

THE ALCOTT YOUTH MAGAZINE

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Sophie Kim is a senior in high school from Winchester, Massachusetts. She loves playing tennis, and especially loves playing for her high school tennis team in the spring. She has always had a strong passion for reading and writing, and is excited to share the incredible stories of young women through *The Alcott Youth Magazine*. She hopes these stories will encourage and inspire young people, especially women, all over the world.

DIRECTOR

Kaitlyn Donato is pursuing her A.B. at Princeton University. In her sophomore year of high school, Kaitlyn recognized that there were too few magazines focused on writing for and by young women and decided to create *The Alcott Youth Magazine*. With the magazine, she hopes to publish inspirational writing for all to enjoy. Kaitlyn also oversees an affiliated 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Books and Bridges, Inc., dedicated to reading books about women in leadership to elementary students. She hopes to foster a dialogue about women in leadership throughout schools and communities.

WRITING



Modernization Is Not Westernization

By Alvina Parvez

Westernization has managed to penetrate through various cultural spheres, worldwide and its influence can be felt to a great extent. However, it has been observed that people tend to use the terms modernization and westernization synonymously, which actually differ greatly. Modernization refers to a progress from a 'traditional' society to a 'modern' one, and is based on scientific approaches. On the other hand, westernization refers to the adoption of the culture and practices of western Europe. The fundamental difference between modernization and westernization is that the former is indispensable but the latter is not. Modernization is required to keep up with the rapidly progressing world of the 21st century but westernization assists only in a negligible manner. Additionally, the essence of modernization must also be present at a personal level. Modernization can only occur when people modernize their thoughts, beliefs and way of living etc. In contrast, westernization is primarily about external

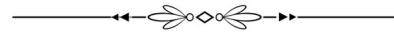
actions and manifestations.

The concerning issue regarding this is that majority of people perceive westernization as modernization itself. They feel that through adopting western traditions, they will be able to modernize their society. It must be noted that the flourishing of a civilization takes place with the advancement of science and technology. Westernization has little to do with modernization. Japan serves as an excellent example of this. Japan retains the richness of its culture despite westernization. At the same time, Japan has advanced greatly in the field of science and technology and today, it is a highly developed nation. But we must also keep in mind that Japan made several attempts to westernize itself and introduced great reforms to do so. From this, we can easily observe that most nations were not spared from westernization.

Additionally, it must also be understood that the road to modernization does not entail dressing a certain way or holding certain beliefs. It

is exceedingly upsetting to observe people who still believe that if they speak English and follow English etiquette, they will become more civilized and modernized. Such perceptions were very common amongst the citizens of countries colonized or imperialized by Europeans. Since the Industrial Revolution began from Britain, and progressed through Europe and the US first, people began to admire western culture. They assumed that if they followed western culture and traditions, they would be able to industrialize and modernize their society. Owing to this, Indians too, began to lose pride in their own culture. Therefore, during the Indian Independence movement, any sort of industrial goods or traditions were boycotted. This was not solely due to their British roots but also because any sort of industrialization or modernization was seen as westernization. Despite that, Independent India never entirely gave up on western ideas. The effects of the British colonization are visible even today. Indians still wrongly believe that modernization is equivalent to westernization. The notion that westernization is vital for modernization has proved to be immensely detrimental. This idea has led to the unnecessary adoption of western practices and values. As a result, it has begun to demeaning or

even wiping out Indian customs and sentiments. Hence, if we wish to preserve our culture, we must erase this notion from our heads entirely and once more embrace the glory of our own way of living.



Alvina Parvez is an immensely motivated and dedicated student with an unmatched inclination towards efficient work. She has attained several accolades for her writing and extra-curricular endeavors. Alvina has also consistently scored top grades in all her academic years. She is keen to learn from new experiences and utilize her potential in different ways.

Strangers in Tokyo

By Kazumi Hayashi

Looking through the window of the old thrift store, I remembered walking through those aisles. Various ephemera sat on its shelves with their unspoken narratives. In the corner, an oak chair collected dust. It had the rigidness and refined qualities of a veteran. The missing back spindle, like an amputated limb, added charm. However, people only saw the chair through a lens of sympathy; it's old, and no one was willing to pay any attention even with the big yellow sticker that read "20% off". As others passed by the oak chair, they saw a veteran and appreciated its services, but only for a fleeting moment. I stared, remembering gliding my fingers on the top rail, the unpolished surface rubbing at my skin, desperately trying to splinter it. Sitting on it was embarrassing. Kids stared and chuckled as their parents hushed them to not look at me. *What an uncomfortable chair.* I got up and moseyed down the aisle, abandoning it like everyone else. I like this store. It sells the most random items. That day, there was a vintage coca-cola fridge right next to a tacky leopard coat hung on the wall by a rusty nail. There is a romance in picturesque stores like this, always having warm ambient lighting that matches the hue of a golden hour.

These stores never have A.C., and warmth puts me in a muddled state, time stagnant, a bubble from reality. Cupping my hands on the window, I looked for the oak chair, but the veteran had retired from its corner.

The familiar scent of urine and liquor hit me in the face with the winter breeze passing by, snapping me out of the warm memory. Glancing at my phone, it read 10:58 P.M. 1 new message.

Head back now. Your clients are coming in 20.

Okay, will be there soon!!

I had terrible punctuality, and as always I had to pick up my pace as I jogged back to the bar. It was a strange hour unique to Kabukicho. As I started losing my breath, I dropped to a walk. It was strange how the desolate the streets were, feeling as though I had accidentally walked into a mirage of time. The shutters down for most stores on the street, it was eerie how quiet it was; even a pin drop would be deafening. The harsh, white street lights illuminated a path along the asphalt, shadows of moths over the cracked paint designating the bike lane, towards the red lights. I

had four thoughts while walking towards the light:

I could turn back right now,

I could run to the station,

I could catch the last train,

I could be home.

Stopping in the middle of that desolate street, I was right in front of the entrance to the red light district and its neon arches. I wanted to look back to the street behind me, but my nerves were shot and my body did not allow me to consider what choices lay behind me.

“Oh, sorry.” A stranger bumps into me, propelling me forward. I barely caught myself as the first wave of pleasure seekers engulfed me in motion. The silence, the emptiness, all gone, those four thoughts were long forgotten.

This district was my home.

“Sorry! Sorry! I’m back.” I said, jogging back into the bar with performative urgency. In the half an hour or so I was gone, a dozen guests had already gotten comfortable in the booths, cozy with the hosts and hostesses. Slow jazz music filled the room, accompanied by the thick layer of tobacco in the small, poorly ventilated space.

“Lin, hurry the fuck up, Terano-san is already waiting for you in the back booth.” Manager is

always stern, but even with this tone I know he is fond of me, at least more so than he is of the others. All the girls in the bar call him “Papa “ while the boys call him “Oji-san”, which means uncle. Those words always made my stomach churn, so I just called him by his name, Akira-san, or simply Manager. I quickly ushered myself into the locker room, grabbing my slippers, changing outfits, and reapplying blush, all at once. Finally, fixing my hair, I walked out to the booth.

“Terano-san! So nice to see you again!” I always feel bad for his long-suffering dress shirts trying to contain his protruding stomach. His suit was well-aged but clearly expensive, probably designer or maybe even tailored.

“Sorry I have not been able to come as often! I was on a business trip till last Tuesday.”

Sighing, I could tell he had already had a few to drink. I sat squarely next to him, looking into his eyes with as much genuineness and charisma I can muster.

“I missed you so much...what would you like to drink?”

“Hibiki, 12 years old.” A smile spread across his face.

“On the rocks as usual?” Asking in submission. It took me a long time to remember how my clients liked their drinks. I made flashcards that would sit in my school bag next to those for my Intro Biology class. Terano-san liked Hibiki whisky on the rocks, and the beaker is different from a graduated cylinder. I had one set of cards for each client. It was crucial I reviewed what weird hobbies they enjoyed chatting about, horse gambling or golf. If someone were to eavesdrop on a conversation between a skilled host and client, it should sound as though two old friends are catching up after being apart for sometime, a steady tone and no hidden undertones. Truthfully, it was no different from two strangers sitting with one another.

“You know me so well, get one for yourself too.” He had a perverse tone to his voice, but there was no doubt in my mind Terano-san was one of the nicer clients. I’ve had instances where clients would get forceful, but Terano-san was always rather pleasant. I ignored the tarnished silver wedding band that adorned his ring finger, seeing it when he first walked into the bar a year or so ago. I wondered what his wife was like; maybe he had a kid not much younger than me. Closing my eyes, even just for a few seconds, I could imagine Terano-san’s household. He comes home late,

telling his wife, maybe a Saori or a Mizuki, that the office kept him late, paperwork undone. His kid, Aoi or Yuka, would jokingly scold him for his working habits. A warm meal, grilled salmon with rice and pickled plum, miso soup a must, beer poured sweetly in a glass from a cold bottle. Dinner is followed by a bath, one with a citrus bath bomb, not stripping away but masking the sin of being here with me.

“Hey! Are you there?”

I opened my eyes. “Sorry, I must be tired, you were saying?” The rest of the night was filled with a thread of small talk; what I liked about Terano-san was that he would take most of my time slots for the night, a costly endeavor, and all for just conversation. Terano-san never once tried to sleep with me. Today was an insightful look into a love scandal in the bank’s office he worked at. Something about how Akira in accounting made a move on the boss’s secretary. By the time he was done talking about the politics of people who mean nothing to me, he was through half a bottle of Hibiki whiskey and had downed two bottles of beer. I had a “cup of sake,” but I always filled my glass with small ice cubes, the type that melt quickly, diluting drinks the moment they’re poured in. Keep the client drunk, never yourself, a holy rule the best abided by. The

biggest illusion in this industry is that the hosts are drunk with clients, but either they can hold their liquor or give the illusion they can. Losing a clear conscience can make you lose out on cash or, worse, get raped. One of my mentors once told me, “The booth makes us equal to a client.” I had nodded, but I always disagreed with this idea. We hosts had an overwhelming advantage; it was our playing field, but even one drink could make us the losers of our own game.

“I best be getting home.” Slurring his speech, struggling to stand up, like his shirt struggling to hold back what was contained, he left a dull brown envelope on the table.

“Have a safe trip home! Please visit again soon.” That sentence was the last of my charisma for that night. Self-amazement always filled me; how I survived through hours of conversation I cared so little about while being sober was a mystery. I peeked into the envelope after the light *cling* of the brass doorbell as Terano-san walked out. Making sure the Manager wasn’t around, I slid exactly eleven bills into one of my slippers. Take twelve and it’s too much. Twelve gets you caught. I bring the rest to the Accountant in the room behind the bar.

“Terano-san’s bill,” waving the envelope in the

air.

“Okay, put it in your cubby.” Not looking up, she throws my cubby key at me; it has a yellow tag attached, “Lin” written in faded ink. I unlocked my narrow steel cubby, wrote “Terano” with the ballpoint pen inside my cubby, carefully placing it down after. Lock the cubby, throw the keys on her desk, an unchanging routine.

“How’s school?” She asked, still looking deeply at an excel sheet with absurd sales numbers. The simple question was oddly unsettling. Not once before did she take interest in my life outside the bar. It was taboo to talk about our personal lives. Being strangers to the other hosts made it easier for the necessary betrayals. That, and whenever adults ask how school is going, it really isn’t a prompt to actually talk about school. It’s an indirect way to ask about who’s dating who, why she’s not talking to her, why he is so popular. In all honesty, they probably don’t care for the stories but are chasing memories of the days they didn’t have the responsibilities of adulthood. I didn’t know what to answer, at that moment, I was out of the loop of most “hot” topics.

