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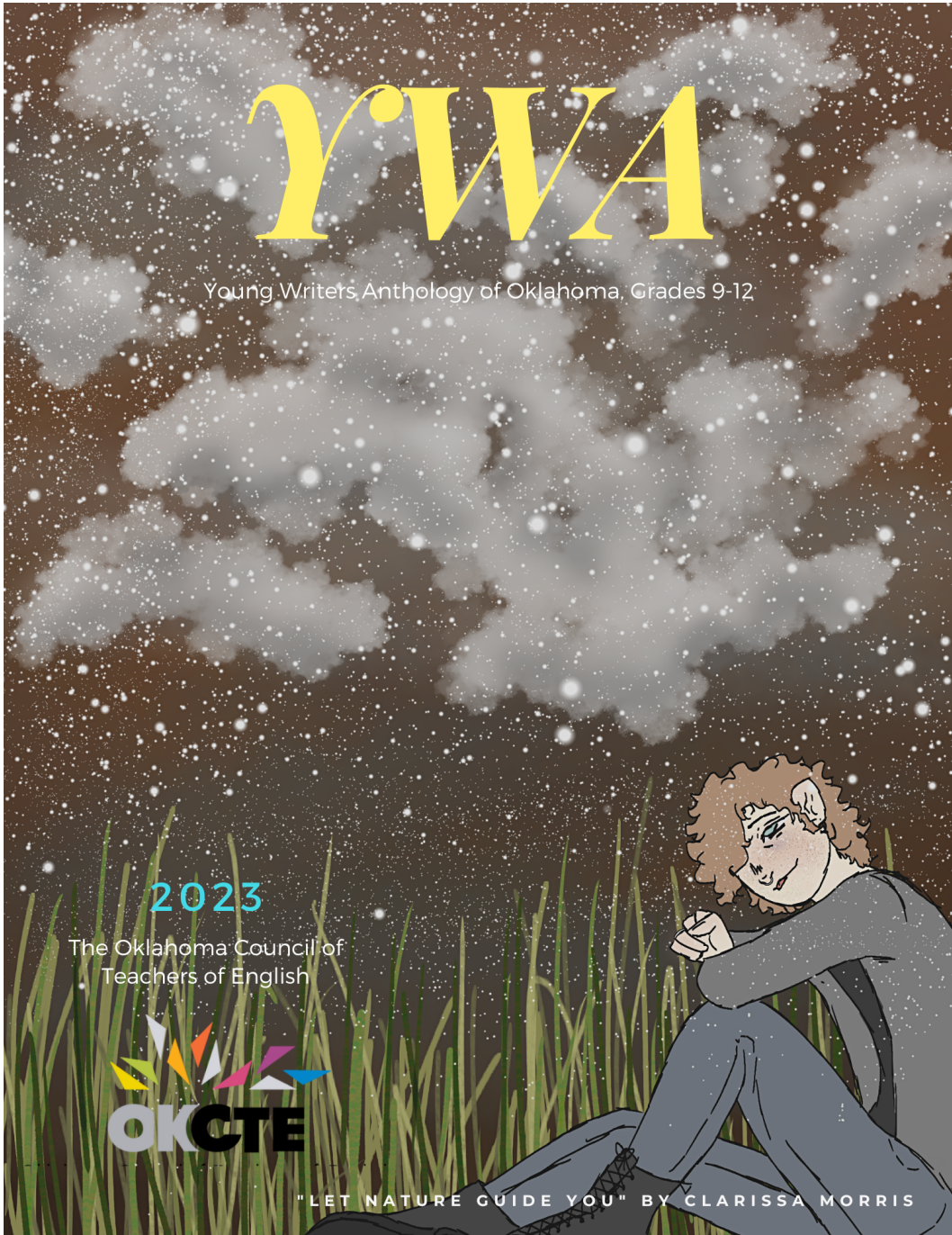
Young Writers Anthology of Oklahoma, Grades 9-12

2023

The Oklahoma Council of
Teachers of English



"LET NATURE GUIDE YOU" BY CLARISSA MORRIS





Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

2023

**Young Writers Anthology
Grades 9-12**

By Students of Oklahoma



Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

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The Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

About the Anthology

This anthology contains the winning works submitted for the annual Oklahoma Young Writers Contest, sponsored by the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English, the state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English.

We received nearly 300 entries with the support of nearly 60 educators across the state of Oklahoma.

The winners, ranging from grades 9-12, submitted works for short story, personal narrative, comic, poetry, descriptive paragraph, and expository essay. To the writers included in this year's anthology, *Congratulations on this prestigious achievement!*

Submission Policy & Review Process

The Young Writers Anthology welcomes submissions from any student grades 9-12 in Oklahoma between November and January via online submission form. Teachers submit work on behalf of the students verifying they have read the work, have parent permission to enter the work for publication, and that the work is original. What is submitted must be a "final" copy as we will not make requests for revisions. From January to March, the review board judges each entry using the same rubric developed by the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English. Each piece is reviewed by multiple members of the review boards. During March, the editorial and layout teamwork to copy edit and create the anthology. All writers are notified in late March through teacher contact as to the status of their entry. Anthology writers will receive a certificate of congratulations at the OKCTE April gathering.

Editorial Policy

The Young Writers Anthology editorial staff reserves the right to edit minor errors such as grammatical and spelling issues.

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Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

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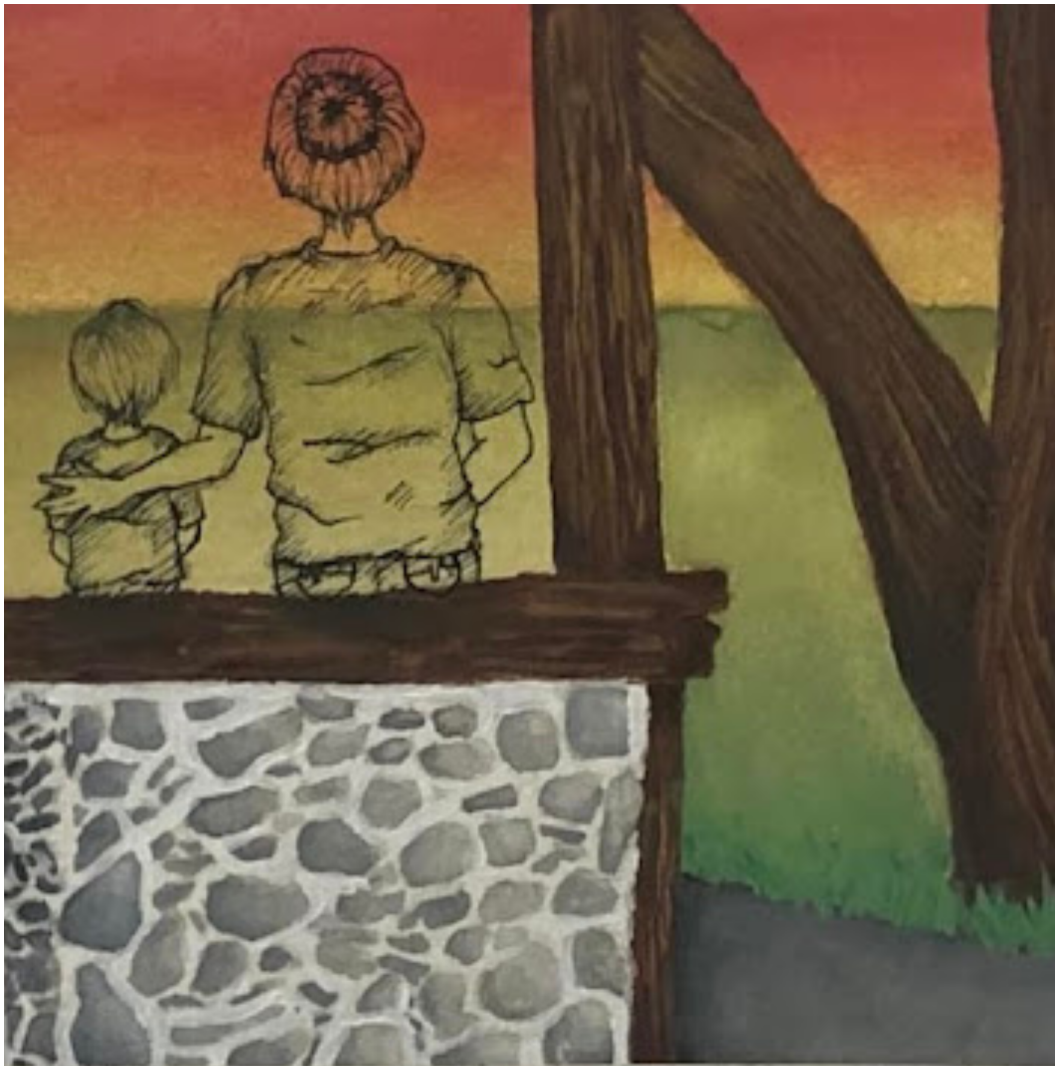
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Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English



"THE SUNSETS OF LIFE" BY NICOLE SCOTT

DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH

Stomp-Dance

Alexus Young

It starts out with a beat, rhythmic and strong, the shaking of shells rattling through the biting air. Then comes the voice, cutting through the night with its crisp tones and beautiful notes. The people gather around our singer, colorful skirts and shirts, feathers and shell shakers, all coming to dance around the crackling fire, its scorching embers joining us in our dance. In the midst of the circle, you feel the ground rumble as we stomp-dance around the burning coals, the aroma of smoke fills the air and brings a sting to your eyes. The feeling of warm bodies around you, deafening sounds of the women's shell's rattling through the air. Inching closer to the center of the circle through every movement, studying the intricate steps of your people, you help tell your story through dance. The men bow, waving their hands in a motion as if they were casting seeds to the ground bringing life to the earth again, as the women do the same, we tell our story as we move along. Continuing on, changing our motions, we wave on the fire, encouraging it to grow stronger. Intertwining our hands, we form a connection with our family. There's no better feeling than being connected with your people, contentment all around as we sing and dance together. Departing from each other, we shrink the circle, slowing down our tempo, once again casting seeds to the ground. We dance a few beats longer, then the rattle is struck one last time, the song ends, then just like that there is laughter and "nya:wəh" or "thank you" to our singer. The rest of the night continues on with more fulfilling and exciting dances.

