

# StoneSoup

The background of the cover features a dense, abstract pattern of thin, wavy lines. These lines are primarily red and green, set against a solid black background. The lines are concentrated in the upper half of the image, creating a sense of depth and movement. They form various shapes, from small loops to larger, more complex patterns, resembling organic or digital data visualizations.

SEPTEMBER 2019

VOLUME 47 / ISSUE 8

# StoneSoup

*The magazine supporting  
creative kids around the world*

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Stone Soup (ISSN 0094 579X) is published 11 times per year—monthly, with a combined July/August summer issue. Copyright © 2019 by the Children's Art Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in Santa Cruz, California. All rights reserved.

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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Stone Soup, 126 Otis Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95060. Periodicals postage paid at Santa Cruz, California, and additional offices.

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## Editor's Note

This is an issue that looks at relationships from many different angles. The poems and stories (and many of the images too) explore what it means to be a friend, a sibling, a child, and a student. You will notice many of these pieces are set at school. The start of school every fall can be an exciting but also frightening time. I remember always being worried about whether I'd have classes with my friends, and how I would cope if not. I always found a way to cope and usually made new friends in the process!

I hope these pieces will push you to think about the relationships in your lives—how they have changed and shaped you—and inspire you to create art about them, in any form. I also hope they will inspire you to reach out to new friends this school year.

Happy September,

**Letters:** We love to hear from our readers. Please post a comment on our website or write to us via Submittable or [editor@stonesoup.com](mailto:editor@stonesoup.com). Your letter might be published on our occasional Letters to the Editor page.

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On the cover:  
"Flowerwork in the  
Sky"  
*Canon PowerShot*  
by Owen Scott, 7  
Fayetteville, NY

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Give Me Your Hand, iPhone 7



by Ziqing Peng, 11  
Nanjing, China

# The Hello Kitty Shirt

by Una Dorr, 12  
Brooklyn, NY



## *After years of trying, Kiera is finally popular . . . so why isn't she happy?*

From afar, Kiera fit in perfectly at MS 452. Watching her pick at her peanut butter and jelly sandwich while fanning herself with her homework folder on this late September day, an unsuspecting onlooker might give her a glance and deem her an average seventh grader, not particularly interesting and far too obsessed with clothes, hair, and makeup. This onlooker, seeing her talking naturally with the group of girls surrounding her, would suspect that this was simply an ordinary day for Kiera, that she had known these girls for years. In assuming this, the onlooker would be entirely wrong.

While it didn't show, this may have been the most important moment Kiera had experienced in the 11 years that she had been alive. Ever since her family's SUV had finally pulled up in front of her new house in Brooklyn after the drive from New Jersey early that summer, Kiera had waited for this moment. Finally, after nearly a month of relentless effort, she had been accepted by the popular kids at their lunch table, and therefore into their group of friends. If she were to embarrass herself in front of these people, this new friendship she had formed would crumble in front of her

eyes—something that she wouldn't let happen, no matter what.

Every day of being thought of as the quiet one, the friendless one, the lonely one who sat with a book in the corner of the playground during recess, vanished from Kiera's mind. Now she was speeding down the road to what she had only dreamed of in years before: popularity.

"Oh my gosh. Eric is so weird. Like, he literally wears the same pair of sweatpants every day. How gross is that?" Mia's voice rang through the bustling lunch room, somehow managing to be louder and more significant than any of the other voices in the crowded cafeteria. Sitting across from Mia in the center of the table, Kiera tried to time her giggle with the rest of the group. Together, they sounded like a bottle of soda fizzing, or perhaps a pack of joyful hyenas ready to pounce on their prey. Other people from different tables cast the group of girls annoyed glances, but this was not apparent to Kiera. Even Eric's upset face didn't matter. She was absorbed in her own circle of friends, who were so perfect and so beautiful and so amazing, and, more importantly, so existent. In this way particularly, they were

# *“What happened to our little Hello Kitty?”*

different from her friends from when she lived in New Jersey.

Life went on for Kiera. She became closer with the girls, and by mid-October, she had mustered up the courage to invite them to her house for dinner one night. That Thursday, a few hours before the group was due to arrive, Kiera did some last minute, very necessary work. She pulled her parents out of their room, sat them down across from her on the couch, and stared at them intensely.

“You are not the world’s most embarrassing parents,” Kiera started.

“Well, yes, when we gave up our model Santa collection, I think that we stepped down to the world’s second most embarrassing parents,” Kiera’s mom said with a grin.

Rolling her eyes, Kiera continued. “But, as I was trying to say, you certainly aren’t cool or anything. So please, please, stay out of my business when the girls come over. It means the world to me.”

Kiera’s parents nodded, but as she stood up to tidy her room, she heard one of them murmur quietly, “What happened to our little Hello Kitty?”

The girls came, gossiped, ate, and then left without Kiera’s parents saying anything more than “Yes, this is vegetarian.” Ella had just gotten her ears pierced, and all she could talk about was how beautiful they were, and how it hadn’t hurt a bit when she got them. Kiera found herself thinking about how boring the conversation

had become, and how she really didn’t care about the brand new holes in Ella’s ears. Alarmed, she pushed the thought out of her mind and leaned in closer to hear about all the different options for earrings that Ella had had to choose from.

The next day in school, Ms. Perez, everyone’s least favorite teacher, decided to switch the current Science tables. Harper and Kiera exchanged annoyed glances, as they had only recently been seated next to each other. Many students groaned bitterly for the same reason. Ms. Perez, they thought, must be made of nothing but pure evil.

Harper, Mia, and Ash were seated at the same table, and Kiera heard Harper squeal “Yes!” in her high-pitched voice. Kiera looked down sullenly. Hadn’t Harper just been moaning about being moved away from her?

As she grumbled, Kiera felt a sudden movement to her left. She jerked her head up as a tiny girl hopped onto the chair next to her, and promptly rested her feet on the shiny plastic table as if she were sitting in her living room at home. Looking around to see if anyone else had noticed, Kiera found a giggle bubbling in the back of her throat. The girl, who Kiera remembered being called Claudia, looked at her warily, one eyebrow arched to the extent that it seemed as if it might come off of her face entirely.

“What are you looking at?” she smirked, the accusation clearly fake.

Kiera clamped her lips shut to hold

in her laughter, but she was unable to control herself. As her mouth was shut, a rambunctious snort burst out of Kiera's nose. Claudia grinned at the peculiar noise, and Kiera grinned back. They were silent for a moment, pursing their lips to keep from laughing as they stared at each other. Then, all of a sudden, they erupted in laughter. It wasn't as if anything was particularly hilarious, yet Kiera found herself gasping for breath between laughs. Only when they realized that Ms. Perez was staring daggers at them through her cat-eye glasses did they finally stop laughing.

