

theRev

A MAGAZINE BY CREATIVITYUNLEASHED

RUSSELL SAGE COLLEGE - THE REV 2026





Greg, by Veronica Sinnott from New Visions

THE REV

The Rev

a magazine produced by
CreativityUnleashed Publishing

for Russell Sage College
in partnership with Questar III's New Visions
Visual and Performing Arts Program

Welcome to the 2026 edition of The Rev literary and creative arts magazine, originally *Laurel Leaves* and previously the *Russell Sage College Review*. In this edition, you will find works from current undergraduate and graduate students, staff, faculty, and alumni from both the Albany and Troy campuses, alongside creatives from London, UK. This is why there is a mix of British and American English woven throughout. We have also worked with young people from a range of high schools. Please see "This Year's Partners" on page two for more information.

Thank you to all of the creatives who submitted this year. Months of careful reading, review, and curation have resulted in our biggest edition yet. We are excited to reveal 140 pages of thoughtful, imaginative, and hard-hitting works of creativity. Our selection process is driven by the mission to amplify as many voices as possible, focusing on what matters most to our communities. Overall, we received almost 300 submissions, and though we couldn't publish them all in print, we've included some further works on our blog. You can check them out at www.creativity-unleashed.org/our-blog.

Dip in and out, indulge, and enjoy. By the time you get through these pages, we know you will agree that while pens are mightier than the sword, young pens are even mightier...

The Rev is paid for by Russell Sage College's Carol Ann Donahue Endowed Fund.

Our magazine editors are guaranteed the opportunity to publish a piece of their choice.

Front cover artwork: *Spider Lily* is by Leenah Ansari from CreativityUnleashed Publishing.

Please see our inside back cover for all our thank-yous to the wonderful people who make this project possible every year.

This Year's Partners:

Questar III's New Visions Visual & Performing Arts program, located at The Arts Center of the Capital Region in Troy, NY, is a specialized program for academically and artistically advanced high school seniors who are planning to attend college for the visual or performing arts. NV: VAPA students gain knowledge about the business of art and specific techniques through a curriculum that blends college-level education with practical experience. Topics of study include preparing the college application and audition/portfolio, filmmaking, songwriting and recording, playwriting and performance, and an art show.

CreativityUnleashed Publishing is the face of a legacy project that began in 2014 as Haringey Unchained. What started as a small collective of students aiming to showcase the creative talent of a school in Tottenham, London, has now grown to become a community interest company (CIC) working with young people globally. We promote social change, tolerance, and diversity through community-driven art experiences. It has been our absolute pleasure working with the editorial teams of *The Rev* at Russell Sage College and Questar III's New Visions for our sixth magazine.

Stay in Touch:

Follow CreativityUnleashed Publishing on Instagram @creativityunleashed_org and Bluesky @createunleashed.bsky.social. Join our Eventbrite page for notices regarding future creative workshops, magazine launches and submission windows, or visit www.creativity-unleashed.org to sign up for our newsletter.



Mirador Punta Culebra, by Germaine Desrue from CreativityUnleashed Publishing

Meet our Editors

All members of the editorial teams below split the workload throughout the year, adjusting their time and support based on capacity. Those who took on specific roles are indicated below.

The Rev Team:

- Ethan Alcee
- Maryam Alsammarraie
- Sofia Baldwin
- Kyra Burris
- Deanna Cooper (Flatplan Manager)
- Aryanna Deutsch
- Maverick Douglas (Copyeditor)
- Victoria Harris
- Kathleen Muller
- Laurel Petersen (Submissions Manager)
- Jonathan Reese
- Angie Smith (Director of *The Rev* & Founder of CreativityUnleashed Publishing)
- Newton Wilk
- Aryanna Zeigler

Questar III's New Visions Visual & Performing Arts Team:

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- Diana Carangelo
- Peg Danner-Frank (Program Instructor)
- Ruby Gazorian
- Phoenix Morehead
- Isabella Schmidt
- Amelia Stannard
- Duncan Teasdale-Ulrich
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CreativityUnleashed Publishing Team:

- Ashley Busby
- Germaine Desrue
- Zi Xin Guo (Guest Editor) Plainview - Old Bethpage John F Kennedy High School in NY, USA
- Jeremiah Morgan (Intern)
- Andreea Pavel
- Anna Reilly
- Maysoun Sheikh
- Xuyi (Lauren) Zheng (Guest Editor) Guelph Collegiate Vocational Institute in Guelph, Canada

Foothills (Sunset)

Ashley Busby CreativityUnleashed



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PAINTING

At Chuck E. Cheese, Freedom Costs A Token

Maverick Douglas Russell Sage College

I only went to Chuck E. Cheese once as a child, and I didn't remember the sheer volume of noise that permeates the child-centered zone of games and activities. It prompted me to think about how people process and observe such spaces as children versus as adults, and the differing determinations that come from processing at alternate developmental periods. I had the opportunity to attend a birthday party for my friend's niece at Chuck E. Cheese and decided to use it as the foundation for participant observation. I reasoned that a space made for children, specifically for children to have fun and explore, was the perfect opportunity to observe child agency in action.

Saturday is the ideal day for parents to plan birthday parties for their children with their children's friends, as it is generally an available time for everyone to be able to gather. However, when you get six families who have the same idea and all their children's friends together, even a relatively large space like Chuck E. Cheese begins to feel small. Different pitches of excitable voices harmonize with the cheesy upbeat music of games, and the artificial voices of arcade games were designed to draw the attention of beings with short attention spans. All of this noise was overwhelmed by the center stage when Chuck E. himself came out to dance with the birthday children and their friends, the music warring with the screeches and giggles of the sea of wriggling bodies who tried to follow his moves while being the one to claim they were dancing closest to him.

Lights accompanied the sounds, flashing in yellows, blues, reds, pinks, and greens of eye squinting shades. They reflected against the shiny plastic bracelets, necklaces, and rings that could be claimed as prizes at the ticket booth. Video games flashed from scene to scene, the voices of the player lost within feet of the monitor, often making it difficult for even the player to understand what was happening, having to follow the quick paced graphics without the benefit of continuous verbal input. Adults had to take care as they moved about the tightly packed maze of games and activities, keeping an eye out for tiny bodies that appeared between one breath and the next, easy to trip over if great care wasn't taken.

The generally pleasing scent of baking pizza was overpowered by the underlying eye watering smell of burnt cheese and bread. Depending on where you stood, that nauseating combination would couple with the sickly sweet scent of

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THOUGHT PIECE

spilled soda, tugging at your shoes and leaving a sticky, squicking noise for several steps afterwards. Across the room where the indoor trampoline was set up, rubber intermingled with smelly feet, and the burnt pizza was almost preferable. Once in a while, a blast of rain-fresh air refreshed the area when the door opened.

My friend's niece was celebrating her fourth birthday. She's full of personality and knows exactly what she wants, and has no problem communicating that to those around her. She had spotted one of the basketball simulation games, where the ticket releases basketballs and you have a couple of minutes to get as many baskets as you can. She wanted to try it but she was too short, though she didn't seem to realize it. She scanned her card (no longer do they have tokens but cards with a certain amount of "tokens" on them) and tried to figure out how to play. Even the start button was above her line of sight. I lifted her up to stand on the lip and showed her the start button. I was aware at this moment that I was both a participant and observer, helping her engage while also noticing what my involvement revealed about how adults shape children's play. She squealed in excitement when the balls rolled down towards her. Lifting one up she tossed it, and it didn't even make it halfway across the court, but it bounced and that was enough for her. She tossed the balls for a few minutes but quickly lost interest when she realized that she wasn't yet able to make the basket and asked to get down. I placed her down and she skipped off to her next game happily and eagerly.

As I finished the round for her, I overheard another child telling his adult that he wanted to try the game. He was from one of the other birthday parties, where the birthday child was turning three, and so he likely was between three and five depending. The adult told him no, that he should try another game because it was a waste of tokens; he was too short and wouldn't be able to do it. He continued to plead with her, telling her he just wanted to try and throw them, and as he spoke he grew louder. I recognized that the adult was already at the end of their tether, something that seemed common with the adults (no doubt because of everything happening around us), she finally snapped at him, told him they weren't playing that game and wasting her money, and that he could go find something else to do or he could go sit with the adults and babies at the table. He began to cry loudly. After being around children at various stages of development my whole life, I find it usually pretty easy to figure out what kind of crying they're doing. This cry was of frustration, of someone not being heard, and was no doubt exacerbated by his own overwhelm from all the stimuli happening around us. His adult huffed and followed through on her threat,

dragging him back towards the tables, his gasps and cries dissipating behind the other noise the further away they got.

It was amazing to me that, even in a space that is made for children, with the intent of them having fun and being able to explore on their own terms, their agency was still being tested and ignored. Was the cost of a single token really worth ignoring what the child was asking, and ruining both of their afternoons? The game wasn't dangerous, and no one else in line was a proper age to play. It would have been easy to let him try and throw a couple of balls. Either he would have grown bored, as my friend's niece did, and leave partway through, or he would have had great fun throwing the balls until they stopped, and she could have drawn his attention to something else. It had me wondering about the importance of a singular token to an adult versus a child. To her, it was a waste if he couldn't play properly and potentially earn some tickets, but he was just there to play the games and try things out. Why wasn't his desire to play and try something new more of a consideration in her decision? If nothing else, it could have been a learning experience for later when, maybe, he ran out of tokens and wanted to play something else, or wanted to get a prize and hadn't won enough tickets with which to choose anything.

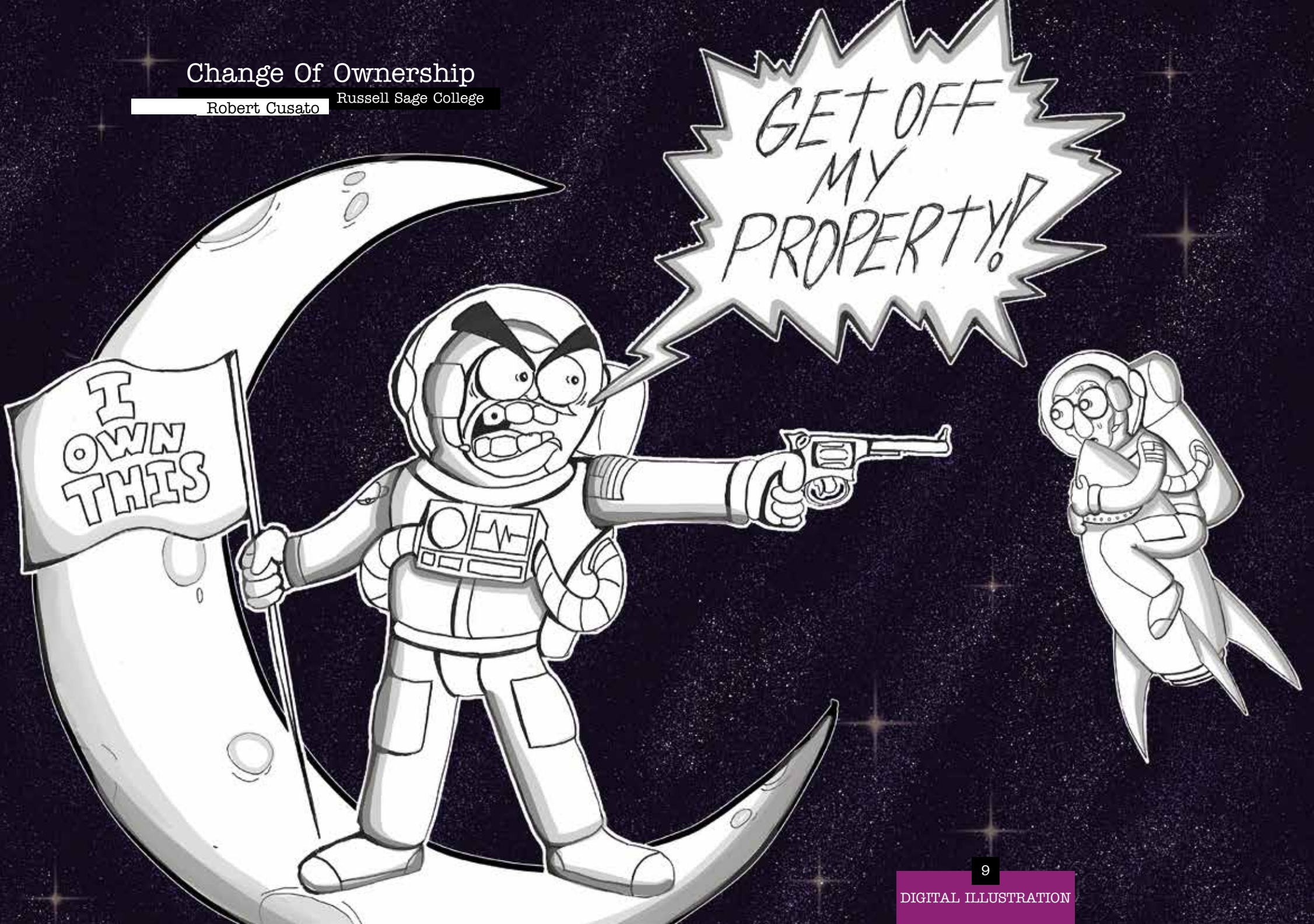


Scan this QR code to read the rest of this piece...

Change Of Ownership

Robert Cusato

Russell Sage College



Penelope The Weaver

Amy Hou
Concord Academy

Weaving—a torturous tribute to her intellect,
each strand rough against her fingertips,
a reminder of the emotional wounds she carries.

The loom creaks under her constant attempts,
the rhythmic sound that mirrors her longing.

As she carefully intertwines the rough strands,
the fabric transforms into a painting of her grief,
each knot a depiction of her heart's agony.

The muted and dismal hues of her tapestry
reflect the shadows that linger in her soul,
a stark contrast to the vibrant life before his departure.

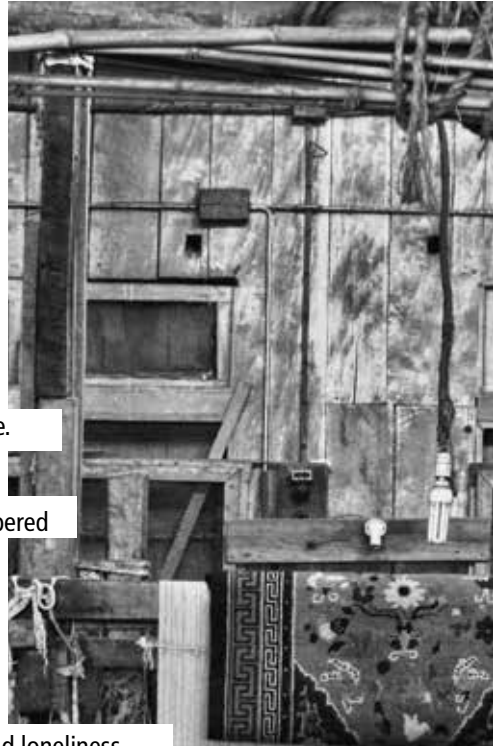
With each passing day, all the suitors' expectant
gazes follow her, ignorant that every thread is a whispered
protest against fate.

Her heart, laden with memories,
clings to the brief echoes of his laughter and
the warmth of his embrace.

The hardness of the strands in this work – strength and loneliness.
She weaves a web of hope and sorrow,
a delicate balance of love and longing.
Hers is an expression of unwavering loyalty.

Beneath the surface of her hard work
lies a deep melancholy,
a silent revolt against the world,
and still she weaves
 and weaves
 and weaves
 and weaves

in the hope that her lover will return
to restore her life's brilliant colors.



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POETRY

Complicated

Isabella Schmidt &
Amelia Stannard
New Visions



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PAINTING

Lavender Serenity

Amanda Bastiani Russell Sage College



My Mother's Island

Newton Wilk

Russell Sage College

I have a flower from my mother's
island, something from the land,
flattened in my notebook, pink petals crushed into
one less dimension.
I can't tell for sure
if it still smells sweet.
I beg it to.

I have a snail shell from my mother's island,
something from the sea,
that either dried up and died
or grew into something too large
for its little spiral home to hold any longer.
It's still covered in that red ochre dirt
I found it in.
I won't clean it.

I've been sitting in my room,
smelling flowers now thin and straight, staining
my thumbs with the red dirt of the spiral,
begging,
dirtying my hands,
and *trying* to feel her in it.

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POETRY

Queen Of Congo

Aisha Jean-Charles

Russell Sage College



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MULTICOLOR PORTRAIT



Postpartum

Olivia Stebbins-Hopkins
Russell Sage College

from me,
a red and writhing body,
with a swollen bottom and new neck
is born
then taken
washed, measured, warmed, covered
then returned
and me,
i cry, i weep, i scream
quietly
and despite my silent suffering, which i caused myself, he is alive and
God only knows why

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POETRY



Mandala

Kathy Biggs-Campos
Russell Sage College

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PHOTOGRAPHY

Growing A Life

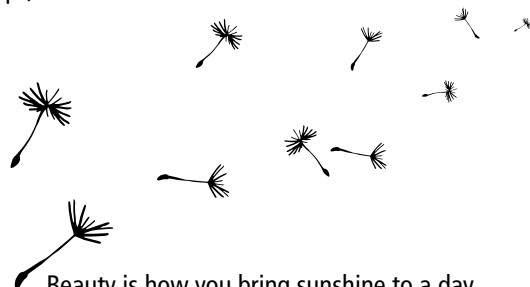
Mackenzie Akin Russell Sage College

I used to hate my body.
She and I were mortal enemies.
No matter what I did, I wasn't happy.
I wanted a new body,
or at least the body of Camille Kostek.

My body has been through changes,
extraordinary growth,
for my baby.
Aches and torn ligaments,
cramps and stretch marks.
Sleepless nights,
all so that our little angel can come into this world.

With growing my baby,
I have reasons to love my body.
I mourn the years I didn't.
My twenty-eighth year may be my first of peace.

My daughter will walk in my footsteps,
follow my lead.
So it's time to change my thoughts.
Speak positively,
or at least neutrally,
for my baby girl to learn
her worth is not tied to her body.



Beauty is how you bring sunshine to a day,
kindness to a stranger.
Health instead of waist size.
Feeling good instead of fitting a mold.
Moving for joy and strength
and connection
...not forcing it.

She is beautiful because she grew a life.
She is beautiful because she is powerful.
She is beautiful and just a small pin in the map of my life.

