Cool was Cool. I wish I could say Cool lengthened to Yo, be on my team for 3 on 3's, to Are you gonna be there for the next game, 'cause we need you. On the bus to away games, I still sat by myself or with the other two Asians, listening to the tik-tik-tik of the trap beat emanating from the back of the bus. My basketball shoes spent more time soaking in the artificial glow of the gym lamps by the benches than weaving through light-bending crossovers. I even tripped and fell, twice, in a game because I wasn't used to how

much stiffer they were than normal sneakers. Defensive slides still hurt, suicide drills still left my lungs clawing for air. Slowly, the thought that I'd secretly suppressed so long began to unravel: I'd never be able to fill those shoes, shoes that began to feel like the world's most expensive clown shoes.

I played my last high school basketball game wearing the Curry 4's. It was February, the month of love. And in the final quarter, I thought about my love for basketball. I thought about how much I loved the game, how much I sweated for it, how I even bought a pair of shoes for it. I thought about how basketball was more than just a game—it was also the people that played it, fought for it, loved it. It wasn't a one-man sport. And I thought about how the court was passion, the court was spirit, but the court could only bring us together so much.

When the time came to turn in our uniforms, I quietly shelved my beloved Curry 4's as well. My mom was pissed—the shoes weren't a high-return investment.

Though retired from the court in their glory, the Curry 4's still serve a purpose: that is, as another weapon in my mom's verbal arsenal. Sometimes when I complain about not having enough shoes or clothes to wear—in the context of my suburban, upper-middle class lingo I mean I'm in a "let's-go-to-Marshalls-and-buy-another-unnecessary-graphic-t-shirt" mood—if my mom isn't berating me for buying the grunge leather jacket I thought looked cool but never wore six years ago, she's devilishly reaching through the dust and aridity at the back of her mind and saying, "Remember that pair of \$120 sneakers you barely even wore?"

“How many times do I have to tell you,” I say, “they’re basketball shoes. You’re not supposed to wear them anywhere except on a basketball court.” I cite the fact that dirt can nestle in the folds and wear away the traction, and that I’d look plain silly wearing them.

But really, it’d feel unfitting to wrangle the shoes from their resting place and cuff them onto feet that haven’t touched a basketball court since freshman year. Don’t disturb a mummy’s tomb, they say. Even the mildew of the basement wards off prying fingers, reminding me that despite the ample ankle support and responsive cushioning, the Curry 4’s still left me hurt. And yet, I still love them. They’re a tribute to my time on the court, a time when my naive dreams swept me up and sent me plummeting, stinging me with the reality that not all fights are worth fighting for. But the courage to take the plunge, to shoot my shot and watch the ball glance off the rim, was something that I never needed the Curry 4’s to do.

Joye He ‘21



Romila Kaushik ‘23

Dinner Epiphany

Throwing open the fridge, I grabbed a pack of egg tofu and ripped open the plastic package. It was already seven o'clock. I had to hurry.

In my haste, the lump of tofu slipped from my hands and landed on the cutting board with a bounce. As I raised the knife to slice it, the frying pan sizzled, signaling that the saucy chicken wings were drying up. Dropping the knife, I lifted the lid and took a moment to admire the golden wings before adding water to thin the sauce. Sweat trickled down my forehead as I slapped on the lid and lowered the heat. I quickly returned to the egg tofu, cutting it into smaller lumps.

After three hours of hustling around the kitchen, I finally collapsed into a chair and inhaled the savory aroma that represented my blood, sweat, and tears.

Thinking about what my parents' reaction would be, I giddily surveyed the scene: savory egg tofu topped with scallions, golden sweet and sour chicken wings, and vegetable pancakes fresh off the frying pan. The food lay in large platters on the freshly wiped kitchen table, along with four bowls of rice and chopsticks.

"Mom! Dad! Johnny! It's dinnertime!" I shouted, expecting an immediate response from them. Surprisingly, I was greeted with silence. The tense air threatened to shatter as I squirmed in my seat, debating whether to eat on my own.

My mom came down moments later, glowing at the sight of a table filled with freshly prepared food. "My daughter is grown up and can make dinner for me!" she exclaimed.

I just rolled my eyes.

Following my third call, my dad and brother shuffled into the kitchen, comfortably plopping themselves into their chairs. Stiffly, I watched as my family dug in. Grabbing one chicken wing after another, they chatted away, oblivious to my stony silence.

I don't recall what they talked about, nor do I recall what happened during the meal. I only know that as my family finished their food, they silently trickled away, one by one, leaving me with a table full of dirty dishes. Chicken bones littered the table and a pancake lay untouched in my brother's bowl.

I bit my tongue, not trusting myself to say anything. I had spent hours planning and preparing the perfect family dinner. Yet I had not gotten the appreciation I deserved.