“Fine. Lots of tests.”

Finally she looked up from her screen. She locked

eye contact with such efficiency looking away was not an option. Hazel eyes are uncommon in Asians, but her eyes were piercing almonds.

“Hmph.” She replied, looking away from me finally. I didn’t like that feeling, that I was being analyzed and understood by someone better than I knew myself.

How irritating.

Most of the clients had started to pay their checks and were making their way out like balls on a mini golf course, bouncing against every wall possible. It was an interesting perspective, standing where I was, seeing all the expressions of the hosts smiling with purity only to grit their teeth as soon as the clients looked away, not allowing the malice to fully pour out.

“Oiii, come here!”

I looked at one of the corner booths where the shout came from. Sophie was motioning for me to come sit with her. As much as she was a sweetheart, I wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“Sophie, you’re here? Don’t your shifts start later?” I slid into the seat beside her, hugging her in the process. I could feel her ribcage through her

cheap rouge slip dress. Her 13 rings pierced the back of my shirt with a sense of much desperation.

“Didn’t you hear? I classed up!” She could barely stay seated in all her excitement. Bar Saikoro had a ranking system like most host bars around the area. Our top 20 earners got to work the “early” shift, 11PM to 3AM, while the rest suffered the slow low-paying hours from 3 to 8 AM. I couldn’t imagine how the pay from the latter schedule paid for a roof and enough money to feed two stomachs. I remember Sophie talking sweetly about the little sister she cared for, how she loved the round fruit candy that came in cans.

“See? I told you Manager was gonna move you up, you’re too pretty to be in that pile,” I smiled earnestly, but I lied looking straight into her eyes. It was nothing but surprising that she had been moved up after all this time. I thought she still belonged at the bottom of the ladder, with all the rest who are too old, too ugly, too fat. She had scars on her legs and belly, I’m not sure from what, but it didn’t matter. Clients did not pity the fact that she was undeniably damaged goods. I wondered if her appeal lay in this fact; clients had varying tastes, and playing into her innocence and scars might have sadistic appeal.

“I’m gonna head out, I am exhausted.”

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow!” she laughed with a sense of humble achievement.

“Yes!” dragging the “s” in “yes”, I quickly slipped out of the conversation.

2:07 a.m. Every so often, my shift ended early, leaving me with an awkward amount of time to spare before I hitched a taxi home. When a shift ends, most hosts have a sense of urgency to leave, away from this place. Wearing masks, hats, glasses, all sorts of adornments just to even slightly alter who they were here when they left, making themselves strangers to this district. For me, it seemed as though after a little time passed my resistance to this place faded away; maybe I didn’t really want to leave. Changing out of uniform, my honed hunger made me pull the push door instead. The front door felt heavier than it had a few hours ago, *cling-cling*.

Kabukicho is truly a nighttime playground. The sky of the narrow street has no stars even on clear days. Through clouds from the chain-smoking businessmen, the stars here are the bright lights of the signs. To the foreign eye, it must be glamorous, but residents here know the lights are nothing but a facade. An array of personalities meet here, from the dominatrix to

the maid; they all hand out fliers, desperately calling out exclusive deals that are the same every day. Winter air in Tokyo bites, but their pale legs and arms have no refuge. The street drunks are serenaded, adorned with fliers, the middle-aged men’s foul smiles growing with each flier.

Even though this street was filled with my people, it was a sickening sight I avoided looking at for too long. As I briskly maneuvered through the crowd, a shaking hand reached out: a small girl — maybe 15? — in a pink and white dress with a short princess skirt, she could be Strawberry Shortcake. The shaking hand grasped a flier for Libertas, a small but popular girls bar.

“First drink plus 30 minutes for only 1,600 yen.” Almost croaking. I could tell she was new. Probably the orphan kind. Before I could say anything, a skeezy voice resounded behind me.

“Lin-chan, shift done a little early today, no?” He was the assistant manager of Libertas and a pariah in the district, but he sure knew how to take advantage of the lost and abandoned. All bars had high turnover, but Libertas was perhaps the worst, using new hires and disposing most in a month.

“You know how Terano-san likes long talks, always booking odd hours, anyways can I borrow

her for a little?”

“You sure like teaching newbies. Fifteen minutes just for you.”

Strawberry Shortcake followed me silently like a duckling the entire walk to 7-Eleven. Telling her to wait outside, I walked in to no acknowledgement from the cashier. The singular donut packet left amongst the unpopular packaged breads. Plain rice balls. *7-Eleven at this hour is truly depressing.* I would feel bad if I was stuffing my face with fried chicken as she just sat there and watched, but I couldn't get her the same thing. She'd feel sick after the greasy fried chicken. I walked down each aisle in a hurry, no this is too heavy on the stomach, no this flavor isn't good. Defeated, I walked down the miscellaneous aisle towards the cashier. Shampoo, notebooks, and batteries all in one section. Next to the batteries was the last pouch of hand warmers. That's it. Hand warmers. I immediately snagged the pouch and approached the cashier, satisfied.

“Is there anything else you would like to purchase?” A forced politeness from the 30-something-year-old.

“One fried chicken stick, please,” I mimicked his tone by accident, the remark going unnoticed or

ignored. He walked over to the hot food display, moving the chicken out of the case and into a paper bag in one calculated motion. He put both chicken and hand warmer into a small plastic bag he forgot to ring up. I handed him the exact change, and he smiled a little with no remark of “thank you” or “come again”.

As I walked out of the door, I saw Strawberry Shortcake sitting on the curb, staring sentimentally into the busy streets. Even away from the epicenter of Kabukicho's rot, her shoulders were tense. Her short bob pointed to her neckline, a purple hue peeking out over her collar a heavy contrast to the innocent white lace.

“Here.” Tossing her the hand warmers. She smiled lightly. Behind the bristles of her obnoxious lashes, her eyes were still alive, flickering with both denial and desire. It was evident from her look that she still believed that where she was now was only temporary, and as spring rolled around she too would be gone like the suffocating air. I remembered being where she was. I also remembered when I looked around me and realized that time had passed quickly, leaving me behind. Looking into the mirror now, I only saw acceptance in my eyes.

“Thank you,” she answered in a sweet voice,

unwrapping and sticking one of the hand warmers in her pocket. We both sat as if waiting for something.

Advice. I should give her advice.

“It’s not too late to leave.”

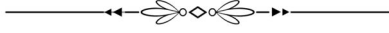
Looking down, she said nothing. From that angle, she was indistinguishable from Mariko-san despite her age. My mentor, Mariko-san, was an intelligent and beautiful woman. She became an orphan of the streets when she was twelve after her parents died in a car crash. Always by my side when I was a rookie, when the glasses felt ten times more slippery and the pay was in coins. I always knew this life was not a life I had to live. Mariko-san truly never understood why I chose that which she fought tooth and nail to escape. “It’s not too late to leave.” It’s the right thing to say. I know this for a fact, but the exact words always pierced me with immense pain. *Cling-Cling* it was a random day of the week. Staff surrounded the locker room, whispering, and girls sat in the booths with quiet tears. Mariko-san’s last lesson for me was that people did really die.

Sitting in silence once more, she giggled a little, covering her mouth the way kids do.

“All my sisters at Libertas push the unwanted chores like passing fliers on the new girls. Thank you for giving me a break, you are very kind.”

Was I being “kind”? Thinking back at it, “pitying” would have been more fitting. There were always new faces on the streets, all similar, all lasting for a few months before being replaced. There was a day when, walking to my bar, I accidentally bumped into a girl. She had fallen over, and I’d hastily helped her up. I had similarly pitied her and had given her some hot cocoa. She had reeked of sickness, and her skin was sunken. Muttering something of apologies, then quickly disappearing into the crowd. I never knew her name. However, I remember eyes that lacked any shred of remaining character.

“I must go back; thank you for the hand warmers, Lin-san.” Quickly standing up, she bowed with grace. She was out of view within moments. As a few minutes passed, there I was on the curb, tears welling up, falling quietly on the pavement. I had lost track of how many girls I had sat with on this same curb. I never saw any of them again. Each time, my tears would end sooner, indifference replacing any sympathetic emotion.



Born and raised in Japan, Kazumi Hayashi is currently in Hawaii, continuing his secondary education. Kazumi has been selected to present poetry at the Keables Night by Naomi Shihab Nye, and since then, He has been driven to elevate his writing to a new standard beyond a hobby. Kazumi is a winner of the 2024 Iolani Writes competition as well. Kazumi's experiences as a person of Japanese-Chinese descent, as well as his exposure to American culture, allow him to explore various narratives through a unique perspective.

Daffodils

By Haley Hsu

Red anthers stain the delicate white petals of the *Lilium Roma* Lilies with their “paprika,” yet somehow the flowers are still able to hold the name of being the star of our dining table’s centerpiece. We all have our own name for *it*. Dorothy calls it lily dust, while I call it paprika. And little Flynn calls it red snow. Probably because the world is magnified through her adventurous eyes and imaginative mind. Though, there’s something different about the lilies this year, there are only fifteen in the bouquet, rather than sixteen. Maybe Naomi lost track of what number I was turning, and fell short of one lily?

I shake it off. Downstairs is quiet and peace washes over me. I’m always the first to arrive downstairs on my birthday for two reasons. First, I’m utterly delighted to find the new type of lily that Naomi decides to send me for my birthday each year. Opening the front door to the sweet creamy aroma of the fresh florals is heavenly bliss. Some people say the lilies have a bitter waxy scent, but their subtle honeyed fragrance awakens my mornings. Second, as I sit on my front porch waiting for dawn to break through, the splendor of amber and the array of pinks in the

sky remind me that this year will be a fresh start. A new season beholding doors yearning to be walked through.

I take a good look at my reality around the still dining room. Sometimes, it hits me like a pile of bricks: I’m living the American life that I never thought I would. My name is no longer Yin Shui Xian, but was changed to Elizabeth twelve years ago when the Forester family adopted my sister and me into their home. I’m living in a two-story house in Cincinnati, Ohio which has a basement, an attic, and the most charming backyard. And I’m fluent in English. It’s hard to believe that Chinese is my second language and English my first. I haven’t visited my hometown of Tianjin, China where I was born, in more than a decade. But most significantly, Naomi, my oldest sister, and I haven’t seen each other ever since we were separated in the orphanage.

Flynn comes bolting down the stairs in her polka dot one-piece pajamas and runs up to embrace me with a warm hug. Dorothy follows after her, drowsily walking down and yawning.

“Did you like the lilies? *Lilium Romas* are divine,” Dorothy says tiredly, gesturing towards the bouquet that I’m transferring to a yellow vase with water.

“When did you become an expert in floral types?” I ask her, astonished. Dorothy bites her lips, and squeezes her eyes shut, then opens them.

“I saw the UPS guy deliver them at dawn. And then I may have looked them up on Google.” She winks at me and lets out a chuckle, while Flynn blows at the red anthers releasing their “red snow.” “Happy birthday sis,” Dorothy gives me a tight hug and smiles. Mom and Dad begin coming down the stairs, and Mom’s face lights up when she sees me. She opens her arm for me to embrace her.

“Morning Lisbeth! 16, can you believe it?” she squeals and kisses my forehead. My entire family calls me Lisbeth because Flynn can’t pronounce the “E” in my name yet.