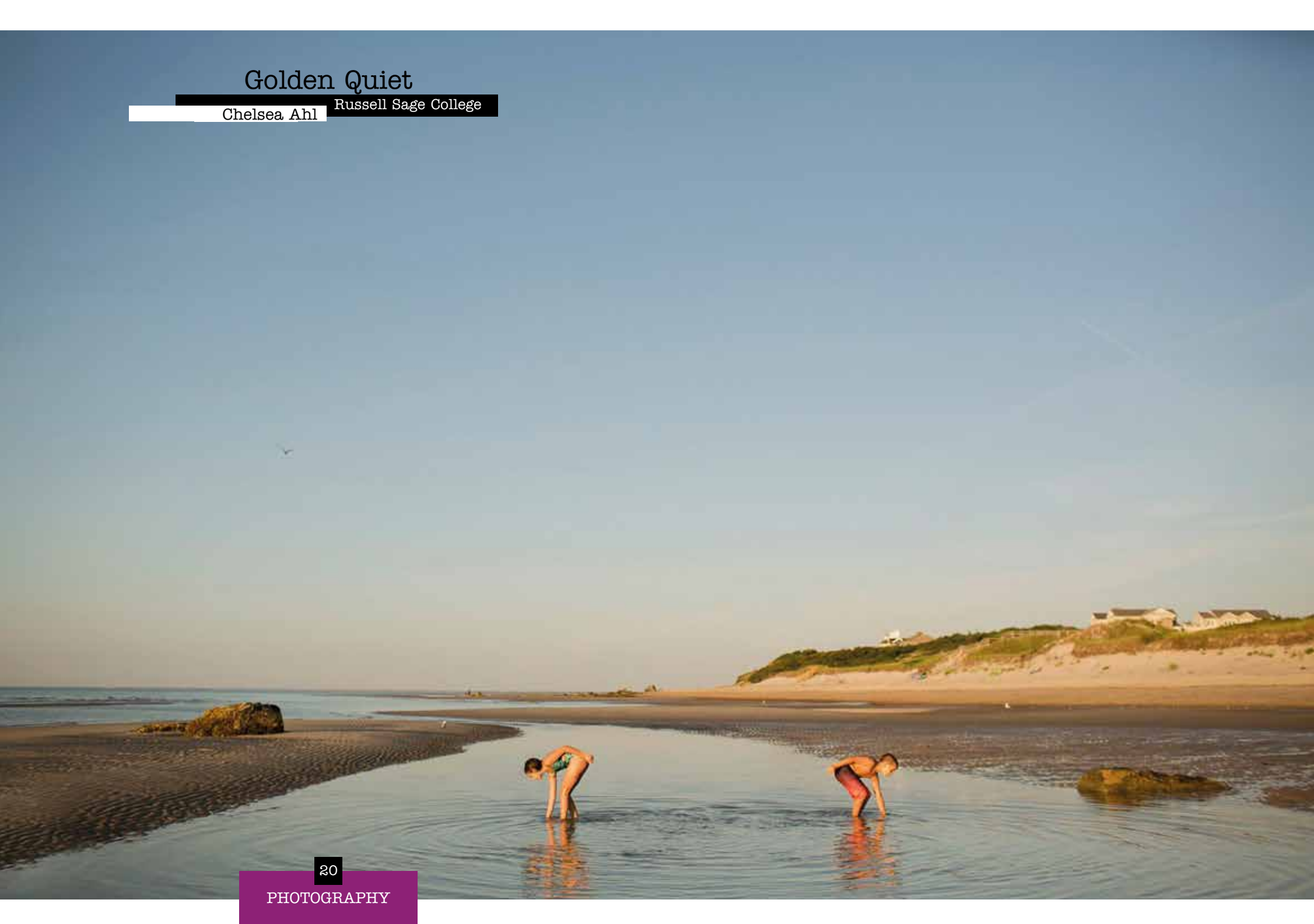
Wonderland

Veronica Sinnott New Visions



Golden Quiet

Chelsea Ahl Russell Sage College



Baby Blankets

Jeremiah Morgan

Russell Sage College

When they tried to tell my future, they got it right.
My mother thanked the doctor for the news:
a baby boy slept fitfully in wait to be born.

The snowstorm couldn't keep my family from the delivery room,
and everything was closed for the holiday
when the nurses took their guess back, and draped me in pink.

When I was told about their prediction for me (butterfly clips in
my fine hair, to keep the bangs from my face), I couldn't
understand why I felt so sad.
My father told me what they were going to name me,
had I been a boy, so
I tried to sign it in crayon, to see how it felt.
My should-be-name.

When the grey dawn scared away the fragile teenaged night,
and sunlight surveyed my questioning wreckage, my skin
scraped raw from shedding,
I finally understood.
When they tried to tell my future, they got it right.

I watched the sun rise, and draped myself in blue.

The World Keeps Spinning

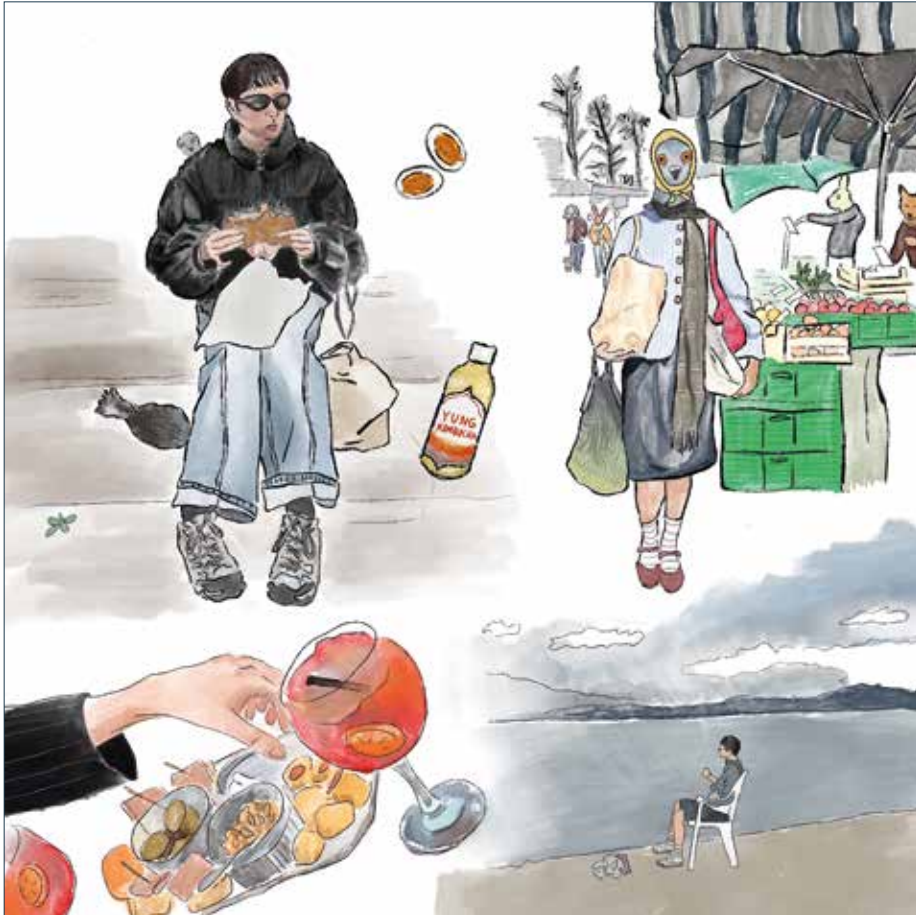
Diana Carangelo

New Visions



Pigeon Lady!

Sarah Schonhiutt Russell Sage College



Old Man On A Park Bench

David Marcell Russell Sage College

Long winter gone, the solitary sentinel faithfully returns to his post.
Purveyor of the bustle of the street, the rushing of its citizens,
He steals a little purpose from your headlong flight.
You will not miss the energy you lend.
His needs are few.

Off to work, to shop, to share, to laugh.
Memories of places to go return and fade
As he watches,
As he naps.

"A fine day," he observes for those now absent.
"What would Julia be doing?"
Dinner smells greet him at the door to end the day's journey,
A cup of coffee shared in silent communion...

Laughing children break the revelry.

Fran climbing the rock; Meg on the swing,
The slide, a game, a butterfly.
First date, prom dress, lovely flowers
"Don't stay out all night."
But now they do.

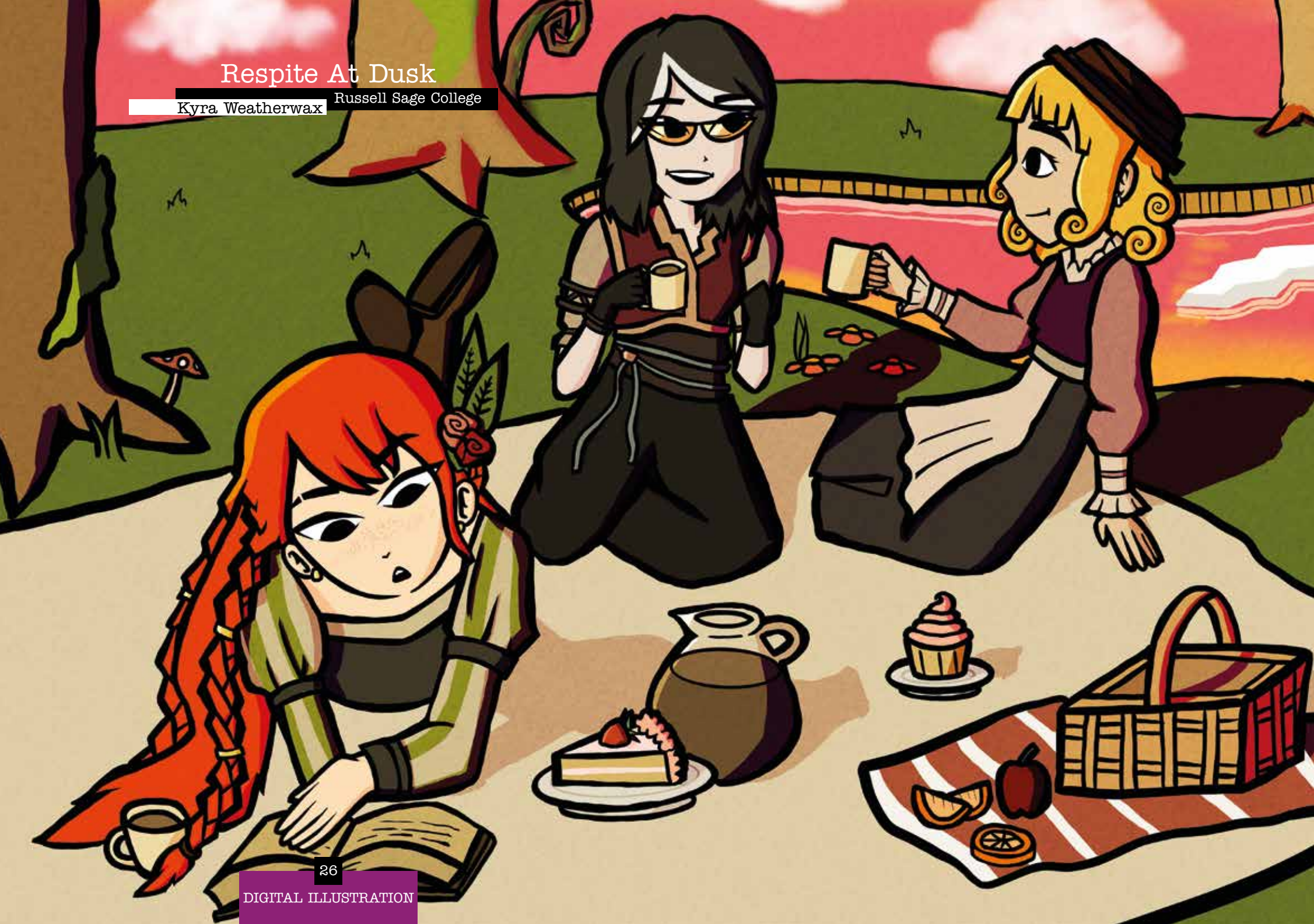
Treasured, guilty phone calls.
A first tooth there.
No news here.
Should have said...
Don't know how.

The rushing, working, dashing, children are now theirs
And keep them far away.
Fine boys. A blessing.
Fine boys. Really.
My girls.
Their wives.

Time to go. Not summer yet.
Cold creeps into crackling joints that protest the stirring.
We'll come back tomorrow.

Respite At Dusk

Kyra Weatherwax Russell Sage College



not your cup of tea, i guess.

Jack Ellis Russell Sage College

i feel like you always want me when you're busy;
so you don't have to look at me,
wake up from the dream of what was,
and see who we would be
if it were just you and me.
i refill your cup with my heart every day.
i leave a cup of me on the table
praying you'll come down before it gets cold.
and you leave it on the table
hoping it'll still be warm when you remember me again.



I And You: Us

Sydney Gier New Visions



Harvest Joy

Amy Pass Russell Sage College



City Lights Monument Square

Ariel Dominelli Russell Sage College



C9-5 Codic Breakage

Justin Kong Russell Sage College

The impossible is just a word that doesn't exist. "Impossible" is merely the inability to do a simple but unique task. Impossibility can be rewritten, reshaped, and tamed—just like every other word in the dictionary. Unknowns and errors are simply "codes" used to represent certain attributes or ambitions.

People created words to express themselves clearly, just as they created writing and animation. If there were one word I would denounce publicly, it would be normal. Everyone is unique in their own way; it's all in how you choose to look at things.


The inability to choose between two forces—good and bad, infernal and celestial—reflects the reality that this universe isn't as balanced as many believe. This curation group is violent and cares for only one goal: the cure to celestial conquest. Normality is neither as simple as curing a virus nor as complex as finding a new world to settle. It is a complicated process on both sides.

Chaos is the inability to choose between either side, just like life in general. If I had to choose one word to describe my life, it would be numbness. Numbness toward trying new things. Some people view life as something to be gained, seen, or done—but people like me often see it as a negative instantaneous speed spell that cannot be avoided.

Celestial conquest will never cease to exist. It is a given fact of destruction and eldritch pacts. Conflicts arise within this faction, and many denounce these conquests, yet they remain necessary to survive. FEWA is dying—the world that once was home to so many is vanishing.

Even now, the world feels dull and empty. Everything feels as though it vibrates on different wavelengths I cannot touch. Every mouth, word, and phrase feels as though there is nothing behind it. Burdens of every kind, deals which can be ignored, now vanish like nothing. I still remember the last words spoken to me that held true meaning: "Life is just a way of motion we all live within, no matter where we come from."

Cily... I miss the way you talked to me like you cared about who I really am. Even the way I write no longer conveys its message. It feels stunned, like a gunshot wound to the chest. Cily, Cilistua, you always cheered me up like an illuminated star in the golden night. I still remember the day you disappeared... truly disappeared. The hollow echo is real. The disappearance of so many citizens and beings is real. It's no myth; it's a given fact. One day you'll return, and when you do, I'll be so overjoyed I won't be able to stop myself from jumping higher and higher for you.



Our group isn't entirely against celestial conquest... but it isn't entirely for it either. As with everything, there are two sides to every story: the one the author shows and the one the author conceals. People say I'm "fine," but that isn't true. I'm tired of pretending. **I'm tired of saying that empty phrase. Nothing is fine anymore. Everything is changing—shifting so dramatically it shatters glass.** Even my feelings feel like they don't matter. I hope you understand if I— If I even say it, I know what might happen, so I won't take that risk. I won't even risk that thought.

Every message is being read by the admins of this server. Every signal.

Lies and Darchy: Chapter 1

<\LOADING NEW AUTHOR>
</ERROR DETECTED — WARNING/>
<\AUTHOR RECOGNIZED: Y-T76>

I still remember the trauma of yesterday—thousands of knives falling from the sky like children playing in starlight.

~<ERROR 294: Universal Galactic War>~
<Loading Audio Log 294.c4>

Trauma is a word that defines a double-edged sword. I still remember fifteen years ago, when this all began—the allegations of murder and deception I never committed. They still haunt me, because thousands believe I was responsible for the destruction of the co-existence group between Elyria and FEWA. Political groups, mercenaries, and even entire worlds are hunting me for something I never did. I am their scapegoat in this Universal Galactic War.

Even now, I feel pinned to the wall by millions of lies, and by propaganda. Pins and needles that refuse to fade. Every spell, every element attuned to life and death never truly disappears—it changes like tides and moon phases.

I'm an exile in the eyes of many, but I see myself differently: a person with a vision to change a tainted world order.

<ERROR ERROR ERROR — DATA STORM 872-51C@D>
<UNKNOWN ENTITY DETECTED — PREPARING CONTAINMENT
PROCESS 687T-B19>

Elyria comes from a different codic region—one no celestial or spiritual entity can enter. Their government is ruled by someone, or something, entirely different: a collective of gods and goddesses who will defend their homeland against any external threat. Even if their heavenly rulers disagree, they still work together.

^%>~<819-712-6192-9102-472-294>~<%^

Even now, they never utter a hostile word toward one another. United, they stand against an invasion that could cost countless lives.

</Changing Authors: Lily/>

It's been a while since I last spoke on this recording machine, but I'd rather say this now. No matter where you live, every day someone dies—and every moment you live is an accomplishment. If you're dealing with suicidal thoughts, or violent war-like tendencies, you are not alone. If you feel like you are fighting yourself—like I am—you are not alone. Everyone struggles with living, even when they hide it. A world without chaos would be dull and purposeless.

"Lily is a girl's name."
"Lily is a foreign alien."
"Go back to your home country!"
"Lily or <Redacted>"
"Never come back, you ungrateful child!"

Can't someone have two names in one body? Here's a fun fact about me: I'm non-binary. Every name carries a story worth telling. Every author, animator, and artist has a story they cannot erase. Some express themselves freely; others shut out the world and retreat into the ones they create. Sometimes writing is simply how we say, this is how we live.

<ERROR 872-519-9102C8 — CRISIS DETECTED: LAUNCHING
INVESTIGATION> <ERROR>
<ERROR ERROR>

That was close—phew. Remember, every message is monitored by the admins. We're not living in a dystopia—we're entering one. There's always a chance to recover after a loss, even a slim one. Big Brother won't win. I'm treading a thin line no one should cross.

One that stories shouldn't tell. Stories that touch this scale shouldn't be ignored. The Phobi War was one of them. It was during the time when Project AVA and FEWA were still "friends." A war no one speaks about anymore. Known in our culture as the War Between Rivers, or the Insane War.

What is love?
What is humanism?
What is a human?
What crimes escape human explanation?

These questions plague many of us—even after I shut down the system. They're working to restart it, so I'll be quick. A human is a mix of good and bad, celestial and demonic—

<Forced Author Change: Yti Ryu>

This message is being interrupted by Project AVA.

Lily has violated many codes—a codic breakage that must be corrected by force or deliberate measures. Lily has broken federal laws and regulations. If you're reading this message: you are warned. Do not continue for your safety. Celestial conquest is ongoing and will never cease. It is a given way of life in this world.

Chapter 2: The Truth

Lily, why are you risking your body? For something so graphic? For something so "important" to you? I don't understand these revolutionary ideas you're installing into innocent beings. These children, these students—they don't deserve this. They don't deserve to be turned into living weapons against the system that raised you. I know code is meant to be broken, but at what cost? When is it acceptable to say "more death is fine"? I think we all agree: no more.

No more death.
No more lies.
No more excuses.
No more fear.