Chirps of Tranquility

Brayden Osterholt

My eyes flick open with a feeling of uncertainty and curiosity, staring into the ceiling of my tent as crickets serenade an ardent song of love I can only attempt to fathom the lyrics to. I sit up on the layers of fabric separating me from the rock-ribbed soil beneath. I have always been a light sleeper, so there was no surprise in waking up before dawn. I lean and crawl forward, grasping my way around the jungle green nylon tent that is like a maze in the almost pitch black night. My hand brushes against the slight metallic zipper made of ice, signaling to me that it's there. I grip it and pull down, the chilled waft of midnight air consuming me whole. My soul shivers as I shift into a hunched position and vacate my temporary dwelling. The once starless night in the city I emigrated from is now a spectacular light show from the surrounding cosmos and galaxy clusters that are no longer restrained by light pollution; giving it their all and shining with excitement that cannot be contained by the perpetual distance of space. My bare feet step onto the grassy field, crunching with an infinitesimal sound on the dew ridden blades that only the animals of the forest can hear. The crickets become hushed in response to my noises. Clouds that look like a paint stroke against the night sky are taken by the wind, revealing the moon man who gives his nod of approval.

The Paintbrush's Forgiveness

Devra Beebe

The stroke of a paintbrush, delicate and soft, yet bristly and rigid. It requires so little momentum that the user's muscles blend into one with the movement, growing to endorse a subconscious, habitual drive. Causing the brain to transcend into a whirl of euphoria that empties the user's mind of dilemmas, offering a mercy of momentary peace. Blessing one's soul and mind with a cleanse by whistling a silent lullaby capable of soothing the roughest and most troubled thoughts. This is thanks to the brush's ability to absorb and comprehend a human's frustration far better than humans themselves. They achieve this grounding by making themselves vulnerable because they understand human's innate requisite for control. By making themselves gullible to a human's creativity, they enable the human mind to feel empowered, to finally allow a person to utilize that innate yearning and create something while in a mindset of pure bliss and natural instinct. Unleashing a human's true spiritual nature, the bad and the good, while simultaneously being forgiving to mistakes, as it can be reversed by yet another stroke. Allowing one person to have the ability to construct whatever they please without the interference of internal or external forces or the judgment of the mortal mind. A factor that not many individuals, especially those with underdeveloped maturity, do not possess. So, to finally obtain that inherent desire, one is left feeling something that many, if not all, wish for. Which is, to belong.

The Protector

Cora Aldridge

Glass shattered against the ashy brick wall. Piper ducked quickly to grab her vulnerable baby brother. She grasped the boy, feeling his warm tears drip down the soft tissue that made up her chest. They hid in a dark room. The floors were greasy black and slick in spots from whatever her mother had been cooking up in the back room. The air was dank, musty, and smelled like stale chemical fire. The curtains over the windows held all light and warmth captive. Piper caressed her brother's head just down the center where the patches of hair had begun to grow. She smothered the baby with herself, out of fear, out of love, guarding him with her life. She held him in her lap, her legs crossed to cradle him. Drops of blood fell to the ground underneath them from the shattered glass. The blood pooled and once heavy enough spilt over onto the ground. The baby's fragile body shook while his bottom lip strained itself while he cried. His tiny hands clutched Piper's shirt. He flailed his arms out of desperation and ignorance. Piper gripped his little hand in hers. "I know you're not old enough to understand this, baby, but she really is getting better," Piper whispered softly in his ear.

Floor of All Floors

Madison Boyd

It's a dusty brown carpet, worn and stained. It's an off-beige mop, one stomped and grazed. It's covered and bare, full with emptiness. There's art in the corner by the door, art seeping across the floor. Paint stains, makeup stains, everyday adding on to the mess. The slightly warped pull towards the middle, the tight and bursting seams towards the walls. Two dressers, on top lay. Two sisters, on top play. There's a crunch when you step on the paint, a swish when you drag your feet as you rush out and away. It carries lots of weights, it has for, probably, decades. Things can never hide when they try to sneak, the floor itself loves to squeak. The weak spot towards the left groans when stepped on, but that "spot" is more the whole left side. It's well worn, well torn. But it's the floor of my room. It's there when I need support, or structure, or a place to sit, or sit things on. It's got oranges, greens, and blues speckled all over, but it's still the same — mostly — beige carpet I grew up with. It's been used for years by all my siblings. But everyday no matter what time I come home, it's still dusty brown, used, old, squeaky, torn, and stained. It holds my perfume, my mother's, my sisters', and even my brother's cologne. And it always is, and always will be, my favorite place to come to, to love, and to call my home.

Ink and Paper

Eli Sanders

As I sat in class, thumbing through the weathered pages of my book, all I heard was the scribbling of pencils, like a chorus of shuffling feet. The book was as old as time and seemed to fall apart when I held it, but the stories and knowledge it conveyed never ceased to amaze me. The book smelled like mildew and old people. The way the words danced across the pages was mesmerizing. At least a hundred people had read this book before me: the stains, tears, and scribbles telling a story of each. The book was written as if it were told by my grandfather, with a wise and sarcastic undertone. The way the story was told really made me feel as though I were really there in the scenes. The damp scent of the pages was one I knew all too well. All the best books were the old, beaten, and weathered ones. When I turned each page and heard the flap that always accompanied, I knew that a new smell was imminent: it would never be completely different but just enough that each was unique. The turning of a new page always brought the possibility of a new papercut, another feeling that I knew too well. When I read my book I was always fascinated by how it was different every time I opened that leather binding, I never knew what I was in for.

Late Night

Dakota Stone

Rain from the late night sky fell on the car's windshield as we pulled into the driveway. The sound of country music played through the speakers as the light from headlights touched the house. The sound of music stopped as the humming of the engine went silent. Four doors opened as six people emerged from the car with a pitbull. Four of us were kids. My father and my half-sister were the other two, both adults. My father had been drinking. He knocked on the door and my grandma opened the door, irritated. My father and my grandma started arguing. Grandma sounded troubled. With the sound of the arguing and thunder cracking through the sky, my young heart started to race as fear arose in me. Suddenly, my grandma went inside and closed the door with a slight slam, as if she was mad but didn't want to startle us kids. My half-sister and father argued for a few moments then we all went inside, including the dog.

All of a sudden my grandma chased my father out of the house with a knife yelling, "I told you not to bring that dog in this house again!" Moments after we went in. My father and half-sister ran out the door with us kids and the dog following. We all ran through the wet gravel to the car and drove down the driveway as my grandma watched the bright headlights disappear from her porch. For me every rainy night is a reminder of this.



"JUPITER" BY SHAY HIDER

INFORMATIONAL ESSAY

Gender Inequality in the World of Sports

Hannah Yoon

As a female athlete competing in many sports, the issue of gender inequality has a direct, negative impact on me. I am a soccer player, a cross country runner, and a track runner who has seen the poor treatment and discrimination towards women every day. Because coaches care more about guys, we get less recognition and get very little interest in our sports. Gender inequality has always been a very controversial issue, yet it is still unsolved in the world of sports. Although there is progress in minimizing the funding gap, it is not sufficient enough to solve this prominent issue. Women have faced inequality throughout the world of sports as their funding is insufficient compared to men, there is inadequate media coverage of women's sports, and stereotypes affect the perception of female athletes.

Female athletes have faced many hardships throughout their careers in sports as there is an immense gender pay gap. During March Madness 2021, I saw a viral Tik Tok that drew many viewers' attention because it was shocking. There was one stack of dumbbells in the women's weight room; however, in the men's weight room, an entire room was filled with weights and benches (Fitzsimons). As the views got higher and higher, researchers saw this situation, and a few people were hired to investigate the difference between men's and women's funding and inequality (Diaz). NCAA had been funding men's Division I sports 2x more than women's Division I sports (Diaz). Athletes began to realize how much money they were losing and spoke out, for the NCAA annual revenue was \$1 billion, showing that they had more than enough for another weight room ("Finances"). Women are undervalued and deserve better funding in their careers along with better media coverage.

Inequitable media coverage of women's sports has a direct impact on many women's teams across the world with reduced funding and attention. According to the University of Minnesota, "forty percent of all sports participants are female, yet women's sports receive only 4% of all sports media coverage" ("Multimedia"). Women barely get media coverage, therefore, viewing participation is very low as media attracts viewers' attention and increases interaction with the sport ("Media Coverage and Representation"). Furthermore, Cheryl Cooky, a professor at USC who specializes in gender inequality, claims that there is more excitement for women's sports when media coverage is more widespread (Springer). As an athlete who watches college and professional sports, if more people could see more women's coverage even at high schools, more people would turnout to games. Having more consistent and overall media coverage is a solution that could very well impact women's sports past the NCAA and end the discrimination against women.

Stereotypes are another big issue in women's sports as it affects the way people view women in sports, resulting in a decrease of women athletes around the world ("Media Coverage and Representation"). When news stations cover women's sports, they mainly focus on femininity and attractiveness ("Media Coverage and Representation"). Around 14% of negative comments on social media were researched to be sexualized comments ("Media Coverage and Representation"). For comparison, men's media includes words such as strong, dominant, and fast; however, women's media contains words like married, older, and aged ("Media Coverage and Representation"). It has led many girls to develop body image issues, eating disorders, and depression (Wartel). Many of my fellow female athletes have developed eating disorders and lost confidence because of individuals and coaches who sexualized them and believed they didn't have what it took only because of their gender. "By age 14, many girls are dropping out of sports at two times the rate of boys" ("Do you Know the Factors"). Affecting athletes all over the world, research and evidence point out the progression in which women are stereotyped daily.

In order for sports to become more enjoyable and be accessible to me, people need to recognize and change the inequality that we face every day. I am surrounded by so many talented female athletes who deserve better because they are so influential and powerful. Gender should not be a factor of discrimination as women are strong and can dominate the world of sports.

Racial Inequality in Education in America

Noah Ben Turvey

The impact of racial inequality on the lives of minorities can scarcely be overstated. One area of life in which racial minorities do not have the same opportunities as other Americans is education. As a student myself, it is important to me that everyone has equal access to education because it is the gateway to many pathways to success in life. People of color often do not receive the full benefits of education because they do not have the same quality of primary education or the same access to higher education as other Americans; however, the government and the people can work together to help minorities get the education they deserve.