Dad walks past me as he’s on his way to make coffee and pats my shoulder, “Hey! How you feeling?”

“Strangely, I thought I’d feel older, no different than yesterday, but I think it’ll kick in after a week or two.” I nod and shrug my shoulders.

I walk over to the kitchen where Mom is already cooking my favorite Shakshuka dish that she only

cooks on special occasions such as today. Once breakfast is prepared, we pray together and dive into the two dishes of Shakshuka Mom cooked, one with serrano peppers, and one without, for sweet Flynn. The dinner table is silent until Mom pops the questions that I’ve been dreading to answer but will also lighten the burden I’ve been carrying for the past twelve years.

“So Lis, Dad and I got you something small but we wanted to ask you what big gift you’d want since it’s your Sweet 16! It can be anything.” she pauses to take a bite and mouths to me when Flynn’s not looking but instead playing with a blob of feta cheese, “Flynn wants to go to Disneyland.” I grin, but it’s forced because a million different thoughts are going through my head about how I’m going to tell Mom and Dad what I want for my 16th birthday. I look down at my plate and eye Dorothy who glances at me fast. I try to catch her attention, and then she gives me a tiny reassuring nod.

Along with the bell peppers and tomatoes, I swallow down my fear of what responses will come. I clear my throat. “Well, it’s been twelve years now, and I decided that I want to find out more about my biological family.” After letting out my burning desire, I realized I couldn’t have been more blunt.

Flynn's head pops up and says in a confused tone, "But *we're* your family." Little Flynn doesn't know that Dorothy and I are adopted yet. Mom and Dad are planning on telling her when she turns five next year.

Dorothy looks down at her plate, playing with a piece of runny yolk with her fork, which she never does because she usually gobbles up runny eggs since they are her absolute favorite. Mom's expression hasn't changed from the time I finished talking to the time Flynn stops. Confusion, sadness, and astonishment wash over her face, and Dad squeezes her hand.

The rickety dining chair breaks the awkward silence as Dad gets up from his seat.

"Hey, umm... Flynn let's go play with the new stuffed animals that Grammy sent you for Easter," he suggests.

"Okay!" Flynn squirms out of her seat, clueless about what's going on, and follows Dad up the stairs. Dad pats Mom's shoulder and kisses her head, leaving with Flynn. My eyes follow the two as their bodies disappear up the staircase. I shift my gaze towards Mom, who's still speechless. *Why is she reacting so weirdly? Why is she so*

shocked? Didn't she see it coming sooner or later? What did I even expect her reaction to be in the first place?

From my peripheral vision, I can see Dorothy staring at me, wondering what I'm going to say or do next. Mom blinks and lets out a deep breath. She begins to speak in a calm, but shaky manner, "Honey, we already told you. When your dad and I adopted you and Dorothy, the orphanage didn't give us any records holding information about your parents."

Dorothy speaks for me, "We know, but Lis and I want to see if we can go back to the orphanage and try to find more information about where we were born and where our parents might live."

I nod and add, "Yeah, you never know, I mean, maybe our parents came back to look for us too right?"

"But we are your family. Aren't we enough for you?" Mom's voice quivers in frustration. Tears stream out of her eyes that she wipes with her sweater.

"Think about it. Please?" I ask, but Mom doesn't answer. Instead, she bolts upstairs and softly shuts the door of her and Dad's master bedroom, not

wanting Flynn to hear her anger.

Dorothy comforts me, “Don’t be discouraged Lis, it’s gonna take time for Mom to accept the fact that we want to learn more about our *real* parents.”

“I know.” I give her a small hug and stare at the baby-blue ceiling of my bedroom for the rest of the morning. All I can think about is Naomi, who seems to not have forgotten about me after twelve years. I wonder if I’ll ever see my other sister again. Not sure where my mind is at right now, I stare at the ceiling in silence. That is until someone knocks on my door. By the sound of the soft three knocks, I know it’s Mom and a hopeful spark ignites within me. Maybe she’ll say yes this time. I open the door. Instead, it’s Dorothy, telling me to come down for dinner. She doesn’t say a word except that, “Dad made green chile chicken enchiladas.”

Mom must be crestfallen and discouraged for Dad to be making dinner tonight. He never cooks, and when he does it’s his one and only perfected dish that he knows how to make... enchiladas. Don’t get me wrong, they’re delicious, but he rarely cooks them. Dad’s enchiladas are calling my name as I take a seat at the dining table, screaming, “Eat me!” Though the first thing I notice isn’t the

delicious sight of bubbling cheese, but the fact that Mom is smiling as I come sit down. A forced smile, for Flynn who’s sitting across from her. I take my usual seat next to Mom, Dorothy sits next to Flynn, and Dad takes a seat at the head of the table.

It’s as if nothing happened this morning.

Dad prays this time, and we all take turns serving ourselves in silence as the clanking of cutlery fills the dinnertime conversation. Flynn zooms up the stairs since she has already eaten Dad’s other specialty, boxed Annie’s mac and cheese, beforehand. So Dad begins to say, “We decided that both of you guys are old enough to travel to Tianjin and visit the orphanage you came from, but you must be careful since it’s a long journey to arrive there.” A warm smile shines across Dad’s face and a sad smile across Mom’s. Her eyes water with tears, and she gives me a reassuring nod that reluctantly says, “You can go, Lisbeth. We love you.”

The taxi ride is one hour, away from the bustling city and into the more suburban parts of Tianjin, China. From afar, dark swift clouds drift east towards our direction in the open sky, a sky that is now almost hueless. The clouds in

the distance. They're heavy, pregnant with rain. I can't tell if the air pollution is wrapping and covering the sky in all its gloominess, or incoming rain.

The taxi driver drops us off at the front gate of the orphanage and accepts the money Dorothy hands him. He chuckles at my poor attempt to say thank you, as we wave goodbye to the little blue taxi.

The building is smaller than we imagined. Here, I captured a picture for you: stone blue roofs, tan chipped walls, and filthy rust windows, the ones that look so fragile like sugar glass that they could shatter by the touch of a finger. The guard gestures to the black gate, letting Dorothy and I pass through. "You may enter in," he says in broken English.

The truth begins to sink in. This is where you came from, your parents once left you here.

Dorothy and I walk into the building, and she catches me wringing my hands in agitation. She reaches out her hand enveloped in a cream knit glove for me to hold. *Am I afraid of learning about where I came from? I have nothing to lose, I assure myself, I already have a loving family that I belong to.* I grab her hand and squeeze it gently, exhaling a soft sigh. We enter the building that holds our past and our fate, together.

Inside, the orphanage reminds me of the childcare program I volunteered at this summer abroad, in Mexico. The walls are colorful but not overly vibrant, painted soft pastel yellows, pinks, and blues. From my peripheral vision, I catch a glimpse of rooms down the hallway with cribs and mattresses laid out on the floor. The squealing of babies pierces my ears. It brings me back in time to the first few weeks when the Foresters brought baby Flynn home, and the endless waking nights it brought.

A woman walks up to me, the secretary I believe, or maybe the director? She greets us with a warm smile and invites us into the main office. "Please come this way." Dorothy and I walk into the tiny room next door, and look at each other simultaneously, impressed by the lady's English despite it carrying a slight accent.

"Hello, my name is May and I'm the secretary," she reaches out to shake our hands and continues, "Our director of the orphanage is not here today, but I can assist you. What brings the both of you here today?"

I put on my warmest smile and speak on behalf of Dorothy, "Hi, nice to meet you. I'm Elizabeth and this is my older sister Dorothy. We were both adopted from this orphanage twelve years ago

when we were young. We're wondering if there is any information or records this orphanage might perhaps hold about our biological parents?"

"Hmm... give me a few minutes to search through our records and I'll see what information I can find. You may sit here and wait, I'll be back shortly."

Before I have the chance to say thank you, May has already shut the rickety door of the office and left. I let out a long breath and sink into the wooden chair, gripping tightly onto its armrests.

"What if we don't find anything, Dorothy?"

Dorothy takes my hand in her gloves and gives me a comforting smile. "Then we'll go back to our life in Cincinnati with the Foresters and be at peace knowing there's nothing else we can do," she says contently. I lean my head on her shoulder and she leans her head on top of mine.

Fifteen minutes later, May finally opens the door and walks into the room with a grin. She lets out a sigh of relief and begins to speak as she sits down, "Elizabeth and Dorothy, I'm sorry to tell you that we have no record of your parents' names except that they resided in the countryside miles away from this city. Your father left you here at

the orphanage along with your oldest sister Naomi Griffiths, whom you were separated from, after your mother died giving birth to you. From what we know, he suffered a povertous life and couldn't provide food nor financially support you or give you an education. Your father wanted you to stay here in the hope of a better life, where you could have meals each day, sleep under a roof, and be safer and healthy. Two years after your mom passed away, your father died from heart disease. Please know that they loved you very dearly."

Dorothy and I begin crying at the same time, hot tears streaming down our cheeks. But they're happy tears. Thankful tears, that now I can live in peace knowing the dear love our parents had for us. May sits there, her face beaming. I'm sure this isn't the first time she's seen this happen before. Dorothy and I thank May for the blessing of peace and joy she's given us as we leave the office. Dorothy and I open the main door, walk past the black gate, and wave for a taxi to come.

Abruptly, the sound of footsteps beating down a path quickly shakes the ground. "Wait! Please, wait!" I turn around, only to see May sprinting down the cement pathway, waving a file of papers in her hand. She's bolting past the gate and catches her breath when she sees that she caught our attention.

Then she yells, “I forgot to tell you. I found an address. It’s your sister... Naomi Griffiths.”

Dorothy turns to me and smiles, “Want to make one more stop?”

The airplane flight to Michigan is filled with mixed emotions of exhilaration and apprehension.

Will Naomi recognize who we are? Does she want to be found by us? Does she even remember us?

Of course she does, she must. She sends me lilies each year for my birthday, I tell myself. As we depart Detroit Airport, Dorothy requests an Uber to drop us off at 6258 Pembroke Ln. in the city of Midland. And I decided to buy a bouquet of tulips and roses for Naomi. My heart is racing.

A smile beams across my face but my hands are also shaking as I hand the florist fifteen dollars.

Dorothy gestures to me to walk over to her, signaling that the Uber has arrived.

The drive to Naomi’s home is ecstatic. Dorothy turns from the front passenger seat, and advises me, “You should get some sleep while we’re on the road. It’s gonna be a long two hours.” For the first few minutes, it’s hard to tell myself to close my eyes and simply rest when my heart is overflowing with anticipation. Finally, I lean

against the window and give way to the rest my body so badly yearns for.

“Thank you so much for the ride,” I hear Dorothy say softly, two hours later. Immediately, my head bolts up and I gaze out the window. A cute modern farmhouse meets my view with a scarlet door waiting for me to walk through. I get out of the car, grab the bouquet, and walk down the stone pathway. My eyes soak in the abundance of autumn. Three maple trees are planted next to the house, and bushes growing autumn leaves line the front porch. Its scarlet-maple hues create garlands which flutter among the sheer winds. On the front porch, a wooden sign is painted with the last name, Griffiths. We must be at the right house. Me and Dorothy’s faces both radiate with joy.

As I search, a doorbell is nowhere to be found so I knock on the door four times. To our surprise, a young girl, somewhere between the ages of six and nine, opens the door. She greets us with a warm smile and a woman comes up next to her, I assume her mom. “Honey, I told you not to open the door to strangers,” she says, laughing a little while she softly tousles the girl’s chestnut brown hair. The little girl giggles and runs up the stairs in her dress. The mom turns her attention back towards me and Dorothy. “Girls, is there something I can help you with?”