The revolution you're trying to trigger won't heal anything—it will make it worse. That's why I messaged you last night as a benefactor, urging you to stop. The lives lost during the war were too much to bear. And seeing that you lead the curation group... it's worrying. Our Syto emissions are shrinking. If it weren't for certain people—

<ERROR ERROR>

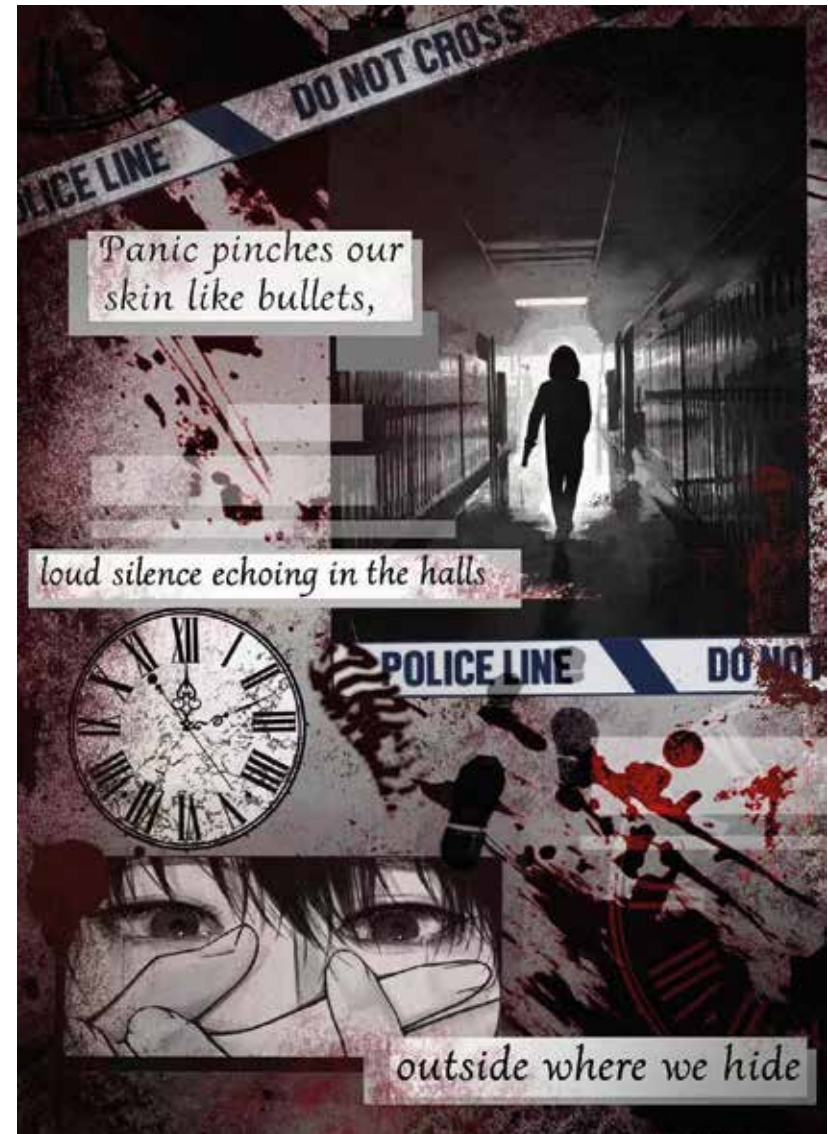
This happens sometimes. Ignore those messages. Celestial conquest is still the majority, but it's fading—replaced by a more stable way of life. The word "error" is simply an unexplainable occurrence that some people insist on fixing—



Scan this QR
code to read the
rest of this piece...

The Monster We Make

Serena Wang **Concord Academy**





tick
tack



One Day

Isabela Marie Leech

Russell Sage College

I send my daughter off to school
without fear she'll be touched
by hands that do not love her—
without dreading sirens,
or the silence that follows
a headline too late.

I drive to work
and no one screams with fists in the air,
no horns like war drums,
no fury in the next lane over—
just the hum of tires,
and time unfolding softly.

I park wherever I please—
not beneath the safety of a streetlamp,
not near the guard's booth,
not under the gaze of cold-eyed cameras.
I simply step out,
and breathe.
At lunch, I run.
A sports bra, biker shorts, bare legs.
The sun is warm,
and no one's shadow follows mine.
My fists are empty—
no pepper spray, no keys between knuckles—
just wind and rhythm and breath.

At home, she skips out the door—
my daughter, off to play.
And I do not wonder
about the uncle,
the grandpa,
the father in the room.
There is no threat
wrapped in a familiar smile.

I turn on the radio—
the bombings have ceased.
The wars that outlived generations
have quietly laid themselves to rest.
No more children growing up
under a sky that cannot promise tomorrow.

At night,
I close the door
but do not check the locks twice.
The bat stays in the closet.
My breath, unguarded.
And when my eyes close,
they do not do so in fear—
but in peace.

This is one day without
Men

Doe And Fawn

Chris Palmer Russell Sage College



Felt

Madison Taylor

Russell Sage College

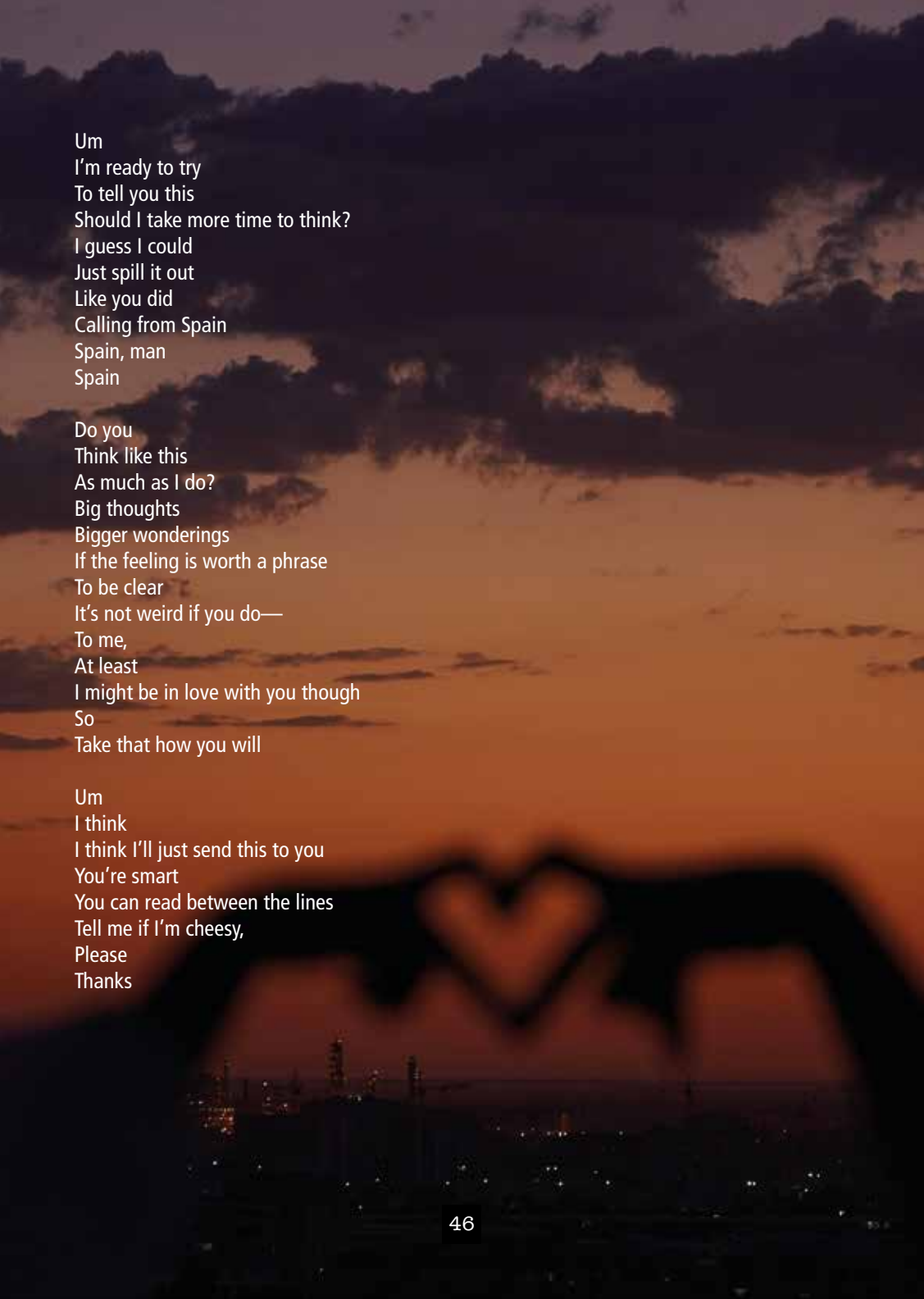
Um
I think
I think I'm in love with you?
Which is weird
Because I think
I think we're too young to say that
But
I guess I've never really
Felt
Like this.
That's cheesy right?
You're blunt when I'm being too ridiculous
So be blunt with me
Am I being cheesy?

Um
I think
I think I'm scared to tell you
Since that's a big thing to say at 20
We're young
Inexperienced
But old enough to drive a truck
Or have a kid
Or fight a war
Young.
Inexperienced.
Right.
Soon we can fill our bodies with substances
To save the place for a later partner
That won't hold a candle to "summer nights"
Like so many other people say they did
Before their happy ending

Um
I think
I got off track
I can do that with you
Ya know?
Hours of driving to cons
And concerts
And colleges
Will do that to two people
Even if they started out shy
I'm proud of you
You know?
For that-
Well-
For growing
Being your own person is as important as being us
Heh
There's an "us"

Um
I think
I'm willing
To work on this
On "us"
To remind you to cut back on Monsters
To listen when you say to get some sleep
To sit silently on video chats
Because we're both studying
But being present is enough
And

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Um
I'm ready to try
To tell you this
Should I take more time to think?
I guess I could
Just spill it out
Like you did
Calling from Spain
Spain, man
Spain

Do you
Think like this
As much as I do?
Big thoughts
Bigger wonderings
If the feeling is worth a phrase
To be clear
It's not weird if you do—
To me,
At least
I might be in love with you though
So
Take that how you will

Um
I think
I think I'll just send this to you
You're smart
You can read between the lines
Tell me if I'm cheesy,
Please
Thanks

Angel In A Garden

Jonathan Reese **Russell Sage College**

She stands cold in stone. An angel, eyes looking down to Earth. Her gaze falling upon wet moss and dew-laden grass. Each blade bent in prayer by the morning's condensation. The sun has dried her lips as her face is aimed away from her patient gaze, as if her body sought heaven but she could only see Earth.

Wrapping around the angel in the garden is a walkway. The kind you trace after a few drinks as your breath begins to feel like the world entering your lungs, your soul reaching back to the world. Tonight is no different. The grey bricks are outlined by knee high stone walls, each encircling beds of flowers, uncut grass, lily-padded ponds, and the occasional paling willow. Your right hand gently runs along the wall as your left holds the half empty bottle of pinot noir you opened an hour ago. It helps warm you, protect you, from the cold of a summer night without anything but a dragging nightgown. Your hairs grow longer, tangled, in these few months. Enough to cover your back as an additional layer from the cool lakeside breeze. An urgent gust beckons you to turn around and so your blurry eyes move to reflect the mirrored image of a thousand lonely stars.

How the moon reflects off the water. Little tides and tiny waves form as geese float about, their heads caressing each other. You smile to yourself, feeling your red cheeks warm as you move to face the centerpiece of your manor's garden. The angel greets you, one arm open to the world while the other loosens on a flower. Her lips parted just enough for you to know her breath is the world, same as yours. You sit with your back against her stiff dress. Moss and grass act as a cushion for your thinning legs, and though they wet your light blue gown, the bottle protects you from that discomfort as well.

You set it down, pick it up, and then set it down again, close enough for the glass to touch your thigh. In the foreground of the lake are two of the three willows in your garden. You wonder if any birds have made nests in their branches yet. You wonder if they ever do. With eyes closed your head lulls back and the cool stone cradles your neck. It doesn't hurt... you just forgot she was there with you. "She made everything better," you think, placing your elbows on your knees and your chin on your knuckles.

After a few minutes you stand up, grabbing the bottle as you move. You drink some more before turning it on its head, letting the liquid ichor fall at the foot of the angel. Looking at her face the sorrow in her eyes stares back. How desperately she wishes to see her home above. How sorrowful the best of us stand cold in stone.

Crashing

Ethan Alcee Russell Sage College



Birdsong (Ariel)

Coco Song

Emma Willard School

My mother doesn't speak in tamed tongues.
She cries beat up hope and stifled love. A language
not taught but passed down mother
to daughter, mother
to daughter.

Blood burning, adorned in gold, we dance
to the thrum of the blood flowing
in our grandmothers' veins.

The beat of their songs echo
like shattered porcelain, blue, white.
Sorrow sharp, beckons blood red like anger.

The mothers rip open their hearts, ribcages undone,
and feed half-cooled rage into the hungry mouths of
their children, too impatient to wait for real love.

Home, none, discarded, forgotten.
Home, definition: the cage that waits across the blue.
The bird flew (my mother with her baggage) gone.

Her voice untamed, wild. Cuts fast
like shards chipped from grandmother's
songs; the bird freed, wings unclipped, and
soars.

And her soul bleeds, never stitched back together—
body broken by my violent becoming.
A child still left waiting on the shore,
fed three generations of rage, too grounded for flight.



Winds Of Change

Rebecca Schneffel

Russell Sage College



Walking Through Air

Maryam Alsammarraie
Russell Sage College

Flowers bloom when they see the sun,
they get comfortable enough to open up and sing
happy songs.

When I get comfortable, all I want to do is run.
Run a marathon, run through walls, through people,
like a ghost, so fast that no one notices me.

Just to float on the waters, on my own deep oceans
that drown me everyday. My own darkness that consumes me
when everyone's asleep. My own thoughts
that become alive when I lay my head on the pillow and doze off.

Never to be bothered, never to be disturbed.
Just a girl, sitting in a room full of people but hears
no one and sees no one. Just her and her imagination
running wild in a marathon through walls, through people.

Is that too much to ask?
To be left alone, in my own thoughts and
my own little world, where I can feel comfortable and
bloom like a flower. A world
where no one can reach me and pick me
apart like a flower.

Still Life #1

Sofia Baldwin
Russell Sage College



Echo

Emma Wrieden

Russell Sage College

The doctor's mouth was moving
But the sound ...
Was a thin, tinny **BUZZ**, a hollow,
Small machine
"Papillary ... fast-spreading ... routine..."
But all I heard was **cancer** on
The ground
A word that cracks the present...
Breaks a mold,
A whisper from the darkness...
Stark and cold
It settles in the neck, a subtle lump
A small, unwelcome guest inside the...
THROAT
My voice, sudden, an unfamiliar note –
A sound that makes my heavy spirit jump
The waiting room is bright, the clock moves slow
Where do I put this secret...
Where can I go?

Detour

Gina Occhiogrosso

Russell Sage College

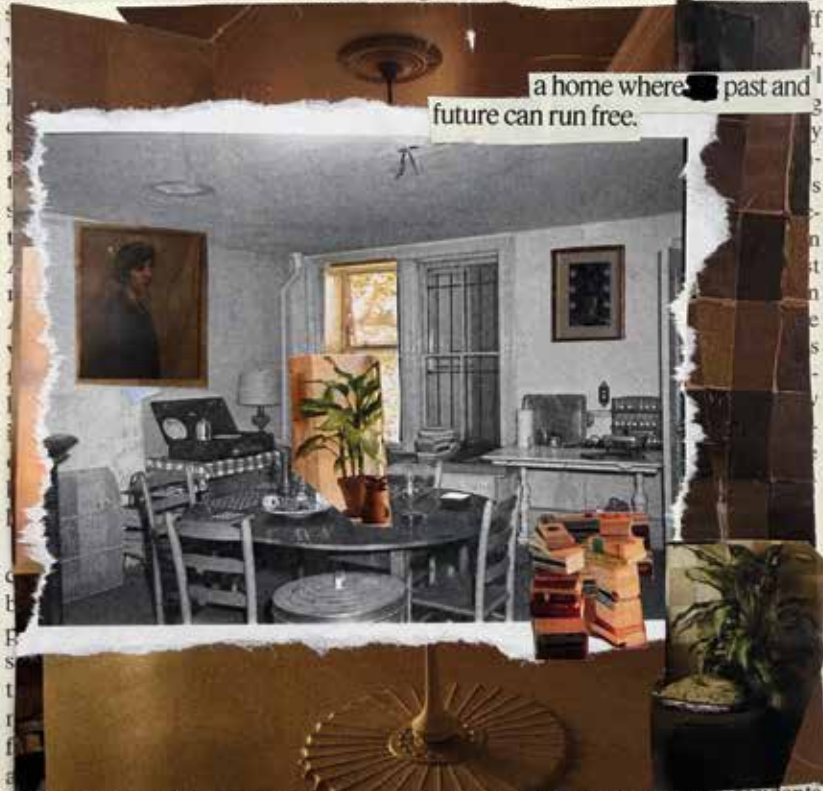


Property Value(s)

Germaine Desrue CreativityUnleashed

provides a record of the social value of "blackness" on the part of society. In this way, the social-psychological realm of racist ideology may be directly linked to the economic arena in the valuation of property.

This devaluation of black neighborhoods is partially a result of white fears of a decline in property values and the white flight that ensues. In other words, there is a loop: as long as whites are a significant majority and have the ability to decide where they will live, they will have an economic incentive to flee integrated neighborhoods, thus continuing the vicious cycle. Aside from any per-



homeowners were given a guarantee that the percentage of black residents would not exceed, say, 15 percent in a given community, they might be less likely to flee, because they would not fear a complete racial turnover of the community. But such ironic constraints on the residential choices of African

Just How Do They Do It?

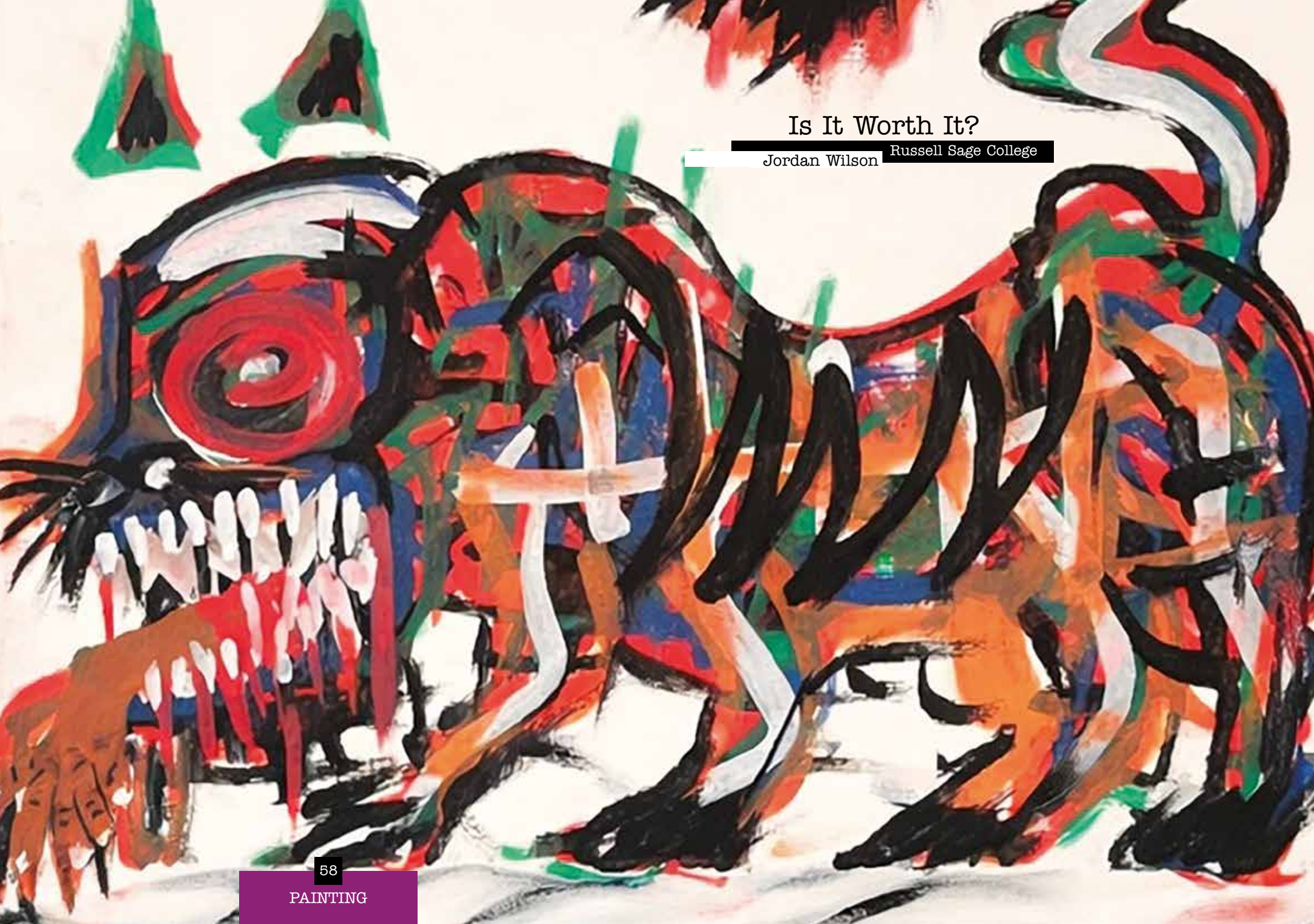
Kathleen Muller Russell Sage College

Green, green, green.
It's all they see, it's all they know.
Blue, brown, red, and yellow.
Green has no place in my world to glow.