Not everyone has equal access to quality public primary education, and racial minorities are disproportionately affected by this issue. People of color often face discrimination in school discipline, as their punishments tend to be harsher and more frequent than non-minority classmates (Minority Access to Education in the United States). Black and Hispanic children are 18% more likely to be suspended than white children (Racial Disparities in Education and the Role of Government). Minority students, on average, do not have the same quality of classes and college preparation in their schools, often due to poverty, and they have less access to college prep classes like Calculus, Physics, and Advanced Placement classes (K-12 Education). This is not only unfair to a large part of the American population, but is also a huge waste of intellectual talent. Brilliant young minds with so much to offer the world are limited in their education, and these limitations mean they will not be fully able to share their ideas and perspectives.

People of color do not enjoy the fruits of higher education as easily as other people. Historically, minorities are much more likely to feel the pressure of poverty keeping them from attending college and trade schools (Sanchez). They may have trouble affording college, and they are more likely to work a job in addition to their classes (Sanchez). Minority students are more likely to be required to take remedial classes because of their poor primary education (Sanchez). These classes offer no credit and are simply a drain on time and money (Sanchez). Despite these difficulties, minority students continue to persevere and complete college, but there is more that can be done to help others who also look to get a better education. A diverse college is important to me as I start my college search, because a varied student body reflects a college that is devoted to making all of their students feel welcome and are thriving.

Many policies can be put in place to help underprivileged people get a better education. One of these is increasing the affordability of colleges and the oversight of their actions (Policies to Ensure Equitable Access to Well-Resourced Colleges and Universities). By increasing the affordability of colleges, they can become accessible to people who previously were not able to go for financial reasons (Policies to Ensure). Changes to boost opportunities for minority students should start at the elementary-school level (Want to Close Racial Gaps, Advance Equity? Try These Policy Ideas: Institute for Policy Research - Northwestern University). Minority children should not face harsher discipline than others because of their race. More fair disciplinary policies in primary school can lower these discriminatory outcomes (Want to Close). I believe that underprivileged people and people of color gaining more power will make America a better place for all ethnicities, as broader representation of people from all backgrounds creates a better and more nuanced public society.

A lack of quality primary schools and discrimination in college are ways people of color are not given equal access to education. As a student, I have learned the value of a rigorous education, and with the cooperation of the government and school systems, a more fair and equitable system can be made for all people regardless of race and class.

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The Cause and Management of Procrastination

Joseph Wang

Time is of invaluable importance in every aspect of our lives regardless of occupation or career, making good time management and delegation skills a deciding factor for how successful a person is. The general well-being of a person is impacted tremendously based on small and minute decisions made daily. Studies have shown that 70-95% of undergraduate college students suffer from problematic and recurring procrastination, while over 20% of adults suffer from chronic procrastination (Badri Gargari, Rahim, et al.). For us seeking to resolve such a widespread and detrimental practice, we must address the fundamental questions of "What is procrastination?", "Why do we procrastinate?", also "How do we combat procrastination?" These questions will be further elaborated on in the following essay.

Procrastination occurs when one willfully puts off the task at hand, engaging in trivial, pleasurable, and completely unnecessary activities concerning their task. The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of procrastination is: "to put off intentionally and habitually." Contrary to popular belief, procrastination is not simply being lazy or slow, it involves one who knows the consequences of delay, yet still engages in it. Numerous studies were conducted to discover the reason for and the psychology behind procrastination, some of which we will explore further ahead.

Procrastination results not only from laziness or sluggishness but also reflects the lack of self-regulation and discipline in the procrastinator. Researchers concluded that procrastinators tend to engage in self-defeating actions, arriving at that through either a positive or negative motive (Jaffe, Eric). A study on how moods and emotions with a positive motive induce procrastination was conducted by assigning students a research assignment, then periodically collecting data on their levels of procrastination and emotional state. As the pressure increased, students exhibited higher levels of engagement in pleasant and divergent activities which corresponded to higher levels of guilt, indicating that though they procrastinated, they entertained dread concerning their assignments. They understand that procrastination is detrimental to them, yet the diversions appealing to their moods and emotions are too much to resist (Jaffe, Eric). The negative motives which induce procrastination result from personal apprehensions, such as fear of failure or lack of ability. One example of this is that students use procrastination to generate the excuse of "I don't have enough time" instead of admitting to their lack of ability, especially when the task is daunting (Voge, Dominic J.). All these negative qualities that go into procrastination have caused it to be called the "quintessential" breakdown of self-control (Jaffe, Eric).

Overall, researchers generally conclude that the primary reason for procrastination lies in a lack of discipline, people doing what they feel like doing instead of what they should do.

Whatever the reason, procrastination of any form is nevertheless harmful and detrimental to ourselves and society, with whom we interact. The first step towards eliminating procrastination is through people acquiring insight into procrastination and how it affects them, which creates a defense against the feeling of helplessness and provides awareness whenever they are tempted to procrastinate (Voge, Dominic J.). Once procrastination is realized, one must proactively take steps to decrease its number of occurrences. Since procrastination has been shown in the previous paragraph to worsen when the stress of a task increases, one method to improve time management is to divide the task into smaller tasks, focusing on one task at a time, and emphasize the satisfaction derived from accomplishing those tasks (Voge, Dominic J.). There are instances when tasks are long and tedious, requiring long-term motivation for one to overcome the tedium without succumbing to procrastination. Writing down positively influenced motives for completing a task is vital, as well as defining goals you want to achieve through completing your task (Voge, Dominic J.).

Benjamin Franklin once said: "You may delay, but time will not." This simple quote elegantly sums up the importance of responsible time management as well as the fearful and unforgiving consequences of procrastination. For us to live impactfully and to our fullest potential, we must purge procrastination from our lives, developing self-control through positive motives and well-defined goals. We must motivate ourselves wherever we feel tempted to procrastinate to think of our goals, of our reason for accomplishing our task. To conclude, the key to eliminating procrastination lies not only in our ability to exercise discipline but for us to be focused and driven, well-informed, and responsible for ourselves, to be able to live our lives to the fullest.

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The Unjust Treatment of Transgender Women of Color

Addy Brown

Living in a conservative state, I do not come across many openly transgender women. The very few I have met have spoken of the troubles they face receiving care and respect, or how they have been harassed. One kind girl I met several months ago, whose name I will keep to myself, expressed the frustration she feels because teachers refuse to acknowledge her identity and always use the wrong name. These experiences are not exclusive to Oklahoma; it is happening all over the world. My transgender friends live knowing violence against trans and other LGBTQIA+ people is on the rise, especially among queer people of color. Violent crime against marginalized groups such as these and general mistreatment of them is a significant problem. The LGBTQIA+ community, people of color, and women can often become targets of violence, hate, and discrimination for doing nothing more than exist. While the mistreatment of these groups may seem like separate issues, it overlaps in a crucial area: transgender women of color. The intersectionality of sexism, transphobia, and racism has led to widespread violence and discrimination against transgender women of color.

A problem of many decades, sexism is nothing new, nor is violence and inequality due to it. An unfortunate amount of women are subject to sexual violence, and this includes transgender women. The Office for Victims of Crime reports, “one in two transgender individuals are sexually abused or assaulted at some point in their lives. Some reports estimate that transgender survivors may experience rates of sexual assault up to 66 percent, often coupled with physical assaults or abuse” (“Sexual Assault: The Numbers | Responding to Transgender Victims of Sexual Assault”). This indicates that being transgender increases the likelihood of being a victim of horrendous violence. In addition, the NCAVP’s 2009 report states that 50 percent of people who died in violent hate crimes, such as sexual assault, were transgender women (“Sexual Assault: The Numbers | Responding to Transgender Victims of Sexual Assault”). Transgender women are more likely to be attacked than cisgender women, and this is in part caused by socially acceptable intolerance of trans people that is too often supported by legislation.

In recent years an onslaught of anti-transgender bills have been passed. In 2016, 175+ anti-LGBTQ bills were filed, 44 of which were anti-trans (Anti-Trans Legislation Spreads Nationwide, Bills Targeting Transgender Children Surge). These bills involved healthcare, anti-trans marriage, undoing current non-discrimination provisions, invasive inspections to confirm biological sex, and more (Anti-Trans Legislation Spreads Nationwide, Bills Targeting Transgender Children Surge). These anti-trans bills promote ignorance and intolerance. In 2021, “more than 100 anti-trans bills have been proposed this year

— the most in U.S. history — by conservative lawmakers. Thirteen of those bills have passed” (Natividad). In addition, 2021 became the deadliest year for transgender people with 29 trans and gender non-conforming people killed by late June, breaking the 2020 record of 13 people killed by that same time (Natividad). Eric Stanley, an expert on queer and trans social movements, said “we must also be clear that Black, brown, and Indigenous trans women continue to be hyper-impacted by these and other forms of violence.” There is a direct correlation between anti-transgender legislation and the murder of transgender people, especially transgender women of color.

A person's race is a defining factor in transgender brutality. Of the 57 transgender murders from 2021, 40+ were Black, brown, or indigenous transgender women (Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021). It is even more shocking when compared to the number of white trans women murdered: only 4 (Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021). Transgender women also often subject to worse conditions. The NAACP stated “transgender women of color face enormously high rates of homelessness, unemployment, negative health outcomes... unjust treatment when seeking help from law enforcement, and homicide” (Ending Murders of Violence Against Black Transgender Women and Supporting Transgender Communities). One's race is yet another factor in the unjust treatment of transgender women of color.

Violence and discrimination against transgender women of color has been built by pre-existing sexism and racism, as well as a more recently developed transphobia. All the progress the world has made is not nearly enough to keep these people safe. It is not enough to keep my friends safe. Transgender women of color are being murdered at a substantially higher rate than other queer people and it will continue to get worse unless something is changed.



Two Wraps

Abby Marshall

I rolled upward on my blanket. I pushed my tingling hands down into the wet grass below me. I felt the morning dew that had just fallen on each blade, sopping into my handprint. Although I was in a tent, the dew had found a way to reach me. It was spring, but the part of spring that makes you question the weather each morning. Some nights, I would wake up frequently to sweat or possibly rainwater soaking my t-shirt. On nights when it was cold or at least unbearable, we would sleep in a Walmart parking lot somewhere. We brought around two trash bags stuffed with hand-me-down clothes from my wealthy cousin.