“Hi! We’re wondering if we can see Naomi Griffiths. She’s our... oldest sister,” I say. I’m not sure how the mom will react, maybe she’ll tell us to leave. Maybe Naomi’s not even here. Instead, she places her hand over her mouth and takes in a deep breath. Tears stream down her face and she uncovers her hand, only to reveal a warm smile. She’s thrilled to meet us.

“You must be Dorothy and Elizabeth right?” We nod at the same time. “Well, I’m Mrs. Griffiths and that was Winnie. Come inside the house! Let me show you up to Naomi’s room. She will be absolutely overjoyed to see the both of you.” Mrs. Griffiths gestures for us to follow her, and we walk up the white oak stairs. I scan the walls for family pictures of the Griffiths, but all I see are Winnie’s crayon drawings hung up in wooden frames. Mrs. Griffiths walks to the second to last room in the hall and stops. “Well, I’ll leave you both to it, Naomi’s right inside.” She pats our back and leaves rubbing her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater.

I grip my flowers tighter and squeeze Dorothy’s hand. A million thoughts are racing through my mind, but I silence them all. For love, hope, and peace are the only emotions echoing into my soul. Dorothy opens the door and I walk in first. A tall girl who’s sitting in a cozy reading nook turns

around, and a confused expression shows across her face. I can’t help but smile and tears stream down my cheeks uncontrollably. Dorothy speaks for me, “Naomi, we’re Dorothy and Elizabeth... Your sisters.” Naomi puts down her book and runs to us, embracing us with a hug. All of us are crying, not sad tears, but happy tears that sisterhood has been restored.

After the three of us have finished crying, I sit on the bed with Dorothy and bring up the lilies to Naomi. “How did you know where to send lilies to each year for my birthday? Did the orphanage give you our address?”

“I never sent you any lilies, I don’t even know where you live to be honest.” Naomi looks confused. Who has been sending me lilies then?

Dorothy looks at me, puts her hand on my knee and confesses, “It was me, Lisbeth, I put the flowers on the doorstep each year on the morning of your birthday. I did it so that you would have some hope that Naomi wasn’t lost from our life yet and that you would find comfort knowing she still remembered us and loved you.”

Instead of being angry at Dorothy or frustrated, I’m thankful. Thankful for the hope she gave me each year that I had a sister who still loved me and

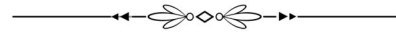
cared for me. I give Dorothy a small side hug and mouth to her, “Thank you, sister,” with a smile.



Morning awakens me from my sleep with the chirping of wrens on a pine tree and the doorbell ringing. A year has passed since Dorothy and I reunited with Naomi, whom we saw again this summer in Michigan, and things have changed. Dorothy is out of the house now, dorming at Kenyon College in Gambier. I miss her dearly, but we see each other once a month since she decided to attend a university in the state of Ohio. Although she couldn’t come home to spend my 17th birthday with me today, she called me last night saying she would send a gift.

I quietly walk down the stairs, not wanting to wake up Mom and Dad or Flynn. A sliver of light blinds me. An abundance of sunlight pours into the living room through the kitchen window, creating heated planks of wood under my feet. A cozy sensation rushes down my body as rays of sunshine warm my soul. I open the freshly painted yellow door of our home only to find a bouquet of gorgeous daffodils on the front porch. The creamy peach bulbs contrast the white petals beautifully. I gently pick up the note that is placed between the rosy pink wrapping and the daffodils, and read it.

Lisbeth, we’ve walked through seasons of hardship and celebration, but I’m grateful that we did it together as sisters. Through long winter seasons to a brighter spring, I pray that these daffodils remind you of the hope, joy, and new beginnings that life brings. Love, Dorothy



Haley is a third culture kid and Chinese-American high school student who transitioned to the United States after her family lived overseas in China for 10 years, doing mission work. After going to a bilingual international school there and being immersed into cultures across Asia, she has grown a strong passion for the written word.

Sweet Tooth

By Megan Petronella

It was a great date.

Just as I was about to delete my array of dating apps again, I matched with a guy who was everything I was looking for. He was my age, local, friendly and kind, and most importantly, looking for a long-term relationship. We quickly hit it off on the app, with me loving his conversational skills and positive personality. He was funny and sweet, and he matched my energy completely. We swapped phone numbers and instagram handles, where we continued to talk regularly and plan our first date for the end of that week. He was a great storyteller, giving so much detail and energy about his recent road trip back to our area after living in Florida for two years. He sent me videos and pictures from the trip, as well as him with his old friends, whom he was now catching up with. These would come throughout the day, so even when he wasn't talking, he was showing his interest in me by staying in touch. He consistently said how sweet and interesting I was, remarking on all our shared interests and hobbies. He was also constantly remarking about how much he liked me and how excited he was for us to meet on the date we set. Now, I'm no stranger

to love bombing, so I took his enthusiasm with a slight hindrance, knowing things could change completely when we did spend time together in person. I was eager to go on our first date quickly, wanting to find out if we really did like each other. From experience, I knew that might not be the case, as of course, online interactions and real-life time together are very different and sometimes disorienting.

When the date came, I was nervous. There was so much on my mind. I had been on three dates this year, and they were bad, good, and okay, all in that order. But they all had the same thing in common: they weren't leading anywhere, which I knew on the ride home right afterwards. That fact was haunting me, as that idea had my whole life. I hadn't identified anything I did wrong on these dates, and yet the guys really didn't seem to like me, or at least didn't want anything from me, after our in-person encounter.

I hadn't had any dating experience before this year, and I knew from social media that a lot of other people were having difficulties with connection too. From ghosting to not being able to even carry a conversation, it seemed all of us on the dating apps had collectively forgotten how to communicate with others.

I have always been a person who places a lot of importance on love. As a kid, my number one goal was to fall in love with someone and spend my life with them. I figured if I had that, everything else to do with adulthood, like having a career and finances, would kind of just fall into place. Even after learning that wasn't the case, I always tried and continue to try spreading love. I consciously try to strike up conversations with strangers when I'm out and I'm the first one to compliment someone in hopes of making them smile. Community and connection are what I always yearn for. I want to be able to share my true self with others, and make them feel they can do the same with me. I want to show them they will be met with honest enthusiasm and interest at what they are sharing with me. I truly love everyone and I try to make that known. I ask lots of questions and remember every detail I possibly can about the people I encounter. No matter how small the interaction, I carry everyone I come into contact with with me and think of them fondly. Going on this date, although I was nervous, I was also excited to just get to know a lovely person more and spend time with him.

We were meeting in a public park near his town. It was going to be cold, so we figured we could just chill in my car. We had made each other playlists before the scheduled meeting, so we

could exchange and play them together from my car speakers. I had also brought snacks and drinks to complete the date. When I pulled up to the playground at the end of the park, I saw him waiting there for me and got out of my car to greet him. He gave me a big hug that, to my pleasant surprise, lasted much longer than I expected.

We nervously and giddily climbed into the front seats, and I asked him my icebreaker about how the drive over was for him. He happily explained that he used to come to this very playground all the time as a kid, and that it felt so crazy to be there now, especially after just arriving back in his hometown this week. I asked him to tell me the stories from his road trip that he promised he would, and I put on the playlist I had made for him. We quickly fell into the easiest conversing I had ever experienced with someone new.

Every now and then he would stop to say what a good song I was playing. Soon enough we were playfully touching, me hitting him lightly on the shoulder when laughing, and him getting very animated telling his tales, touching my leg and huddling into me. Finally, I felt brave enough to grab his hand, and we fell silent for a moment, looking into each other's eyes. I felt so stupidly relaxed and comfortable that it really did feel like I already knew him.

Things continued on, and we touched more, growing closer. We cuddled and held hands with each other. We kissed. It hit me that I didn't feel like teenagers or kids, even though we were making out in my parked car in a playground. It was exactly how I thought "right" would feel. I was just so happy to be sharing this moment with him.

Somewhere in our continuous conversations, he mentioned that coming back to town and seeing all his old friends again, he was informed that a boy he used to know had died. He told me about the boy he knew and their short times together, how it felt weird to know he was gone and feel like he had just these little pieces of stories with him left. They weren't particularly close, but he was a good guy who he shared time with that he still remembered so fondly and now bittersweetly. I told him I heard of a quote once that read something like, "I hope death is like when you are a small child, sleeping during a family party, and someone carries you softly away, letting the laughter and voices fade as you are brought to your own bed." I was holding his hand, and he squeezed it whispering, "I hope so."

I asked him what things he had to leave behind in Florida. He told me about how he left pretty spontaneously, leaving mostly everything in

his room. I described how my room is like my sanctuary, and how I have a lot of trinkets, posters, and figurines. I laughed, telling him that I had my dad's canine tooth in a white pearly box and that my dad specifically brought it home for me after having it pulled at the dentist. His face lit up. He dove into his pants' pocket saying, "Oh please, I hope I still have it!" Out came a big chunk of a tooth. He explained that just a few days prior, he had fallen on his face out on an adventure with his friends, and most of his tooth had cracked and fallen out. He pressed it into my palm and said that he wanted me to have it. I thought it was the sweetest thing and stared at it in awe, quickly putting it in a sachet I had in my purse, terrified of losing it. We kissed, and I thanked him earnestly.

We just stayed like that until I had to go, his head on my lap and my thumb rubbing his knee. When his friend arrived to pick him up it was pitch dark out. He said he didn't want to leave and kissed me. Against my lips, he whispered, "You're amazing." Before he left, he said he was going to be free Friday and Saturday if we could plan something. I was so happy I was getting a second date, and I truly believed we would meet again. But, unfortunately, as so many others are experiencing after great dates, we never saw each other again.

The next day we were both busy, so there was little contact, as I had expected. Friday I asked him if we were still on, and he informed me he would let me know. He didn't, and from the looks of his Instagram stories that night, he was out with his friends. The texts between us pretty much diminished after that, even though he was watching and liking my stories. I was left on delivered, and despite trying to reach out to him, I remained that way.

It was not easy to leave things like that. All I wanted was to feel the same effort put in and the same importance placed on connection. I thought he felt the same way, but instead he was just another date that led nowhere. I'm tired of not only receiving less in relationships, but accepting less, because I'm so panicked at the thought of not having any love that I'll take whatever little attention and kindness I can get. It seems like no one wants to share their life or their vulnerability. It seems like when they do, it isn't as serious to them as it is to me.

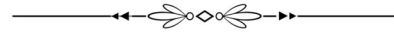
I know the value of connection exists. I, myself, am living proof that this vulnerability is out there. I have always been one to show love, displaying it outwardly and without shame to all I encounter. And I take so much joy in that, in bridging the gaps of strangers around me with a smile and a

little effort to be understanding and generous. But am I such a rarity in my generation on dating apps? Why are our connections so fleeting? Why would he lay there with his head in my lap and so earnestly share his stories and memories with me, only to say, "Eh, nevermind"? The confusion was so frustrating and so accurate, given how it seems every person in the dating realm is experiencing connection.

I was given a literal piece of him, a token of flesh from his very body. He wanted me to keep a part of him, and then he immediately left me without any more. I was reminded of those in the Victorian era who kept locketts of hair and vials of tears in memory of their departed loved ones so that they could still hold a small piece of their connections to these people who were no longer with them. How they carried on was through these relics and memories. He held my hand and told me about the death of an old friend, pressed his severed tooth in my hand, told me he wanted to see me again, and then he was done. It felt wrong. It just didn't make any sense.