I threw away the uneaten food quietly, simmering at the "disrespect." *What's wrong with them? Did I not just prepare a wonderful dinner?*

As I washed the dishes, I called out to my mom sarcastically, "I hope you're enjoying your rest."

She nodded from the couch with a wry smile. Her usually tired eyes twinkled.

Realization hit me like a rock.

My mom cooks for our family every day, but we never give it a second thought. My brother and I often read while eating dinner, without so much as a second glance at our food.

The single dinner I had prepared was nothing in comparison with the thousands of dinners she's made, dinners taken for granted.

Without another comment, I silently finish washing the dishes, making sure to carefully wipe down the table. After all, isn't this what my mom did every day?

Naomi Wei '24



Keana Sifora Gamaro '23

A Cup of Muddy Orange Juice

Orange juice splattered on the cabinets. Footprint trails surrounded the scene. Broken glass shimmered. Cabinet doors creaked back and forth. Not a single person moved.

Just minutes ago, sweat was trickling down the clouds on a late August afternoon. In our tiny teeny apartment, American Standard air conditioners moaned like crippled cows. Five vintage suitcases lined up like soldiers near the door.

“Grandma, please don’t go back home. My five-year-old sister Renee is an annoying pig when you are away. Stay here with us,” my older sister Haley begged.

My grandmother muttered, “This apartment is too small for seven people.” She walked out of the balcony without a word, holding her newspaper.

“This is the last day that grandma is staying with us. I will make orange juice for her,” I suggested. “Perfect for a hot day like today!”

“No. I should be the one making orange juice.” My sister’s face turned red. Her fierce dragon eyes pierced through me.

Arms crossed, we stared at each other for five seconds.

Then I ground my teeth and clenched my fists. War was about to happen...

Fighting to make orange juice for grandma, we raced to the fridge to get oranges. Yanking the fresh produce drawer, my sister got the biggest orange. I got a tiny orange just in time before my sister slammed the drawer close.

We then flung open the cabinet like a mob to get our cups.

Placing the orange on top of the cup, my sister stepped and sat on the orange. No juice. I sunk my fingernails into the orange. No juice.

With a muddy ax from the storage, I spliced the orange open. A narrow river of orange juice came trickling down my sweaty palms. I collected the juice in a bowl and poured them into seven cups. Noting my success, my sister chased me around to snatch the ax out of my hands.

The kitchen became a battleground. Orange juice splattered everywhere. Fingernail streaks were on the wall; glass shattered on the ground.

Suddenly, the front door creaked open. Not a single atom moved. As stiff as a chair, my mouth propped open.

My mom walked in the front door as she sang, “Good afternoon, I just returned from...what? Why is the house in a big mess?” Her smile flipped upside down. Fire started puffing out of her nose. Her blood vessels expanded as the clock ticked faster and faster.

Out of nowhere, a familiar voice said, “Are you girls making orange juice for me? I can smell it. That’s so sweet!” It was my grandmother. She came in from the balcony after hearing the commotion.

All eyes shifted to the messy cups on the counter, with a small puddle of orange juice in each cup.

Covered with sweat, we gulped down the orange juice. It trickled down our throat, and our bodies cooled down. Looking at the chaotic kitchen, I thought, who uses an ax to make orange juice? So I chortled, and juice

sprouted out of my mouth like a fountain. Realizing my silliness, my family laughed, too. Giggling like Bozo the Clown, we cleaned up the kitchen together for the rest of the afternoon.

Who knew this tiny puddle of juice is filled with such sweetness? A cup of juice contaminated with sweat and mud is the same cup that is loaded with love. It turns out, all we needed was a cup of orange juice to cool down our fierce hearts.

Renee Ngai '24



Dana Saporova '23

Loneliness and Judgement

Loneliness took a central role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions were stuck in their homes, some with company, some without. We communicated through Facetimes, Zoom calls and social media, still losing touch with some people. We avoided human contact by nature, wore masks covering our faces, and socially distanced while getting groceries. Humans are instinctively social creatures; even if you declare yourself an introvert, you probably feel the need to talk to at least one person a week, right? Although I think that is true, being alone can sometimes be serene and thoroughly enjoyable. Nearing one year since the pandemic began closing schools and other establishments down, I ponder, why is loneliness seen so negatively in the first place?

When one says they feel “lonely,” people immediately respond with sympathy, which is only sometimes sincere. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with sympathizing with someone, but why is that the first response when hearing the topic of loneliness? I am certain that every human has felt “lonely” at one point in life, even if surrounded by other humans. Maybe you had problems that you were dissecting, maybe worries were occupying your subconscious mind and they did not allow you to focus on the present. If everyone experienced this, why do some people make judgements based on the fact that someone is alone, or seems lonely? One cannot be certain whether the person they are judging likes being alone, or is actually lonely. There should be a grey-space, and judgements should

not immediately be made about people, their character, and their personality based on a guess.