Rich man, what's your secret?
I don't have money in my pocket.
You say I can do anything,
but not when they offer me nothing.

A house cleaner,
a made-up character,
a store clerk,
or a cook (such a jerk!).

I've tried all options with such flair,
but no bites, and it's not fair!
Live a day in my life, if you dare!
There will be no green, green, green.



Is It Worth It?

Jordan Wilson Russell Sage College

Bras

Marie Allen Campbell
Russell Sage College

As I go out into the world, contained I am
Not freely flowing but reined right in

You hold me close; you don't let go
But then you loosen, why? I never know

There are times when you know me
And you fit like a glove
There are times when you hurt me
And I can't get no love

Some days you stay put
Other days you lag
Some days you slip
Other days you just nag

There are times when you dig me
Times I don't know you're there
There are times when you strangle me
Times you go on a tear

Maximize, minimize, sheer and lace
Smooth, curvy, strapless and all in place

Uplifted, upright, underwired too
Supported and sported, old and brand new

You love me, you hate me
You hold, you let go
You're right for me, wrong for me
Sometimes I don't know

Size this and cup that, changes so fast
I finally find the fit, but it just doesn't last

Upgrades, replacements come at a huge cost
Yet if it doesn't work out, I can't claim a loss

While I always value you when you hang in
The marks left behind cause quite the chagrin

Some days I want to go without you
But convention says NO
So I throw you on anyway and off we go

But conventions be damned I sometimes feel
Let's just hang loose and go with free will

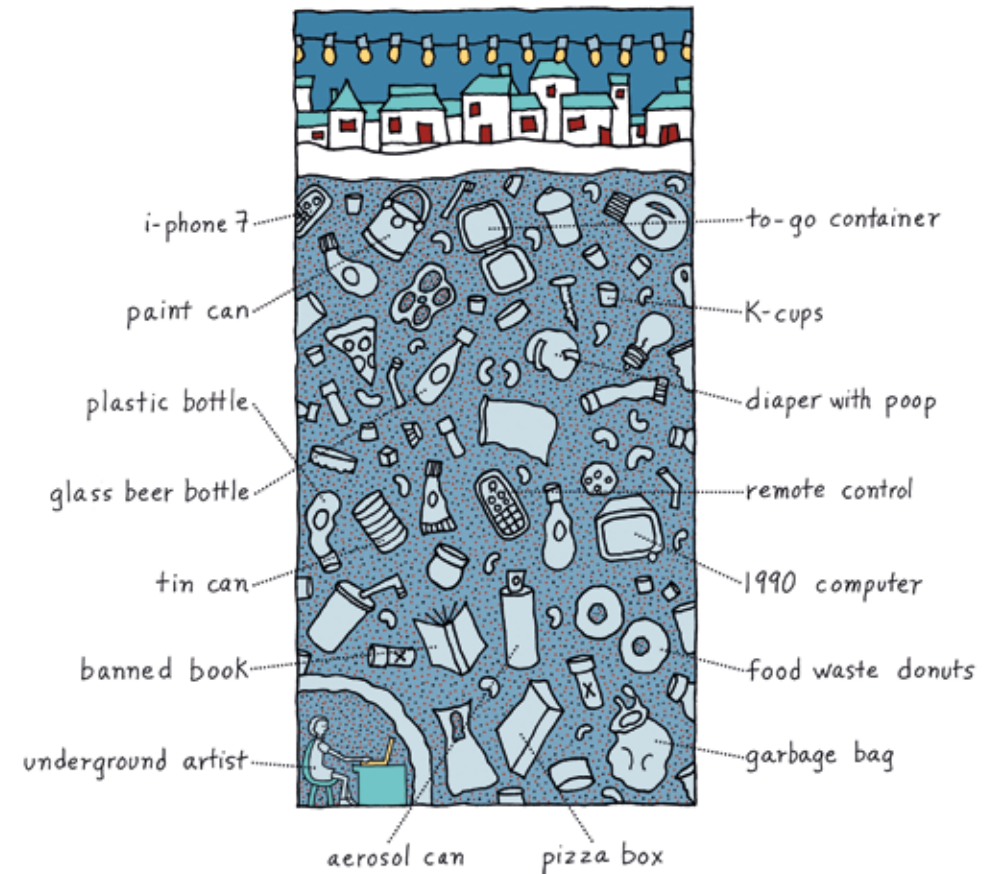
Some days are a struggle, you won't let me go
It's a love affair for which I have little to show

This is why at days' end first off is you
Some days you're off before my day's through

Oh to be free is often my silent cry
But I know you'll be with me, until
The day that I die.

Underground Artist

Laurel Petersen
Russell Sage College



Progress: Geologically Slow

Brett Petersen CreativityUnleashed

I hate technology,
how it becomes obsolete after 5 years,
that the companies making your tech plan it this way
so you'll keep giving them money,
but what I really hate is this absurd world
this capitalist world
this fascist world filled with bullies and evil men
taking advantage of the weak
abusing women and children
torturing innocent people
killing animals systematically
deforesting the sacred grotto
cutting the flesh of Mother Earth and dishonoring her,
disrespecting what she's done for us.
She's kept us safe from cosmic rays for millions of years, and what do we do?
we take some hot gas and scorch a hole through her ozone layer
like holding a lighter to a woman's skin and laughing as she cries out in pain
cuffed to a bedpost, her scars a book of evidence we all take part in burning
as we siphon her blood

and toss her husk onto a pile of other discarded women's husks
and grind them up to make the next grifter's remedy for autism or COVID
we feed her shards of glass
and call the sounds she makes as the glass shards cut her windpipe "music"
the latest modern country anthem about beers, bitches and big guns
pointed toward the eyes of the goddess and fired
American pride parade a boot party
stamping on the face of a black man, a starving man, a man already dead
yet we stomp on his corpse anyway
his grave an alleyway of a nameless city sprawling, needle littered
stares of the destitute jabbing my flesh as I walk by
my feet mired in the muck of used humans –
what remains of lives snuffed out,
cut and parceled and sold as mystery meat,
the water a sickly yellow, smelling of ammonia
like the inside of a prison factory farm matrix
henchmen gathered in your cell to beat you down
violate you no matter your gender
kill the humanity within you
kill the very concept of love and drown its siblings
trust and compassion flushed down the toilet
lodged in a sewer pipe with the skeletal remains of a pet goldfish slurped up by rats
a glistening death ripe with nuclear nodules
dreaming of mutant apparitions wandering the corridors of Gehenna
a decay far too sluggish to track with a human sense of time
progress, a rotting hand that reaches toward freedom – geologically slow.

Fountas & Pinnell

Ethan Alcee Russell Sage College



I Am Not Alone

Sylvia Teasdale **New Visions**

INT. ELEANOR'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

ELEANOR is in her bed, completely crashed out from the night. She starts dreaming.

DREAM Eleanor and STELLA are together in a crowded stadium, but for some reason, which is unclear to her, a man comes up to them.

DREAM MAN (TO STELLA)

Nice girlfriend you've got there. Would be better if she smiled more.

STELLA hesitates for a second.

STELLA

Yeah... I don't even really know her that well, honestly.

Various people crowd around them, saying things.

ARI

I think I work with her.

WALT

Oh yeah, I thought we were becoming friends, but then she just ghosted me.

SARA

We went to school together, then she left my side for some dumb reason...

ELEANOR tries to say something, but her mouth disappears. She feels around her face, and it's completely gone, replaced with an ever-fading question mark. She tries to grab STELLA as she turns away into a swarm of other people, but she turns into a bunch of stickers. The stickers overwhelm ELEANOR as she finds herself trapped, trying to escape. She falls as her surroundings change to her room at night, and it's the early morning of January 2nd, 2 am.

INT. ELEANOR'S TINY LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

ELEANOR, finding it impossible to sleep, sits on her couch and contemplates what she just dreamed.

ELEANOR (MUMBLING)

You're not gonna miss your shot. You've missed many shots, but something about this one is different. I have to find her. I don't know what it is, maybe fate, maybe- oh dear, I have a crush on you, Stella.

ELEANOR crashes down on her couch.

INT. ELEANOR'S APARTMENT - MORNING

ELEANOR frantically calls her friend ARI, who picks up.

ARI (O.S.)

Eleanor! What's up?

ELEANOR

Oh...nothing, butt dial, sorry.

ARI (O.S.)

Oh. Okay.

ELEANOR

So. I'll see you at work tomorrow. Thanks for the New Year's party, by the way.

ARI (O.S.)

You're welcome. Looked like you had a good time! I saw you with my friend, well, friend of a friend, Stella.

ELEANOR

Oh really? I don't uh.....bye.

ELEANOR hangs up and sighs.

FADE IN: FANTASY SEQUENCE OF ELEANOR TRAPPED INSIDE A SMALL GLASS BOX

INT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

ELEANOR is in a long line, when she sees one of the designs STEALLA showed her during the New Year's party, on a pin, getting her distracted as the line moves up.

GROCERY STORE PERSON
Um, dude, could you move up?

ELEANOR
Sorry.

INT. LOCAL BOOKSTORE - DAY

ELEANOR is looking at STEALLA'S designs on the front counter of the bookstore.

CASHIER
They're great, right?

ELEANOR fails to respond.

CASHIER (CONT'D)
Right.

ELEANOR
Yeah. They're from a local artist, right?

CASHIER
Yep, Stella Octangula. Okay. I don't think Octangula is her last name but it's like her street name or whatever.

ELEANOR
Does she have a website or anything like that?

CASHIER
I dunno, my coworker told me.

There is an air of silence.

CASHIER (CONT'D)
So....are you gonna buy something or what?

ELEANOR grabs some of STEALLA'S pins and stickers.

ELEANOR
Yeah, I'll get these.

CASHIER
That'll be 10 dollars.

INT. ELEANOR'S TINY LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

ELEANOR sits on her couch, watching the scene from "A Streetcar Named Desire," where Marlon Brando screams "STELLA!" ELEANOR then puts her newly bought pins on her work bag and sighs.

ELEANOR
I'm gonna find you, Stella. I just have some obstacles in my way.

She takes a moment and breathes.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)
Is that creepy? I'm not trying to stalk her. Who the fuck am I even talking to? God. I'm so desperate. 520- something thousand minutes wasted, and it's all my fault.

FADE IN: FANTASY SCENE OF ELEANOR TRAPPED INSIDE A SMALL GLASS BOX THAT IS CRACKING.

This piece is an extract from a longer screenplay that is currently in progress. To read the full script as it is finalized, please scan the QR code below.



Scan this QR
code to read the
rest of this piece...

Charcoal Self

Sofia Baldwin Russell Sage College



70

SELF PORTRAIT

People Like Me

Batul Alshabout Russell Sage College



I feel it before I see it. The shift in someone's posture, the way their mouth tightens when I speak. The way their eyes flick over my scarf, my name, my presence.

They don't say it out loud. They don't have to.

I know what they see: a girl who doesn't belong, a name they can't pronounce, a story they think they already understand. But they don't know. They will never understand. They don't know that my name carries centuries, that my voice speaks in languages older than the streets they walk on. They don't know that I have seen war, that I have held grief in my hands like something fragile, something holy.

They don't know me.

But I see them.

71

LYRICAL PROSE

The Sibirsky Medved

Eric Zhu Blair Academy

The reactor's hum vibrates through the long, complex channels of the K-829 Sibirsky Medved: the Siberian Bear. Its large steel body groans under the immense, crushing pressure of the Arctic Ocean.

Aboard, the Bear carries 160 members of the Northern Fleet of the Soviet Navy. Among them stands Starshiy Leytenant Mikhail Sergeyeovich Antonov, the fleet's head sonar officer. He sits comfortably at his post with his morning zavarka. By now, he is used to the growls and roars of the submarine that holds him.

The space smells of oily machinery and the worn, thick leather boots hanging on the wall to his side. In front of the senior lieutenant, the sonar panel blinks and pulses in a rhythmic beat every two seconds. Sometimes the beep moves quickly, signaling something approaching the underwater machine.

Above him, Mikhail can hear the soft murmurs of the cabin crew and, periodically, the shouting of Kapitan 2-go ranga, Commander Petr Volkov, far above him in the main command room. Close and coming from his right, he hears the naval radio crackling with familiar static. Suddenly, a voice returns, the same one he hears every single morning, that of Iosif Stalin, the founding father of the USSR. He repeats words of iron will, emphasizing the ideology that shaped the motherland.

“Товарищи, граждане, братья и сёстры...
Comrades, citizens, brothers and sisters...”

Just above the sonar control perches a nailed-framed painting of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, protector of all sailors. Below Mikhail, stored in dark and terrible silence, lie the true weapons of the Sibirsky Medved. Twenty-four R-29RM intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads are packed deep under the hull, each ready to be launched with authorization from the homeland and the turn of a key by the Bear's captain.

Mikhail finishes the last of his morning zavarka and scratches another mark beneath the desk of the sonar table—the one hundred fifty-sixth mark. Just as he empties his cup, the radio crackles again. This time, it is not Stalin but a loud beep that sounds not just from the radio but across the broadcast speakers of the entire submarine.

“Внимание... всем стратегическим единицам. Подтвержденный массированный

ядерный удар по территории Советского Союза.
Attention... all units. Confirmed massive nuclear strike on Soviet territory.”

Mikhail listens closely. Could it be?

“Повторяю. Подтвержденный массированный ядерный удар. Выполните протокол Д-5.
Repeat. Confirmed massive nuclear strike. Execute Protocol D-5.”

He stiffens—the words seem unfamiliar. Then the warning lights turn red, and all around him the sound of running boots, shouting, and a cacophony of alarms swirl and collide.

He is on his feet now and opening the hatch. When he does, the pandemonium from the other side rushes in. He steps into a loud corridor when a comrade grabs his shoulder. “Lieutenant, Captain Volkov wants all high-ranking officers to report to the command room. Now!”

Mikhail rushes up to the main section of the fleet, where the scene is worse. Twenty-five or so men are packed tightly in the command room with Captain Volkov in the center. Deep below them, through the decking, he can hear the metal cranks and rotating gears of the missile-loading mechanism. He doesn't need to look; he knows that the crew in the missile deck preparing the warheads to launch. Captain Volkov speaks individually to the ranking officers, and when Mikhail catches his attention, Volkov redirects his orders.

“Lieutenant Mikhail, return to the sonar control room and look for possible enemy fleets.” With no time wasted, he is back downstairs and greeted by an assistant officer holding a black metal box. This is the same box typically stored in a glass cage behind Captain Volkov's desk. Inside sit the launch keys for the warheads. He realizes this is happening.

Below the main deck, the alarm buzzes continuously; there is no light in the radar deck except for the constant flash of crimson that washes onto Mikhail's face, making him feel sick. But before he can get to the main radar room, the radio switches again; the operator speaks firmly through the static:

“Выполнить протокол D-5. Требуется немедленный ответ.
Execute Protocol D-5. Immediate response required.”

Every man in the room knows what it means: the enemy has struck the Union, and Mikhail imagines the motherland and Moscow in flames.

Volkov's voice cuts through the decks below: “Missile report. All tubes one through twelve are loaded. We now load tubes thirteen through twenty-four. Prepare for the first launch.”

Mikhail can feel the hydraulic press of the big red button above him, zooming down into the missile loading room. Yet nothing changes. He stands there for a moment; he thinks the signal has failed to reach the warheads. Then suddenly he hears several bolts slam below, and the compressed hissing of gas.

The screeching of the tubes and the gas slam the first missile up, followed by the second and the third. Each departure leaves a deep metallic roar echoing across the submarine.

Somewhere above him, he imagines plumes of white vapor erupting through the calm, frozen waters as the missiles burst through, the flames of the engines the only light to illuminate the Arctic night.

Back beneath the frozen water, less than a minute passes. Then a large boom crashes through the vessel. The radio announces that something is happening above the waters. The hull begins to creak under pressure. A low rumble rolls through, growing louder. Mikhail closes his eyes, now sitting on the floor, his legs wobbly; he cannot hear a thing but the loud rumble.

Five more seconds pass, and a sudden cold shiver runs through Mikhail's body. The shockwave has hit the Bear, and the black, ferocious Arctic water rushes in and swallows everything: the control room, the radar systems, the missile that has not yet fired.

Mikhail holds his last breath. Everything goes dark.

—

He is back in the radar room, the zavarka warm in his hands.

The radio crackles: "Товарищи, граждане, братья и сёстры..."

The sonar beeps, slow, steady, rhythmic. He can still feel the submarine vibrating, although it currently appears to have returned to its original calm. He can also taste the frozen Arctic seawater that had swarmed him... yet he is not wet. There is no water here.

He tries to reason with himself: Moscow burned in flames—the motherland was destroyed, right?

Mikhail looks around, and everything seems the same, but no. He remembers. He remembers the captain's order, the launch tubes firing, and his own death. He thinks, again, of the motherland in flames. What happened above the waters? Why did the Bear explode hundreds of meters below the frozen Arctic? And why is he back here, alive, with the zavarka, as if none of that had happened?

The words repeat in his head:

Moscow is in flames;
Moscow is in flames;
Moscow is in flames.

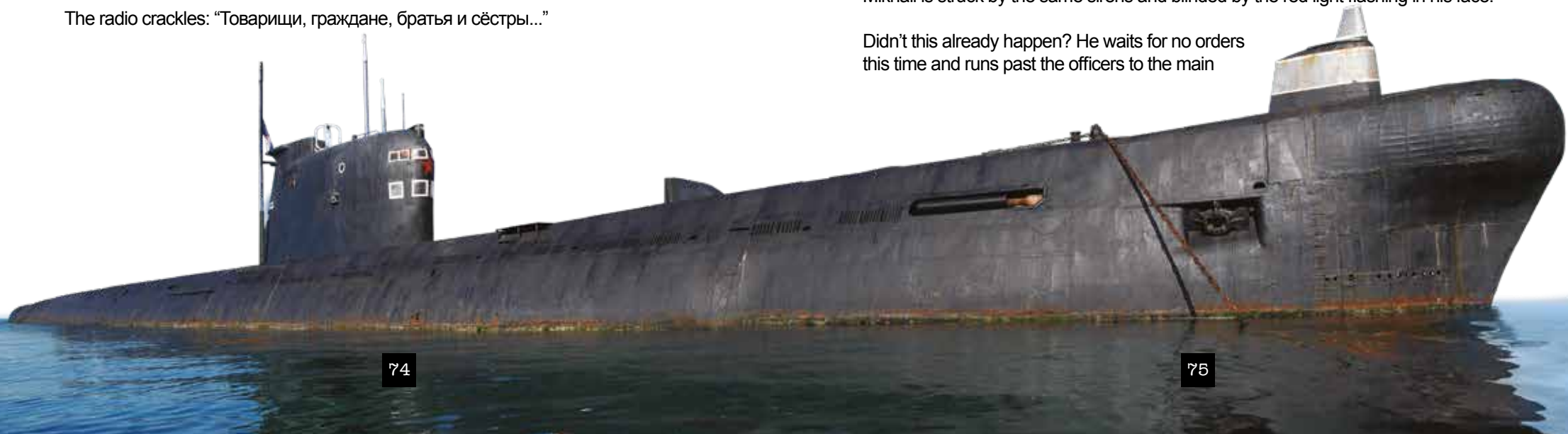
He looks at the hanging picture of Saint Nicholas, the saint of all sailors. Has he done his job? Has he saved the motherland?