I am far from the only one left confused and heartbroken by dates like this. There are whole Tiktok accounts dedicated to navigating situationships and there are pages of answers on Google to the question, "What does it mean

when you have a great first date but they don't text back?" I don't understand this as being so normalized, but I know it is.



Yet, I still have to think of him when I see an Iron Maiden t-shirt and when I watch a Gregg Araki movie, and I'll still have his tooth in a green silk sachet next to a good luck crystal shaped like a teardrop. He had actually given me a part of him, but I felt like I was the one used and forgotten about. I doubt I will ever forget that his tooth exists in my small, dusty bedroom, but I question if he will remember my name when he runs his tongue over the empty socket and recalls with a laugh that he passed the missing bone along to a one week situationship with a girl he met and left in a time in his life that only I seemed to care about. To me, he is like that departed friend he so kindly shared the memory of with. I have spaces with him in my heart and in my stories. It was really just a moment of loving, and we didn't know each other particularly well, even though it felt like we did, but it's so weird and disheartening feeling him in my memories and knowing he is no more. I carry him, as I carry so many others, with me everywhere. But it was only one date.

Megan is a 22 year old writer and poet from New York State hoping to spread empathy and passion in Gen Z artistic communities worldwide. She loves all things pop culture and hopes to work with special needs children. Her passion is sharing love and understanding with all humans (and animals) she meets.

Girl on the Other Side

By Joelle Oh

I want to be beautiful.

I want to laugh and smile with my teeth
in a way where people won't notice my crooked
hair and chapped lips.

I want them to think, "Woah, I wish I could look
like her."

I don't want to be me. I want to be someone
prettier.

For once I want to be someone better.

I don't want to be that girl again,
hood tucked all the way up to my chin so no one
could see this ugly,

Ugly

Ugly

Mess.

I don't want to look in the mirror and see all the
flaws that I see scattered all over me.

I don't want to be told that "I've never seen two
pretty best friends."

Because I know I will never be that friend.

I will always be the one that's seen as someone to
feel better about.

I don't want to cover my teeth when I laugh
because I'm scared someone will point out my

yellow teeth.

For once, I want to be pretty.

I want to feel good today.

I want to make sure my sleeves don't cuff around
my shoulders,

So tight to make the fat leak out.

I want to make sure that my hair doesn't stick out,
and poof up like it's too big for my head.

I want to be admired and told, "You look so
good!"

I want to look good enough, so I'm noticed, I'm
seen.

Because if no one will tell me that I'm good
enough, I want to shine so bright that they have to.

Because, for once, I want to be the girl on the
other side.

Some new kids and boys from the volleyball team
will join us today. To be honest, I don't know
anyone here that well there. I'm playing with
these people in a volleyball championship, and we
recently just won our tournament. I guess my team
got so excited and decided to invite me to their
celebration party. The whole competition isn't
even over yet, but I guess it's good to celebrate the
small victories. The celebration was in a bowling

alley in the busiest spot of town, squished between an arcade and a convenience store. Probably the place most middle schoolers go. I'm going to be really honest: I'm not the most social person you'll meet, so maybe this will be a chance to make friends or whatever they say on those advertising billboards. It was all new, but hey, it's the experience that matters. I am in the bathroom, trying to hype myself up before I meet everyone. I finally finished touching up on my outfit for probably the fifteenth time. My hair was arranged on the top of my head just right, so maybe, just maybe, I could be beautiful. Hopefully, that's what happens today.

After staring at my face for a couple of seconds, I took a couple of deep breaths before I decided it was good enough. You can do this. You'll kill it out there, Irene. I splashed my face with a bit of sink water before quickly heading out of the bathroom before the paranoia could settle in.

I swung the door open, stepping out way too fast and nearly crashing into a couple. They shot me a look before scurrying down the stairs. Whoops. That was embarrassing.

It was dark inside, the only thing I could see being my two shoes and my hand. The disco ball didn't provide enough light for me to see properly, probably because it's underfunded and only middle schoolers go there. But hey, I can't judge because I'm in middle school.

I walked up to the cashier, telling him the number the place was reserved for, and asked for a pair of bowling shoes my size. He looked really tired, which I can't blame him for 'cause this place is in a constant state of night at this point. He handed me my things, telling me to head down a flight of stairs to meet them. Giving him a nod of thank you, I quickly made my way down to where he instructed me to go.

Squinting through the dark, I easily spotted the group I was supposed to be with. As I approached them, a girl named Seoyoon waved at me. I was surprised that someone actually recognized me, which was dumb because they invited me here. But the feeling was nice.

I sat down at one of the soft benches, setting down my things as I said hi to everyone there. The reactions were pretty nonchalant, but they were reactions nonetheless. This one guy, I think he was one of the other volleyball kids in a different school, was surrounded by his friends. They all looked at him discreetly, pointing at me and then looking at him again. He looked annoyed and flushed a shade of pink, batting them away.

Did I dress weird or did his friends just catcall me? Boys are weird. You have to assume the worst.

It was uncomfortable, but what could I do about it? The others seemed fine, and I didn't want to look sensitive or anything.

“Don’t mind them. They’re just teasing all the time.” A voice said above me. Her name was Danielle, and she was on my team and seemed to be nice enough. She flashed me a smile, giving one of the boys there a teasing look.

She invited me to bowl with the other team girls and some other people, and it was a good time, throwing balls and missing horribly. Laughing in a group felt good. It felt good when they called me funny and asked why I hadn’t talked to them before. Of course, I didn’t tell them about my crippling anxiety about talking to other people. I just said I was a little shy. And they called me adorable, which was the best feeling I got in a while.

We all sat down, deciding to take a break and socialize with the people who weren’t bowling and just talking.

“You guys are so anti-social,” Seoyoon said, grinning at them as she sat down next to me.

“Seriously, what are you guys even talking about anyway?”

The group then burst into chatter, the same group of boys whispering amongst each other and looking at me AGAIN. Seriously, what is up with that? This time, I stared back at them, trying to make them as uncomfortable as possible.

As everyone talked amongst themselves, I was pulled into the conversation with them.

“Oh my god, did you hear about how the coach

dated a player?”

“That team from that rich private school sucks soooo bad.”

“Remember that cute guy I met at the match? Turns out he had a girlfriend! What a player.”

It was just the kind of conversation I would have dreamed of, surrounded by people I fit in with, all gossiping about something new. It was all just so...new. And I didn’t plan on letting it go.

I was talking right along with them, smiling and laughing so naturally.

Then, the guy who had blushed at the start got up and sat next to me, his friends teasing him. I was confused, but no one else seemed to be. In fact, they all seemed to be encouraging it. It was weird, but...whatever.

“Oh woah, Andrew, you’re making moves, aren’t you?” one of his friends cooed, chuckling. “Come on, why don’t you guys hold hands?”

Everyone then turned to me expectantly, causing me to freeze up. I didn’t know what to say, really. I didn’t want to do it at all. But that’d make me a party pooper, and I don’t want them to think of me like that. He grabbed my hand. I awkwardly sat there as I tried to make it look like it was normal. I didn’t know if everyone was in on it or not, but they all seemed happy and seemed to be having fun, so maybe I should just go along with it.

“Haha...anyways, what was that you said about the volleyball teacher?” I asked, trying to shift the

topic away from whatever this was. But no one seemed interested in that. They just kept poking fun at my somewhat obvious discomfort as my hand sweat in his, and he squeezed it even harder. Eventually, they did move on. Thank god for that. “Guys, guys, who want to play truth or dare?” some boy asked. Everyone else agreed, and I was excited to get back to the fun that we were having before.

“I’ll go first!” Seoyoon piped up. “I choose to dare.”

“Ooh, what should we do, guys?” Andrew, next to me, laughed. “What do you think?”

He turned to me, and then so did everyone else.

They were asking me. They wanted MY opinion. I was used to being pushed aside a lot. Being the person in the back, no one noticed until I said something. With these people, I feel seen. I’m the girl on the other side.

“I think maybe she should...chug a glass of soda really fast.”

Oh god, that was so lame. “Chug a glass of soda”? Who even says that? What were they even going to think of me? But instead of making fun of me, they agreed with me.

“Oh my gosh, that’s so harsh!” Seoyoon joked, grinning at me. The others laughed along as well, patting my shoulder as if I said something incredible. I could feel myself smiling as well. She drank the soda and we continued on like this for a

couple of other people until it was my turn.

“Irene, truth or dare?” Danielle asked, finally turning to me.

“Dare,” I said, not wanting to be boring.

“I dare you to kiss Andrew right now.”

I froze, and so did Andrew. I didn’t want to do that. I didn’t even know the guy. “Uh...” I stuttered, not knowing what to do.

“Come on, Irene, do it!” Everyone chanted, and my head finally turned to him. To me, he didn’t seem upset about it at all.

“Aw, are you guys shy? Just do it in the other room.” Danielle said, a cheeky look on her face as she pointed to the separate booth on the other end. Feeling pressured, we awkwardly stood up and headed over there. As we sat down, he leaned over to kiss me right on the lips. I flinched a little but squeezed my eyes shut and let it happen. After the moment passed, I assumed it was over. But it wasn’t. In the privacy of the booth, he tried to do it again, and I let him. I really didn’t want to, but what was worse was being the loser here.

Then it went too far. Andrew tried to touch under my shirt, and that was when I yanked his hand off.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I yelled, backing off.

“What do you mean? You WANTED this to happen. You let it.” He said, crossing his arms. He leaned over again to try and grab me again, but I resisted. “Come on, don’t be boring.”

“I thought it was just some dare that we had to do,” I said, narrowing my eyes. He looked even more upset as he glared. “Then what was all this for? You led me on, didn’t you?” “What are you even saying? I wasn’t!” I protested, confused. “Yes, you did! This whole time, you were flirting, and now you’re telling me you don’t want to?” What. The. Hell. Did I lead him on? Was it really my fault? A guilty feeling started creeping up on me. Maybe I was being dramatic. Andrew suddenly did it again, this time trying to stick his tongue into my mouth. I made a sound of surprise, trying to push him off as I struggled. I obviously couldn’t; he’s stronger and all I could do was helplessly stay there until he finished with it. He finally shot me one last look before he headed off back to the group. I followed right behind him, still shocked. It surprised me most that he sat back down and talked as if nothing happened. Was this normal? I uncomfortably sat down as well, my posture tense and my dialogue robotic. Seoyoon and Danielle noticed how quiet I was and asked what was wrong in front of everyone. Should I say it? “I uh, didn’t really want to kiss Andrew.” I blurted out. “I dunno, it just made me uncomfortable.” All the guys immediately started teasing, punching Andrew’s shoulder. “Ooh! Andrew, not even the new girl likes you.” I could see him

turning red for embarrassment. Seoyoon looked at me in confusion, frowning a little. “Didn’t you want it though?” She asked. Huh? Why was everyone saying that? “No! I didn’t. I was just going along with it ‘cause I thought it was normal.” I replied. “Not gonna lie, Irene, you were kind of asking for it.” Danielle chirped up. “You two were flirting this whole time and all we did was set you guys up.” I gave her a confused look, shaking my head as I opened my mouth to protest, but I was caught off by Seoyoon. “If you didn’t want it, you could’ve just said it. You weren’t doing anything to stop it.” Then they just turned around as if it were nothing. I didn’t want it! I just did it so I could fit in! I wanted to scream and kick, but I couldn’t. Were they upset with me? I had to check. “Sorry uh, do you want to keep playing truth or dare?” I asked timidly. No one answered, all ignoring me except some boys giving me a glance. They were mad at me. Shoot. The girl I wanted to be wouldn’t be like this. She’d laugh and let a boy kiss her. The rest was a blur as everyone talked without me, and I just sat there, alone. Then I felt a hand wrap around my behind and squeeze it before quickly snatching back. I immediately stood up, whipping my body to see what it was. “What the hell?!” I exclaimed, seeing that it was

Andrew. "What's wrong with you?"