It was the summer before sixth grade. We had been homeless for a couple of months now, and we had become professionals. Dad had rented hotel rooms, which was nice until we couldn't afford the \$30 nightly fee. He said he hated being forced to pay for somewhere to sleep every night. He also had control of our money, even while mom was working. It was like she would have to practically advertise and pitch to him to get our necessities.

"Hey mom, where are we going today? I asked, knowing she probably didn't know the details either. "We are going to stay at a campsite for a couple of days", mom said to me without making eye contact, "your dad found a tent on Facebook Marketplace for five dollars." My initial concern was where we would shower, to which dad told me there were showers on the campsite. I didn't want to clean myself outside, but I still "had to do what I had to do" according to dad, so I sucked it up.

As we pulled into the campsite, I noticed it was decent. There were patches of yellow in the green grass. The entrance fee was five dollars, but fifteen dollars to stay overnight. We got to the camp spot and began pitching our tent. After three hours of sitting in the car, lots of vulgar cursing, and my father's "expert mechanical skills", the tent was finally ready.

It was about 8:00 pm, and everyone was starving. Everyone piled into the car, all of us sweaty from the humidity. We drove to Walmart, and Dad ran in while mom stayed with us kids. They were discussing finances outside of the car, saying we needed a meal, but we only had \$15. Mom hunched back into the rusted car, and she could tell by the anxious look on my face that I had overheard their conversation through my cracked window.

"He's going to get wraps. We can't each have our own, so we figured we get a package of two and split them amongst ourselves." How could we possibly split two evenly between five people? I thought to myself. Dad came back with a

full sack explaining, "I just told the sweet old woman our situation at the register. She told me that we could get another pack of wraps on her, and it was awful kind."

We opened the wraps in the backseat. My littlest sister got the smallest portion, but my older younger sister and I were enthralled to have this much for tonight. We snatched our halves, feeling the soft tortilla in our watering mouths. We both took huge bites, and the juices of the perfectly cooked chicken dripped into every morsel. The ranch covered everything, including the bits of vegetables that were diced to be minuscule.

While eating the wrap, I felt gratitude for the first time in months. I had finally remembered that I could still enjoy the little things while my life was in shambles. Not a day goes by when I don't think of this day, and how lucky I truly am compared to others. Not everyone who is homeless gets to eat every day, especially something as filling and fresh as a caesar wrap, and it reminds me to be grateful for every single thing I have. No matter how rich or poor you may be, you will always have more than somebody else.

You Are Not Alone

Megan Janzen

It's. Race. Day. I think as soon as I wake up. I'm a little nervous, and the jitters consume me like fireflies enclosed in a jar, but I'm ready.

But... *Something is off.* I have a bad feeling in my gut. *Just shake it off.* *Everything is fine,* I tell myself. I decide it's just nerves. I try to think reassuring thoughts, but can't shake this weird feeling. It follows me like a shadow. *Something is seriously wrong... what is it?* Before I know it, the day flies by, the race is on, and I'm up next. Then just as fast as it had started, I'm done. My race was okay but nowhere near my best.

The car ride home feels protracted. Dad was especially quiet and even turned off his usual talk radio show. I'm exhausted. I just want to go home and sleep. Before I could get out of the car, Dad had me wait a second. He was crying. *Dad never cries,* I thought, *what is going on here?*

"What's up? Are you okay?" I question.

He paused, looked at me with a grave look on his face and said, "Texa Kite committed suicide last night." I froze. *What?* The world around me stopped. It turned to a fuzzy signal with those 6 words playing on repeat in my head. It doesn't make sense. I just saw her two days ago. *I heard him wrong,* I thought, *she had to have done something.*

I let the news sink in. Tears streamed down my face and sunk into a puddle forming on my t-shirt. The unchanging look on my dad's face told me I heard him right. The words stung like a million bees, piercing a hole through my heart. It's beating so fast it felt like it would shatter my ribs. The only thing I could think to say was "NO!" repeatedly. The tears are a waterfall of sorrow that would never end.

I don't even unpack my bags. They lay in a lifeless heap by my bedroom door. I go straight to my bed in search of some form of comfort, lying feeling hurt and dejected. I curl up and cry. My best friend for over 8 years is gone. Poof. I didn't even say goodbye. I stay there for hours. Used tissues littered my floor like a blanket of snow. Sensing the pain I was in, my dog never left my side. She cuddled up next to me, letting me wrap my arms around her.

I learned tonight your body could physically hurt from sadness. My lungs grew heavier with each gasping breath. My heart sunk in my chest like an anvil falling from the sky. I've never felt more emotionally drained. So many different emotions hit me; some came and went and others stayed like unwanted guests.

I'm enraged at the world for taking my best friend away. Sometimes, I'm mournful, longing for one last hug that I won't get.

"Your grandparents want to go out to dinner," He asked cautiously, "are you feeling up to it?" He studied the floor vigorously, never meeting my eyes.

No. I thought. How could I go out to dinner right now?

"Sure. Can we eat here?" I responded. *How can I say no?*

This marks the end of my sorrow for tonight. I have to put on a smiling face. I told myself I need to keep it together for everyone else. I have to be the strong one yet again.

Fast forward 4 months, and I still hear the same 6 words every day. They are engraved in my brain. Grieving stays with me at all times, but it looks different each day. I never know when it'll hit me. All I know is it is a long process that is nowhere near over yet. The rollercoaster of emotions continues forever.

I have a different view on life now. Some people hide their pain well, while others don't. I try to check in on my friends every once in a while. You never know what someone is going through until you hear their story. From this, I learned one of the most important things to know in life: you are not alone. Reaching out for help is okay and normal. Seeking help doesn't make you weak, it shows you are wise enough to know you need help

A Love Letter

Fabiana Zauzich Libassi

Thousands of miles away, flying towards the new horizons I would soon call home. I would have never thought I would be where I am today. I– that little girl who flew toward new horizons– was bullied because she had short hair and looked like a *maschietto*. I was divided by two nationalities that would never make me completely one or another in the eyes of *mi gente*: divided by the way my words sounded when they danced their way off my tongue; divided by the way my moody skin color looked, depending on the forecast: sometimes too milky, sometimes too much coffee to be the perfect cappuccino. My countries' roots run within my bloodstream, with culture and passion engraved in my erythrocytes: little steps on an immense ladder that, with each breath, grows larger.

Waking up to the realization that my skin and bones were one, my eyes sunk into the craters of my skull and my brittle, tangled hair like shriveled straw. It was nothing compared to what my eyes witnessed when driving by the highway. Little mourning sounds from mothers unable to feed their perishing children tormented the route as the wind spoke tales of once-upon-a-time happiness. Sometimes, words would be scarce, unable to escape the spines in my throat; sometimes, routine made everything an invisible poison as tears came down my face.

Since I had lived 6 years in Italy and 6 years in Venezuela, respectively, I realized Venezuela scarred me the most with its hardships compared to Italy. While living in Venezuela, my family decided to come to the United States to pursue “the American Dream.” The military at the airport restricted our flight because the president, Nicolas Maduro, was setting unexistent “rules and clauses” in the constitution due to the dictatorship in the country. Two days later, they let us travel. A couple of hours later and thousands of miles away, flying towards the new horizons I would soon call home, I arrived in Oklahoma. Sounding almost sacred, “Oklahoma” felt like a special word to say.

At the time, kids at school were ashamed of speaking Spanish; I had no way of communicating because I knew few words. I will never forget the first conversation I had with an American girl my age– through Google Translate on my phone.

“Hi! Are you new?”

“Hi! Yes, I am new.”

“Awesome, we can be friends!”

“I would love to! Oh, *can ai jav yur fon nomber, plis.. Teink yu,*” I said as I proceeded to speak the little English I had proudly learned during my first week of school.

As a non-English speaker, I felt like the most special person to have an American friend. I felt privileged to call the girl with blue eyes and blonde hair my friend.

I would have never imagined I would have been completely fluent in English after 7 months of learning it; I never imagined I would be walking around using lockers, wearing regular clothes instead of uniforms, and feeling like the main character in High School, like in the movies. I would have never imagined I wouldn't be in the famine's cave, that children like me would be okay and their mothers would be sane. It is a pure blessing to have the opportunity to say I love this country and that I am thankful for the opportunities it has given me. Without my parents' dedication and pursuit of a better future for us, this would not have been possible. To call Oklahoma my home, the place that received me with open arms, the one that embraced me and impulsed me into being someone I could never be in Venezuela. But, from time to time, when the sunset is almost touching the edge of the earth and the heat feels like damp glitter around my body, right then, invading memories carry a wave of nostalgia, bringing flashbacks of these sometimes-forgotten events.

I, the proud daughter of Italian-Venezuelan immigrants, would have never thought I would be where I am today. I felt like I never physically belonged where I came from, though I have an inevitable love for those countries: I am one with them and, perhaps, they didn't know any better. I cannot fit the scope of this story into this love letter, but: thank you, Oklahoma, for embracing me, an alien child, when my own countries thought of me as such. You will always have a special place in my heart, my sweet Oklahoma.

Yours truly, Fabiana.

They Didn't Like Me

Ashton Burr

When I first moved to Taloga, I was excited because I was going to be somewhat closer to my Nana and Papa, who both live in Oakwood. I was excited because I never really got to hang out with them because of how far away I lived. One Saturday morning I asked my dad if we could go see them, so we went to Oakwood to talk and eat dinner with them. I live out in the country close to where my grandparents lived. Both of them died about four years ago so no one lived there anymore. One day my dad got this call from my Nana and Papa. They were having trouble paying their bills because my Papa got laid off from his job, and he had trouble finding a new job near Oakwood. Since my grandad gave the property to my dad, my Nana and Papa were wondering if they could live there. My dad said he didn't see the harm, and eventually we helped them move in. I was really excited because I could just walk down the street to see them. One day, while my Papa was working at his new job, I went to go see my Nana. She needed to get groceries and asked if I wanted to go. I told her I couldn't go because I had to work cattle with my dad. I said my goodbyes, and I gave her a big hug, which I'm glad I did. Around 7:30 were done with the cattle, and my dad's phone rang. When he answered, I knew something was wrong. He started to cry and said we need to go right now. I knew something terrible had happened.