That period of Science, despite the evil teacher, held the record for the best Science class Kiera had ever experienced. Kiera was far from a troublemaker, so angering Ms. Perez should have upset her, but she was too busy talking to Claudia. It was as if this girl brought out a whole different side of her: Kiera, for the first time in her life, felt funny, unique, and charismatic, even. When the bell rang for sixth period, the two girls walked towards the cafeteria next to each other, mimicking Ms. Perez's condescending British accent and bossy, overly posh air.

When they arrived at the lunch room, Kiera invited Claudia to sit with her at her regular table. Claudia's face brightened, but following Kiera's finger to the table where Mia, Harper, Ella, and July were already unpacking their lunch boxes, a frown developed across it.

"Oh, gosh no. Sorry, but if I sit there, those girls will literally kill me," she said, a look of disgust unhidden on her face.

Surprised, Kiera replied, "Them? They aren't so bad. They're really nice actually! I know they might seem shallow or something, but I bet they'd really like you if you'd just be nice to them, you know?"

Claudia only shook her head and laughed quietly to herself. "Look, you seem nice and all, but those girls? They're just plain mean. I'm serious. Sit with me if you want, but only bad will come if I sit with them."

As Claudia waited for a reply, Harper noticed Kiera standing by the lunch room doors. Smiling brightly, she waved her over. Kiera looked at Claudia, and then at Harper. Finally, she turned back to Claudia, and mumbled, "Bye. I-I gotta go."

Claudia shook her head again and walked over to an empty table as Kiera turned to go to hers, which by now was almost filled with her friends.

When she arrived at the table, the girls were talking about the new Science seats. When she told them who she was sitting next to, they all groaned simultaneously.

"Poor you," Mia said with a swish of her neat blonde ponytail. "She is such a dork." Kiera wanted to respond, but she knew that it would only make things worse. And, she reminded herself, she had promised that she would try her hardest to keep her friendship with these girls. Telling them that she wanted to be friends with Claudia might murder her reputation, so why would she do that?

The weekend passed far too quickly, as always. Kiera spent it sitting in her room watching Netflix and thinking about Mia, Harper, July,

Ella, and Ash. She reassured herself that just like the people in the show she was watching, she and these girls were destined to be friends. Who had invited her to sit with them when Kiera was new? The girls. Who was nice to her when she got lost around the building? The girls! Claudia hadn't even tried to be kind to her in the beginning of the year. She may be funny, but really, Kiera thought, she was nothing compared to her other friends. On the way to school that Monday, Kiera promised herself that she would stop trying to be friends with her, that she would completely give up on her. However, Kiera had never expected it to be so difficult.

When Kiera stepped into homeroom, a wave of nausea rolled over her. Claudia stood in front of her rusty purple locker, struggling to wiggle out of her oversized navy sweatshirt. Underneath the sweatshirt, Kiera saw her interesting outfit.

She wore a pair of average blue jeans, cuffed to display a pair of beat-up Converse, and on the top, she wore a white T-shirt. This wasn't the strange part. No, the strange part was the cartoon image that had been ironed onto the T-shirt. It was a picture of a white cat with beady little eyes and a massive bow in front of one of its ears. Under it, in hot pink bubble letters, the words "Hello Kitty" were inscribed. Kiera remembered that cat. In fact, Kiera remembered that very image, ironed onto a very similar white T-shirt.

She had received it as a birthday gift in fifth grade, during the height of her Hello Kitty obsession, and had

worn it at least once a week until the beginning of the summer after sixth grade. Then, after speaking with her cousin about the current trends in New York, she had put it, along with the rest of her Hello Kitty clothing, into a plastic garbage bag. Stuffing it in the back of her closet in case she wanted some extra fabric for a sewing project, she declared that if New York found Hello Kitty silly, then she did too. She remembered telling this to her parents as a way to ask if she could take a trip to the mall, and watching as her mother looked at her strangely. After all, Hello Kitty had always been Kiera's favorite character, and it was so unlike Kiera to give her up. Her mother understood that she wanted to fit in in New York, but she thought that Kiera was taking it too far.

During school that day, Kiera felt as if she were floating through the halls. As her friends gossiped and whispered during lunch, Kiera hovered next to them like a ghost, watching Claudia at her table. Old Kiera wouldn't have hesitated to befriend her: she was funny, kind, smart, and had the same interests as her. But, she reminded herself, old Kiera was gone. She was dead. Burned up. Down the drain. Turned to dust. That was final, she thought, and turned towards July to catch up on the gossip. Everything was going to be alright, she thought—until she heard what they were gossiping about.

"That girl is literally killing me. I mean, Hello Kitty? How could anyone be so babyish? I mean, the sixth graders wouldn't even wear that." July laughed as she readjusted the knot

*Old Kiera wouldn't have hesitated to befriend her: she was funny, kind, smart, and had the same interests as her. But, she reminded herself, old Kiera was gone.*

in her shirt. "You know, we might as well be good people, don't you think? Maybe we should tell her how stupid she looks. Come on, let's go."

Once again, Kiera felt sick to her stomach. Not being friends with someone was a piece of cake, but bullying them? That was a different story.

"No! Guys, umm, maybe it's just a costume? Like, she's mocking little kids or something? I mean, we really shouldn't talk to her. Because she's a dork," Kiera tried, immediately regretting saying something so implausible. They just waved off her comment as if she had never spoken and wandered over to where Claudia was eating rice and beans out of a thermos. She looked up, and seeing Kiera, smiled weakly. Kiera didn't mean to, but on instinct, she smiled back.

"Hi Claudia. We were just noticing your mature, flattering outfit. It really highlights your eye color! Nice job," Harper said sarcastically. She slid onto the bench next to Claudia, and smiled with her perfect teeth. The others joined in, teasing her, telling her that they hadn't seen anything as hip as Claudia's outfit—hip for kindergarteners, that is.

After saying a particularly rude comment about how pigtails and a pacifier would complete the look, Ella looked at Kiera, and grinning broadly, said, "Right, Kiera? Don't you think?"

Kiera looked at Ella, and then at Claudia. Once the insults had started, Claudia had found a particular interest in her thermos, and only now did she look up at Kiera, her eyes big, innocent, and injured looking. But the rest of the people were looking at her so encouragingly, hoping for a top-notch insult. And they were her friends. *And they would stay her friends forever.* Sweat slipped down Kiera's forehead despite the cool fall weather, and her heart felt as if it was about to beat out of her chest. Her voice was practically a whisper, but somehow, she was able to manage a feeble, "Ha! What are you, six?"