He just raised his two hands and looked at me as everyone else stared. "Don't be so dramatic, I just touched you a little." I wanted to scream insults, but the look everyone gave me made me sit down again. They just looked at me and muttered before going back to their conversation.

Great. Now I made it worse. I started panicking and started trying to think of ways to get them to like me again. God, what was I even doing?

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom," I mumbled, standing up quickly and rushing in the direction.

No one said anything. Of course, they didn't.

I was back in here again, but this time, I wasn't hopeful. I felt a pit of despair sit in my stomach as I leaned over the sink, taking a couple of deep breaths as I tried to think of something as I fixed my hair. They were nice at first, they talked to me and everything! What happened now? I started racking my brain for something that might have been wrong. Did I ever lead Andrew on? I barely knew the guy! He was the one who kissed me, and I only went because I thought it would be just a quick peck, something that we'd never talk about again. No one told me that it would be more, and then they started blaming me.

Did I just have no social cue at all? But then he grabbed my butt, and everyone just looked at me like I was some kind of alien. Looking back, this really wasn't my fault at all. I can't do this right

now. I just wanna go home.

I grabbed my bag, pushed out the door, and returned my shoes to the cashier. He didn't question anything and just placed it behind the counter. I didn't tell anyone I was leaving; they wouldn't care either.

Stepping out into the light hurt my eyes a little, and I shielded my eyes from it as I tried calling for a taxi. There weren't many people around, and getting one to come to my direction was easy enough. One stopped by, and I opened the door to let myself in.

I wanted to be beautiful. I wanted to be one of them.

I wanted to be the girl on the other side.

I wanted them to think I was cool, that I was likable.

I tried, for once, to be someone better.

I wanted to be one of those people on the billboards,

Pretty girls and handsome guys linked arms as the photo captures them mid-laugh.

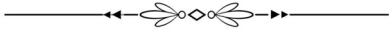
I did everything I was supposed to

I laughed, I cracked jokes, and I did what they told me to

They didn't see my crooked teeth or my messed up hair,

They didn't comment on my face

So why, why is this happening to me?



Joelle Oh is 13 and in the 7th grade. She is from Seoul, Korea. She has been published in her school magazine, Magpie, and is a two-time winner of the spooky story contest sponsored by her school. Writing is her passion.

She explores themes such as what it feels like to be a female in society and hopes to bring awareness to important issues like gender equality. When not writing, you can find Joelle playing competitive badminton and spending time with her friends.

The Woman in the Chair

By Lorin Zamer

Pounding.

Panic.

“I can’t breathe.”

Flashes.

Screaming.

“I can’t breathe!”

Running.

GET OUT! GET OUT!

I CAN’T BREATHE!

Katharine woke up with a start; panting, lying down, frozen with terror. She had so many questions. She ran her hands across the hard, flat surface she lay upon, and realized that there was nothing covering her. Katharine lay still, her body aching, still breathing heavily. The ceiling was wooden, the walls were wooden, and she guessed by the feel of it, that the table was wooden as well. Katharine sat up slowly, her heart skipping a beat when she realized that she wasn’t alone. There was a woman sitting in the corner of the room on an old, wooden rocking chair. The woman rocked methodically back and forth, the floorboards creaking with every sway of the old chair. Unblinking, she stared right at Katharine. The woman’s hair was straight and black, the

humid air causing it to stick to her face. She was slim, far too slim: her bones were pointed harshly at the joints; her arms were scrawny, her skin stretched tightly around her bones; her face was sunken, pale as the snow with dark, deep marks surrounding her cold, gray eyes. She looked fragile, as if she would break if she tried to leave her chair.

What is going on?

Katharine knew that something was wrong. She had a horrible, nagging feeling that something really awful was going to happen to her. With this in mind, Katharine’s eyes quickly swept the room as she looked for a way out. To the left of the woman, was an open window lazily allowing the moist summer breeze to float around them. The room was dimly lit by the rising sun peeking through the clouds, timidly making its way into the rickety old house. With this new found light, Katharine could see that there were scratches and holes in the wooden walls, and the room seemed to have been recently soaked and stained with a dark, thick crimson: like blood. This sudden realization made Katharine’s heart beat faster. She started to smell the stain on the walls as it mixed

with the sweet air floating through the window, making her feel sick. She had no memory of coming here. Her thoughts were swirling in her head when, out of nowhere, she heard:

“Good morning sunshine.”

Katharine jumped and snapped her head to the left, locking eyes with the woman once again and, unwavering, the woman started to smile. Her smile grew and grew, the thin skin on her face stretching, her lips cracking, and a small drop of blood fell leisurely from the center of her bottom lip onto her bony thigh. A shiver shot through Katharine from her head to her toes, causing her body to jolt and shake violently with fear.

“How did I get here?” Katharine asked breathlessly.

“Why, I brought you here, my dear.” The woman replied calmly.

The world started spinning and black started to creep in from the outer corners of her eyes. Katharine couldn't think, she couldn't remember anything.

Why can't I remember? Oh my gosh. What is going on? Oh my gosh! I can't breathe!

Katharine's breaths came in short bursts but she felt no relief from the air going in and out of her lungs. She was grasping and groping at her throat, weezing, desperately trying to breathe. Tears started running down her face in a constant stream, soaking her cheeks and hair. Her ears started ringing loudly and the black spots continued their trek across her vision. She was determined to keep consciousness out of the fear of what might happen to her if she slipped under the dark lull of senselessness. With much difficulty, Katharine was able to breathe again, she slowly filled her lungs with the warm, moist air filling the house. The black spots started to disappear and the ringing stopped. She closed her eyes and listened to the wind in an attempt to center herself as she pondered a way out of the house. She wiped her face and opened her eyes, looking directly at the strange woman. Her eyes were wide and unwavering, her smile growing more, splitting her bottom lip, causing a slow stream of hot blood to drip down her chin and onto her pants. She was enjoying Katharine's unease.

Suddenly, a blood curdling scream burst through the silence, making Katharine turn white with fear once again.

Where did that come from? Oh my gosh, oh my

gosh!

Katharine was sobbing uncontrollably. She tried to think of what she did that made her deserve such horror.

“He’s coming!” The woman sang.

“Who’s coming?” Katharine gasped.

“You ignorant little girl,” the rocking stopped.

“You think humans are in control of everything! Darling,” she teased, “This is the work of the Gods!”

“The work of th...”

“You think you’re so special don’t you? How do you think humans are able to survive? The Gods control everything! We must please them to save the rest of your kind!”

“My kind?” Katharine questioned fearfully.

“Humans, dear,” The woman replied impatiently.

Katharine was in shock. She didn’t know what to think.

This is insane! The work of the Gods? What does

that mean?

Katharine asked timidly, “What do you mean, ‘we must please them?’”

The woman laughed maniacally “Why, nothing pleases the Gods more than human blood. It keeps them strong and assures their loyalty to this disaster you call a world.”

Katharine felt numb. Her mind went blank, and she couldn’t speak. She was going to die and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Her mouth opened and closed as she tried to speak, tried to think, but only a soft moan escaped. Katharine gasped as her memory came back in a flash, hitting her like a brick, sending her body back against the table so violently, it made her head spin. She had a family! The love of her life was waiting for her at home.

Alex! She remembered, her heart breaking.

She was leaving for work, it was supposed to be just like any other day. Katharine had accepted a work trip where she would meet others to discuss how they could make the world a better place.

Make the world a better place. Katharine thought.

Make. The world. A better. Place.

The woman's voice ambushed Katharine's brain, suspending the flood of memories, as the voice mocked her over and over again: "*We must please them to save the rest of your kind.*"

He told me not to leave! Oh my gosh, he told me not to go. Katharine thought hopelessly, remembering Alex.

Alex.

The woman interrupted Katharine's thoughts, her smile just as wide, saying, "You're just one of many. I'm sure, of course, you can smell that. I've heard that humans have a way of smelling their own... both inside and out."

Upon hearing this, Katharine turned quickly and vomited violently until she was sure that if she retched any more, she would surely die: she hoped that this was the case. She would rather die now than wait for how she might be killed later in her undeniable, inescapable slaughter. Unfortunately for her, the vomiting ceased and she was left feeling weak and defeated.

"Are you done, dear?" the woman asked, mocking pity.

Katharine did her best to block out the tsunami

of memories torturing her: her head hurt, she couldn't do this anymore! She realized that her pity would get her nowhere. Katharine let out a final sob, releasing her fear, releasing every feeling she had until all she felt was anger. Pure, all-consuming hatred. This woman was taking everything from her! She would never see her family and friends again. She would never see another sunrise, another waterfall: she would never see the beautiful world that she always wanted to see. Katharine was furious. Her face was hot and her vision blurred, her anger filled every inch of her, taking over.

"How many humans have you taken?" Katharine muttered, her teeth clenched.

"Come again, my dear?" The woman sneered.

"Stop calling me that!" Katharine screamed, "How many humans have you taken?" she roared, enunciating every word harshly.

"Getting angry now, are we... Dear." The woman's smile returned, making Katharine's blood boil.

It was as if something had possessed Katharine. She wasn't thinking, she wasn't seeing, she felt disconnected from her body. Every intention she

might have had was annihilated instantly and replaced with an animalistic fury. Her teeth were bared and she was ready to pounce, to tear the woman apart, piece by piece.

“You devil.” Katharine spoke deeply, biting each word.

The woman laughed, catching Katharine off guard. She smiled - a dark smile - her face changing and contorting.

“Oh no, my dear, I’m your guardian angel.”

Still laughing, she grew taller and the skin on her bony limbs seemed to melt into her frightening, elongated figure. Her legs and arms grew out, her hands and feet turning into claws, six inches in length. Her neck stretched, spiraling and coiling like a snake ready to attack. Her face was pulled forward off of her skull and was molded to a point, almost a beak, while a multitude of menacing fangs pierced through her soft gums, soaking them in blood.

Katharine’s anger was slowly suppressed, her face turning white: she had forgotten to breathe. She gawked at the creature, unbelieving and horrified by this sudden change. Her anger had given her a hope that she didn’t realize until now: now she had no chance. This creature was more horrible

and terrifying than anything she could have ever imagined. Her tears returned, accompanied by uncontrollable sobs as she stared at the face of her killer. The creature laughed deeply, a horrible, bellowing laugh and started towards Katharine. She jumped off the table and hid behind it, allowing her instincts to take over, though she knew that she wasn’t protected. Her breathing increased, a soft whine escaping her throat with every exhale.

BANG

Katherine’s head snapped toward the door. Someone was trying to get in... some-thing was trying to get in.

“He’s here.” the creature hissed.

Katharine looked around the room, tears streaming down her face. She thought about her family and her Alex.

BANG

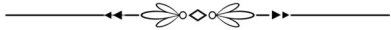
She thought of the world that she knew so little about, but loved so dearly. She took a deep breath, inhaling every happy memory she had ever had and she let this joy consume her.