Suddenly, the radio glitches, and the broadcast speakers ring out across the submarine.

"Внимание... всем стратегическим единицам. Подтвержденный массированный ядерный удар по территории Советского Союза.
Attention... all units. Confirmed nuclear strike on Soviet territory."

Mikhail is struck by the same sirens and blinded by the red light flashing in his face.

Didn't this already happen? He waits for no orders this time and runs past the officers to the main



command room, where Captain Volkov is giving orders to his fellow officers.

Volkov orders Mikhail to return to the sonar room and scan for possible enemy fleets... Mikhail stands there and contemplates the captain for a beat. Volkov recognizes the delay in his comrade.

“Antonov! What are you doing? Get down there and check the radar! NOW!” Mikhail looks at the captain. “Captain, we cannot launch the warheads.”

“What do you mean?”

“Moscow will be in flames; we need to stop the launch to know what’s going on.”

“Stop the launch? Obey the motherland’s orders? Moscow in flames? Antonov, what are you talking about?”

“Sir...” He turns his back, realizing now that logic won’t work here. No matter how he explains what he knows to be happening, no one will believe him.

Suddenly, an epiphany grabs him: the black box. The black box holds Captain Volkov’s keys, the ones needed to initiate the launch. He finds the officer below deck and, without a word, snatches the metal box from his unsuspecting hands.

“Brother, do you realize what you are doing?!” But Mikhail does not look back to answer the source of this shouting. Instead, he runs.

Thinking himself clear of the nuisance behind him, Mikhail’s spirit shrinks when he runs into two officers. With little regard for the panic he displays, they rip the metal box out of his shaky hands and escort him back to the radar room.

“We will deal with you after this matter,” says an officer, locking the door behind him. Mikhail is stuck inside the radar room; he knows he has lost his chance.

He sits in his usual chair and sighs at the tepid zavarka on his desk. He looks at the radar; nothing changes, just the same old pulsating beat every two seconds. For a moment, relief settles upon Mikhail. But that, like everything else, appears to be short-lived.

The warheads fire. Imprisoned in his space without any way of freeing himself, he begins to fixate and panic. He watches the clock—tick, tick, tick—and the seconds pass over him like a snail through treacle. All the while, he can hear the pressure and the shockwave that hits the submarine, hidden deep under the Arctic Ocean.

Mikhail feels the crash. Enveloping him now are the screams and shouts of his fellow crewmen as they succumb to the treacherous water that has breached their safety. The submarine rumbles, shaking the radar room, and the locked door, no longer strong against the pressure of building water, breaks. Freezing seawater undulates.

The zavarka spills and splashes onto Mikhail while the painting of Saint Nicholas falls to the ground, shattering. The water swallows it all again. Mikhail turns around, and in his final seconds with water rising above his shoulders, he sees a small dot on the radar. Its accompanying beep pulsates faster and faster.

Beep
Beep
Beep

Mikhail opens his eyes once again.

The radio crackles, and the same voice of Stalin resonates into the cramped space: “Товарищи, граждане, братья и сёстры...”

“No. Not again...”

He grips the zavarka harder as the pressure builds around his body. Despite hot steam spreading from his cup across the dim radar room, he’s given up on enjoying any warmth from it.

Beep
Beep

Mikhail remembers the dot on the radar. He wonders if something could be around the vessel, or whether this is just a sophisticated trick of the enemy.

All he knows for sure is that he cannot disobey the motherland. He has to stop the launch first, or he will never make it. And when he goes to let himself out of the radar room, he is not surprised to discover that it is, of course, unlocked, because he has not been escorted back here yet, and he has not been locked in by the officers.



Scan this QR code to read the rest of this piece...

Architecturally Speaking

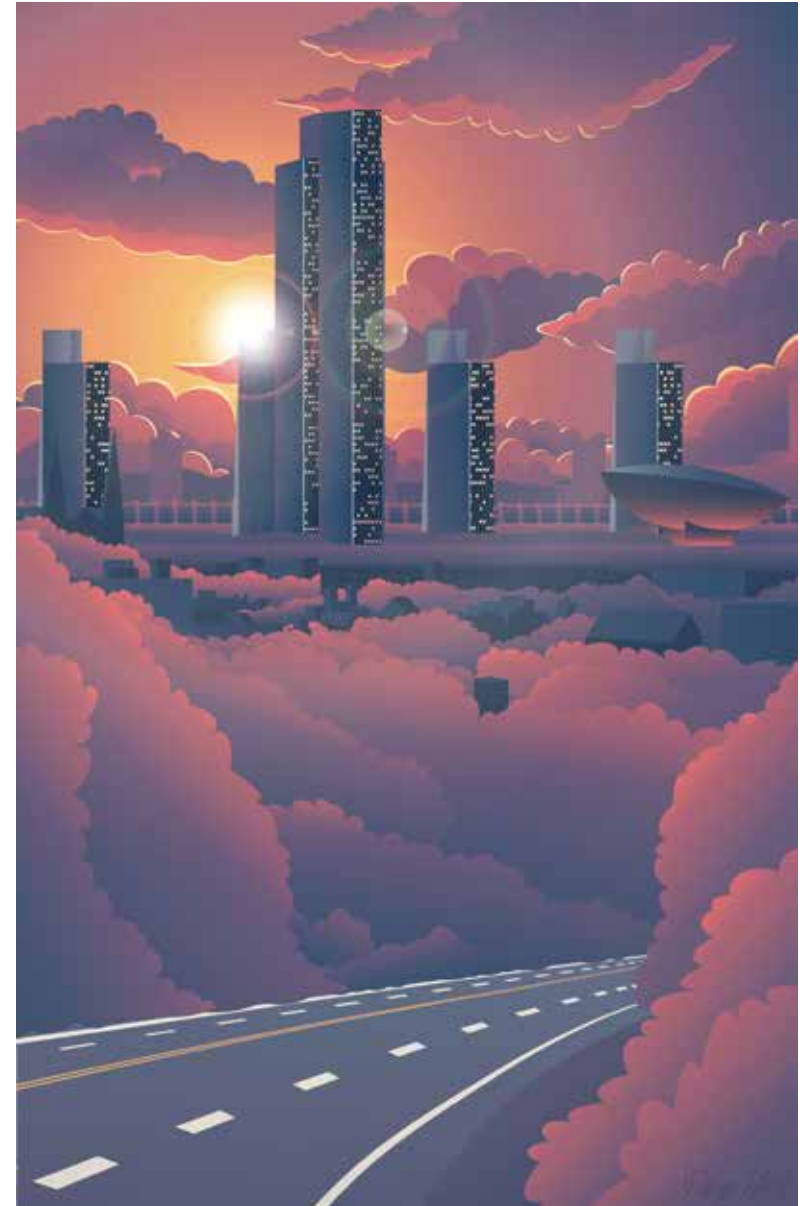
William Hayes Russell Sage College

I would like to liken the poem its construction
"cutting it out" (Olson) of the space the con-
fines of a sheet of southwork paper by me
or someone better equipped to do the job
to the incident this afternoon on the way to
the park sack slung over right shoulder filled
with the incidence of moving along the road
bare chested belly sucked in beltless at one
point passing six men two trucks their tools grimaces
the ledge behind the back seat of
one an old GMC pickup lined with beer
bottles emptys by their look rattling to a
stop beside the hole where the new water
main installation had been completed
days before measuring the scene its
consequences potential kineticisms
between their fingers the air the metallic
thump spades unloaded shovels picks
scraping the rear gate lowered a gray
coarse batter coming to life spilling
the edges gritty the fingers whitening
defining form troweling off the finishing
touches stepping back at arms' length
the worth of it a new place to place
your foot.



A Memorable View

Paige Hoch Russell Sage College



Sick And Cold

Sophia LaBarge **New Visions**



Zombies United

Carmela Morano

Russell Sage College

Over the years
The hole has grown deeper.
I find myself pulled
By clammy cold fingers
Down, down, down
Deep into the earth.
My hope
Shrinks
And my fear
Grows.
And desperate for rest
I allow myself
To begin
To decompose.
In this graveyard
Full of plenty
Of other
Tired
Hopeless
Zombies.

And now
Suddenly
My community
Needs me and the threat
Is much deadlier than it has
Ever loomed before and so I
MUST claw myself out of the dirt
And reform into a body made
Of stone, rage, and sharp things
And help the other zombies do the same.
Wake up and see the clock ticking down.
Wake up and join your brothers and sisters.
They want us alone so we MUST band together
They want us weak and hopeless so we MUST be strong and determined
To fight and survive and protect each other.

Come now.
They cannot stop all of us at once.

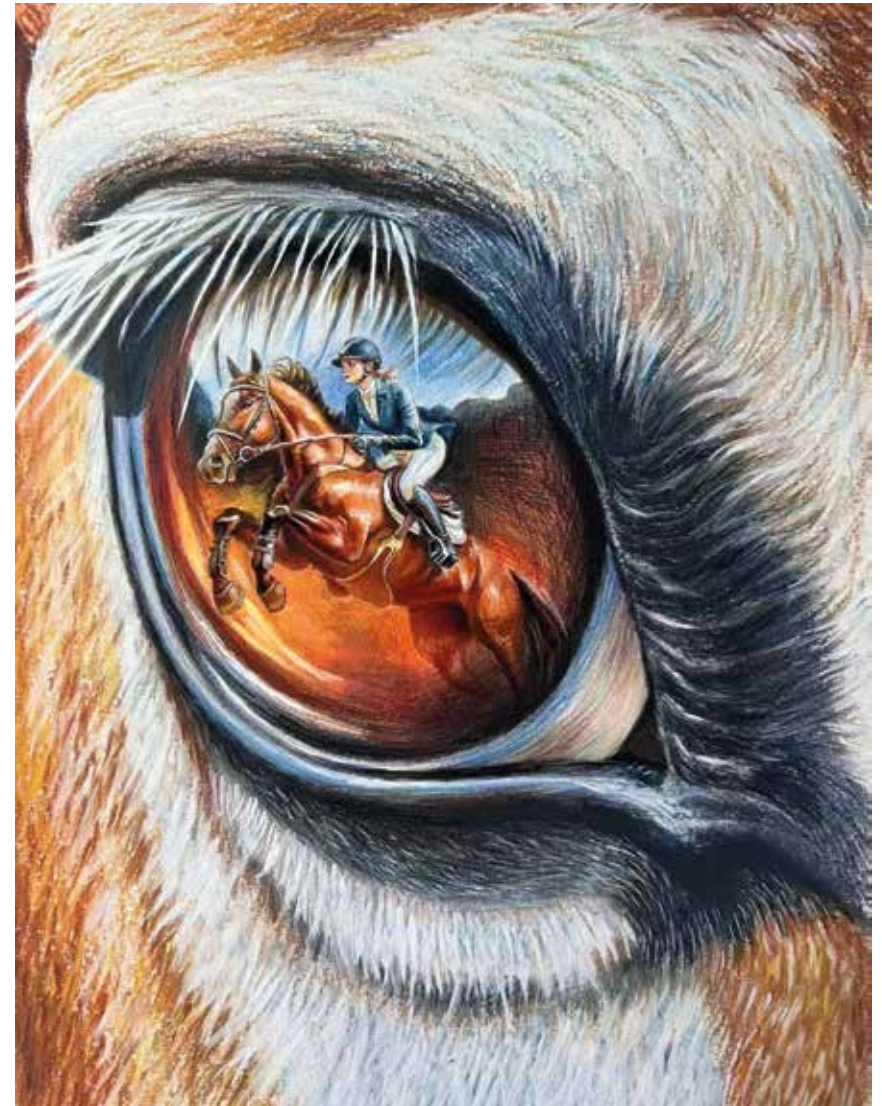
82

POETRY

Reflection Of Desires

Serena Wang

Concord Academy



83

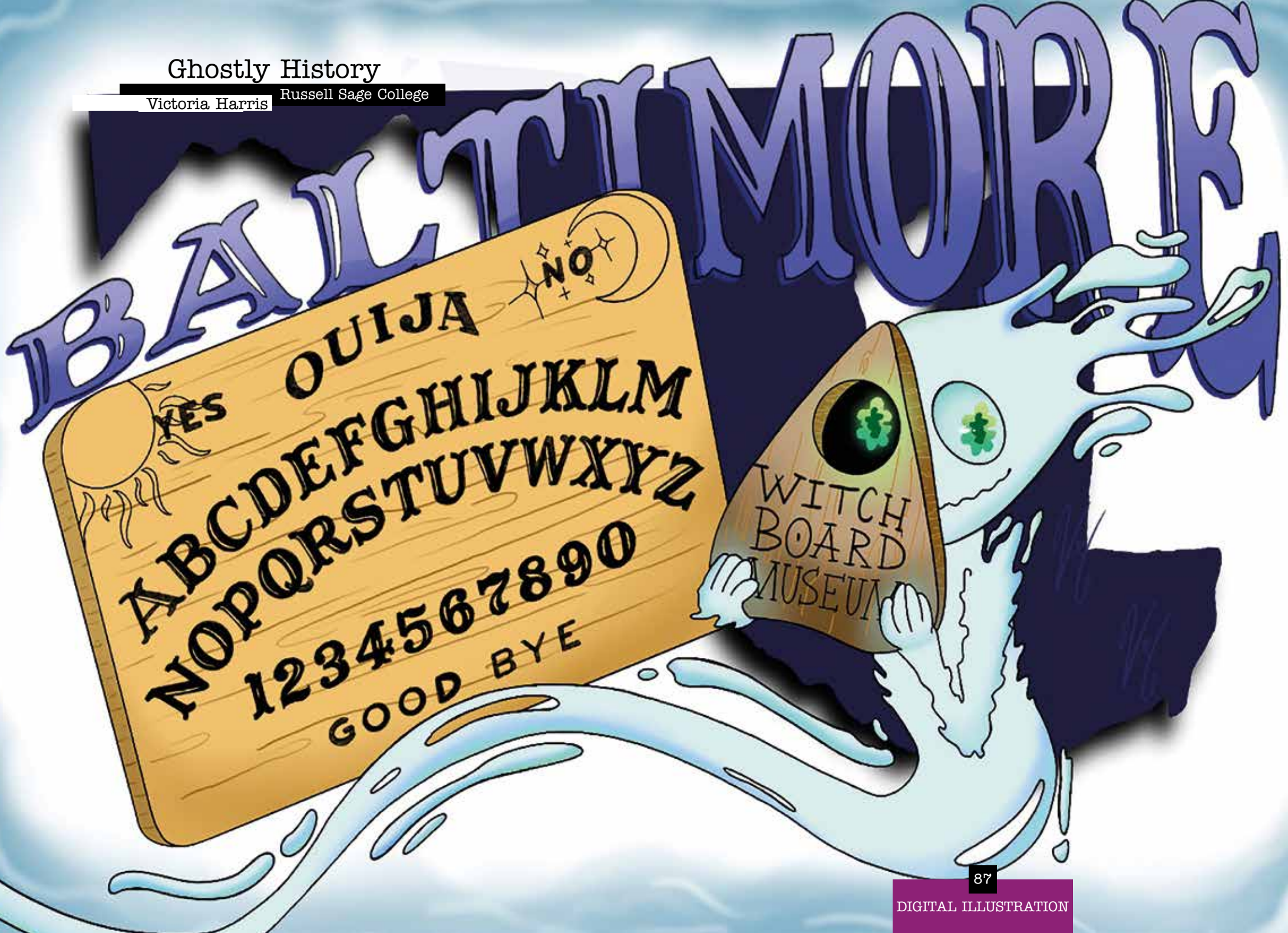
DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION

Why Won't You Look At Me?

Phoenix Morehead *New Visions*



I've known you now for quite some time.
I'm glad you're here! It's true!
For my lonely heart has been here much longer than you.
But since you've come my world's alight with sparks of joy and love,
And far more great discoveries than one could think of.
For since that fateful day we met at my old rivers bend,
I've never been so happy just to call someone my friend.
You have proven since to be as kind as one could dream,
and throughout all our years it's clear we make a perfect team.
I know you're quite insightful on the topics we discuss,
though I believe I'm talkative enough for both of us.
Regardless of the circumstances, you are my bestest friend,
and I would be heartbroken if my time with you should end.
There's just one odd thing that I will never fail to see.
A question still unanswered.
Why won't you look at me?



Gaza Is Awake

Maysoon Sheikh CreativityUnleashed

It was nothing short of a dream.

Rafah thought that to be a funny phrase. The waking world she used to know always came short—the weddings, the galas, the parades, the protests. Always one-fifth of what they could be, even if they did seem dreamlike, as their ‘likeness’ meant they could only ever come close. But Rafah’s dreams were boundless.

Borderless.

So yes, where her soul existed now was nothing short of one. But she’d like to believe that if all the dreams of every single person that had ever dreamt on Earth were accumulated and brought to existence, it could never come close to this.

She sat against the silvery veil that cocooned her, one that provided a partition that was subtle but present enough between her and the previous world she had once known. Rafah rubbed her thumb and index fingers together, stared at it. Her body of cells that were once called skin were now reconfigured in the form of saffron. It looked natural but in an otherworldly sense, royal but stronger in colour and richer in scent than the ones she could buy from her local Souq market. Like her skin on Earth was merely an exoskeleton, moulting, waiting to be shed into a form that fit more perfectly than it ever did.

Rafah never bled here.

No, now she emitted musk. Sweet and fragrant and undying. There was no difficulty here. There was no point to it. When her house was made from the stars, the markets free of charge, and people gathered every Friday in celebration and left with more beauty on their countenance than when they entered, ease was now their constant. And boredom, a foreign concept. The spectrum of human emotion has been elevated. The parts humanity thought were necessary; pain, guilt, fear, and even hope, had been nullified. Parts which weren’t even known to exist thrummed in her every fibre.

Children screamed.

In joy. Pure, unmasked, unadulterated, perennial joy. The type of laughter she had never heard before, the type of laughter that knew it would never have to stop. Rafah watched as kids bounded about in the air as green birds, in the waters of milk, honey, and wine, like mythical creatures who were no longer myth, and on the ground, running about the large, noble feet of Prophet Ibrahim. He embraced them like a father.

Rafah remembers her father. Her Baba. And felt a debilitating emotion that somehow still had a purpose to exist in this plane.

‘Rafah! Catch me!’

She turned towards the sound coming from above. Rafah’s siblings, all five of them, soared towards her like those flying American elf boys they once read a book about. She opened her arms with a grin, ready, and they all collapsed into something soft and pillowy.

‘Ya albi,’ Rafah exclaimed, breathless, ‘Will the rest of my eternity be spent keeping you from harm in this place too?’

She looked up at them, at their clean, smiling, full-cheeked faces and squeezed them all tightly, fulfilled by the simple fact that she’ll never have to let them go.

‘Why do you sit here by yourself?’ Rafah turned to her little brother, Younis, his eyes curious and as blue as the Jordan River as he surveyed her. ‘Why don’t you come play?’

She sat up, glancing back at the veil beside them, at the star-studded galaxy behind it, and felt the deep longing in her bones travel to her tongue.

‘I miss Baba too.’

Haifa said it before she could. Rafah stroked her sister’s hair in response, Khalili gemstones falling out of her strands like starbursts.

‘Did you hear?’ Little Jenin piped, bright-eyed. ‘Ahlul-Jannah says there’s gonna be martyrs arriving from the camp Baba is in.’

They all turned back to the eldest sister, wanting a confirmation to a question in their hearts Rafah didn’t have the answer to.

‘He’s coming to us, Rafah,’ Haifa said, reaching her hand out tenderly. ‘We’ll be together again soon.’

It was paradoxical. News that she had been willing to welcome into her arms since she first entered The Gardens was now slipping from her grasp, because this fickle human emotion would not rest. But fickle as it was, perhaps it could serve as a means to return something greater than longing. Rafah smiled at her siblings.