Immediately, she felt the damage that she had done. Claudia let out a long breath: she had clearly been holding it while Kiera had hesitated to speak. Then she looked at Kiera pityingly, shaking her head. She was smiling sadly, like it was Kiera who had been hurt, not her. At this, Kiera realized that it was true. Claudia didn't care what the other girls had said. Claudia was only upset for Kiera, who had done such damage—to herself.

That afternoon, Kiera speed-walked home by herself. Her father said hello to her from behind a crumpled copy of the New York Times as she unlocked the front door. She hardly even noticed him—she was heading for her room. Heading for her closet,

specifically. After a forceful twist of the unpolished doorknob, her room displayed itself in all its glory: its constantly chipping white walls that had yet to be repainted, the twin-sized bed wedged into the corner, and of course the closet, partially blocked by a cardboard moving box that Kiera still hadn't found the time to deal with. Kicking the box aside with her sneakered foot (she hadn't bothered to take her shoes off when she had rushed through the door), she pulled the door open and immediately began fishing through her things. It was surprisingly cluttered, given that she had only had a few months to start her new collection of garbage, and it took a while to swim through the randomly placed items towards the back of the closet. Finally, she found what she was looking for. A small glimpse of black garbage bag had never made her feel happier.

Kiera pulled it out of the closet and laid it on the uncarpeted floor of her room. It took her a moment to untie it, but once the knot came loose, she began hurriedly dumping out the contents onto her floor. Hello Kitty-themed sweatshirts, t-shirts, pajamas, swimsuits, pants, and a few pairs of Hello Kitty underwear spilled out in a heap of vibrant color. Kiera sorted through them, tossing them over her shoulder one by one. About halfway through the pile, she spotted it: the white tee with the ironed-on picture. She blew out a relieved breath, pushed her clothes out of the way, and proceeded to finish the Social Studies project that was due the next day.

---

It was just a Tuesday. An average, October Tuesday, yet it felt like a momentous occasion for Kiera. Less than a week ago, Kiera had met Claudia, and now here she was, sacrificing her reputation and her friends for this girl. She felt a little bit crazy, and scared too. Her plan might backfire and make her lose all her friends, because Claudia might think that she was mocking her. But it was worth a shot, she decided, pushing through the double doors of MS 452 into the messed-up world of middle school.

First period was Science. Kiera fidgeted anxiously in her seat, tapping her fingers rapidly against the plastic table and waiting for Claudia to arrive. No one else had noticed her T-shirt yet, as she had only just zipped down her jacket to reveal the design. The minutes passed slowly, as if the ringing of the late bell had been postponed by a few years. As the bell finally started to ring its shrill scream, Claudia came hurtling through the door, determined not to be marked late. Just in time, she slid into the seat next to Kiera, and pulled her planner out of her bag to copy the homework for the day. Feeling Kiera's eyes on her back, she turned around in her seat, homework planner in hand. Her expression morphed from annoyed to surprise in a matter of seconds, a clear clue that she had noticed the beady-eyed little cat and the words underneath. Kiera's breath caught in her throat as she tried to read Claudia's expression. Was she happy? Sad? Angry? Did she even understand the gesture? Seeing her face soften and turn into a wide smile, it was clear that she understood.

Folding her arms across her chest,  
her eyes gazing directly into Kiera's,  
she opened her mouth and spoke in  
a steady voice. Her voice louder and  
more significant than any other voice  
could ever be, she said with a wink,  
“What are you, six?”



**Sunset Silhouettes, Canon G9X**



by Anya Geist, 12  
Worcester, MA

# Coconut Pudding

by Tristan Hui, 12  
Menlo Park, CA



## *To save her life, Thu must take his younger sister on a long journey from rural Vietnam to the city*

I used to be Grandma's favorite. She told me it was because when I was born, she was the first to hold me. "No one can replace you, Thu," she would say, taking me onto her lap and stroking my dark hair. "No one."

Bao, my older brother, was Grandpa's favorite. Grandpa's life had been centered around him, and sometimes it seemed like I was Grandma's only cháu trai, her only grandson. I loved it.

One humid June day, the gentle waves rocked our house as I docked the sampan boat and skipped inside.

"I'm home from school!"

"Good!" Grandma was sitting in the rocking chair, repairing a fishing net. "Thu, come here."

I was 12 and almost as tall as she was, but Grandma let me onto her lap. I leaned into her, expecting her to stroke my hair and tell me how no one could replace me. But instead, she took my hands and looked me in the eye. "I'm getting older, Thu. My daughter has two sons and my son has a daughter who lives in America. My husband has long passed, and I've done everything I need to do." She smiled sadly, her Khmer accent slightly lilting the Vietnamese words.

I knew almost immediately what she meant. She was ready to die. "Oh."

She laughed then patted my hair, a shouting peddler outside breaking the silence between us. A gull cawed, and Má called us to dinner. The moment was lost, and we never spoke about it again.

But in July, Má found out that she was pregnant. I would have a little sister.

Everything changed.

When Grandma heard that, she vowed to live until that baby was born.

As Má's belly grew, so did our responsibilities. I ran errands at the floating market instead of playing katrak behind school with Xuân. Grandma mended old baby clothes instead of my favorite shirts, the ones she'd promised to patch. Bao went fishing alone or helped Cha with his paperwork. Cha worked extra hours at the sales company, and I took Má to Dr. Accola's office nearly every week, missing school most Fridays.

Minh was born on a bright February morning, nothing like anyone had expected. And not necessarily in a good way.

She was a sickly child from the

start. Her limbs were thin, and she didn't drink enough milk. I didn't think she would live, and even Dr. Accola was skeptical. But Grandma loved Minh with all her heart, and I guess that was enough.

---

Now Minh can talk and walk, though she's not steady on her feet. Grandma still loves her, but I think she lost most of her steam after Minh learned to talk. Even she has realized how old she is by now.

On Monday, I stay home from school. Minh has a fever, and Má is peddling vegetables in the south, so I take her to Dr. Accola's office across the village.

"She just has a cold. Check back with me in two weeks." Dr. Accola flies around the dim, one-room office like an agitated bird, trying to get everything done at once. She's had a busy week. I can tell by the way she's acting.

"Okay."

On the way home, I stop at the floating market and buy a bowl of noodle soup for us to share, and a little plate of coconut pudding from an old man wearing a blue shirt, just for me.

Minh reaches for my full hands, but I lift the plate out of her reach. "Not for you."

"Thu . . ." she whines.

"No."

She sighs dramatically, and I glare down at her. She sighs again, and I pop the last pudding scoop into my mouth. Ha.

As soon as we start for home,

Minh falls asleep. I groan, taking off my *krama* and using it to tie her to my back. She snores loudly.