BANG... BANG... BANG

“Goodbye,” she said softly, her voice wavering.

BANG!

The door flew inwards, Katharine let out her last scream, and everything went black.



Lorin Zamer has won 1st place in various speech-writing competitions and has won 2nd place in a local story-writing contest. In her free time, Lorin enjoys many activities such as singing, playing her oboe, and watching movies. Lorin is a student at Cookeville High School and she lives with her family and two dogs in Cookeville Tennessee.

POETRY



By Brookelyn Maxwell

Flood

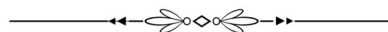
The cool rain was falling so close to grasp
Unpredictable, untold direction,
Even if you try to use the best map
It's puzzling to get its clear affection

Trying to understand the thoughtful rain,
It's a task some others have failed to do
Its soft anger has caused thunder and pain,
The rain unable to get its point through

The rain's shy words only come out silent
Soon the weary rain starts to roar and pour
Flooding all lands, seeming violent
The sad rain leaves, afraid of ruining more

Hiding in the protective clouds, anxious
Isolating itself from everyone

Trying to avoid all chances of failure
It says next time it will be a savior



Brookelyn Maxwell has been writing stories since she was eight years old with only her older sister's computer and Microsoft Word. She started posting some of her works through free online websites and apps at age thirteen, but she has yet to be officially published. She enjoys playing bass clarinet and soprano clarinet, painting, and drawing in her free time when she is not writing. With her writing, she tends to stick to elements such as fantasy/ supernatural, romance, and comedy with deep and intense characters. She usually writes longer stories, but will occasionally write short stories and poems. She is currently a senior about to graduate from Cookeville High School in Cookeville, Tennessee.

By Ella Morel

Her

I see her.

I hate the way she breathes.

I hate the way she moves.

I hate the way she speaks
and stalks around the room.

I hate the way she walks.

I hate the way she opens her mouth.

I hate the way she looms over my shoulder

I know her.

I've seen the way she acts.

I've seen the way she pretends.

I've seen the way she talks behind other people's backs.

I've seen the way she thinks.

I've seen the way she dresses.

I've seen the way she truly believes she's doing good.

I've mirrored her.

I've breathed just like her.

I've moved just like her.

I've spoken just like her.

and stalked around the room just like her.

I've walked just like her.

I've opened my mouth just like her.

I've loomed over others' shoulders just like her.

I've become her.

I act just like her.

I pretend just like her.

I talk behind other people's backs just like her.

I think just like her.

I dress just like her.

I truly believe I'm doing good.

I am her.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is worth it.

That's what I'm always being told.

No boundaries or feelings

just all worries and constant stomachaches

tears of pain that I'm supposed to just endure

The lingering emptiness that watches and stalks.

Sacrifice is worth it.

That's what I'm always being told.

What you feel isn't important enough.

The constant silence whenever I'm alone

there's nothing to do when there's no one around
the nothingness is overwhelming
The loneliness of isolation from everyone I know is deafening.

Sacrifice is worth it.
That's what I'm always being told.
It doesn't matter whether you like it or not.

Nothing spoken feels validated
nothing felt is taken seriously
a part of me feels hatred
You just have to take it whether you like it or not.

Sacrifice is worth it.
That's what I'm always being told.
It's tiring being "Me."

I feel suffocated
I don't like being around people
yet I don't like being alone
the things I feel are complex
Complicated
Twisted
It's hard to know whether I should be feeling them at all.

Sacrifice is worth it.
That's what I'm always being told.
Is it really worth it in the end?

I should be grateful

I should be this, I should be that

why should I be grateful

for something that hurts me?

A part of me feels love despite the pain.

Sacrifice is worth it.

That's what I'm always being told.

Hate and love are things that shouldn't be mixed.

The constant hatred is eating at me

the love for oneself and others is eating at me

everything I feel is there through the nothingness

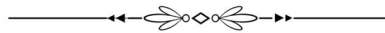
The nothingness that kills,

yet is what I crave the most.

Sacrifice is worth it.

That's what I'm always being told.

It's not worth it if it's killing me.



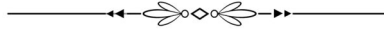
Ela Morel is just a 13-year-old girl from the keystone state who happens to like writing about dark stuff. She goes to an urban school in the southeastern part of PA. She draws in her free time (albeit horribly) and listens to music 24/7. She's a very chronically online person.

By Kasidy Cates

Game Over

i don't think she's supposed to learn those lessons this young like which men in the family never to be
alone in a room with like how you pretend
you're with another person
when you're out and he's staring
like what you need to do
to make sure he can't follow you home
drive around the same block twice
and if the same car is behind you
from starting out
don't slow down
don't pull over
don't answer the phone
don't let him take you out
even if there is going to be
other adults around
his hand can still find your thigh
his eyes can still tell the truth
while his mouth says nothing but lies
don't let him corner you
don't let him know you'd be too scared
to scream
because the minute you get in his car alone
the games begin
like gaslighting and twisting every "no" to a
"well maybe, i don't really know"
what you want or what you think

what is your true beliefs
and he may never have seemed demanding
and you may never again have to feel lonely
but don't just stay because he isn't distant
like everyone else has been
because older doesn't always mean wiser
and he's the one who knows that
your game is completely over.



Kasidy Lee C. loves to express herself through her art, whether that be in poetry, painting, or theater. She has been featured in different poetry magazines and anthology books. Located in East TN, you can find her cuddling with her cat Sheldon and reading John Green novels. Writing love notes for every single stranger she falls in love with and poetry about the struggles and reality of eating disorders and depression.

By Raquel Silberman

Self-Doubt

I am unclear before I am sane by Raquel Silberman

then, one sane instant brings clarity:

One clarifying instant brings sanity

I sweat until the sweat becomes annoyed with me,

I breathe for the first time and the air thanks me.

I am a praying mantis on a cliff top

extending an olive branch to my dear friend, fear.

I am a hot air balloon who will never meet the ground again,

who will roam the unknown endlessly, pointlessly.

I will the legs beneath me to show me they are alive, awake, willing.

I remember what it is like to faint, where millions of voices becomes one

incoherent bumblebee circling my head, and my vision becomes a blurry vignette

struggling not to engulf the painting I admire: "Real Life."

I am a seagull tempting fate on the surface of the ocean,

each time I dip my beak in the salt water, a fish goes into shock and I digest it like a rock. I am also

the phone on the wall, loud and obnoxious, pick me up and slam me back into place. Pretend I am not

there. Forget I am even there.

I am my own villain in disguise only that disguise is a fishnet and I am a poor clueless trout. I like to

think I blend in like a queen bee in her hive, different enough to be worshiped. But I am more like the

odd leaf on a fall tree, the first to change,

the first to fall and hit rock bottom.

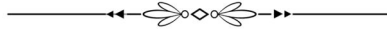
I am the annoyance, the thanks, the friend bellow the cliff top that reaches out, I am the odd bird in the

sky that hits a hot air balloon, I am the needles in my legs when they fall asleep, the mint jammed in

my mouth that brings me back to the painting, I am the rock in my throat and the slammed phone on

the wall, I am the villain to my own demise and the beekeeper who takes the queen in an open palm, I

am the moment I hit the floor and everything becomes clear, and I become sane.



Raquel is a Junior at Ruth Asawa School of the Arts who finds comfort in exploring and writing fiction of all kinds. Raquel was born and raised in San Francisco. Along with her cat, her home city is one of her favorite things to write about.

By Lennon Shumate

Female Rage

As a man, I can talk about female rage.

No, I am not going to go on and on

About how female rage doesn't exist.

In fact, I have experienced female rage,

In the form of a female, when I was still a woman.

I've experienced weird men hitting on me,

I've experienced that I'm too emotional

And I have had men talk down to me about my car.

I only need an oil change; no I don't need new tires.

I've used toilet paper because a tampon was too expensive

And the bathroom managed by men did not have any provided.

I've had men stare at me when I was younger,

My dad called a guy I liked because he was sending *Un-consensual* sexual innuendos.

I was in seventh grade, I had no idea what he was talking about.

I've been told to cover up as a child as grown men.

I've been told to wear two bras instead of one

Because one could not seem to hold my sisters back.

I was given dresses to wear on a daily basis,

Only to be asked why I was so dressed up.

In a world full of cis men,

There is no way to be a woman comfortably.

You are judged for every decision you make.

Even now, traces of female rage linger

In my body. Perhaps it is because I

Have not transitioned, or perhaps that,

No matter what, I will always be a man

In a female's body, so I will never truly be a man.
I'll only be cosplaying as a man with traces of
Femininity in my genetic coding.

To Be A Rock

Sometimes I think I woke up in the wrong body.

“Sit Still” they say to me;
“Dramatic” they say as
They handed me my
“most dramatic” Award.

I was a woman in the world once,
Navigating girlhood like
There was some set of
Invisible instructions everyone got
(I think I got the wrong set of instructions).

Being a girl meant you could cry,
But don't be a drama queen.
It's your fault that a grown
Man looked at you when you were twelve.
Don't stop wearing skirts.

Now, I'm a trans man, trying to navigate this world
Following the instructions I got.
I feel better. I feel me. I feel
Like puzzle pieces falling into place,
Snuggling into fluffy clouds.

I'm a man, but everyone looks at me like a woman.
I shut myself down,
Happy that someone

Is interested in my body – instead of me.

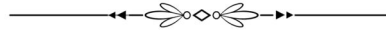
What do I expect in a world made for cis men?

Oh, to be reborn as a rock.

Genderless, calm, still.

Oh,

To be a rock.



Lennon Shumate is a 21-year-old trans man living in Louisiana. He got his high school degree from West Monroe High School. He currently studies as an undergraduate student at Northwestern State University, studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing.

By Amirah Al Wassif

To bury a curious girl

When I was younger,

I stood on a mountain of pillows

With a brave decision to swallow a whole finger. My father insulted me because I am curious.

All his life he wished to have a non-trouble baby whatever girl or boy.

My forefathers preferred to bury baby girls rather than put them

In carriages and sing them a lullaby.

I was born with a great motivation to scratch the sky upon my shoulders, crazy monkeys and heavy weights, I used to bake my grief each night

And through the daylight, while they're trying to sell me,

I spend my time calculating the distance between my gender and my awaited funeral.

When I took my first steps, my tribe circled around me like bees.

They approached figuring out that I have thighs and breasts. They tucked me in the obedience pocket, they dwelled me in an iron cage.

They ate my wings, my ears. When I was younger,

I crawled towards my father's shoulders, I whispered, "how far does the world extend?"

He frowned and replied "just, look at the space between your legs.

Prayers from Our House Roof

We were boiling bananas on the roof of our house.

Mother's laughter clutched the heart of my ears.

She was gossiping with a neighbor.

Mother was storytelling, sweet as poetry. I loved

To watch her tongue play the music of conversation.

They worked on their knees, their noses
colored by wood smoke. Boiling bananas
was like a prayer

We whispered, sang with faces lifted up,
We made art through peeling bananas,
slicing them into pieces to boil on the
fire, hoping for a kiss on a cheek
From a bird; an old hymn bathing our
exhausted souls.