‘I have an idea.’



*

Khalil stood at the opening of the tent, squinting up at the burning circle in the sky. He raised his hand, blocking most of its rays but relented his limb when his skin began to sting from the heat.

That wasn't good. He won't be able to see it when it comes.

It had been almost too pleasant lately. After being displaced from Khan Younis, Khalil and the many neighbourhoods in his city travelled in droves to the camps in the south. The buzz from the drones could still be heard above their heads, white noise that could paint the land red and burnt black at any given moment. But they hadn't gone off for four days now. And that was never a good sign.

He peered over his shoulder, surveying the many persons huddled inside the tent, like flightless birds inside a splintered nest. His gaze lingered on the man sitting cross-legged at the centre, the man he had followed all the way from their shrapnel-ridden neighbourhood to this camp. He hasn't spoken much, just the usual *Allah Ysalmak. May God protect you.* The uncle wore a grey thobe that may have been white once, a salt and pepper beard that was increasingly more salt than pepper as the days went by, and a sandy-brown, giraffe-spotted turban. He played with the bandage that Khalil swaddled his bleeding arm with before looking up at him. His eyes were sunken but not pulsing red like most who had lost someone; they were warm like the Filastini Sunbirds in the valleys of Wadi Qelt.

They reminded him of *her*.

At the familiar pounding sound of death, Khalil instinctively turned, ducking under the tent flap. But there was no smoke, no screams. Just an elderly man who had toppled over by the weight of his belongings. Khalil sighed, plagued by the fact that death's voice was everywhere, and so was its claim on his soul, hence there was no use to distinguish between its whispers and its rallying calls.

He needed to be ready for both.

He reached for his phone, the little box that could make the world stand on its feet, and clicked on the recent video he posted online. The comments, a pool of both heartfelt prayers and hard-headed blame games, settled the nerves in his chest. It was proof, in one way or the other, that they exist.

'I had a daughter.'

Khalil flinched, turning to the man behind him. His eyes, half-vacant half-alive, stared somewhere around Khalil and not directly at him.

'Her name was Rafah,' the man said, now meeting his eyes.

He knew. He hadn't been following the man's shadow for no reason. The girl in his pharmacy class that had dreams the size of the Earth, who had promised to feature in his film project that very day. The day her dreams were pulled from under her feet, and her body, six feet under the school. Khalil was then overtaken by an inner calling, a fire that he thought had long been put out since the day he ran back home to find it in ruins. How many kids whose lives could've changed others are now gone? Not just the ones that have been martyred, but the ones that were still here, survivors that had forfeited any previous conviction of the world's mercy upon them. Like him. Khalil dug his nails into his fists, thinking it was best to simply acknowledge the uncle's words in silence.

'My daughter has gotten married to the skies.' The man smiled. 'And she has her whole eternity to live now with the rest of...'

Khalil watched his face twist, the creases of grief unveiling themselves by the words left unsaid, and felt compelled to sit down in front of him. The Sunbirds in the man's eyes returned.

'*Living.*' He said the word like it was revelation. 'Not just surviving. But away from me. Only visiting occasionally.' The inhabitants of the tent were listening. Khalil could tell the difference between the silence saturated with wet grief and this one, rinsed once again by the hands of faith. 'She visited me last night. We were in her room. Rafah was lying on her mattress, her eyes shut like she was asleep. I tried waking her, but' - he chuckled - 'you could never take Rafah out of her dreamland.' He sighed. 'I began to cry. But that's when she looked at me, the soul of my soul, wiped my tears and said, '*Ya Abati, blessings will be upon you soon,*' and placed this in my right hand.' He held up a brown key with his good arm, a Hello Kitty keyring dangling from its bow. 'I laughed,' he continued. '*What would I do with this, ya omri? We no longer have a home.*' She looked at me, almost sadly, and then said, '*It'll open more than the door to our home, Baba,*' and shut her eyes again. I woke up with Rafah's housekey in the same hand.'

He kissed the metal and whispered a prayer. Khalil swallowed heavily, his throat feeling like sandpaper, likely from the lack of water and maybe something worse.

'What do you think the dream meant, Ya Khalil?'

Khalil blinked, staring at the warmth exuding from the man's face. He didn't remember mentioning his name.

'That you'll be home to her soon,' he answered, then paused, contemplating, 'Nabhan.'

Nabhan raised his brows and laughed heartily. Khalil looked down, his cheeks warm. The film project he was planning to make at school was titled 'The Heroes Among Us'. Rafah, her presence as warm as Nabhan, told him she was going to talk about her father. And it seemed, he hoped, that she had talked to her father about him.

The warmth inside the fragile tent was washed out by the sudden pattering attempting to shred the tent from the outside. They were still too light to be bullets however, too liquid. Khalil stood up, stepping outside of the tent. A wet sheen glazed over the sands of Rafah like a gauze as it rained. The tents gained life; sheets of plastic, torn fabric and prayer mats moved back and forth as if they were taking long breaths. Mothers grabbed their remaining children, their arms shielding their little frames from the front as the little ones held onto that shield, their slippers squelching hurriedly.

Too hurriedly.

Khalil saw the tank before he heard it trudge along the sands towards the camp. He stepped forward, having to make sure he wasn't seeing things, that the rain was not tricking him. That there really was only one. He turned to Nabhan who stepped up beside him, a ready look on his face as raindrops leaked from his beard. Khalil knew something was going to happen today, everyone did, but that didn't stop his chest from thudding in his ears again. He caught a glimpse of the lone soldier standing atop the green tank. He looked young, half-baked, ideals unripe, his helmet fitted for someone twice the man he thinks he is. The soldier held no guns himself, like the weapon beneath him was big enough to conceal his deficiencies.

'Let's go,' Khalil muttered as the hunk of metal moved closer, grabbing Nabhan's sleeve, only to be shrugged off briskly. He frowned at the older man, wanting to shout as Nabhan held up Rafah's key defiantly, as if it could singlehandedly block the machine gun. Khalil had the mind to turn and run like the others were, away from the camp, pretend there was somewhere safer beyond it. But then he heard it. A melody that made every deadened cell in his body spark with vigour. The calling.

*'Come to my hometown and see how the sea smiles at you,
Come to the coast of Haifa and keep its sand for souvenir,
Take a photo of the streets of Khan Younis,
Our hearts are the home of your eyes.'*

As Nabhan sang the Dal'ouna, the winds accompanied him in intensity. And no sooner did the nameless figures from their tent. A new mother, two teenage brothers, an elderly couple and a child rose up beside them, each with their own keys in hand and an iron voice. Khalil took a shaky breath, stepped back behind them all, and held up his own weapon, pressing record.

*'Come to my hometown and see,
How the sea, how the sea smiles at you.'*



Scan this QR code to read the rest of this piece...

Grandma's Attic

Kyra Burris Russell Sage College

No, Isabella did not expect to find much out of her grandmother's belongings. After the funeral, her father was the one who made the pointed decision to go through everything in that woman's weird, dusty attic. The thing about Grandma's attic was that nobody could ever touch it— ever. Growing up, Isabella's older brother often told her ghost stories about the *single time* Grandma gave *him* permission to climb up the folding ladder and retrieve an old shoebox for her. Creaky floorboards, eerie noises in the corner, and a strange box that emitted a low humming sound. This, Isabella figured as she got older, was just her older brother's way of giving her nightmares for a week— as older brothers often do. But still, something inside Isabella's chest twisted every time she heard the story. Besides that, for as long as she could remember— no one was allowed up besides Grandma. Not Isabella, not her father, and not even their grandfather— when he was still alive, at least. It was grandma's attic through and through. And— maybe inappropriately— Isabella's father decided seconds after burying her— that it was time to see what the *hell* was up there. If ghosts were real, Isabella was sure her father was about to get a rude haunting tonight.

In short, there was pretty much nothing in that attic.

Besides a few stray rats, and broken old Monopoly boards— Grandma had absolutely nothing to hide.

After going through so many storage containers that it could have made her grandma the mayor of empty cardboard boxes, her father was about ready to give up. "What on earth was she hiding up here?"

"Maybe it was her secret smoke spot," Isabella cracked.

"Too soon," her dad replied.

"You're the one gutting your dead mother's attic."

"Well, at least I'm taking it a little bit seriously—"

In those few short seconds before her father could finish his sentence— the floorboards collapsed under Isabella.

Through all the screaming, pulling, and Dad rushing to her rescue— Isabella failed to

notice that falling through the floorboard had a much more underwhelming drop than she'd thought.

Because there was something *underneath* her.

Dad was at a loss for breath. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Isabella huffed. "Maybe just bruised a leg."

Her father coughed, "God— with that scream I would've thought it got chopped off."

But when Isabella gained her footing, no pun intended, she turned back to the floor she fell into.

Inside was a small, wooden compartment. And hidden in a perfectly-fitting gold box, was a dark purple book.

When Isabella crawled towards the diary and traced her hands against the smooth, leather binding— a strange chill ran across her arms.

Her father looked on with a puzzled expression. "What's in it?"

And by the time Isabella had opened her grandmother's manuscript, between the old, browning pages— she couldn't believe what she had found.

Scribbled in black ink, on the very first page, was the phrase: "*Step one: how to make contact with the recently deceased.*"

書道 - Calligraphy

Michael Groissl Russell Sage College



Shang Shan Yuan Cemetery: Section 56 Lot 3&4

Iris Zhu Deerfield Academy

I don't know much about you—
only that you loved mangosteen
and had short, curly hair like a lion.

1982:
Rusted wheels spin through soft dirt.
You ride the squeaky bicycle
with peeling purple paint
beneath the shade of venerable trees
toward the summer marketplace,
where throngs of fishermen squatted around *mahjong* tables
fanning sweat from their necks

I wonder if you knew
that one day it would be my grandfather
who would walk that same dirt path.
He'd greet the tired merchants and ask
if the fishing was good, *and your wife?*

By the time he returned home,
your heart would have already gone

quiet.

They say the last color one sees before death is red.

Like a watermelon's
crimson flesh
your children stood
barefoot, on its rind,
until the green zebra-stripes *cracked*—

Red
your lipstick at your funeral,
the funny shade of daddy's face:
I had never seen him cry before.

—*Cracked*, was my heart
watching mom stand frozen in aisle 5
a week after you had died,
her eyes fixed on a bar of
mangosteen-scented soap

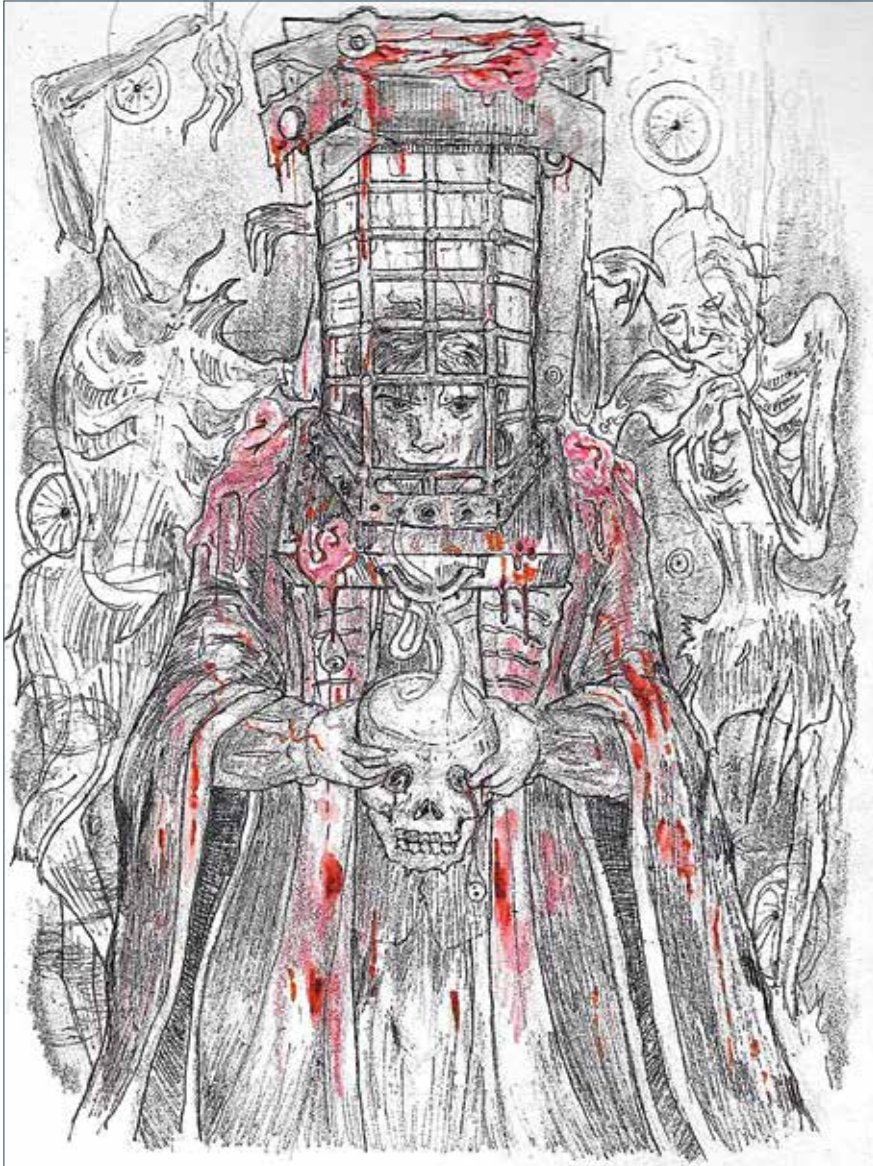
they say when no one's left to remember you,
that is when you truly die.
You were never forgotten, Grandma, not even when
Alzheimer's stole Grandpa's memories—
he'd hold your photograph and tell us
that the lion-haired woman in the frame
was his lover.

Your love was the kind that
even memory couldn't undo
and I cling on to every fragment
like a dream slipping away
just out of reach

I don't know much about you,
and I'm sorry that I can't visit often
but I love you,
in the small, inexplicable ways
that never make it into poems.

A Hunter Is A Hunter, Even In A Dream

Chloe DeSilva **CreativityUnleashed**



100

LINE DRAWING

Longingly

Natalia Phoenix Ervin **Russell Sage College**

Before I'm gone, tell them that I understood you.
Tell them about how we talked for hours,
Tell them about how I watched the first snow
of the season fall all around us;
and about how I waited at the clock tower in the snow for you.
Time stood still and cold like a snow globe for me,
never changing,
a decoration, something trapped in time, unable to change.
Tell them I was a broken clock,
because I was the "right person, wrong time."
But even a broken clock gets the time right twice a day.
So I stay, longingly and hopefully, waiting
for the clock to be fixed.



101

POETRY

Light, When I Look Up

Amanda Bastiani Russell Sage College



102

PHOTOGRAPHY

Palm Trees

Amelia Stannard New Visions

Things are altered in a shadow
You don't see the full picture
When that color's black and white
You may not wanna fix her

Kind eyes are blind without a light
You can only see the sideview
Once the night is prime and new
You may not want to see it through

(Chorus)

And if I'm ever wrong
I don't think any of this was planned
We're just palm trees on the beach
Dropping our leaves onto the sand
And if I'm wrong
Then honesty is my stand

Count the stars in the sky
What do you think would happen?
Would the world be drained of all
Its fun and ever-loving?

Crazy eyes and crazy cries
When you are down to nothing
Crazy eyes hypnotize
And leave you wondering

I lie in my bed wide awake
My mind repeated every mistake
The one thing I'm left with is all these questions
Like who or why or why?

(Chorus)

And if I'm ever wrong
I don't think any of this was planned
We're just palm trees on the beach
Dropping our leaves onto the sand
And if I'm wrong
Then honesty is my stand (x2)



103

MUSIC



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code to listen to
this piece...

Poetry

Wren Allen Russell Sage College

If you sit down and hope to write poetry, you will.
Poetry is nothing but a bunch of grammatical bullshit on a page.
If I said: "The frog flew fast above the canal at my mansion," no
one would question that, but rather they would find meaning.
Isn't that what poetry is?

Maybe it's not an expression, but instead a puzzle.
It can be a chance for people to step into a dark room,
Into their own dark room, rather, and see if they can find light.
It's words that feel, it's words with empathy.
It is periods that stand as stop signs and metaphors that touch your soul.
And even with eyes closed five hours later, you still feel it.

What a beautiful thing.

The Echoes Of Distance

Hooria Mirabzadeh Russell Sage College

Part One: Finding Spring

The Call to Leave

I dream of flying without wings. My body, weightless, floats between earth and sky, free from gravity and free of borders. The wind carries me towards an endless spring, where the air smells of renewal, where the land is neither foreign nor familiar, only welcoming.

In the dream, I am free. In waking life, I am not.

For years, I searched for this spring, not just a season, but a state of being. A place where fear has no meaning, where a woman's voice does not disappear in the silence, and where hope is a fire that does not fade in the wind. I spent my life between leaving and staying, torn by the weight of belonging. Spring, in my mind, was always distant, within reach, yet unseen, something I could sense but never hold. It was the space between past and future, between loss and renewal. It was not just about escaping the cold, but about finding warmth inside myself, about believing that something brighter could exist beyond the shadows.

The dream of flight came to me often, a vision of lightness, of a body free and weightless. I would wake up with the feeling still in my chest as if my body had momentarily known what it meant to be free. But the morning would always return me to reality, to the heaviness of my existence, to the knowledge that I had yet to find that place, that season, that spring.

This longing settled deep within me, shaping my decisions before I even realized it. I was always looking beyond, always searching, always feeling that something else, something unseen, unnamed, was waiting. And so, the decision to leave was not made in a single moment. It had been unfolding inside me for years, like the slow melting before the first blossom of spring. I did not know then what leaving would truly mean. I did not yet understand the weight of absence, the silence of separation, the aching distance between here and home. I only knew that I was answering a call, a whisper in my own heart that told me it was time to go.

The Girl Who Dreamed of Flying

She came to me in a dream long before I ever spoke of leaving. A young girl, standing alone in an open field, looking up at the sky with longing in her eyes.

The wind blew around her, pulling at her dress, lifting her hair like whispers of forgotten promises. She raised her arms, as if preparing to take flight, but she had no wings. And yet, she believed.

She ran, faster and faster, her feet barely touching the ground, her heart pounding with something between fear and hope. And then, for a moment, just a moment, she lifted off. The earth no longer held her. She was light as air, rising higher, free from the world below. The sky embraced her, and for the first time, she felt free.

But as suddenly as she had risen, she began to fall. The air could no longer hold her, and the sky no longer carried her. She stretched out her hand, reaching for nothing, her breath caught in her chest as she fell back down. When she landed, she did not cry. She did not break. She simply lay there, staring at the sky, knowing she had touched something greater than herself, knowing she had to try again.

When I woke up, I carried her with me. She was not just a girl in a dream, she was the voice inside me that had whispered for years, the part of me that had always longed for more—but I had buried her under fear.

The Decision

The morning of my 40th birthday arrived quietly. The weight of the years pressed on my chest as I sat alone, staring at the flickering candles on a simple cake. Outside, the city moved as it always had. The hum of distant traffic, the chatter of neighbors echoing through the alleys, the rhythmic tapping of a spoon against a glass of tea in a nearby cafe. And then, above it all, the familiar, soothing voice of the muezzin calling the Maghrib prayer from the mosque. The verses of the Quran flowed through the night air, weaving into the sounds of the city, just as they had throughout my life.

A reminder of home.

A reminder of everything I was leaving behind.

But inside me, something was changing.

As I prepared to blow out the candles, I sat down to write, a tradition I kept every year. I made a list of what I had, a reminder that I owned more than I often realized. But this time, at the top of the page, I wrote:

“May this be the year you find the courage to unearth the buried dreams in your heart.”