Rowing home is slower, carrying an inconvenient, 22-pound bundle like a backpack, but eventually, I get there, dumping Minh into Cha's hammock. I'm done caring for her for today.

---

It's been three weeks, but Minh hasn't recovered. Dr. Accola was visiting family in Laos last week, and as far as I know, she hasn't returned.

Yesterday, Minh's fever spiked. She refused to drink water, and about halfway through the night, Grandma started to cry. She begged me to bring Minh to the hospital in Battambang. I agreed. It's a chance to regain my place, to be Grandma's favorite again. Maybe she'll find the will to live longer.

Today, I slip out of the house in the dark, Minh tied to my back. Lunch and a snack lies in a wicker basket at my feet, my pockets heavy with riel that Grandma took from her purse to give me early this morning. I can't help but be a little jealous that she would spend her savings on my sister instead of me, although I know that's not really fair. Bao drew me a map, highlighting the route I should travel. Everyone is pitching in to help.

My wooden paddle traces patterns in the dark, still water, as the world slowly wakes up. I wave to Xuân as we leave, the sun just barely peeking over the horizon. Minh shifts against my back, sweat dripping into my eyes as the heat becomes uncomfortable.

By the time the docks come into

view, the sun is high in the sky and I'm sweltering. I've been rowing for many, many hours, and my arms ache terribly.

I sigh. Minh's hot forehead presses against my neck as I tie our boat to a tree beside the dock, just out of view. Má would kill me if it got stolen.

I grab my shirt from the wicker basket, dunking it in the cool water and putting it on.

"Walk about half a mile west to the nearest bus stop," Bao had told me. "Ride an hour into the city, and disembark at the closest stop to the market. There, someone can give you directions to the hospital."

Sure enough, after walking for about half a mile, the three-walled bus shelter comes into view. Written in large Khmer script is a schedule:

**Morning Bus: 6:00 AM**

**Afternoon Bus: 3:00 PM**

**Night Bus: 9:00 PM**

It's only 1:00 now, so we'll have to wait. I should've known that such a rural bus stop would only have three boarding times.

Minh shifts against my back, slowly waking. Sheltered from the sun, I take off my shirt and use it as a pillow, getting comfortable for the two-hour wait. Some sleep would do me good . . .

The hour-long bus ride blends into brown farmlands and chipped barn paint, and we eat our lunch on the way. Getting off with a group of noisy tourists, we slip away into the market.

"Excuse me, sir? Do you know how to get—"

He pushes past me, disappearing

into the crowd.

"Ma'am? Can you give me directions to—"

She's on her cell phone, engaged in a heated argument.

I hold tight to Minh's hand, determined to find someone.

"Miss? Can you help me find my way to the nearest hospital?"

She continues to hang up acrylic paintings as if I hadn't spoken.

Someone grabs my arm. I whirl around, fist raised, but it's only an old woman, hunched over a wooden cane.

"Where is it you want to go?"

"Uh . . . the hospital."

She takes Bao's map from my hands, tracing a route with her finger. "Go to the end of the street and turn right. Walk a little ways down and the hospital will be on your left. Good luck." She smiles, turning away, letting herself be swallowed by the crowd.

"Thanks!"

I carry Minh on my hip as I shoulder my way towards the intersection. Bustling people press against me as I focus on putting one tired foot in front of the other, turning right, and watching the rough cobblestone street blend into white hospital linoleum.

A nurse greets me. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah. My sister has a fever that hasn't gone away for three weeks."

"Ah. Right this way."

"Thanks." I follow her down a clean hallway and into a spacious exam room, where she removes a little pink bottle from the shelf.

"You're welcome. I have to test her before I can give you anything, though."

# *The moonlight streams through the window, lighting up his tearstained face.*

“Okay.” I take a seat in one of the plastic chairs, resting my head in my hands.

Minh gags on the flu test, and when it comes back positive, I’m not surprised. The little pink bottle goes in the wicker basket, and Minh and I eat our snack in the hospital waiting room.

The rest of the day passes in a blur. We catch a different bus that goes all the way to the docks, saving us an extra mile. My arms are so sore I can barely move them, and it’s long after dark by the time I reach Xuân’s house at the edge of the village. I’m too tired to wave, anyway.

When I dock the boat at our little yellow house, Cha runs out to meet me, scooping me up just as my legs give way. I reach shakily into the wicker basket and set the little pink bottle on the table. Má whoops with joy, something I haven’t seen her do in a long, long time. Bao pats me on the back and Grandma hugs me, kissing Minh’s face.

I stumble back to my hammock near midnight, falling into a deep, blissful sleep.

---

Bao is shaking me awake, shouting.

The moonlight streams through the window, lighting up his tearstained face.

“Bao! What’s going on?” He pulls me out of my hammock, dragging me

to Grandma’s cot.

No. Tears spring to my eyes, but I don’t bother blinking them away. No. I failed her. IfailedherIfailedherIfailedher. No. I kneel by Grandma’s side, and weakly, she reaches towards me. Almost automatically, I move aside so she can see Minh, but instead she grabs my hand.

“Grandma?” I whisper.

“Thu . . .” She gasps. “Thu, I—”

But then her hand goes slack, her eyes close.

“No! Grandma!” I’m yelling now, tears streaming down my face.

She’s dead.

---

Today, I don’t even want to leave my hammock. Cha covered Grandma’s body with a sheet, but other than that, no one has moved. I’m exhausted anyway.

I planned on staying in my hammock again like yesterday, but then I heard a peddler outside.

“Coconut pudding! Fresh coconut pudding!” The Vietnamese words fill my head and bounce inside my skull, a twisting pain bubbling up inside my rib cage.

Guilt.

I jump out of bed, forcing myself not to look at the sheet-covered body in the corner.

“Hey, Minh, you wanna go for a boat ride?”

“Okay!”  
“Shhh . . . Má’s sleeping.”  
“Where we going, Thu?”  
“You’ll see.”  
“But I wanna know now!”  
I smile, ruffling her hair. “Kiên  
nhǎn.” Patience.

The old man is wearing a red shirt  
today.

“Two small pudding cups, please.”  
“Here you go!” He speaks in  
Khmer, grinning wider all the while.  
“Thank you!” I hand one to Minh.

She cradles it carefully, eyes wide.  
“Coconut pudding!” She squeals,  
scooping it into her mouth at lightning  
speed.

“Careful,” I laugh. “Don’t choke!”  
She beams up at me, cup empty,  
face covered in pudding. “Thank you!”  
She wraps her arms around my leg  
and squeezes.