At the roof's edge, I overlooked a cavernous
grotto, and I saw God cooking for children
like me. I watched him prepare the dinner
table for them in heaven,

A kingdom of mercy. I stretched my arms
to touch the magic, then ran to my
mother, whimpering

That I saw God cooking for the children.
She smiled but continued talking with her
neighbor. I yelled

At my mother for attention, pointing,
but she just smiled. I kept watching God
make delicious food for one hundred
children gathered on their knees around
him, longing in awe. I waved to them,
But they didn't notice me. I imagined
the smell from our rooftop carried a
kind of hope.

Under my bare feet, bananas peels and two
bowls, one for us and the other for the

hungry people

In our neighborhood. It became a ritual
ever since one hundred children had died of

hunger,

One hundred innocent souls vanished.

I swear I saw God cooking for them,
but no one believed me; they just kept
smiling

Transformation

I dream of cockatoo birds sipping milk from the sky

I fly from corner to corner holding sugar, wine, and more funny jokes.

God is up sitting on his throne watching how the earth dances under my bare feet.

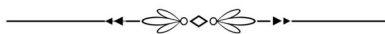
Kisses, wishes and more than that riding silver horses.

Creamy cloud falling down close to my head singing an old song.

My bones covered by the rhythm. My tongue turned into a butterfly. I sway in the air thinking of the
worlds I pass dreaming of more honey rivers to have more fun, wondering how many orphan girls still
live within me.

I try to raise both hands throwing them to a new universal castle. I feel new again. I sense more than
being alive. There is something beyond happiness. There is delicious beyond joy.

Believe me, there is music you have never heard of.



By Grace Yoon

my neon reverie : the *soul* of americana

my reflection against
...the realm where the expanse
between
dreams, reality,
and what is my soul
is painted
with the billows of the distance.
as if the very concept of depth
is woven into its fabric. it beckons a
siren's stare, resounding through the calm of the water
and the electric charge of the uncharted.
this is a chromatic symphony,
the clandestine clash of serenity and enigma
orchestrates an aria, imprinting on the canvas of the
mind...

i let my eyes run loose for just a minute, and it
jumps out and chokes me.

i tentatively grab onto it and
reach out w/ my right arm,
pulling into a surer, long embrace,
a tang of bittersweetness tickling the tip of my tongue

it sends an electric shock through
my tastebuds,

it entrances and
consumes me;
it is an overwhelming arousal,
leaving me drooling for more
of me
for all
of me;
me.

so
i plunge free,
my left side,
deep into the sea of—
until i am doused in—
in it—
imagine it—

until the neon lights beckon—a dazzling array—
and pull me away from my trance and
onto the dance floor.

i am jiving to assimilation's dance,
with a unique figure whom looks
shockingly like myself with a hint of
a little something uncanny.
nevertheless, i tap and step until my feet
are bruised,
and when the led's fizzle out, i am jolted
rudely and widely awake.

i pant, running far, far away to Gatsby's green light, except
mine isn't green.

i trek

my

internal terrain and i kill the

bears on my way

—and—

and the dragonflies and the cockroaches

for 'neath neon's hum

is a spillage of red mahogany burgundy deep maroon red,

first up to my ankles

then my knees

then my neck.

i try—i try—really, i—try

but my words run out of my esophagus and spill back into the void of nothing-ness of which it came from.

i drown,

drown,

i drown,

deep, deep, deep-deep.

but it is my pride for which i cease.

i am proud to die for my hues of americana:

 this is all for which i plea,

 yes, for

this is my neon reverie.

&&& (anchor)

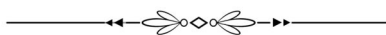
after WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

if that were to be so,
that the current current didn't expect much,
how would the waves dodge its depends?
or will it always be fate&destiny it rests upon?

the promise of the next tide shall bring a-
nother share of tomorrow's peace and the red
that bleeds will turn the wheel
of tomorrow until he lies beneath his barrow!

his eyes will be glazed
with shocking compunction, with
the color of a monsoon rain.
the current will still push and pull its water.

the present will lay yet another anchor beside
the sunken ship of innocence. the
sea will repair itself a clean white
slate and the fields will open home to new wheat and barley, but no chickens.



Grace Yoon is a sophomore at Choate Rosemary Hall. Her work has been recognized in numerous competitions, such as the Scholastic Writing Awards, and her slam poetry performances have earned her the title of Connecticut Youth Grand Slam champion and invitations to regional, national, and international slam conventions.

By Haven Simmons

Makeup

I settled in the similarity of both of us
because I knew that she would never call me ugly.
It was more visible than highlighter under the sun
that I was my mother's daughter.
It was also clear that our bonds had open scars
but she covered it in foundation,
then sprayed over it with citrus perfume
so the blood could smell luscious.

Now, when I cover up a small imperfection,
I think of her.

When I wanted to venture out,
give my lips the same crisp lining,
she supported the idea of me changing
since she hadn't accepted the fact that
she had too.
She drew around the face in the mirror,
denied and patted away the flushing red
brought on by the substance.

Now, when I put on too much blush,
I think of her.

She took me by the arm and led me
into a new stage of girlhood
to make up for the ones she missed
or forgotten-
bought warm toned palettes to replace the sunsets
we watched from opposite homes.
But this time I left under the assurance
that this would be something we could do together

but now, it's just another thing
that makes me miss her.

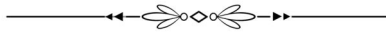
I was left to scribble on eyeliner
by mapping out uneven wings with tape,
putting on the layers like I had seen her do
so many years ago.

But memories of her didn't feel the same
and the cosmetics just exposed my pain—
the mascara running down my face
because of a broken promise.

Now, when my tears turn black,
I think of her.

Now, I'd say I'm pretty good at makeup.
My mascara is waterproof, I can make sharp wings
that sometimes I'm convinced I can fly on
all the way back to her.
Every once in a while, I draw stars on my lids
and stick gems to my face
with a glue that I thought we'd always have,
but I refuse to make up bonds that hide those unhealed scars.

Now, when I get ready everyday and see those scars,
I think of her.



Haven Simmons is a junior Literary Arts student at Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts. Haven has been published in several anthologies and recently won the Lehigh Valley Press high school poetry contest. She is a regular open mic contributor to several local poetry societies in her area and is looking to pursue creative writing for her college studies.

By Isabella Lagarto

Crush and Tango

My heart beats so ferociously—I think I can dance.
Across the floor from me, you shoot me a glance.
Tango with me, move your feet to the beat,
Pump your hips and ignore the defeat;

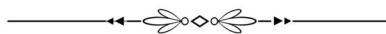
One-two, pull me closer to you.
Three-four, pick up with the speedy tempo.
Again, my neck calls for your grace.
I beckon you with my eyes and praise.

You may look away, but do you feel my stare?
Hands on my waist, transport me to the sea's air.
Sail with me, bask in the crisp winds.
Call it a man's affection, and grasp the ends.

Pass over the fishing line, call it a muted, timid love.
Awfully, I wish I knew what you were thinking of.
I extend, extend, extend my arm with trembling ache,
Desperately, I wonder, did the fish catch my bait?

Guide me through the rushing waves,
Move with me through the heated, craving pains.
The evening approaches us,
Moonlight amplifies my desires and lusts.

See me for who I am, awaken freely!
I know you want it too, so overtake me.
Heave as I weave my legs around your shape,
Consume me—the music, the dance left us agape.



Isabella Lagarto is a senior in high school and a Cuban-Honduran writer who lives in Miami. She looks to expand her reach, and her poetry publication journey began with her first publication in the Diamond Gazette. Besides writing, Isabella can be seen in the gym, around the ocean, or with her loved ones.

VISUAL ARTS



Claire You

Photography Collection

Faith



Glory



Claire You is a hobbyist writer and photographer. She lives in the States and has been published in multiple different magazines as well as been the editor's pick. She enjoys gaining inspiration from the world and scenery around her.

Isabela Ramirez

Photography Collection

follow the sun



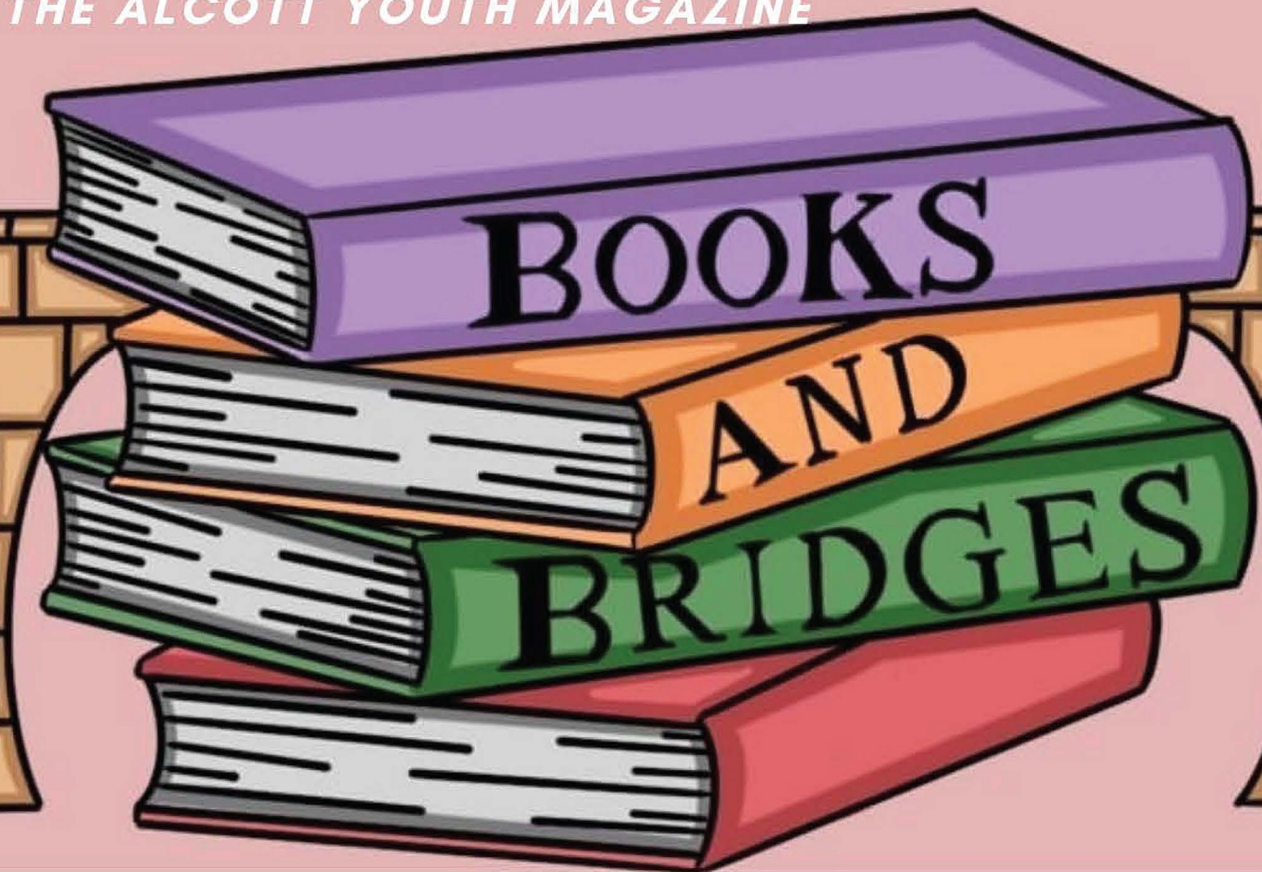
learn from the waves



where two sides
meet

Isabela Ramirez is a 16-year-old from Florida, who is passionate about capturing the perfect shots and turning them into captivating stories.

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