Perhaps the strange dream I had the night before, the dream of the girl and her wish to fly

without wings, had left something deep in me. It was no longer just a dream: it felt like a message.

My mind drifted between the past and the future. Forty years. Four decades of waiting, hesitating, wondering if I should stay or go. The whisper that had lived in my chest for years grew louder. It was no longer a quiet longing: it was a demand. It was time.

And so, as I stood before the 40 candles of my 40th birthday, I whispered my wish aloud.

Louder than ever before.

Loud enough to make my own heart tremble.

“Perhaps spring has lost its way, and that is why a cold and dark winter has cast its shadow upon this land for so long. If spring does not come, then I will search the world for it. I will gather its warmth in my hands and bring it back home.” The moment I blew out the 40th candle, my path became clear. A place far, far away. A place distant and unknown. A place where I would be utterly alone. I sat there for a while. The warmth of the candles slowly faded into the air. The realization settled deep within me: this was no longer just a thought, no longer a whisper in the back of my mind. It was real. The decision had been made, and the journey had already begun, whether I was ready or not.

And yet, it was a sign, a quiet sign leading me forward. The path of beginning. Maybe I needed to go back to sleep, to find that girl again, the one who had unearthed her dreams. Maybe in dreaming of her once more, everything would become clear.

That night, on my 40th birthday, she returned. She stood before me again, her eyes locked onto mine. And at that moment, I knew she had been waiting. Waiting for the day I would finally unearth the dreams I had buried. Waiting for me to understand that she had never fallen. She had simply not yet learned how to fly.

And perhaps, neither had I.

The Buried Dream

Once upon a time, in lands both near and far, our story began. Once, there was a girl who dreamed of flying, not just ordinary flying, but flying freely without wings.

One night, she woke up, her body covered in sweat as if she had been running for hours. She had a strange dream, a dream of flying without wings. In the dream, she stood on the edge, ready to leap, but fear held her back. “How can I fly with no wings?”

A voice inside her whispered: "Jump. You don't need wings."

But she was afraid.

She didn't tell anyone about her dream. She didn't want to be laughed at. So, she dug a small hole in the corner of her heart and buried it there, keeping it safe from the world.

Time passed. She grew, and so did the holes in her heart, more and more, one after another, each holding a dream she was too afraid to share. One day, as she was digging yet another hole to bury another dream so that no one would laugh at her, her fingers found something familiar. What is this?

Did I dig this?

Of course I did.

She brushed away the dust and saw it, the dream of flying without wings.

"What a foolish dream."

A strange feeling washed over her, something she had never felt before.

"Weren't my dreams supposed to stay safe in their hidden corners? Why did I laugh at my own dream?"

She looked around. Her heart was filled with mounds of earth and buried dreams. Her heartbeat grew faster and faster, until, suddenly, she collapsed. The long, forgotten dreams saw her fall and rushed toward the oldest buried dream.

"When she laughed at you, how did you feel?"

The dream of flight replied: "I was not hurt because she laughed. I was hurt because she didn't even remember I existed. She buried us to keep us safe from the world. But if she now mocks us herself, what is left to fear?" The dream continued, "That is what makes me the saddest of all." The girl who once dreamed of flying without wings had forgotten she ever had that dream. And when she remembered, she mocked it.

A great commotion rose in the corners of her heart.

The buried dreams trembled in fear, knowing what would soon come for them. So, they pushed away the soil, rose from the earth, and stood tall. "Better to be mocked than to remain unseen," they cried.

She woke up.

Her entire body was covered in sweat, but she shivered.

She looked at her hands. Why were they covered in dirt?

She looked at herself in the mirror. Why had her hair turned white?

She tried to stand, but her legs could not hold her.

Her vision blurred. Darkness crept in.

The girl was dying.

She screamed.

"I don't want to die! I haven't flown yet!"

"I haven't flown yet! A flying without wings."

And suddenly, I woke up.

This piece has been extracted from a bigger text.

Self Portrait

Isabella Schmidt **New Visions**



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DRAWING

He Who Is Warmth

Jonathan Reese **Russell Sage College**

There sat, in the middle of an open, empty field, a child curled and at rest. His head lay in his hands while his little nose breathed the sweet scent of dandelion's bed. The sun would warm the child at dawn, and with the company of morning light it would stand.

Tracing the edge of the glade were rows of dense forest. Overgrown roots, dried cones, thorny branches, all dissuaded the child from leaving. Birds would perch on unnested branches and watch him patiently. Some days they would see him bite into a pinecone before spitting out small rigid chunks. On the warmest days of that summer, the child would go to the small body of sunlit water and dance to the sounds of their chirping. Hopping forward, splashing left and then right. The water staved off thirst, the sun gifted comfort, and the birds sang nature's melody.

It's the nights after those days swimming I hold closest. The sun would sink below the tree-lined horizon. The birds would stop their song and go to their nests. The water would cool, and relax. It was then, in a yellow bed under low-hung dark that the child would rest next to me. His body would curl and his head would lay upon his hooves. Ease would find home in his face and my beloved would dream of elsewhere. This child, my child, will one day grow up and leave our field of grass and flowers, but for now I feel his warmth on my back and know he is here. I hope, in the days nearing my baby's end, he will return to lay next to me one last time, so that as my paint fades in the sunlight and my hollow body becomes a shelter from the rain, I will forever remember what it must be like to have been alive.



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SHORT SCENE

Prove Me Wrong

Kyra Burris
Russell Sage College

Look deep in my eyes,
Don't look away
Catching hope in your grin's
My favorite game
Is this another mistake I'll make?
Another lesson to regain?

Felt that fire snagging
Deep in my chest
Swore that I was dead
Now I'm catching my breath
Oh, you're gonna drag me through again

I swore I'd never feel better
Well baby, never say never
Tried so hard to change this tune
But I'll switch it up for you
Can't believe I'm writing this song
Go on and prove me wrong

(Go on and prove me wrong)
Just go and prove me wrong,
(Go on and prove me wrong)
Just go and prove me wrong,
(Go on and prove me wrong)
Go on and prove me wrong,
Can't believe I'm writing this song
Go on and prove me wrong

Got red in the cheeks
When you countered my play
Never knew that you knew
Just how to curve around my unbreakable ways
What did you do to make me cave?
How'd you drive me insane to sane?

Ooh, you're such a heartthrob,
And I'm obsessed
Kill me swift
Before I live another end
Oh, I won't live another end
Another end

I swore I'd never feel better
Well baby, never say never
Tried so hard to change this tune
But I'll switch it up for you
Thought all my dreams had been ended
Must've been all in my head
Can't believe I'm writing this song
Go on and prove me wrong

(Go on and— well, come on and—)
Just go and prove me wrong
(Go on and— well, come on and—)
Just go and prove me wrong
(Go on and prove me wrong)
Go on and prove me wrong
Can't believe I'm writing this song
Go on and prove me wrong

Prove me wrong
Wrong, wrong, wrong

Jump (jump) in (in)
And find me (and find me)
Watch (watch) me (me) climbing
'Cross the sea ('cross the sea)

Jump (jump) in (in)
And find me (and find me)
Watch (watch) me (me) climbing
'Cross the sea ('cross the sea)

Jump (jump) in (in)
And find me (and find me)
Watch (watch) me (me) climbing
Stupid me (oh, so stupid)

Jump (jump) in (in)
And find me (and find me)
Watch (watch) me (me) climbing
Will you climb to me?

Thought all my dreams had been ended
Must've been all in my head
Yeah, I'm finally writing this song
Go on and prove me wrong

You're gonna prove me wrong
(Go on and prove me wrong)
You're gonna prove me wrong
(Go on and— well, come on and—)
(Just go and prove me wrong)
You're gonna prove me wrong
(Go on and— well, come on and—)
(Go on and prove me wrong)

Can't believe I'm writing this song
Go on and prove me wrong



I Am Free

Andreaa Pavel CreativityUnleashed

I am free.

...
...
...

Am I?

...
...
...

It should feel different.
I think I feel different.

...
...
...

Yet... why do I still cry when I get so mad that I don't know what to do with myself?
Why do I keep having conversations in my head instead of actually having them with the people that deserve them?

Why do I still burden myself with other people's sadnesses, angers, frustrations,
and make it my own as a last resort to help them,
at the expense of my own sanity?

As I look back, I can feel it.
It's unseen, but still there.
The only telling signs are its clanking noises at even the smallest breath.

It feels heavy,
and it goes a long way back.
I don't have to see to know where it is leading.
I do not have to see its source to know how tied I still am to the place I called "home"

Every fight, every sorrow, every shout, every sigh,
reverberates through the chains.
Not enough to pull me back,
but enough to remind me.

Remind me that I will forever be a carer for my family's emotional immaturity. Remind me that I am to forever be the bucket for their emotional and verbal vomit, a bucket patched together with mindless apologies, empty promises, and the forever guilt that you have to be there for family.

And yet,
I still *hope* I am free,
or that perhaps one day I actually might be.





Faces of Nature

Mia Huang Pacific Academy Irvine

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PAINTING

International Student Creative Competition

Welcome to our special section dedicated to ten inspiring young creatives.

Each year, we run an international student creative competition in collaboration with Aralia Education. This is our fourth year running this contest, and we couldn't have been more impressed by the works that were submitted, works that are both bold and brave.

We received almost 150 pieces total from middle and high schools studying in America, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and China. Of those works, 10 were accepted for print publication here and represent the strongest of their cohort. This includes our 1st place gold winner, Yao Wang, whose satire: *The ABCs of Being an ABC*, was unanimously accepted by our editors. We are excited to award 2nd place silver to Alysa Wu for her acrylic painting: *Reaching for an Absolution*. And finally, our 3rd place bronze award is given to Katherine Wu for her piece: *Ghost Girl*.

The decisions for print publication were incredibly difficult, as all of the works submitted reflected careful intention, control, and originality. This is why we have long-listed a further 30 pieces on our blog. Please visit www.creativity-unleashed.org to read them.

Enjoy what these young voices have to say!

For further information about Aralia Education, visit www.aralia.com.



The ABCs Of Being An ABC Yao Wang

Union County Magnet High School



You've read the ABCs of animals and trees,
Perhaps even the ABCs of...democracy.
But what about the ABCs of being an ABC?
America Born but your family's Chinese,
And to make matters worse, you're raised in between.
So come along on this journey from A to Z,
Of what it means to be an American–Born–Chinese.

A is for Accent

Americans will expect an accent when you speak English. Your relatives will expect no accent when you speak Mandarin. Neither expectation manifests.

B is for Banana

Yellow on the outside, white on the inside. This metaphor isn't very hard to figure out, but its reality can be quite confusing. Parents warn you about becoming one, yet remind you of the benefits in doing so. Sometimes, you'll wish you could just be white all-around.

C is for Chink

A slur that almost seems like it isn't. You'll learn to tolerate it from friends and ignore it from strangers. You can try explaining its xenophobic and hateful undertones, but few will care. Pro tip: calling it the "Chinese n-word" will help them understand—but be warned, some just laugh and remind you: "it's just a joke".

D is for Duality

Every choice in your life is now a negotiation between two identities. At home, you'll respect your parents, observe Chinese tradition, and try your best to speak their language. From outside this dome of conformity, you'll transform into an independent person versed in pop culture and celebrity drama. Dr. Jekyll would be proud.

E is for Education

The main reason your parents brought you to America, and the one they'll be sure to remind you about. You'll know the phrase by heart: "Good grades, good college, good career, good future". Bringing home A's pleases them, so you'll study passionately throughout high school. You spend hours into the night working; you'll rewrite drafts of essays until they're flawless. By the time college starts, you'll start to wonder whose dream you're actually fulfilling.

F is for FOB

"Fresh off the Boat". It's a strange phrase, especially since most immigrants opt for planes nowadays. Teachers will ask you to guide these new kids around school, but you'll come up with an excuse to distance yourself from such a painful reminder of your own insecurities.

G is for Guilt

This will prevent you from taking control of your own life. After all, your parents sacrificed everything for you—you're obligated to do the same for them.

H is for Hyphenated

Chinese–American. It was intended to symbolize the harmony between two cultures, to connect your two ethnicities. Instead, it's an ugly reminder that you'll never truly belong to either.

I is for Ivies

You'll know the names of these eight colleges before you even learn about the SAT. Your parents give reassurances that if you're rejected, they'll still be proud of you. But will they keep that promise? And even if they do, will you be proud of yourself?

J is for Joy–Luck Club

The token novel taught in American high schools to make ABCs feel seen. It's neat how this book condenses the lives of 5 million Chinese–Americans into one tidy narrative—maximum efficiency, right? At least it's more relevant to you than *The Good Earth*...

K is for Kumon Institute of Education

You'll adamantly deny having gone to this institution, laughing at the trope of "Kumon trauma". Deep down, you'll be grateful for the hours spent toiling on worksheets in

the brightly lit learning center, well aware it's the reason behind your stellar grades in Math and English.

L is for Looks

Hundreds of dollars will be squandered on hair products, scents, and clothes, all in the hopes of blending in with your more traditionally-American friends. Your parents will criticize you for wasting time on outward appearances; time should be spent studying. In the end, no matter how much gel you put on your spiky hair, you'll never get it as smooth as Zac Efron's.

M is for Model Minority

ICE deportations rise and you start to worry, but your friends reassure you that you're not the "type" they're after. Chinese people are too successful and beneficial to the economy to be targeted, they say. But what if you don't become a real life Crazy Rich Asian when you're older? Can you still hide under the myth of the model minority?

N is for Names

You get three, that's the rule. One Chinese, given to you at birth. You'll whisper it in hushed tones to close friends and watch as they try to mimic the syllables and accents, nodding along with their tragic (yet well-meaning) attempts. One nickname that, while still Chinese, holds more affection. Your parents and relatives back home primarily use this one. One American, used out of necessity to avoid awkward introductions (and to save your teachers the embarrassment of phonetically sounding out your name when taking attendance). Unsure what to put down for this one? Just think of once popular white people's names! Richard, Alice, Alan, Christopher, etc.

O is for Origin

The one question you'll never escape: "Where are you from?" Just to mess with them, say "Alabama, I'm a redneck". They'll respond with a forced chuckle followed by a: "No, but really, where are you from?" At this point you can either continue entertaining the facade by responding with a Scandinavian country or just tell them what they want to hear. Either way, you'll end up hearing the classic, "I knew it!" You'll then want to scream at the person for having wasted your time with a question they already knew the answer to. Try not to, because you'll end up regretting it.

P is for Praise

The one thing you crave more than social media. Your parents dish this out inconsistently and unemotionally. A simple "not bad" is enough to satiate you, while a "you exceeded my expectations" shoots you to the moon. As you grow older, you'll realize that a deprivation of praise is the reason for your clinginess, overcommitment, and perpetual need for validation. Looking at you, Simu Liu.

Q is for Questions

As if the ubiquitous origin question wasn't enough, there's more! Here's a couple more that you'll likely encounter: "Wait, you're Chinese! Are you communist?" And "How is your English so good?" And "Do you know how to make dumplings?" And "Are you going to be a lawyer, doctor, or engineer?" Although, to be fair, the last one is pretty reasonable (and likely).

R is for Return

When you return to China, you'll inevitably feel many conflicting emotions. You'll feel alienated talking to cousins you barely know, sad when you realize your grandparents have aged, confused when strangers recognize you, and ashamed that you can't remember the names of gift-bearing relatives.

S is for Stereotypes

Perpetuated by Hollywood movies and YouTube creators alike. The worst part? Many stereotypes become a sort of double standard. Got an A in math? It's in your genetics; you're supposed to be good at math. Got a B on your quadratics test? You're so stupid.

T is for Tutoring

So. Many. Tutors. SAT tutors, AP tutors, Spanish tutors, calculus tutors. So many that, by the end of the week, your mind won't be able to keep up with the constant flow of new information. And when you're not being tutored, you tutor, whether it's for the money, service hours, resume fodder (don't forget the Ivies are looking for a well-rounded student), or the ego boost from having a fifth grader look at you like you're Einstein.

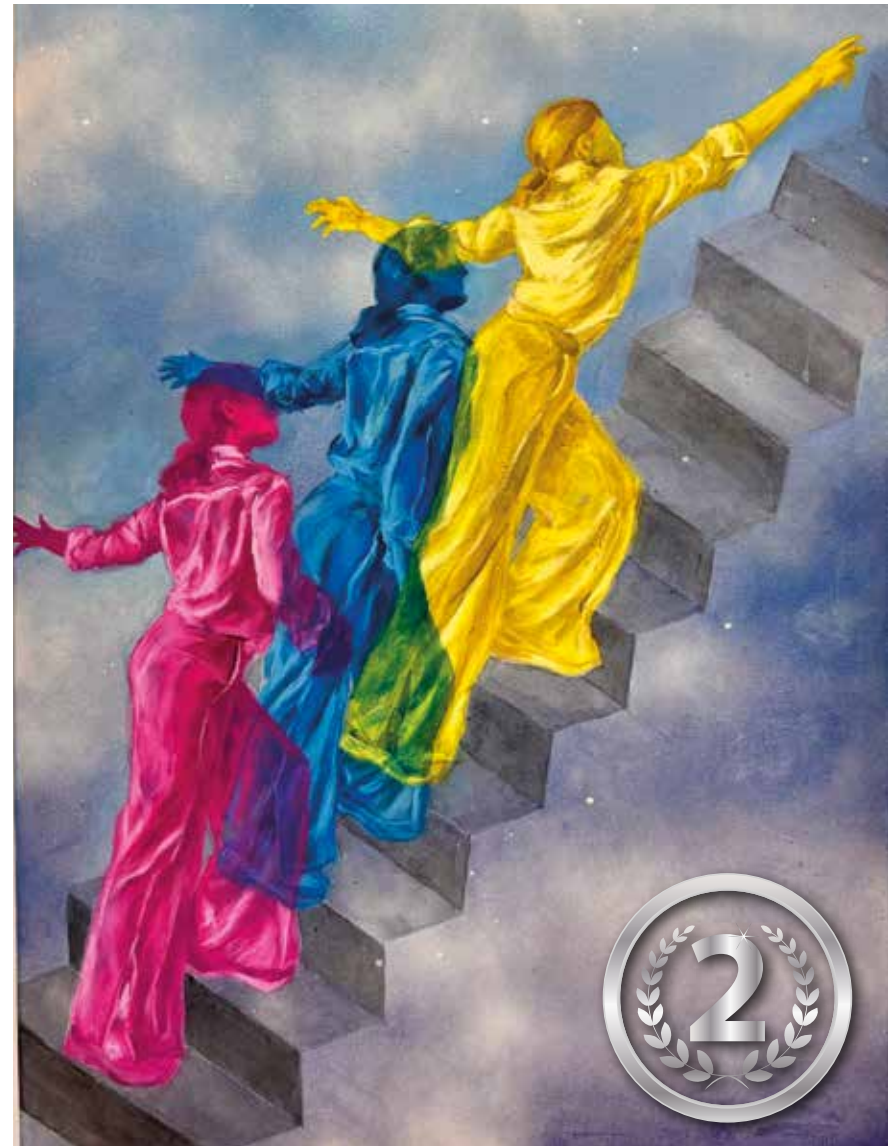


Scan this QR code to read the rest of this piece...

Reaching For An Absolution

Alysa Wu

United World College of South East Asia (UWCSEA)



Ghost Girl

Katherine Wu

Seven Lakes High School

When she pulled the box from the attic and saw the looping strokes of her daughter's handwriting, her hands shook; by the second letter, the tears fell so freely she could no longer see the page, only feel the weight of every word pressing into her chest like a wound reopening.