We went to papa's house and picked him up, and he was crying. I didn't say anything for a little while because everybody was crying, so I waited several minutes before I asked what was wrong. Papa grabbed my hand and told me everything is going to be okay. When he said that, my heart sank to the bottom of my stomach. I asked where Nana was, and he told me words I will never forget: Nana was in a car wreck with a semi-truck. That's when I lost it.

We immediately started driving to Oklahoma City because that's where the emergency helicopter took her. On our way there, we saw my Nana's truck destroyed on the side of the road. I could not stop crying. It was terrible.

We finally made it to the hospital in Oklahoma City, and around 1:30 in the morning the doctor came out and told my family that her insides were badly injured, and she's probably not going to make it. The only thing keeping her alive was the machine that was hooked up to her. My cousins and I didn't know any of this until the next morning when we went back to the hospital, and all my aunts and uncles were standing around waiting for my dad and papa. The doctor came out and said it was time to say our goodbyes. I was fixing to go with everyone else to say my goodbyes until my dad pulled me aside.

“Ashton, I don't want you to see your Nana like this. Just remember all the good memories you had with her.”

I ran towards them trying to go see one last time to tell her how much I loved her, how much fun she was, how I'm going to miss her... but they didn't let me.

The Thing About Fireworks

Addyson Harmon

Fireworks. It is the same for almost every single book or movie character. She finds herself in a situation so complete and surreal that she is taken by the moment and indulges in the kiss of a lifetime. Without fail, the main character's kiss is stunning, her heart hammering melodically in her chest, her head flying in the clouds. This is what a first kiss is supposed to be like. It would be my fate, right? The main character will always feel the fireworks explode inside of her as the kiss happens, that moment where suddenly nothing but the lips she is pressed into matters. I was waiting for my fireworks. My first kiss would be epic and drastically memorable, I was sure of it! Eventually, my first kiss did come. I was certainly right about part of my presumption. It is definitely a moment that I will always remember, whether I like it or not.

It was a day in late October, breezy, but not too cold. This day, my boyfriend and I were at his house, our second "hang out". Our relationship was two days old at the time, and we'd only begun to get to know one another two weeks prior. I should have expected a turn for the worse in the relationship from the very beginning. It was a relationship that began with a text message from him late at night, and my wishing and hoping for a novel worthy romance was a great deal as to why I said yes. Then he did it: he dropped the "L" word. I do not mean loser or LEGO even. I speak of the word: LOVE. I believe in love wholeheartedly, that it is a great emotion that comes over everyone, a blind and deaf miracle that does not choose favorites. I believe in slow-burn and rapid love. I do not, however, believe in love in the first sixteen minutes of a relationship. That was my first hint, my first moment of "Crud, what mess have I gotten myself into? How deep is this hole, and can I dig myself out?". The funny thing about holes is that you cannot dig your way out; all such a strenuous activity would do is bury you deeper. And so, two days later, my hole grew.

His mother was a kind woman, whom I was stressed to meet in the beginning for fear of messing up the entire encounter, but she and I spoke lightly. His older sister also was there for a time. She promptly left for her room to take a nap.

He and I sat on the couch, watching movies and snuggling. From the wind outside, my hair was already a mess. He said nothing of it, staring too intently at me. Of course, this is supposed to be a sweet thing, but I found it more creepy than endearing. This should have been my second hint to call for someone to help me out of my hole.

During the second movie, he kissed my forehead, which was odd to me, because I was fairly sure that it was not supposed to make me slightly sick to my stomach for a person to show me such affection. Hint three. Yet I said nothing, and I kissed his cheek once, trying to even my internal organs and tell them that this was a good thing. Perhaps I should have let my digestive system do the thinking rather than my brain. It knew what was going on long before my brain did.

That was when he did the next worst thing: he told me that he should have kissed me during the first movie. Maybe I am caught up in romantic novels, but not once has a guy said that he should have kissed someone and the situation ended well. Hint four. At this point, I was not sure what I wanted. I had thought what I wanted was a caring and affectionate boyfriend to share my first kiss with, but I was beginning to doubt.

When I couldn't stand watching movies for another second, we went outside. I began pointing out the trees that he had, calling them by their common names, for I have an affinity for trees. I felt better then with the safeguard of the trees. I could talk, and it was more like we were buddies. I liked it that way, if only it could have just been that.

We found our way to his swing set. I wish I was making this up, but-alas-I am not. He asked me where I would like to have my first kiss. Hint five! I shrugged, increasing in tension, for this was not exactly the buildup that I was looking for to my kiss. He sat next to me and did it, pressed his lips to mine without waiting to see if I was thinking the same thing.

I've never been advanced at clearing my mind, not when I ought to. Thoughts of lunch bounce in my head during church, I think of books while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. I thought that kissing might be different, but I was wrong. My thoughts flew. Most of them were along the lines of oh crud!, but there were also thoughts of how improper it felt. What was I supposed to do? Sit there and let him do this? He was sucking on my lips, which was dreadfully odd and rather uncanny to me. It went on for too long, which tends to happen when I get to thinking; I lose track of normal time, and only the time in my brain still goes on. I could not shake the feeling that his mother was watching us kiss there, which revolted me even more. My guilt was simply imminent with the vulnerability of affection.

The kiss ended when I realized that I had been equipped with the ability to stop it at any time, and silence proceeded. Neither of us said a word until I mouthed a slow and unsure, "woah". That was my great speech just after my first kiss, which was not "woah" so much as "oh" with some great disappointment. Just when I thought that the fates could not be any less on my

team, my boyfriend hit me with “I love you” for the second time, and I rejected it for the second time. It was then that I realized the missing thing:

There had been no fireworks.

Hint six.

We sat until his mother brought us in to eat pizza, which was delicious, and we communicated obscurities, the things that no one truly cared about. We smiled and chatted, and my father picked me up after. The kiss was still fresh on my brain, and he laughed when he heard the disappointment in my voice as I mentioned it.

I had dug a hole, and I wanted out of it.

The next day, I sent my boyfriend a message informing him of our breakup.

If there were no fireworks, I wanted no part in kissing. Call me obsessed with the fictional perfection of books, but it was what I wanted, and I still do to this day. Even now, a great deal of time after these events, my parents still jab at me for going on about how great kissing would be and how unenthusiastic I was after trying it for the first time. I chalk up my first kiss to a learning experience. There is hope though! From mistakes come new attempts and better results, so when the fireworks find me, I will be able to say my “I told you so”. Until then, I continue my search, ready to glow like the Fourth of July sky with explosive fireworks.

My First International Extemporaneous Speech

Harini Senthil

My hand hovered over the plain white envelope as my eyes darted around my surroundings. My competitors seemed at ease and confident; how could I ever emulate such calmness? The girl on my right in the lavender pantsuit was actually smiling with delight. I concluded, she probably knows what she's doing here.

Looking back, there was no real reason for me to be so nervous. My hard earned first place medal definitely illustrates that. However, the first time to try anything is inevitably accompanied by some apprehension and anxiety. Additionally, public speaking evokes a strong sense of panic and fear for most people. While I relish every opportunity to present in front of an audience nowadays, I couldn't say the same for my younger self competing in international extemporaneous speaking.

In short, international extemporaneous speaking is a competitive event at debate tournaments. Competitors pick five questions about current international events. These questions are typed on small slips of paper and placed in a large envelope. Each competitor "draws" five slips out of the envelope at extemporaneous draw. Within thirty minutes, each student chooses one of these questions to write a seven minute speech about. The speech must be completely memorized and no notes or reference materials are allowed in the competition room.

The debate coach who organized extemporaneous draw walked quickly from table to table and checked that we had the right envelopes. I sighed in relief as she reached my table and confirmed everything was set up properly.

She returned to the podium and announced, "We'll start draw in exactly one minute!" The fun, relaxed mood had disappeared; you could cut the tension in the room with a knife. Everyone was paying close attention as she set up her phone timer.

"10... 9... 8... 7... 6...5... 4... 3... 2... 1," she counted down loudly without glancing up from her phone. She exclaimed, "Draw begins now! Remember to bring your question slips to the competition room for the judges." This was the moment that would determine the trajectory of my entire future in speech and debate. I took a deep breath and prepared myself for whatever came next.

I quickly rummaged through the envelope's contents, searching for the perfect five slips of paper to pull out. "Crunch! Crunch!," the cacophony of

crinkling paper filled the room. The paper couldn't be too long; a lengthy topic would surely be difficult to write about. I weighed the merits of each paper slip as I carefully drew it out of the envelope.

At the end, questions #5, #12, #14, #17, and #21 stood before me. I agonized over the possible choices compared to my knowledge of foreign policy. I regretted not scrolling through BBC World while waiting for draw to begin. Well, this isn't the time for regrets or indecisiveness, I chided myself.

I picked up my five slips and started reading. #5 asked, should countries abandon "zero COVID" policies? I sighed, not another Covid-19 question. It was just too difficult to find current information to support my stance that topic. #12 questioned, can democracy be stabilized in Tunisia? That seemed interesting. There was a slight problem with that; I didn't know where Tunisia was on a map. That definitely ruled this question out. #14 inquired whether the pledges made at COP26 would be enough to prevent a significant rise in global temperatures by 2050. I knew instantly this would be my question. It was specific, recent, and relevant; however, I still had two more questions to read. #17 read, are price controls hindering the Argentinian economy? I deliberated this question; the only way I could write a good speech with this topic is if I was in AP Macroeconomics. #21 asked, how can Japan increase foreign investment in its economy? It wasn't a terrible question, but I really liked #14.

"I'll choose question #14," I informed the coach. She nodded and replied, "Don't forget to turn the slip in to the judges." I shoved the remaining questions back into the envelope for the next person to draw.

I sprinted back to the table with my question and a smile on my face. International extemporaneous speaking may seem hard, but I was determined to persevere in this form of competition. After all, I don't consider myself a normal teenager; I enjoy contemplating foreign policy decisions at 7:30 on a Saturday morning.