A hug. I don’t think Minh’s ever  
hugged me before. It’s nice. I crouch  
down, wrapping my arms around her  
shoulders. I hug her back.



Free as a Bird, mixed media collage



by Sage Millen, 11  
Vancouver, Canada

# Trenza Francesa, French Braids

by Alina Samarasan, 12  
Brookline, MA



## A busy morning opens a window onto Carlita's family life

“¡Ven aquí, Carlita! ¡No puedes ir a la escuela así! Tu cabello es un desastre!” Come here, Carlita! You can not go to school like that! Your hair is a mess! I walk into the room and sit down so Mamá can reach my hair, wishing that she spoke English. Then I wouldn't be so embarrassed at school. Then no one would tell me to go back to Mexico.

My family's from Cuba, not Mexico, and I wasn't even born there. I was born here, unlike most of the kids at school, but that doesn't really matter. Don't be like them, my big brother said. Don't fall to their level. You're better than them, Carlita. And make that known.

He used to stick up for me. We used to be two peas in a pod, me and him, him and me. Forever, he said. But after he got into trouble, that hasn't been true. I haven't seen him at all since he was arrested. Mamá says that's for the best, that he is *el diablo* who won't come back. But I'd be willing to forgive him. I'd forgive him if he came back.

“¡Terminé! Ve a comer tu desayuno.” Finished! Go eat your breakfast! I walk away from Mamá toward the kitchen, where huevos rancheros

awaits me on our small counter with two stools, the third tucked away in a closet somewhere. Lifting my hand up to touch my long black hair, I feel the twists and turns of a *trenza francesa*, a French braid, and think how life is like that, twisting and turning until it throws you off the fraying black hairband at the end.

# Us Three

by Layla Linnard, 11  
Weston, MA

I liked it a few months ago  
It was just us three  
There was no sharing my room  
There was no screaming baby  
I at least slept when  
It was just us three

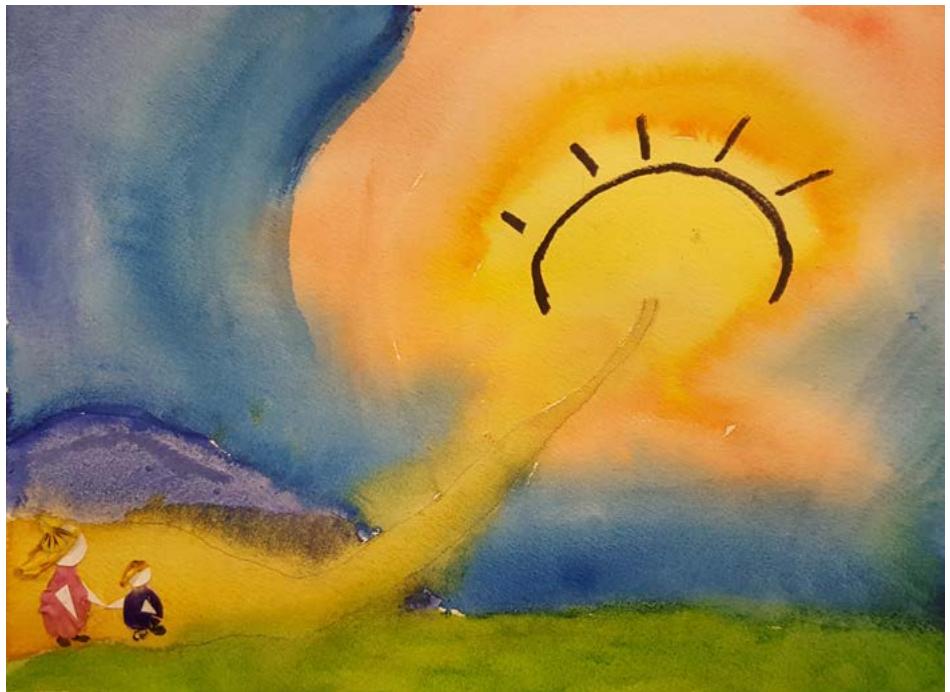
It was just us three  
I at least slept when  
There was no screaming baby  
There was no sharing my room  
It was just us three  
I liked it a few months ago

# Lost Dog



She ran away  
On a walk  
I want her to come back  
Why did she leave  
Dog  
Lost

Lost  
Dog  
Why did she leave  
I want her to come back  
On a walk  
She ran away



The Golden Brick Road, *mixed media collage*



by Sage Millen, 11  
Vancouver, Canada

# The Woolly Mammoth

by Ava Bush, 13  
Baton Rouge, LA



## *A giant woolly mammoth and a young girl, both outcasts, become fast friends*

In a small, secluded, quiet place lived a giant woolly mammoth. The mammoth was a huge, brown, fluffy thing. His tusks were big and grand. They were as white as clouds. He looked very brave, but in reality he was a big softie. Though his heart was in the right place, his mind was in the abyss.

The mammoth lived in a petite school, where he was supposed to be raised as the guard animal. The headmaster, Mr. Krump, would try to train him, but it was useless considering he was not a smart beast. The school was an academy for the brilliant and only accepted those of high intellect. The school had no room for arts or creative thinking, just work. Inside the school, there were students who acted, talked, and did everything the same. They were bland. They only worked and never played. Their hearts were shriveled in despair.

But, as you would expect, they were smart. Every day when they came out for breaks, they would sit and study. The woolly mammoth would often come close to the children, hoping, wishing someone would want to play or talk with him, but day after day the children would pass him by.

The mammoth would ask, "Will you play with me? I am ever so lonely."

The children would always reply, "We have no time for play. We are too old for that. Leave us be!"

*It would forever be the same, he thought. Nothing would change.*

---

Then one day a little girl came along. She was different from the rest. Her brown hair was smooth and shiny, and she wore a smile upon her pale, enlightened face. Her eyes glimmered with the color of the sea and changed depending on her mood. She was different, he could tell. She looked around instead of at her phone or her homework.

The other students teased her as she walked toward him. She ignored them, continued on her way, and stopped in front of him.

"Hello. How do you do?" she said cheerfully.

"Fine, and you?" the mammoth replied.

"I'm feeling yellow," she exclaimed.

"Yellow? You can't feel yellow," the mammoth said, confused.

---

"Yellow is an adjective, so why can't I be described by it? Yellow may mean a color to you, but it means an emotion to me," she said.

"And that emotion would be . . . ?"

"Happy," she said, "very happy."

The mammoth was intrigued. He wanted to learn more about these color emotions that he had never sensed before. They chatted for a while about the different shades of colors and what they meant. On a page of the girl's notebook, they jotted down what each color was to them. Finally, as the clock struck 12:30, it was time to go to class.

"We'll meet tomorrow, yes?" she asked.