January 27, 1990 6 years old
Lunar New Year (春节)

Dear 妈妈 (mama),

The 抱住 (firecrackers) outside go pi pa pi pa so loud my chest shakes. Little red paper falls down like bird feathers. I keep the closet door open just a crack so I can watch. The table is so full, the bowls almost touch – 鱼 (fish) with shiny eyes, 烤鸭 (roasted duck) with skin that shines, oranges stacked high like little suns. Everyone laughs when 哥哥 (brother) talks.

哥哥 gets a fat 红包 (red envelope) from uncle. I see the corner open a little, thick bills sleeping inside, all red and new. 哥哥 grins so big his cheeks fold up like dumplings. Another aunt presses her 红包 into his pocket. He can't even hide it.

You come to me when nobody looks. Your hands are cold. You give me a 红包 with no name on it. You smile quick, like we are playing a secret game, and whisper, 快, 放口袋里 (quick, put it in your pocket). When you leave, I peel back the sticker and open it. There is only air.

I don't ask why I can't sit at the table. I don't ask why I didn't get any money. I think maybe if I don't ask, you won't be angry with me for being here. 我想你会高兴我出生了 (I want you to be happy I was born).

With hope,
Your daughter



April 5, 1994 10 years old
Tomb-Sweeping Day (清明节)

Dear 姥姥 (grandma),

We arrive when the sky is thick black and the moon is hiding behind clouds. 爸爸 (baba) says it's better this way, less trouble. I don't know what trouble he means, but I keep quiet. Even still, I'm scared of the way the dirt path swallows our footsteps.

I never met you. 妈妈 (mama) says you had hands that smelled like 茉花 (jasmine) and a laugh that made the neighbors come over just to listen. I wish you were still here. Maybe if you were, we could drink tea together, and I could tell you the things I don't say to anyone else.

When we reach the tomb, 哥哥 (brother) gets the incense. 爸爸 guides his hand, showing him how to bow three times. The smoke curls up like ribbons, soft and silver. 妈妈 lays the chrysanthemums. I carry nothing.

“不要碰 (don't touch),” 爸爸 says when I lean too close. I hide my hands in my sleeves. The air is cold, but my face feels hot.

I look for my name on the carved stone. There's 哥哥, 爸爸, 妈妈. Not mine. You've been gone for so many years, but tonight everyone remembers you, lights incense for you, speaks your name out loud. I am here, standing just a few steps away, and still, I am not remembered.

Being a ghost might be better. At least then someone might leave me flowers.

With longing,
Your granddaughter



When The Sink Speaks

Aadya Agarwal

The Lawrenceville School

The large granite sink at the kitchen's edge,
which bloomed with the rich aromas
of decadent food just minutes ago,
now holds a day's memories:

a great glass bowl,
still dusted with flour,
that had cradled the dough
for my chocolate chip cookies,

a metal pan holds a stubborn stain
from my rushed breakfast before tennis and
a pot that held the dinner my family shared
after a day of spinning on separate axes.

Soon, water trickles from the faucet
to work its way
past the last bits of cookie dough,
the tenacious blemish,
the lingering remnants of dinner.

A pump of dish soap foams,
filling the sink with light, airy bubbles
that sheaths my hands.
The vibrant pinks and oranges of the sunset
outside the window
are caught in their iridescent spheres.

The day's tensions, its quiet chaos,
dissolve in the warm, soapy water.

Round and round, the motion continues,
until every blemish and imperfection
rinses away.

The china gleams again,
a blank, white page,
for tomorrow's story to be written.

Overloaded

Felix Mao

Rye Country Day School



A Boy And His Dress:

A Case For Inclusive Masculinity

Anonymous

As a boy, I had an instinctive curiosity about dresses. Time and again, I would sneak into my mother's dressing room, run my fingers through the hanging fabrics, and, if no one was watching, put one on in front of the mirror: a narrow-shouldered boy looked back at me from his overflowing dress.

Of course, these explorations were done with utmost vigilance and in absolute secrecy. Even at the age of four, a boy knows he is not supposed to wear dresses; he also knows he should shout, fight, play gun games, and like the color blue. From the very start, a boy knows he is different from and opposite to a girl.

Even to this day, I am bewildered by the mysterious process through which boys become *boys* (to me, it feels like indoctrination).

No one has ever told me what being a boy actually entails. But many people have tried to tell me what being a boy cannot entail: tears, quietness, dresses, high-pitched laughter, platonic relationships with girls, and more. Why? I don't know, and from questioning and fighting back, I've discovered that they don't know either.

It seems like the only thing masculinity actually entails is a perpetual fear of losing it. And as a kid whose interests frequently run into the many "cannots" of masculinity, I might have already lost mine. Many of my traits—cleanliness, quietness, and queerness—seem to render me an outcast in the masculine community, yet some of my other characteristics, assertiveness, leadership, and responsibility, are conventionally deemed as masculine. Caught adrift between masculinity and its absence, I grow increasingly frustrated with this nebulous yet restrictive idea.

What should I do about my masculinity?

Looking beyond my puzzling selfhood, the same confusion is echoed throughout society. In recent years, we have witnessed a growing divide that seems to tear up any remaining common ground on the issue of what it means to be a man. On the one hand, the rise of the "manosphere" and misogynist figures like Donald Trump actively advocate for the return of

(toxic) masculinity (Kahn). On the other hand, the growth of radicalized feminist movements, like the Korean 4B movement, boycotted men and masculinity as a whole (Sarnoff). Sinking between two ever-widening extremes that see each other as perpetual and irreconcilable enemies, our society seems to find itself in a manliness deadlock.

What should we do about our masculinity?

Well, we need a shift in the way we look at and treat masculinity. Instead of seeing it as a defining identity, we should see it as traits, traits available to anyone and everyone.

Masculinity cannot be defined. Up to this day, we have never had a universally accepted definition, and we probably never will. Ever. Any attempt to assign one set of characteristics to half of the world's population is bound to fail from the very start. So, instead of plummeting into never-ending debate spirals on what men should be, we should stop trying to reduce billions of boys and men into one set of standards.

In deconstructing a rigid masculine identity, we empower every boy and man.

For my whole life, I have felt confined by society's expectations. Although I never liked to shout, fight, and play gun games, I spent a considerable amount of my childhood stranded in various after-school sports programs: basketball, tennis, soccer; you name it, I've tried them all, as my parents actively tried to "invent" my masculinity. "All the boys like it," they would say. Well, clearly, not all the boys. At least one didn't like any of them...

If we move on from the belief that all boys, regardless of background, interests, and gender identity, share a universal set of characteristics, a lot of the back-and-forth between me and my parents can be avoided. And surely, I am not the only boy who felt betrayed by the masculine identity. There are many of us.

Even for boys and men who aspire to conform to society's expectations, moving beyond the 'masculinity-as-identity mentality' can be profoundly liberating. In a world where gender dynamics are rapidly changing (and changing for very good reasons), many men find it increasingly difficult to live up to the masculine model that has been passed down for centuries (Emba).



Before I Learned To Lie

Christine Wang

The Harker School

I want to go back to the bathtub from when I was seven and honest, when the water was always too hot and I said so, loudly, before I learned that discomfort could be swallowed like bitter medicine.

Back then, my skin was rough as sandpaper from summer sun and scraped knees, and I wore that texture like a badge—proof that I had touched the world and let it poke me back.

The bathtub held my small body like a porcelain confession booth where I told my rubber duck every secret I owned: how I stole three cookies, how I hated my sister's laugh, how I ripped all the carefully groomed flowers from the garden, and how that was why I was muddy-ing up the tub.

There was no shame in wanting what I wanted then, no careful calculation of what was proper or seemingly or expected.

My mother would scrub behind my ears and I would protest the rough washcloth, the soap that stung my eyes, the way she yanked the tangles from my hair without apology.

I had not yet learned that complaint was impolite, that good children suffer beautifully and in silence.

The drain would swallow the dirty water and I'd watch my small crimes disappear—the playground dirt, the grass stains, the evidence of a day spent entirely present in my body, entirely honest about what hurt and what felt good.

I want to find that bathtub again, to sit in water hot enough to turn my skin the color of embarrassment, and remember what it felt like to trust that someone would always come to lift me out, wrap me in a towel rough enough to remind me I was real, and still new enough to be forgiven for everything.

The Coke In The Medicine Bag

Eric Li

College Station High School

Today is the final day of spring break, 2025. I should be at the beach, toes buried in warm sand, listening to waves crash against the shore. Instead, I'm standing in a funeral home, staring at my grandfather's faded baseball cap.

This is my first funeral. My parents have no relatives in the U.S.. I've never been to anything like this.

Laughter drifts from the service next door: warm, fond laughter. I hear them sharing stories: "Remember when Jim went fishing and fell into the river himself..." More laughter. Then music, the comfort of hugs, many footsteps. I peek through the door crack and see their side filled with flowers, white lilies, yellow roses, wreaths piled like mountains. Tables are laden with food: sandwiches, cookies. And the smell of coffee drifts over it all.

Our side is clinical, stark, austere.

No flowers. No food. No friends. No one to share stories about Grandpa, because no one here ever knew him. Grandpa had only been in the U.S. for four months. Four months wasn't enough to make friends or to leave a mark on this land.

Instead of the same fanfare that permeated from the other side of this funeral home, a circus of people spinning like tops, our audience is made up of just the three of us. Mom grips Dad's arm, crying so hard she could barely stand. She was Grandpa's only child. Dad quietly recites prayers, wishing Grandpa a swift journey to the Pure Land. My little sister stayed home with Grandma, whose depression has consumed her at the loss of her partner. She could not get herself to attend the ceremony, and I suppose I can't really blame her.

Grandpa lies peacefully in his casket, wrapped in his favorite floral quilt and wearing his sunglasses. I stare at his hands, avoiding his face. As long as I don't look at his face, I persuade myself that I can pretend he just sleeps.

The silence in the room is so heavy, yet I can hear my own heartbeat, the hum of the air conditioning, the rustle of Dad turning pages in his Buddhist text, and Mom's sniffing.

Laughter, again, intrudes on our solemn, silent mourning, and is followed by applause.

Next door, they clap. Clap for the dead.

I muster some courage to look back at Grandpa. Someone should clap for him too. Someone should stand up and say, "Remember when Old Ma..." making everyone laugh, nod, and say "Yes, yes, that's exactly how he was."

But no one here knew "how he was." No one knew he played the flute, loved drinking, never got angry. No one knew he'd secretly buy Coke for his grandson, would quietly listen to a kid stumbling through broken Chinese relay his troubles.

Grandpa should have flowers. Someone should tell his stories. Someone should remember him. But no one here knew any of that.

This is what an immigrant family's funeral looks like. Small. Quiet. Intimate. And a little bit lonely. To this country, he never existed, but to us, he was everything.

"It's time to say goodbye," the funeral director suddenly intrudes upon my reverie. Mom, through her tears, takes my hand and declares: "Come. Say something to Grandpa."

I open my mouth to speak, but my voice stays stuck, timid in my throat. Instead, I raise two fingers to my lips, a secret sign Grandpa and I shared. It means "let's drink Coke together."

My mother is a health behavior professor at the university. For as long as I can remember, we've had three different weighing scales at home. Food measured in cups, salt calculated to the gram. Every time she buys groceries, she'll check all the ingredients to ensure they do not hold harmful, chemical additives. She treats CDC guidelines like gospel and our household like her research laboratory. Carbonated drinks? Absolutely forbidden. When guests bring juice, Mom pours a quarter cup and dilutes the rest with water.

In fact, in third grade, at a friend's birthday party, I watched as they poured full cups of juice. "You don't add water?" My question was innocent and entirely based on the comparison of my family's own kitchen. Everyone laughed. My face burned. I stared at my shoes, pretending to study how the laces were tied. After that day, I never mentioned my family's rules to anyone again.

Low-salt meals, diluted juice, strict vegetable-to-meat ratios. They all became secrets.

Until everything changed when my grandparents moved in.

Grandpa had smoked and drank for thirty years. He loved fatty meat, rarely touched vegetables or fruit, and didn't even brush his teeth. Mom watched but said nothing. Maybe because he was already in his seventies. Maybe because he came from another era, another world—one where cigarettes and alcohol were hospitality, where fatty meat was a rare delicacy. Maybe because he was the adult in that relationship, and it's not a child's responsibility to chastise their parent.

Despite his lifestyle, grandpa only had high blood pressure and a little lung disease. No obesity. No diabetes. No cancer. No teeth had fallen out. Anyone else would have been riddled with illnesses, but Grandpa could still walk, still drink, still laugh. His body was much stronger than what we expect of a person in his seventies.

"Is Grandpa God?" I secretly asked Grandma.

She laughed and patted my head. "Your grandpa just has a peaceful heart. He understands life. Nothing bothers him. Nothing makes him nervous."

I thought about that, and was struck by the sincerity of what she said. She was right. I'd never seen Grandpa nervous, ever. Even if the sky fell, he probably wouldn't furrow his brow. He'd smile, move on and laugh again. Life, to him, was joy.

At first, Grandpa and I barely talked, divided by language. My Chinese wasn't good, and he didn't speak English. Then one evening, he called me into his room and mysteriously pulled a can of Coke from his bag.

"Got it at the Chinese church's New Year party today," he said. "I saw many kids drinking it. Sweet things make people happy."

Grandpa smiled and handed me the can. I twisted open the cap. The fizz sounded especially loud in the quiet room, like small explosions, one after another.

I smelled the sweetness, and something sharp I couldn't quite identify, and took a careful sip.

The moment the cold liquid hit, my whole mouth tingled. Bubbles jumped on my tongue, prickling, then sugar radiated, overwhelming, spreading from my tongue down my throat, even up into my nose. It had been so long since I'd had Coke, so long, I'd almost forgotten what it tasted like. Not the faint sweetness of Mom's diluted juice, but intense, almost excessive sweetness.

I took another sip. Then another.

Two weeks later, I was feeling down again. Too much homework, another fight with friends. I walked into Grandpa's room and opened his bedside medicine box out of habit.

Inside was a can of Coke.

The sight of it made my whole body go limp. I didn't know who put it there. My Mom? My Dad? My Grandma?

Twisting open the cap, I listened to the familiar fizz. The room still smelled like Grandpa. I took a sip and closed my eyes.

Grandpa Was still here. Just in another way. Grandpa watched me, his eyes crinkling into crescents. "Good?"

"Good," I said. I'd snuck a sip once at a friend's house when I was younger, but the moment had been rapid, no time to truly experience the taste. This moment in this room with grandpa was different. I could drink slowly, savoring it. My mouth buzzed and danced.

I'd forgotten Coke tasted like this. I'd forgotten happiness could taste like this.

After that, Grandpa would find ways to get one or two cans of Coke for me without my Mom knowing. Sometimes he'd bring them home from community events. Sometimes when Mom took him to the grocery store, he'd secretly buy them with his own pocket money. When Mom put my sister to sleep, I'd slip into his room. We'd sit on the edge of his bed, share a Coke, and chat in broken Chinese-English.

I told him about school, about exam pressure, friend drama, frustrations with Mom's rules.

Once, I told him I'd stood at the school entrance for two hours, trying to recruit new members for a club I'd founded. I'd made a poster, prepared a lot to say, and imagined many people would stop and ask.

Stone Below

Alvin Su

Benjamin Franklin High School

This screenplay is inspired by true events from the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake.

FADE IN: EXT. WENCHUAN COUNTY TOWN - DAY

MAY 12, 2008 flashes across the screen. We see peaceful streets. Cherry blossoms drift along quiet sidewalks.

CUT TO

INT. LI WEN'S APARTMENT - DAY

Wide shot of a bedroom. We see golden sunlight filter through gauzy curtains. In the background, we hear the kitchen hum softly, pots simmering, wind chimes swaying in the breeze. LI WEN, a 28 year old mother, hums softly as LIANG, her 3 month old baby, kicks his tiny legs. We see a mobile made of carved birds spin slowly above him.

LI WEN

Who's Mama's little emperor today? Such noisy feet! What a racket from such tiny toes.

LIANG giggles. The sound of a phone buzzing. She reads the message that has just come through on it. Smiles. Presses the phone gently to her baby's cheek.

LI WEN (CONT'D)

It's Baba. He says he dreams of your smile.

From outside the bedroom we hear the sounds of a TV on.



WEATHER MAN (V.O.)
Another day of beautiful, clear skies for
Wenchuan. Temperatures today are expected to
be perfect...

FADE OUT

FADE IN

INT. LI WEN'S APARTMENT - SAME DAY LATER

A quiet afternoon warmth fills the baby's bedroom. The curtains stir. A faint breeze through the windows. Suddenly: a low, rumbling vibration, like distant thunder, but growing, grinding, closer. We hear the sound of the porcelain spoon clatter into the sink. The hanging light fixture begins to sway wildly, casting erratic shadows across the walls.

LI WEN
(beat) What...?

LIANG lets out a shrill, startled wail from his crib. The floor quivers beneath them. LI WEN rushes to scoop him up.

LI WEN(CONT'D)
It's just thunder, xiǎo bǎo...it's just
thunder...(in English: xiǎo bǎo = precious one.)

We hear a deafening, otherworldly roar rip through the apartment. We see the windows explode inward with a blast of glass and wind. Dishes leap from cabinets. The walls ripple. LI WEN moves on instinct, shields LIANG with her body, and runs toward the doorway. We see the floor underneath LI WEN buckle violently, sending her sprawling. A beam crashes down. We see the ceiling begin to collapse, plaster and steel raining from above.

LI WEN

Hold on!

Camera screen shatters. We hear a final crack, like a snapped spine.

BLACKOUT

We can hear a cacophony of sounds. Concrete groaning like an animal in pain. Glass shatters, dishes crunch. A far off scream, then closer ones, then nothing. Just the hissing of dust. Then, a baby's faint whimper beneath the weight of silence.

INT. LI WEN'S APARTMENT - EVENING

We hear a low, groaning rumble. A faint cry cuts through the dark, helpless. We see a narrow light flicker. Tilted shot of the buried world takes form. Splintered wood. A single fractured phone screen flickering blue. LI WEN is pinned beneath a slab of concrete, blood trailing from her temple. Her legs are crushed. Curved protectively over LIANG, her arms form a fragile shield. LIANG stirs softly against her chest, still breathing.

LI WEN
...xiǎo bǎo...

LI WEN blinks hard, trying to clear her vision. Her breath is ragged. Pain claws up her spine, but her arms tighten protectively.

LI WEN (CONT'D)
I've got you. Mama's here. Still.
Forever.



A Shattered Sky

Anabia Imran

American School Dhahran (ASD)

At eight, the world was soft and bright, the sun on my skin, the earth felt right
the sky then cracked, and with a roar, a
missile
soared
and calm no more.

In the dead of night, we drove away,
under a sky that lost its way.

as smoke rose up, clouding my
Hearts filled with dread
h
e
a
d

Our homes stood, still intact
but something was lost; something unable to track.

That night wasn't just about the missile fight...

I thought it was just politics, standing to its fullest height
I couldn't see that it was more; what was lost was hope,
the missiles soaring, the sound sticking, no way to cope.

It was power and greed, resulting in pain,
people forced to pay for their country's stain.

Online, it was said, "What was done was right."
She scrolls, remembering her fright
and so now she tries, but will not escape, the silenced war
within the world's harsh shape.

The
battles
we
See
on
screens
afar

but it was the survivors who bled under the same star.
She knows her lines, yet still feels lost,
caught between who to trust and what it cost.

The comments were sharp, wearing an evil smile,
her broken mind paid for their excitement — how vile

Others said it was for
for freedom's cause,
but she only sees crushed people and broken laws.
e
c
i
t
s
u
j

In the end, who would decide
which lives to risk and which to hide.

Now she sees, though she is young,
the games played, the lies sung,
The missiles weren't her pain—

They were the hands of politics tying the chain.

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