My main point is this: people should be able to enjoy their own company without worrying about judgement. Yes, society preaches the idea of “not caring what others think,” but the reality is that most people STILL care what others think! Acknowledging this is the first step, and understanding that caring what others think does not diminish your credibility is important too. Society, advanced by social media, has inadvertently programmed us to believe that constant social interaction means that we are doing well in life; it does not allow us to think that maybe spending time alone is good for our wellbeing too. Discovering yourself, and feeling comfortable with yourself should be a main priority, on the same level as discovering others. The pandemic brought to my attention that being alone is not as bad as it is framed.

Shreya Sampath '23



Sarah Chen '22

More Than Pen and Paper

Nearly every summer, my family and I board the 13-hour flight to Beijing, China for a few weeks of unending fun. Along with the joys of seeing our relatives and inhaling the familiar scents of city and food, I look forward to shopping — stationery shopping, specifically.

Of all the relatives on my mom's side, my aunt is my favorite (no hard feelings!) Each time we return to this busy city, she brings us to restaurants that cook with the best ingredients, to tourist destinations, and to enormous, brightly lit malls. Each day is a treasure hunt, each new discovery never that far off. This past August, my aunt took us to five malls, some familiar, others newly constructed, each with exquisite restaurants, clothing brands like Nike and Adidas, and of course, stationery stores.

The malls buzz with endless energy: a hum of giggling children, young couples, and stationery fanatics such as myself. Why would I be bubbling with such enthusiasm, when I could purchase the same adorable pens on Amazon from the comfort of my own home? Well, for one, there are the affordable prices assigned to each aesthetically pleasing pen, paper, and sticker pack. Forget about pricey Muji pens or expensive Faber-Castelle pencils. Here, where the selection of micron pens fills shelves, purchasing them in-store is no question, and the uniqueness and quality of each pen deserves applause.

Unlike the happy birthday pencils teachers hand out with a plastered smile, the smooth, glossy mechanical pencils I select from these aisles give off

an exuberant feel that tingles even after I dump my findings into a paper shopping bag. There's a sense of satisfaction, pleasure, and relief, like each notebook is designed and personalized for me, and the store manager knew I would be the one to choose it.

Sometimes, as I dive deeper into the stationery shopping journey, the electrifying sensation of picking up the perfect pen feels like it will last forever. But alas, as our days in China begin to count down, we pack our bags, stuff the goodies we've found, and take them home where I distribute them among my desk organizers and drawers.

I open up a rusty drawer, sift through a pile of who-knows-what, and discover the heap of years-old American history notes from fifth grade — all to find copious pencils of various lengths and patterns, some with "happy birthday" pasted in exciting colors and others with an arbitrary company with their logo printed proudly. Not every stationery item I own leaves an impression or tells a story.

If I pick up the zebra-print chorus pencils stuffed at the bottom of my backpack, all I'll feel is the cracked surface of their peeling covers, the broken graphite tips, and the dried erasers no longer fit for good use. Attached to them are memories of tedious chorus rehearsals and bizarre vocal warm-ups, stirring up visions of evening concerts, town-wide performances, and the soreness of my feet after standing too long.

The school chorus experience cannot compare to singing with a group of devoted, trained voices in an honors choir. That I received this ordinary pencil along with many other singers who took part in "District Chorus Day," from young fourth graders to towering

seniors, further weakens my relationship with those chorus pencils. Not only did everyone receive this gift, but we'd all left the auditorium the previous year with the same pencil screaming "Chorus!" in bright red.

Unlike the stationery I get in China, the flawed pencils found in schools hold no meaningful connection for me. I see tens of other children with the same pathetic happy birthday pencil or Chorus pencil, and when I stroll into Party City and come across the same product in the same bundle as it was given out in — well, there you go! The secret is revealed to this skeptical receiver.

Perhaps the location where I received this gift pencil influenced our connection or its ephemerality. In the relentless seas of school hallways, a pencil like this won't survive and will soon be forgotten on the desk of my last class. If the unreliable tip snaps during a test, I'll have to use a pen or worse, borrow from the hodgepodge of writing utensils my teachers discover in their classrooms. These neglected, mundane pencils are known for their deteriorating bodies and tenuous tips, but that is their purpose: easy disposal and convenient substitutions for the treasured stationery I store at home.

Like a programmed computer, each student moves to his or her next class when the signature "ding!" sounds. At school, I can't risk losing my favorite M & G pencil, with its metal tip, its honey-yellow and sky-blue accents, and its glossy finish. In fact, I may lose my motivation to write a timed paragraph just to avoid marring its polished grip or breaking its colorful tip.

Like the squat-shaped mechanical pencil that rests on my desk, the rolls of washi tape, stickers, and pens I've brought home from China, each object reminds me of the day I bought it, how I felt picking it up, and the excitement of hearing my mother say, "Let's get that one." Sometimes, if I try hard enough, I can hear the music playing through the speakers, make out my aunt's voice, and feel the tingles running through my fingertips once again.

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