"For sure," he replied.

As the girl faded out of sight, the mammoth knew that his life meant something.

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As the girl walked away, on the depressing, wilting grass, she realized that she may not be lonely anymore. As the girl walked into the building, she noticed the headmaster staring at her darkly. Then he said, "You're late. You weren't talking to that beast of a mammoth? He's very dangerous."

"No, sir I was not."

Then she shuffled to class with her head in her books. The headmaster, Mr. Krump, was a stern man with scrappy brown hair and a goatee. He wore very expensive glasses and a tuxedo. He often would stare at the young girl because he believed that, although she was smart, she could be a risk to the rest.

---

For the next few days, the new friends conversed during every break. They talked about the beautiful things they had seen, like the birds that played on the rooftop. The young girl impersonated her teachers and the kids who took their work way too seriously. She tried to make friends with them, but they would tell her they had no time. She would often tell the woolly mammoth jokes. There was one in particular he liked:

What smells like rotten eggs and has the hair of an 80-year-old man?

Mr. Krump.

He would laugh so hard that the ground shook as he stomped his feet.

---

One day, they decided to try meditation because the young girl had had a stressful day. She was being bullied by the other students for hanging out with the mammoth instead of working and studying. Also, a teacher had confiscated her headband and earrings, because of their creativeness. They started to concentrate but the girl got tired and fell asleep on his ginormous foot. When she awoke, everyone was gone. The courtyard was empty and quiet. Then she realized what must have happened. She said sleepily, "I have to go. I'm sorry. I'm going to be late."

As she silently entered the building, she saw no sign of anyone, which meant she could go into class and say she was late because she had been in the bathroom.

What she did not know was that

Mr. Krump was watching everything from his surveillance cams in his office. He had a grimace upon his face. Mr. Krump knew he had let this go too far. The headmaster had seen the way the girl did not take homework as seriously as the other students, and how she always hung out with that stupid softie of a beast. He needed to stop this at once.

The headmaster yelled through the open door to his secretary, "Call in Miss Herbert!"

Miss Herbert was known for punishing children—especially creative children. Children who were creative took time to look at things other than their work, and this was not okay in her eyes. She was a disciplinarian. She made sure every student studied hard, got good grades, and was never ever creative. She was short and stubby, with her messy gray hair in a bun and wrinkles mucking up her face. She wore huge glasses and carried a ruler around. Miss Herbert scoffed at the secretary as she trotted into the headmaster's office on her short, stubby legs.

"Miss Herbert, please sit," the headmaster ordered politely. "I think we have a problem with the mammoth."

As the two were discussing the future of the little girl's friend, she was listening. She had asked her teacher to get some water and had seen Miss Herbert entering the office, so, curious, she followed her. She slid in unnoticed and stood behind the office door. Then, after all the discussion, the final call was made. They had agreed to send the mammoth to the circus. The girl

trembled sadly because she did not want to see her friend banished.

Then the headmaster said, "Now what of the girl? Secretary, will you call the little girl in?"

At this moment she knew her fate would be worse than his. She knew she would not be in class when they called her. Everything in her mind went blank. She said to herself, *Think creatively.* Without a moment's thought, the little girl quickly launched her shoe at the headmaster while pushing open the door. She leaped out of the office, running for her life. She could hear the headmaster yelling and Miss Herbert shuffling to catch up to her. She dashed out into the courtyard and ran all the way to the mammoth.

"We have to leave now. They want to send you away and expel me," she said hurriedly. The mammoth, without a word, scooped up the girl on his back and galloped as fast as he could.

They broke through the metal gates and ran across the city. The police were on their trail. Cars were honking and sirens were screaming.

"We have to make it to the dunes! We can create a sandstorm to deter them," screamed the little girl.

They saw the dunes close ahead. Then with a mighty jump, they landed in the sand, which exploded all over the policemen and the teachers. They yelled as the sand came crashing down like waves upon the sea. Then everything was silent. The pair turned around to see the sand drowning their pursuers.

The mammoth and the girl traveled for days around the sand dunes, thirsty and hungry. Then the little

girl exclaimed, "Look at that!" It was a bright gold door that shimmered in the desert sun. It was expansive and grand. It had many creative designs on it.

"Could it be a mirage?" the mammoth said. The little girl hopped off the giant woolly mammoth and opened it. The light from the interior blinded them. They walked in to see beautiful trees and blue skies. Everyone was happy, bright, and colorful. There were beautiful scenes with waterfalls and some breathtaking views. It was a town full of people, happy people. They stared in amazement. Then a young boy came up to them. His eyes were like the young girl's and shone beautifully. He looked at the two and said, "How do you do?"

The girl, still shocked, said, "Fine... how about you?"

The boy smiled and replied, "I'm feeling very yellow today."

# Overcoming

by Salena Tang, 13  
Lexington, MA



## *Awkward and shy, Ava's only happiness comes from reading dictionaries and learning new words*

People are making room for me as I slither by. They are afraid to be “touched” by me. I quietly shuffle past, head down, eyes on the ground. As I enter my English classroom, someone yells, “Watch out!” Students laugh. My teacher, Mr. Gallagher, tries to quiet everyone down.

I shrink, my stomach tightening, and hurry to the very back of the room, hunkering down low inside my big, black jacket. Hiding like a baby kangaroo in its mother’s pouch, I begin to feel safer. Slowly, I lug my 40-pound backpack onto my lap and relax when I feel its comforting weight. I know never to make any eye contact with the teacher because then he sometimes calls on me. And I definitely do not want that to happen. So I stare down at my feet for a minute, and then cautiously lift my head enough to look around my desk.

“Pop quiz!” my teacher announces enthusiastically. All the other students sigh and moan, but I get pumped up. A test means no talking, and silent rooms with no talking are what I like the most. Then my teacher says, “Don’t worry! This isn’t going to be graded. This is just a pre-assessment for our

next unit: Etymology!”

I grin from ear to ear in my head, but my facial expression stays the same. It is a word test, and I love words. I love the way they look. I love the way they sound in my mouth. I even love the way they smell and taste. I don’t think anyone else knows that words have an odor and flavor, but I do. To me, each word is unique. I love to pore over dictionaries, spending hours at a time learning where words come from. I can instantly memorize everything that I read or see. Can other people do this as well? From what I have read, it seems that they can’t. I know my parents can’t, but they are unlike me in so many ways; this is just one more way. Slowly, I take out a pencil and wait for the quiz to be passed out. Mr. Gallagher hands me the quiz and smiles kindly at me. I don’t smile back. I just take the test and stare down at it. It really is all on etymology—where words come from. And even more than I love silent rooms, I love word origins.