"IN FOCUS" BY GRACEN RIPPERGER

POETRY

Black Mama's Heaven

Nehemiah Lapsley

The hour will come
when our mother's tears
won't submerge the streets
because of the
 blood
from the cyclamens
 that they grew for nine months
 and watched blossom for sixteen years
 now only to have that same cyclamen's last petal
to sorrowfully
 wither away within their arms
while the camera flashes within their mind, showing the slowly opening,
glimmering, ant-like eyes

of their baby
to the slowly closing, darkened-out, elephant like eyes
 of their sixteen year old son
 as the crimson-colored blood from their child's chest
covers her arms and bosom
 as their last tear falls onto the wilting cyclamen
 like nonexistent rain
 with the false hope
 that it will bring their baby seed back

The World of Literature

Addisyn Miller

All books have a story.
Behind the first thought, the initial impression, there's a memory
Calling you back to a time when you first
Dove into those words.
Escaping, I return there.
First, I go to a house, one with rose covered walls.
Greeting the familiar characters, I am in the Blue Ghost.
How many times did I read that story?
I could never count.
Jumping forward a few years,
Kids chatter around me, but I am
Lost in the past.
Many stories of the slowly fading history of the 1940s
Now call my name.
Open in my hands is Torn Thread, a
Painfully powerful account of a
Quite normal woman, caught in the midst of the
Reign of Hitler.
Soon, I have moved past this era, or should I say before?
To London I have traveled
Upon the throne is Queen
Victoria. Yet,
Within the bustling city is the downworld, only visible with magical
X-Ray vision. There I find Tessa Gray and company.
Yes, I am in the Infernal Devices series.
Zooming by, there is my life in these pages.

Forgotten

Kayleigh Weare

Forgotten in a store, I was used to it,
Forgotten at the mall, I was used to it.
Forgotten for a trip, but it's okay. I'm used to it.
Forgotten right in front of you.

Sometimes I wonder what I am doing wrong,
How I manage to flicker through everyone's vision.
I am forgotten all the time; I am left behind in my own space.
I feel alone.
And when someone does see me, I run, because I'm just so used to it.

But I tried, didn't I?
I try to be seen, and yet still nothing.
I tried talking, yet words stuck to my mouth
like some sweet honey I didn't want to leave my tongue.
I tried, but I still ended up forgotten and I don't know how to fix it.

Because I want to try so bad, but my mind is keeping me locked to my feet,
forever planted on the floor.
Never moving closer, never chasing after the other steps before me.
It's almost like...
even I'm forgetting myself.

But it's okay, I'll get used to it.

Forging

Isaiah Ross

Annealing till' it is red-hot and easy to
Bend into a shape.
Craft the most desirable shape: a sword, a war ax, maybe even a claymore.
Do with it, whatever you please.
Engrave your name onto the blade to show that it is yours.
Forge the path to your legacy swinging strong and precise .
Grab the hilt and admire your work, then find the flaws and erase them.
Hold your tools and light the forge with your passion once more.
Ignite hearts of fire and steel,
Jagged blades that tear up cloth.
Kids with their blades of wood and plastic dream to hold these swords.
Lashing and cutting, these blades swing with grace.
Masters of this forging know where and when to hit the hammer.
New swords glisten,
Old swords rust all the same, and in the end they all share a
Purpose to win battles, to show honor and grace. Though they all start as a
red-hot blade
 that must be
Quenched with oil or water. They all take a new shape, a
Rapier, a sword for piercing armor, now a symbol of wealth.
Schwifter the blades of the desert pirates often confused with a cutlass. A
Tanto, a shorter kattana for simpler
Useage concealed in the shadows and ready to strike.
Vermiculite, a good material for annealing as it speeds up the process due to its
conductivity.
Whitesmiths, the more artistic counterpart of the blacksmith, chisel the beautiful
designs
 into the blade.
Xanthic in color, red-hot metals are.
Yelling and shouting as the hammer swings shaping the metal into a shape
perhaps it's
Zirconium, iron, silver, maybe even gold in the end will form something
beautiful.

Anastasius Overthrown

Sierra Johnson

Anastasius is beautiful- the true definition of it.
Even the most perfect phenomena couldn't overthrow his crown.

A sunset peaking through the mountain's crevices
The smell of a home-cooked meal on a cold winter day
The crackling sound of a fireplace
The peaceful calm as a thunderstorm evolves into a rainbow
The first sip of a warm cup of coffee in the morning
The peace you get in your favorite place
The caress of sunlight warming your face.
None of these events compare to his beauty

Rumor has it that the gods spent ages creating him
The most precious possessions were used to forge his elegant figure.
Hermes' staff, Caduceus
Zeus' thunderbolts
And even Poseidon's trident

But still, whenever the light trickles through the curtain and enlightens your
eyes,
I'm reminded of the lustrous evergreen forests by the ocean's side

So I know,
If the gods spent ages on Anastasius, they spent eons on you.

My Perfect Painting

Kaytlin Matsko

An image sought out for a split second, yet still renders in my mind over and over again.

A door cracked open ever so slightly. A half inch gap
Separating a finger and a new adventure that will await her on the next page
An enormous window covering the entirety of the wall
Thin curtains come loose and fall gracefully to the side
Sunlight beaming in the girls direction
Directly hitting the center of her eye
She doesn't move an inch, as if in a whole different world
A portal discovered which leads to an unimaginable universe
With magic, wizards, and strange beasts
Her world. The one she wishes to escape to
Enveloped in the novel, she sits frozen
A whitetail deer hearing the slightest crack of a twig in the distance
But still no reaction
Once time moves, the sun will move
Colors will change direction
Ebullient sunlight streaks in her golden hair
And here it is
The image is captured
My beautifully sculpted painting

Our Problem

Brennon Wall

Sometimes It seems as if we are glued to a screen,
We believe too much of what we see on a machine
Just an escape from reality,
is not what it appears to be

Been trapped in the algorithm,
Feeling stuck inside a prism
Why waste your precious time,
When you could go out and live your life

Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram,
It's all a scam
to what goes on in our minds,
This is why our generation is so sad inside.

Cowpoke

Brooks Uhlenhake

Your hat is bent
Your boots spent
Your shirt is ripped
Your jeans faded
You're just a simple ole Cowpoke

The truck is broke
The trailers full
The horses are tired
The knife is dull
The man is now a Cowpoke

He rides day in and day out
He rides until his horses legs give out
He rides till his saddle breaks
He rides till he's out of ropes
He rides with pride as a Cowpoke

His body is sore
His horse is gimp
His truck is broke
His mind is spent
That's just what makes him a Cowpoke

Painted Picture
Amairah Hill

They painted a picture
Of what I should be
But my picture's different
Now what do they think of me

They're all watching now
I'm up for display
You don't like what's been painted do you
Their satisfaction decays

I look at other pictures
Of what i should be instead
But my pictures different
Their images burned in my head

Suck In your stomach
I see you've gained weight
You'll never be attractive
My flaws subjected to hate

I know what you like on us
I see what you like created
But I love my beautiful picture
I will not be you want to be painted

Purple Thistles

Harper Holmberg

The same lust she was enraptured by when the earth
greeted her with the countenance of an
Unperturbed, Paragon of beauty.

I call it a hymn of venus,
The instinct of this carnal heart to let the world pervade her;
Breathe through her meaning and transform her;
To let scars ripple on her body,
Telling tales of fortuity and history;
To let her bones become bare,
Caressed by gusts and tempest.
Let the earth mark her as she did to its
calloused and weathered pelt.

Purple thistles fell from her eyes.
Washing the plethora of death away.

Her skin became diaphanous
as her body became languor.
Blossoming came a white rose
that filled her aurora once more.
You are the flowers to my moon.
My never-ending dream of eternity.

Fading Light

Delaney Grubbs

I stare out into the still summer night
As midnight blue waves crash against the sand
I take in the last of the fading light
And watch as the sun sets behind the land
The night grows darker while I hold my breath
As desolation wraps me in shadows
I feel surrounded by a sudden death
Seconds stand still and time abruptly slows
But as a breeze scatters my emotions
A bright golden sun bursts through darkness
Revealing glittering turquoise oceans
Until I can't feel the burden of stress
As I watch the glow of the sun and sea
I finally realize that I am free



'STRUNG UP, LEFT BEHIND" BY AVAN DOEKSEN

SHORT STORY

The Beginning of June

Scout Haggard

I was a stranger roaming the streets of the town I had lived in all my life. I remember these places, these roads, these trees, but they do not remember me. I am but a shallow memory to my hometown, it had rejected me, buried me beneath its cracked pavement. I walked the desolate street, trying to find some semblance of myself, trying to connect to the world around me once more. I couldn't return home, I'm not sure if I even had a home. A home is supposed to feel warm, and old, comforting, yet exciting. But all I felt was cold and lost, confined, anxious. They told me senior year was when my life would change forever, but I have been changing all this time. So many decisions, so many choices, and none of them mine. I wanted to stop, to drop and cry right here, but this "home" of mine did not accept tears as a form of personal growth, so I just kept walking.

"Juniper!" a distant voice cried out to me and I hesitated, I wasn't ready to acknowledge my own existence quite yet.

"Junnnnne." Only one person ever called me that. I reluctantly turned around to face her. She was the loveliest thing in this rundown town, she beamed like sun through autumn leaves. I always wondered how someone could look so happy and so sad at the same time, a personified oxymoron.

"Auden, what's a girl like you doing out at a time like this?"

"I was looking for you, silly," she laughed. I loved her laugh, I wish she would laugh more often.

"And why is that?" I had secretly hoped she would find her way to me, she was the only one that understood my outlook on things. Even if they were a little outrageous sometimes.

"Does that matter? Can't I just walk with you for a while?"

I nodded, if I was to share my existential crisis with anyone, I'd want it to be her. We walked under the light of old streetlamps. It was sort of romantic if you looked past the grunge of it all.

"What is it that is bothering you this time?" she asked, I could have asked her the same thing, but I knew better than that, she was as mysterious as they came but I assumed it was better off that way.

"I don't want to grow up, I think I would just like to stay this way, walking with you down these old streets forever. Think about it, just you me and

the rats, living the dream." She smiled at that just like I knew she would. She had a way of warming up cold nights, something I had always admired about her.

"Oh, you don't mean that, I know you wish nothing more than to leave this place. You're always talking about how you feel so trapped in Oregon." She still sounded sad, I had hoped my comment would cheer her up, but I had never been the sort of person to spew compassion and make others feel better.