Even under my rough jacket, I notice that many students are glancing at each other’s answer sheets. But I know all the answers. I finish the quiz

in five minutes flat. Then I crawl out of my chair and trudge to the front of the class to hand my paper in. When Mr. Gallagher sees me. His eyebrows rise. “Are you sure you’ve finished? Have you checked your work?”

I nod.

“Okay then.”

I turn, slouching back into my chair, waiting for the time to pass. Staring at the clock, I wish the hour hand would move faster. Then I begin to daydream. I think about the clock and about the ancient Sumerians who gave us sexagesimal counting for time, and I begin to wonder about all the different kinds of counting and measuring we do. Our decimal system is Hindu-Arabic and we get inches and pounds from the United Kingdom, which uses the British Imperial System . . .

I glance around at the other students. They seem to be having a challenging time with those problems. I am surprised and think that I may have gotten a high score on this quiz. But then, since I am so bored, my mind wanders off again. Suddenly, the bell rings. Everyone quickly passes their quiz in and hurries out the door.

This is my last class of the day, so I go to the library and walk straight to the dictionary section. This is my daily schedule. I am so interested in learning new words that I can’t even keep track of my time. My parents let me stay because it keeps me occupied. And besides, they don’t really know what else to do with me.

I know that I learn differently from other kids in my school. I just cannot concentrate at all during school except

on things that I’m interested in. I don’t really care about school or tests in general because I’m not interested in them. I only do what I like to do.

In math class, my mind wanders to thinking about how the words “integer” and “integral” are related. When I am in history class, instead of focusing on the chapter in my textbook about the Civil War, I have a debate in my head about whether or not the word, “Yankee” comes from Cherokee or Dutch. Things that I’m not interested in, I just can’t make myself do, no matter how hard I try. My grades are mostly C’s, but that’s only because the teachers feel bad for me. In most classes, I probably deserve F’s.

I have never had friends. I don’t really know how to joke around and make small talk with the people around me. My feelings are all stuck inside, with no one to interact with. When I’ve tried, people just tease me. By now, I have stopped trying.

The librarian has always been very kind to me. She understands my love of dictionaries and recommends good ones to me or tells me when a new dictionary has been bought.

I feel safe in the library. I get to relax from my hard day with other students bullying me. I get to taste words and smell them. I get to be me. I also love to read other kinds of books, especially nonfiction books. But dictionaries are my first love.

Some words I don’t like. For example, “chair.” That word tastes like cabbage to me, and I loathe cabbage. Other words that I really dislike are “window,” which tastes like Brussels sprouts, and “dark,” which feels like



Finding Self, charcoal



by Evelyn Yao, 13  
Cerritos, CA

snakeskin in my mouth. On the other hand, I love the word “flower,” which tastes like ice cream.

After staying in the library for a few hours, I decide to go home. No one is home. Most of the time, my parents are at work. I am alone every, single day. But I like being alone. I don’t have to think about other people’s feelings when I say something. I don’t have to worry about sharing. I can do whatever I want, whenever I want.

After making myself a dinner of bread, yogurt, and crackers, I get ready for bed. I have no idea that tomorrow will be a turning point in my life.

It is a regular school day: students mocking me, afraid to be “touched” by me. A typical Friday morning. Everyone is planning where they will go on the weekends. I love weekends. I can be alone with my beloved books and not have to interact with anyone else at all. Counting down to each Saturday is what keeps me going Monday through Friday.

In English class, Mr. Gallagher gives us back our etymology quizzes. When he reaches me, he smiles. “Great job! You received a perfect score. In my 12 years of teaching here, I have never had a student get a perfect score on this quiz before.”

The whole class can hear. They don’t cheer and clap for me. Instead, they stare. I can almost feel their eyes burning holes in my face. I try to bury myself under the desk, hoping all the staring will go away. It doesn’t.

Mr. Gallagher keeps on talking. “You are an amazing student. What an intelligent girl! How did you learn all these words?”

I take a deep breath. My voice comes out below a whisper. “I . . . uh . . . from reading dictionaries.”

But Mr. Gallagher won’t give up. He wants more details.

“I just have an interest in words and learning about where they come from and their roots,” I explain, clearly annoyed. He knows I am frustrated by his interest, so, of course, he stops. But he keeps a careful eye on me.

The next day at school, Mr. Gallagher calls on me to define the word “etymology.” I can’t hide anymore. Every few minutes, when he catches me trying to bury myself inside my jacket, he calls on me again.

I can’t escape anymore. *Why is he even taking the time to ask me questions and wait for my reply?* After the class ends, as usual, I slither out, trying not to be noticed. But Mr. Gallagher comes out from behind his desk and says, “Ava? There’s a town spelling bee coming up. You should enter. You have a great gift for learning words quickly and accurately. I know that you would do well in the competition. If you do win, you would get to advance into the state competition. No one in this school has ever gone past States before, but maybe you could be the one.”

I feel overwhelmed. This is the first time a teacher has ever wanted to enter me into a competition. *Why is he being so nice to me anyway?* My head spins around and around, and I hear my heart thudding loudly in my chest. I don’t know what to do, so I just run. Out of the classroom. Past all the students staring at me. Past the double front doors of the entrance to the school into the parking lot.

I don't know how long I spend kneeling down next to a brown truck. All I know is that there is an overpowering aroma of avocado and peanuts in the air that disgusts me. Suddenly, I hear footsteps approaching. I duck under the car for protection, but also because I want to see who it is in safety. I see shiny, black shoes. That could be any teacher, I think to myself. I stay still, trying to control my breathing. Butterflies swirl around in my stomach. My eyes dart in every direction in an attempt to find out more about the person who has followed me.

A sudden voice shatters the silence: "I didn't know that such exciting news would bring so much sadness." It is a kind yet stern voice, and I know it is Mr. Gallagher. It would've been so much easier if he hadn't noticed my existence. Suddenly, I break into noisy sobs. I don't know what has gotten into me. I guess that after so many years of being alone, of keeping my emotions stuffed inside myself, with no arms to cry into when I feel miserable, my feelings are finally ready to come out. Still, I don't reply to his words. I don't know how to.

Mr. Gallagher tries to persuade me again. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. The winner of this school spelling bee receives a few grand prizes! These prizes include a \$100 check, a brand new bookcase, and 50 different books of the winner's choice!"

Now, I am listening. I could win 50 different types of dictionaries. I have already read all the dictionaries in the school.

I realize that I want to find out more about the contest, so I squeeze

out from under the truck, brushing bits of gravel off me, and stand up. Mr. Gallagher smiles peacefully, like he knows that his persuasion methods have worked. I follow him soundlessly back into school.

At the end of the day, I stop by his classroom as he asked. I have thought about the contest over and over again in my other classes. My final decision: I want to enter.

I hesitantly knock on the door and hear a "Come on in!" Mr. Gallagher is expecting me.

I look him in the eye and say, "I want to sign up for the spelling bee." I have practiced what I was going to say in my head over and over this morning.

"Okay! I will put your name on the list! You should also practice for the spelling bee. Do you have time after school every day?" he asks in an urging tone. I am not ready for that question. *What am I supposed to say?*

"Uh, yes?" I reply, unsure of what I have gotten myself into. After school is my reading time. Even though I know I will like to learn new words, reading calms me and makes me happy. I don't want to give up my reading time. Also, I don't think I want to spend every afternoon with this teacher. Learning words is fun, but not while interacting with people. I would have to do something I love while doing something else I hate. Even so, I decide to give it a try. I will do my extra reading in the mornings instead.

The next day after school, I drop my backpack into my locker and stroll over to my English classroom. Surprisingly, there is another girl

inside. Eyeing her nervously, I take a seat as far away from her as possible. At first, she doesn't notice me, but when she does, she jumps up in joy. "Yay! I am not the only one practicing for the spelling bee contest!" she declares. I look at her, startled. She slides over to a desk right next to mine.

"My name is Alexa! What is yours? Have we met before?"

"Uh . . . My name is Ava. I am in your science and history classes."

"Oh! Sorry! Yes, I remember you now. You are the one in the big jacket that rarely talks at all. Oh well! We can prepare for the spelling bee together!"

Over the next few practices, I get to know Alexa better. She is very friendly, and she is also very smart. She does not have my talent for memorizing the spelling of words, but she works hard. I thought that I was the only person who had an interest in word origins, but now I know that is not true.

The next few weeks fly by. I study after school every day with Mr. Gallagher and Alexa. Alexa and I have actually become close friends. Talking with her and Mr. Gallagher is not hard anymore. I learn to openly express my feelings and concerns in front of them. When I make mistakes, I no longer hide inside my jacket or get nervous. Slowly, tentatively, I begin to develop the courage to stand up for myself.

The day of the competition is approaching. I am getting more and more nervous as each day passes. Mr. Gallagher tries to calm me down by saying, "You can do it! Don't worry! Everything will be fine!"

But I always think: *What if I mess*

*up in front of all those people?* I am always worrying about what other people will think of me if I ruin the competition. That night, my mom tells me, "Great things never come from comfort zones." From that point on, every time I feel an anxious thought well up inside me, I whisper the phrase to myself and push the scary thought away. I know I have the ability to win first place at the competition.

The day of the competition arrives. The first few rounds go by in a blur. Most of the students are eliminated; many were just participating for fun or extra credit. Then, some students who are serious about spelling get knocked out. Finally, only one other girl and I are left on stage. She has won this spelling bee for the last five years. My cheeks are as red as freshly picked tomatoes, and my hands cannot keep still. I don't think that I have a chance against her. But I know that I have to try my best.

"Spell 'convalesce,'" the judge announces.

"C-o-n-v-a-l-e-c-e!" the girl answers proudly.

"Incorrect!" the judge declares. The girl next to me freezes for a moment like an icicle forming on a rooftop and then stomps her foot in rage. She glares in my direction, slowly looking me up and down. Her rage envelopes me like a disease. I feel scared and sick to my stomach.

That's why I am grateful when I hear the teacher say, "If you get this one right, Ava, then you win this competition. But if you get it wrong . . ." the teacher continues. I think of all the hard work I have done to reach the

goal I was so afraid of before. I have my chance to win. I take a few deep breaths.

“Spell ‘chauvinism,’” the judge commands. I think for one second only. I know this word well. I read it in the dictionary just last night.

“C-h-a-u-v-i-n-i-s-m!” I answer.

“Correct!” the judge bursts out. There’s no clapping and no cheers. Everyone is silent. No one expected me to win. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there is a scream. “Congratulations Ava!” It is Alexa. The audience bursts suddenly into an avalanche of applause and cheering. I stand, frozen stiff for a moment, but then slowly begin to smile, like the sun shining through a window. I am given a \$100 check, a brand new bookcase, and a coupon for 50 books like I was promised. But I get even more than that: I have a friend now.

# Chipped

by Genesis Lee, 12  
Tuscaloosa, AL



Closed casket  
Never can I see her again  
My heart chips  
My favorite song  
I will never hear again  
Another piece chips  
They try to take the casket to the car  
My sister can't take it though  
She runs to the casket  
Screaming no no no  
I watch  
She doesn't want to let go  
As they try to pry her off  
I chip again  
We get into the car  
Silently  
My heart chips  
They put her in the grave  
I know I won't see her for a long time  
A big chip chips  
The gates close  
Behind the gates  
My heart hides  
Chipped and broken inside  
Scared to be broken again  
Scared to love  
Scared to come out  
But  
I live on  
Chipped  
I pushed people back  
Never showed love or feeling  
Only power, no pain  
No more love to show  
This myself now  
Broken in pain

Do not fear  
I will be here again  
Powerful with feelings  
Showing myself  
Chipped  
And in pain  
I won't care  
I will be here once again  
I ride back home  
My home Tuscaloosa  
I'm silent  
Watching the trees pass  
I see  
Mothers and daughters having fun  
I start to cry  
I suck up the tears  
I say to myself  
It will be okay  
Even though I know I won't  
It's been a week since the funeral  
I am home now  
Lying in my bed  
Repeating the poem I wrote during the funeral  
I look out my window  
My friend wants to hang out  
I say I can't  
And shut the door



Hanukkah Morning, *Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ200*



by Leo Hiranandani, 11  
Northampton, MA

# Honor Roll

Welcome to the Stone Soup Honor Roll. Every month we receive submissions from hundreds of kids from around the world. Unfortunately, we don't have space to publish all the great work we receive. We want to commend some of these talented writers and artists and encourage them to keep creating.

## Fiction

Necla Asveren, 10  
Alina Kaplan, 11  
Kai Kathawala, 11  
Claire Klein-Borgert, 8  
Haeon Lee, 12  
Shihoon Lee, 11  
Julia Marcus, 12  
Abigail Hope Jihye Park, 13  
Connor Powell, 11  
Eva Sanchez, 11

## Poetry

Isabella Cossaro, 10  
Nora Finn, 8  
Gwendolyn Gibbon, 9  
Lily Jessen, 10  
Carly Katzman, 12  
Leah Koutal, 11  
Mia Livaudais, 13  
Ira Seth Morse, 8

## Art

Justine Chu, 11  
Isa Khan, 7  
Mackenzie Reese, 11  
Jaya Shankar, 10

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