"I only want to find a home, a warm place to experience. My mother always talked about summer in Arizona, how beautiful it all was, she always said June was her favorite month there." I felt a weight develop in my chest as I said the last part, I missed her more than words could express. I saw a bench in front of us, and I asked Aud if she wanted to sit for a while, she stayed silent but nodded her head to say yes. It was late, and the smoke of the city covered the sky. I imagined what the stars would look like right now, how they would have made this moment feel like one out of the movies. My life was not like the movies. I sat and I thought about home and where I could find it. Suddenly, Auden layed her head on my lap and dozed off. She was so beautiful, she was too precious to be locked away in a place like this. We needed to leave, we could find home together, just the two of us. She was the closest thing to home I'd had since my mother left this earth. As we sat there under the buzzing glow of the lamp, I started to wish on the stars that I knew were up above. I heard her murmur and I turned my attention back to her.

"What was that?" She raised her head just enough to be heard.

"You know your mom was right, June is beautiful." I felt myself blush. She was just dreaming, It couldn't have meant what I wanted it to mean.

"You're quite silly, June in Oregon isn't true, June in Oregon is bland." I had hoped we were on the same page and that she wasn't just disoriented.

"Well I love June, I think June is beautiful everywhere." I grinned, the first time in a while actually. I thought to myself how this, this was the feeling I had been looking for. I took the feeling in as she fell back asleep. I liked this feeling. The feeling of home.

The Other Half of Me

Presley Isaacs

Sun shined through the cathedral's stained glass window, tiny particles of dust floating through the air. The sanctuary was empty, unusual considering that it was only three in the afternoon. Timothy really didn't know why he was there, but he had woken up that morning and had the sudden urge to go to the Old Saint Mary's Cathedral, just down the street from where he lived. He canceled the scheduled lunch date with his ex-wife (it was complicated) and dressed in his nicest suit, hair combed back neatly.

Timothy considered himself to be a nice, quiet, and observant guy. He lived in a small loft in a more rural part of San Francisco and worked at a very prestigious law firm downtown. After the divorce, which derived from his wife's claims of "abuse", he started a new life for himself, free from the expectations of his hometown friends. Sure, maybe he was a little lonely every once in a while, but at least he was successful.

Timothy was pulled from his thoughts when he saw something quickly flash in the mirror hanging on the wall. He whipped around, expecting to see a priest or someone, but he seemed to be very much alone. A single chill ran down the back of his spine, raising goosebumps on his tan arms. His leather shoes clicked loudly on the stone as he slowly walked over to the mirror, thinking he surely must be seeing things. But only his reflection stared back at him with wide eyes. Timothy sighed with relief then turned to move away... and stopped.

"I thought I had decided to put on the red shirt today, not the blue..." he thought.

The sound of glass shattering and the sting of a punch connecting with flesh shook him out of his deliberation. Timothy landed on a blood-red carpet, contrasting the stone he was expecting. He had only a split second to register that he was now in a room that looked very much like his childhood bedroom before he was lifted off the ground and tossed against the wall. With no time to register who the attacker was, panicked confusion covered his mind like a blanket. When he finally was able to recover enough to turn around, he was staring at... himself? And it was an odd version of himself indeed. The other man had perfect, straight white teeth and arms that looked like they could break steel. The blanket of confusion hovering over his brain settled further.

Timothy barely managed to stutter out a terrified "Who are you?" before the other man rushed towards him in another obvious attempt to hurt him. Timothy dodged out of the way before he was pummeled yet again. After a couple of minutes of a cat-and-mouse chase, Timothy came to the realization that

the other man was muttering under his breath. As he tried to listen closer, he heard the name of his childhood best friend. Emery Stool. Shocked, Timothy hesitated for a moment, allowing the other version of himself to tackle him and pin him to the carpet.

“How do you know her?” Timothy asked, his words coming out slowly as if drugged.

The man’s eyes glowed with contempt. “We went to elementary with her, don’t you remember? Don’t you remember how you used to torment her? How you used to trip her and call her names?” the other man said in a vicious growl.

Timothy was stunned. What did the man mean? The things he was saying were true, but they had all been fun and games, and Emery had known that. Right?

“But she wasn’t the only one you hurt. What about “pimple face” Garcias? You threatened to beat the shit out of him if he didn’t smoke 10 cigarettes. And right after his dad had just died of lung cancer? You’re a piece of shit. You deserve to have everything you’ve ever done to someone, done to you ten times over, plus more. “

“I-I-I didn’t me-mean to, I-I’m not a b-bad person anym-more.”

The other man snarled and the hate in his eyes was very clear. Timothy didn’t like to think about his past, and there was a reason that he had left his hometown. Because of people like this guy. Constant reminders of how effed up he was. Timothy had never fully felt the weight of what he had done to people, but he was going to. He was definitely going to, and at the hands of himself.

They found the man in the cathedral. He was alone. The man looked to be in his late twenties, but it was hard to tell through the thick case of blood that surrounded his head like a mask. The oddest thing about it all is that there seemed to be no wounds, and it seemed that the blood seeped out like sweat. When they called his family, they seemed indifferent to the news. The only evidence of any violence, was a shattered mirror, now stained red.

Tomorrow

Cathrine Bedford

"Bro!" I can hear Keshawn yelling for me at the end of the hall, as I shuffle through my locker for my basketball shoes for practice. "C'mon Mane we bout to be late for practice!" "AGAIN!" "This is the third time already," Keshawn added while walking up to my locker.

"Whateva dude," I reply this time a little frustrated because my locker won't close. "Plus I don't know why you all worked up you barely get playing time," I say jokingly while pushing the locker shut.

"Igh, Dat ain em tru for real bro,"

"I mean what's the worst dat could happen doe?" I stated.

"SIX LAPS AROUND THE COURT!" The coach scolded us.

"SEE BRO NOW WE GOTTA RUN CAUSE YOU!" Keshawn says with anger that had built up.

"JEVONTE JOHNSON COME HERE NOWW!" The coach's voice rumbles from across the basketball court.

As I walk up, I can see the paperwork and an unknown man standing next to Coach.

"Yes, Coach?" I ask while examining the stranger from the corner of my eye.

"This is the young man I was telling you about," The Coach explains to the stranger.

"Hello, My name is Ryan Webbers from the University of Texas, and I'm pleased to finally meet you." "We noticed your amazing talents here on the court, and we wanted to give you a full ride to The University of Texas." The man explains to me, but I am too shocked to even say anything. After a few minutes of thinking about what to say all I could think is, "THANK YOU SO MUCH"

"You are very welcome; here's my number and business card if you have any questions." The man said while reaching out to give me his business card. As the man shakes Coach's hand and leaves, I can see Keshawn trying to signal me from the corner of my eye.

"Jevonte, I expect the best from you as your Coach." The Coach states while patting my back.

"Yessir," I reply.

"Now go back and get to work"

"Okay Coach," I said while laughing and running back up to Keshawn.

"So what was that all about?"

" I just got a full-ride basketball scholarship to The University of Texas."

" What da Hell dats good doe." "Are you excited?" Keshawn asks excitingly as if he could almost float out of his shoes.

"Yes, What kinda question was dat foo?"

"Mane I'm tellin' you right naa ion even know," Keshawn adds laughing.

"So you coming ova later to play ball?" I ask to make sure I didn't have plans at the same time.

"Yea Jit," Keshawn replies.

The next morning, I take a shower; as I am about to get on the game, I hear yelling and gunshots outside. I run outside to see my friend on the floor trying to hold on to life as long as he can, whereas the other person drove by shooting anything in sight without a care in a world. As I rush to call 911 my friend grabs my hand.

"Keep doing big things. You're getting somewhere to go to college to do what you dream of doing." Keshawn says while clutching his chest where the bullet hit him.

"Bro you know you my brotha, I got you." "The ambulance is on its way," I add to reassure him he'll be alright.

Later that night, I can't sleep. Instead, I'm in my own thoughts thinking of ways to get back at the people who killed my homie. But there is so much on my mind that it's as if I'm trying to swallow a big pill that is stuck in my throat. The memories of all the people that cared about me come crashing down on me like a heavy weight that I can't get off my chest. My coach's words echo in my mind.

" Jevonte I expect the best from you as your Coach." The Coach stated while patting my back.

" I just got a full-ride basketball scholarship at The University of Texas."

" What da Hell dats good doe." "Are you excited?" Keshawn asked excitingly as if he could almost float out of his shoes.

I didn't know that would be the last day I would ever see my best friend, the last words we would say to each other, but I remember what he told me, "Keep doing big things. You're getting somewhere to go to college to do what you dream of doing." Keshawn said while clutching his chest where the bullet hit him at. "I wish that didn't happen to you; you were a real one for real on everythang mane. But, Keshawn, you're the one that helped push me to keep going." You never know if there will be a Tomorrow.

Shadows

Kendall Webb

Ever since I was little, I have always been able to see little shadows in my vision; tall, dark, and slim figures peeking around corners in my peripheral. This was such a common occurrence that I had even given them a name: Shadow People. These Shadow People were always with me, in my closet, behind cracked doors, fleeing from corners when I turned my head, so I had gotten used to them.

It was around 2 a.m., and I was working at a gas station. My eyes were drooping, my head was lolling, and I was on the verge of passing out when I saw a figure. Not a problem at first, of course...until they reached out to me. I jerked awake and watched as they shrunk back in horror almost faster than I could realize what happened. Intrigued, I pretended to fall back asleep, slitting my eyes open just enough to see thin shadowy hands reach out for my face. I was astonished, but what I expected to be a curious graze was a murderous grip. My eyes instantly flew open, my hands instinctively grasping and clawing at my neck, my lungs gasping for breath. The Shadow was partially obscured as the lights flickered on and off. It reached a hand towards my face; its wispy, shadowy fingers turning into deadly claws of terror. I struggled silently as it traced the knife-like finger across my jaw and cut into it. It pulled away and pointed two claws slowly towards my eyes.

Suddenly, a saving grace; the loud DING of the gas station door opening. I jolted awake...awake? I felt the cut along my jaw...nothing. My mind raced as I heard the footsteps of a customer and the chatter of children. I rubbed the shock and tiredness from my eyes, and when I opened them, there was nothing, only normality. No shadows, no figures, just reality. My hands slowly quit trembling as my heart slowly reduced its BPM. Air easily filled my lungs. The customers came up, the kids still giggling, "Will that be all?" My response felt automated, and my voice held no fear. The interaction went on as normal, the family left, and I was once again by myself.

Not long after that, my shift ended, I went home, and I cozied up in my room. My mind was fuzzy, my eyelids sagging over my eyes; I was on the verge of passing out...and then I saw them. Hundreds of them. In every. Single. Corner. They all reached out for me this time. Hundreds of wispy hands deftly turning into solid, shining blades. My eyes opened wide with fear...they were the first thing to go.

I woke up again, but this time in an unfamiliar place. It was dark, so I felt around until I pushed a door open just a crack. Immediately my sight was

flooded with pink and stuffed bears and big bows. A little girl's room? Why? I looked down at my hands...they blended into the dark shadows of the closet. I tried to feel them, tried to feel my face, I tried to feel anything...it was gone...I was gone. I saw the little girl in her bed, her eyelids drooping, growing tired. Bitter resentment flooded over what was left of my shadowy being as I realized what had been taken from me, my body. My hands instinctively, savagely, murderously reached out for her...but I shrunk back as her eyes fluttered open.

Leaves of Autumn

Tara Lee

The leaves of Autumn brush past my leg as though the nature of the world would comfort me in my sorrow.

It is as though life destined me to be in this state, yet I was not prepared. I was the last of my fellow soldiers, they shouldn't have gone, but isn't that what the world wanted?

I grabbed a leaf and crumbled it in my hands. I thought of this being my world, crushed in time and it can not rejuvenate again. I would be forever in this state, crushed because my only will to live left me in this world.

I was on my two-week rest, yet all I could think about was him, Shuo Li. He was my world, my everything that kept me going. He was my Autumn leaves that made my whole world of a tree live. He had fallen, though, as with all the other leaves that were once there with him.

The future generation won't understand the feeling of going home and still being on the front lines. The way you become everything that is up there, it consumes you. You become a stranger to yourself, you become the dirt that consumed your fellow soldiers. A decade or more you'll still be ingrained there, it won't escape you. Life destined you to be trapped there, a cycle of Autumn.

I looked around me, the leaves drowned the earth in orange and red, the way the soldiers did. I don't get it, how the earth could be so cruel to take the ones we love the most, and yet repaint them over the earth. Shuo would have said it was beautiful; he is now what is beautiful. I understand now, the beautiful painting the world offered us who was still standing, was to remind us. Remind us of everything that we stood for; everything that we loved and hated about the war.

Maybe everything would be different if we returned home, the way everything that defined us would have been different. We would have had some life left in us, some care left in the world. Yet there was no such fib of

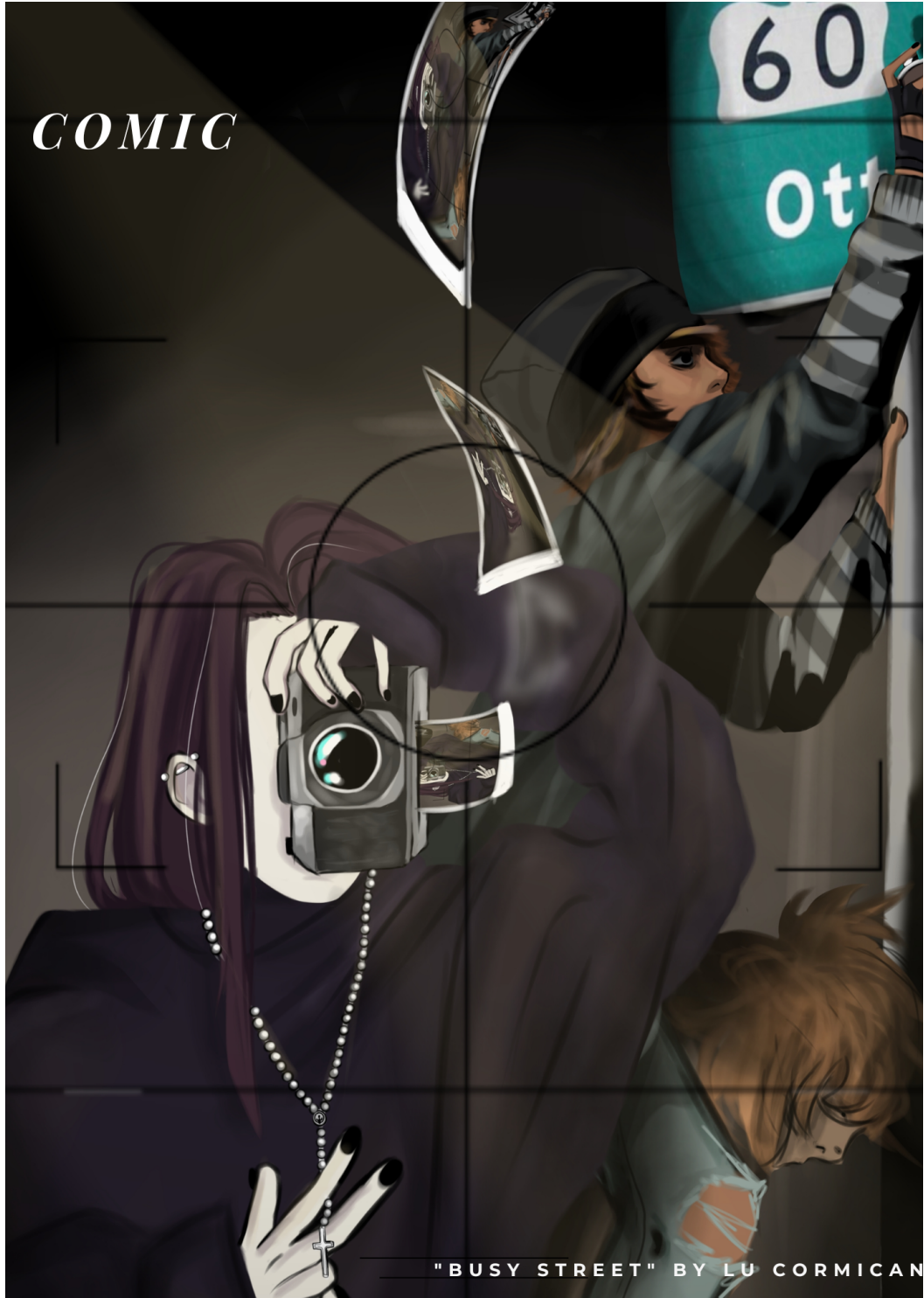
that anymore. Caring became nothing more than a past feeling. It disappeared along with our friends and our sanity.

The coldness of the wind picked up, leaving cold kisses on my skin. The coldness that once felt of Shuo's hands as he laid there in the last moment of his life. The coldness that my eyes radiate now as I walk the earth. The coldness that replaced the souls in our eyes; the ones that stayed behind in our mother's minds as we left. The coldness that consumed the soldiers as they watch their fellow Autumn leaves die.

...

As I laid down tonight all I could think about was the Autumn leaves, how beautifully they've fallen. How they will be replaced in the next seasons to come. They will be forgotten among the repeating years of Autumn, as they served their time.

We were the Autumn leaves; the leaves of Autumn.

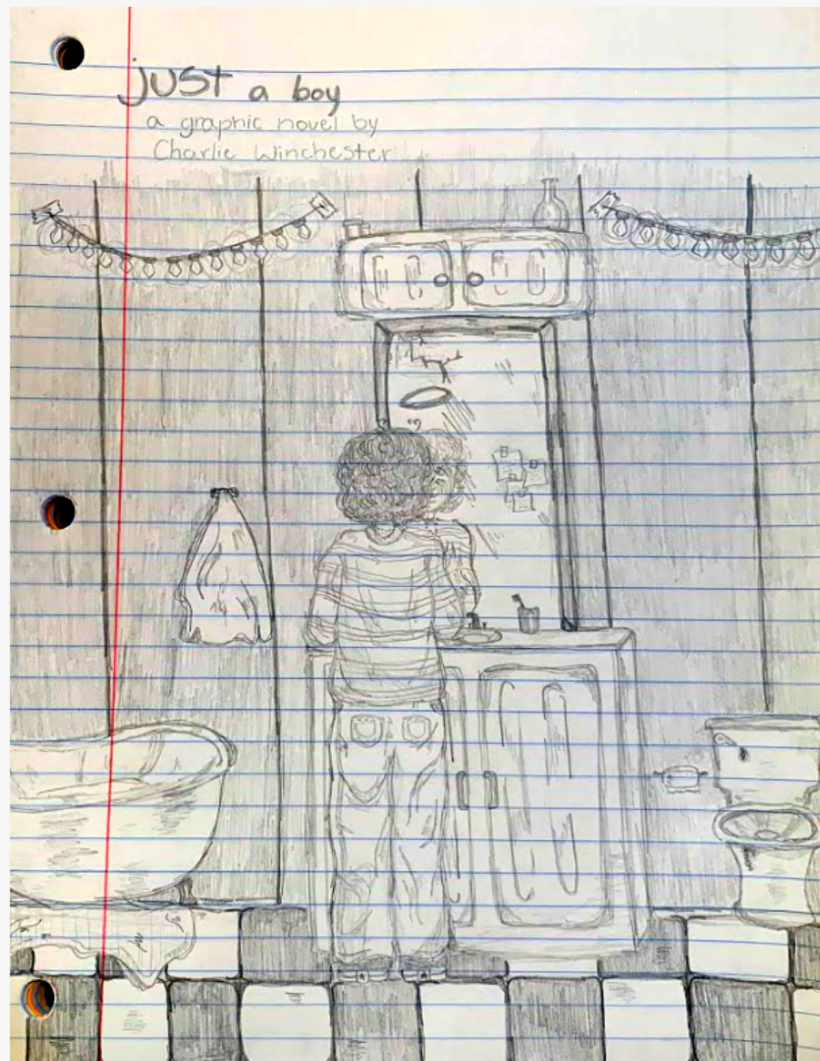


"COMING TO THE U.S." BY RICARDO PATELA





"LOST" BY JASE ELLIS



"JUST A BOY" BY ASHTON WINCHESTER

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A very special thank you to all the teachers who nurture the hearts and minds of writers so that they can be, now and in the future, our scholars, storytellers, and poets.

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